

Inclusive Regions and Inclusive Cities in Intercultural Dialogue

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It is a great pleasure for me to be here in Padua at this great university whose scholarly excellence dates back to the 13th century. It is precisely this university that – since centuries – connects Padua to my region of Flanders. The reason for it is the important scientist and founder of the modern medical science: Andreas Vesalius. Vesalius had a marvellous house in Brussels in the 16th century. He was born in Brussels in 1515. His family came from the dukedom of Wesel in Germany. His family called themselves as «coming from Wesel (van Wesel)», in Latin Vesalius. He studied philosophy and medical sciences in Leuven. The personal doctor of Charles V (Charles the Emperor) allowed Andreas to continue his studies in Paris. Due to tensions and the risks for a war between the French king and the Habsburg emperor, Vesalius had to leave Paris. Charles V did the necessary for Vesalius to start studying in Padua (in 1537). The University of Padua was at that time progressive and open for experiments. So Vesalius made use of dead bodies to study the human organism. Everybody knows his famous medical book *De humani corporis Fabrica*.

It is a great pleasure and honour for me as well that I can speak in this Aula Magna where 400 years ago the famous physicist, mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher Galileo Galilei instructed his students.

So I am happy to be here in Padua and especially that you invited me to talk about the intercultural dialogue and the role of regions and cities in this. Indeed, Vesalius is a good example to make clear the importance of connecting to other cultures and to other societies for the enrichment of your personality.

I am representing the Committee of the Regions (CoR), a political assembly of the EU made up of local and regional representatives with a politically accountable mandate, providing them with a voice at the heart of the European

* President of the Committee of the Regions. Public Lecture on University of Padua, Aula Magna, 11 March 2008.

Union. As around two-thirds of EU legislation is implemented by local and regional authorities in Member States, it is crucial that this level has a say over the content of EU laws. The CoR organises five plenary sessions a year, where its 344 members vote on reports, known as opinions, issued in response to proposed legislation. The European Commission, which initiates EU laws, and the Council of Ministers, which determines the final content of the legislation (usually in tandem with the European Parliament), are obliged to consult the CoR on a wide range of policy areas including the environment, employment, transport and culture. From utmost importance is that the Committee of the Regions is known as the turning point for the interests of local and regional authorities in the European decision-making process and the European debate. Regions, cities and communes can meet in Brussels. But the CoR goes to them also, willing to have contacts on the field, where citizens are living, working, spending their time. This is essential for interculturality.

1. The Background to EU Action on Intercultural Dialogue

Culture and cultural diversity are basic pillars of the European integration process. Handling the different cultural identities is a huge challenge for the EU in a globalising world. Differences in the way questions are understood may lead to answers on which incorrect or wrong conclusions are based. Different cultures or different interpretations of crucial ideas of freedom, human rights, democracy, society, family, etc. need a careful analysis and much dialogue to make appropriate measures possible and acceptable to all involved. Understanding of differences in value-patterns is basic for the understanding of cultural differences. And understanding of differences is necessary for deepened democracy and political action.

Intercultural dialogue is about exchanging information on values, attitudes, identity and diversity, religious background. It is about living together in respect, tolerance and comprehension for the differences between individuals and the societies they are living in.

Cultural diversity has not to be seen as a problem, but as a

solution. It is a much more challenging point of view if cultural differences are seen as a possibility to create new chances and new successes. Therefore it is important to invest in knowing more of different cultures. Let me take this from an economic and business point of view: for international operating managers it is absolutely crucial to take into account the consequences of cultural diversity in their strategic and daily-based actions. In the international business world, culture management became more important and inevitable. It became inevitable also in the daily life of all of us. Therefore: dialogue is the challenge to overcome differences.

The enlargement of the European Union, coupled with increasing mobility linked to the common market, migration and new trade ties with the rest of the world have led to increased contacts between cultures, religions, ethnic groups and languages. Against this backdrop and in the context of an increasingly multicultural European Union, the development of intercultural competences and the promotion of intercultural dialogue are fundamental. Intercultural dialogue contributes to a number of strategic priorities of the European Union, such as respecting and promoting cultural diversity; favouring the European Union's commitment to solidarity, social justice and reinforced cohesion; allowing the European Union to make its voice heard and realising new efficient partnership with neighbouring countries.

Over the years, intercultural dialogue has become an important element of community action. Indeed, the European Union has for many years encouraged intercultural dialogue – inside and outside the European Union – through various programmes and initiatives. However, it appears necessary today to respond to the need for a deeper and more structured dialogue between cultures, which would involve not only public authorities but also civil society as a whole. This is the reason intercultural dialogue needs to become a lasting and visible priority for the European Union. To realise this objective and to reinforce community action, a first step is to identify, promote and exchange experiences and best practices that would illustrate the possibility, value and efficiency of intercultural dialogue; of a better understanding of differences between cultures.

Cities and regions have an important role to play in taking

actions for disseminating respect for cultural differences and to manage it. A more structured dialogue therefore is an important tool. Indeed, local and regional authorities have major competences in promoting cultural activities and intercultural dialogue and they bear a major responsibility for shaping and supporting the rich variety of cultures. They have a key role in disseminating and applying best practice and exchange of experiences in this field, in particular through their coordination of multi-dimensional local and regional networks in several sectors, involving all relevant actors.

An essential feature of the local and regional dimension is interregional cooperation between local, regional authorities supported through networks. Such networks can promote the dissemination of best practice across the EU and enable valuable experiences to be shared from which mainstream policy can be developed. Such networks also provide opportunities for joint action and partnerships which can stimulate local dialogues and also facilitate the development of exciting projects to get off the ground. The new EGTC-instrument («European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation») is a challenging opportunity to go for an extra-territorial approach.

Such examples exist in several Member States where governments encourage dedicated centres of community cohesion to work together at local level. The organisations with different ethnic/religious/language backgrounds aim at integration, foster better bonds between the different communities and boost the confidence of the local population. They tend to reflect the make-up of their neighbourhood, revealing a common ground between the different communities rather than the differences that exist between them¹.

A second step is to treat intercultural dialogue as a horizontal priority for all relevant community programs, especially for those related to culture, education, youth and citizenship. Finally, 2008 was declared the Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Intercultural dialogue events complement existing community programs and raise awareness of citizens, especially the youth, as to the importance of intercultural dialogue.

The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008) was established by the European Parliament and the Council in a

¹ *The Search for Social Glue*, in «The Economist», 23 February 2008.

Decision² on which the Committee of the Regions issued an Opinion in 2006. In this Opinion we stressed first of all that Europe's strength lies in its diversity. Respect for cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity is one of the basic principles underlying the process of European integration, which is not about levelling out differences or creating uniform identities but fostering greater cooperation and understanding among the peoples of Europe.

This year aims at unifying people in the European Union, by respecting their cultural diversities in their respective countries, regions and cities. During 50 years of integrating Europe efforts were made to remove barriers and frontiers between Member States. Our cities and regions have become territories characterised by diversity and coexistence of many minorities, each group having its own history, culture and religion. So, it is the new way of non-territorial citizenship.

There are reciprocal interaction and influences between religions, spiritual and humanistic traditions and the daily life in European cities and regions where citizens should always be free to practice whichever religion in respect of the choice of each other.

Religious pluralism and direct dialogue between religions and societies is the best way to ensure and to spread mutual understanding and respect. Therefore it is necessary to promote deeper mutual knowledge in order to challenge ignorance and prejudices, unfortunately still present in particular in larger European cities. Spreading good practices about platforms of interfaith dialogue at the local level would help our communities to facilitate integration.

But let me look also from another angle to culture and intercultural actions. We have to highlight the socio-economic benefits that culture can bring, notably how it can help contribute to achieve the EU's Lisbon aims. Cultural activities account for more growth and employment than we previously thought. For a few years now the cultural sectors account for 2.3% of GDP, with an annual turnover of EUR 654 billion. Interestingly, this is more than what the chemical, rubber and plastic industries produce, or even real estate, food or tobacco industries! (Chemicals, rubber and plastic products account for 2.3% of GDP, real estate accounts for 2.1% of GDP, food, beverage and tobacco account for 1.9% of GDP). Moreover,

² Decision n. 1983/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council (18 December 2006).

cultural and creative industries employ at least 5.8 million people in the EU and they are very often highly educated.

2. The Changing Role of Religion in Our Societies

Intercultural dialogue has also much to do with the changing role of religion in our societies. I would like to stress this point since the diverse views on the place and role of religion are deeply rooted in cultural and historical traditions. Views of the relationship between religion and society and of the place that religion can or may assume in the society are very strongly culturally defined. But societies change due to, among other reasons, economic cycles, political changes, globalisation, migration movements, etc.

It is clear that because of changes in the make-up of society – multicultural and multireligious – the debate over religion and state has followed a different path. In this connection – in 2006 – the French President, Nicholas Sarkozy, has argued for an alternative interpretation of secularism (*laïcité*) whereby it is acknowledged that religions are useful for society and that they are a factor for integration, hope and trust. The religious phenomenon is permanently rooted in the society and can constitute an element of stability. In Sarkozy's view, society must be open-minded to religion because it is an important safeguard for a democratic constitutional State; through society's open-mindedness, religion will also display open-mindedness to society. When people feel uncertain and insecure, when some people feel left behind on the margins of society, it must be recognised that religions have the capacity to integrate.

In our European society, we are faced more than ever with the question how the social role of a religion should be fulfilled in a pluralist society, and how religions should take part in the social debate. Some people indeed maintain that religion has no place in the public domain but rather belongs at home in the private sphere. It is assumed that the religious doctrine that people adhere to is a private matter and consequently cannot have any influence on the public or political field. Such an approach places emphasis on a rigid division between the public and non-public identity of people. And this, of course,

cannot be so. A person is obviously not divisible. In public discussions, he/she cannot just distance himself from his fundamental beliefs, because his views determine his moral identity. Not a single moral argumentation – in the public sphere too – stands entirely on its own; it is always implicitly or explicitly supported by a well-defined view of man and the world and by one's private beliefs.

In a democracy it is important that all arguments and points of view be given a chance in the decision-making process, to listen to them and to ensure that they are compatible with the rights and practices of the constitutional State. In a democracy, citizens with differing views must seek consensus but they cannot be forced to make an abstraction of their beliefs. On the contrary, they must take part in participative democracy from their own standpoint. An individual's beliefs inspire his private life and are a motivation for his social actions and commitment.

Let me, in conclusion to this point, deal for a moment with the contemporary paradox: on the one hand, there is the conclusion that religion and beliefs have been transferred from a social and political reality to an individual and psychological reality (sociologists speak of a privatisation of religion and belief), but on the other hand, we see that the social impact of religions and beliefs has only increased; religion and belief have returned to the public forum. For an explanation of this paradox, I would like to turn to the Flemish philosopher, Piet Raes, for whom the answer to this paradox is quite simple: secularism (*laïcité*) has won. Where this is not yet the case, a movement is under way in Europe for the separation of the Church and the State. The political sphere is becoming more and more religion-free. Churches are increasingly being recognised as institutions which are part of the civil domain and from now on belong to civil society. According to the Lisbon Treaty, Europe will in future deal with the churches as it deals with the social partners and civil society... But Raes argues that the new relationship between religion and politics has unexpected consequences. In the struggle between religion and politics, politics has borrowed a certain ideal namely the fulfilment of human freedom, for example by absorbing Christian charity into the neutral welfare state. The battle has been fought, but at the same time politics has also lost its inspiring power. That's why today politics needs

religion to supply the unifying power that politics no longer possesses. Religion, not as a player in the political field, but as a civil force.

3. Importance of Intercultural Dialogue for Promoting Inclusive Cities, Regions and Societies

For the Committee of the Regions the basic principle underlying the process of European integration is respect for and the promotion of cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is a source of richness that needs to be preserved, whilst its virtues need to be extolled as one of the main characteristics of Europe's identity.

We have to bear in mind however the different discussions on identity, and above all European identity when dealing with this topic. According to a report of the Group of Policy Advisers of the European Commission³, the discussion about identity often overlaps with that on diversity. Identities are not something that you peel off like layers or tie together (like an onion or a garlic clove). Identity is always relational and contextual. This means that you can be Italian, one minute, a Venetian another, and then European when you go to Japan or the US. Identities and cultures exist only in the plural for each individual, and their relevance does not depend on an *a priori* hierarchy between them, but rather on the specific context in which we find ourselves. For example, during the recent BSE crisis, there was a revaluation of the European identity by the British, in the face of an inability to cope with the problem at national level. There might be also convenient trade-offs between national and European identities as the experience of changing the Deutsche mark for the euro showed in Germany. These are interesting cases to look at because they show the ways in which a more favourable perception of Europe can take place in everyday life and at an institutional level.

The question of migration is linked to the perception of identity. Our societies are becoming more and more multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious as a result of immigration. With the current process of ageing we can only expect migrations to increase in the future. An «open» identity, not based on the establishment of «walls» between places and

³ See http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/policy_advisers/archives/publications/docs/brussels_capital.pdf.

people should be considered as a distinctive feature of Europe. Speaking many languages, understanding the language and culture of others, would be a good way for acknowledging our plural identity.

Therefore we can confirm that intercultural dialogue is, in this respect, a key instrument in promoting understanding and cultural diversity.

1. Intercultural dialogue can promote inclusion by encouraging greater understanding, in particular in relation to cultural traditions, religious practice and history. We know of a recent best practice example organised by the British Council who is leading a European-wide project «Inclusion and Diversity in Education», together with partners from ten education authorities aimed at promoting social cohesion and raising educational standards in culturally inclusive schools. Uniquely, it brings together pupils, head teachers and policy makers to discuss how inclusion and diversity in schools can best be managed and to implement school-based projects which will set best practice standards in the field. «Inclusion and Diversity in Education» will build lasting networks which will focus on the common challenges presented by immigration and cultural diversity to school education in the participating countries. This will lead to the publication of shared best practice guidelines for policy makers and school leaders that promote social cohesion and culturally inclusive schools.

2. It can also guard against the risks of both cultural indifference and levelling down as well as the growth of racist and xenophobic attitudes, which encourage anti-social behaviour. The Committee of the Regions has reiterated that intercultural cooperation needs to be stepped up so as to ensure that cultural differences are an instrument for strengthening and uniting people in a multilingual, multicultural Europe.

3. Intercultural dialogue can promote inclusion by helping to instil the basic values of private, social and civic life, such as solidarity, tolerance, democracy and understanding for cultural diversity. Intercultural dialogue can foster the ability to communicate between different cultural groups and to take part in civic society. Such dialogue is vital since racism, xenophobia and friction are on the increase in today's societies.

The right to be different does not justify different rights before the law.

4. Furthermore, intercultural dialogue can assist in alleviating the social exclusion, isolation and marginalisation of disadvantaged social groups. Culture and participation in cultural activities can provide them with new possibilities for strengthening their identity, their self-esteem and achieving a new status in society. Cities and regions are central clusters in this perspective.

5. We also believe that when framing youth policies, the measures developed must include the cultural and gender diversity of young people of foreign origin, using their potential as a resource for intercultural mediation, and encouraging the establishment of dedicated forums for cross-cultural encounters. Associations and organisations are basic networks for social life. They are part of the basis-democracy. They are best placed to discuss ideas, to confront interests, etc. They are important for the further development of democracy. The more associations you have the more balance you find between them. Regular contacts between different associations and their differences in view are necessary for developing a society of tolerance. Compromises and mutual understanding are part of the meeting place where differences meet. Cities and regions and their authorities have the task to give oxygen to associations so a better understanding of cultural differences gets chances.

The role of cities and regions in promoting these inclusive approaches is fundamental. Through their proximity to citizens, they are strategically well placed to respond to the specific needs and demands of the different cultural groups within the EU and to effectively mobilise local and regional communities. They can help to promote inclusion in intercultural dialogue by coordinating with other policy sectors such as education, training, enterprise and employment strategies.

4. The Role of the CoR as a Promoter of Inclusive Cities and Regions in Intercultural Dialogue

The CoR is the meeting place of local and regional stake-

holders. In 2006, we organised a conference and exhibition on intercultural dialogue together with the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission. The event showcased the results of the programmes and initiatives on the theme of intercultural dialogue backed at European level up to the present day. It also served as part of our preparations for the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008.

The conference provided a platform for discussions from policy makers, those responsible for education, training and culture, stakeholders and, in particular, young people, on the best ways to integrate intercultural dialogue into actions at national, regional and European level.

A future event on this issue is planned for November 2008, again at the Committee of the Regions. It will be a forum this time and should examine the results of the year and the most appropriate ways to provide sustainability to the initiatives from the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

We are also very interested in showing local and regional best practices. Organised by the EU Committee of the Regions and the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional Policy, the yearly event called «Open Days» brings together EU decision makers, national, local and regional politicians, policy experts and representatives of business, banking and civil society organisations in Brussels. Last year 5,000 people took part in events including 150 seminars and workshops on different themes.

I think that existing programmes for cooperation between regions and town twinning make an important contribution to enriching cultural cooperation and that these initiatives should be made use of to the full.

5. Intercultural Dialogue and E-Inclusion

There is another aspect to inclusion the CoR promotes: e-inclusion. For the CoR it is vital that all citizens have access to the benefits of information and communication technologies in order to improve their daily life. We therefore attach much importance to the EU's e-inclusion strategy and related initiatives. Promoting e-inclusion at the local and regional level

can enhance citizens' quality of life and integration in their local community as well as stimulate competitiveness and growth of new businesses and better, more efficient and personalised public and private services, open and accessible to all.

Local and regional authorities have a key role to play in e-inclusion by supporting broadband access at affordable rates, setting examples for multi-channel, user-centred e-government, driving forward digital literacy and creating favourable environments for ICT businesses and research.

Regions and cities are encouraged to use ICT to tackle challenges related to the different make-up of their population, by connecting them and providing services, whatever their nationality, culture, identity, social situation or location. Special attention to the ICT-challenges for specific target groups in society is needed in education- and training-programmes for young people and those dealing with these target groups.

In the future, the CoR will call for a greater emphasis on the involvement of the local and regional level in national or EU initiatives in the field of e-inclusion, because this is where the most creative, innovative and well-targeted actions for an all inclusive digital society can be found.

Conclusion

Culture and cultural diversity is important in the further development of the European Union. 27 different Member States and their neighbours and the differences between all the regions in these Member States urge for a more and better understanding. Immigration, the open market, put forward a cultural variety that will be the basis for the future society; our living together in differences.

Europe has the duty to succeed and to demonstrate that people can live together in spite of their cultural and religious differences. The motto of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue is «Together in Diversity», but we have still to prove that in Europe people can live together in mutual respect and tolerance.

Cities and regions have a strategic place in promoting inclusion

through intercultural dialogue and first and foremost in managing it. Through their position, they are able to promote multi-dimensional partnerships and networks bringing together all relevant actors benefiting the whole community.

The Committee of the Regions will continue to place intercultural dialogue at centre stage in its work. We will continue to place emphasis in particular on initiatives in the field of cultural and linguistic diversity. We will endeavour to enhance the visibility and the role of intercultural dialogue as a useful tool for connecting to each other and enhancing respect for each others' culture and differences. And we look forward to organising our next forum in November to showcase the best practice examples of the year at local and regional level.

I am very impressed with the course on intercultural dialogue and human rights offered by the University of Padua. Promotion of intercultural understanding is also an important element of human rights as respect for them is a prerequisite for any dialogue. In following this way we are building the new cities and regions for the future. We are building a new and deepened European democracy in partnership. We are building a «Human Civitas». Paraphrasing Jean Monnet: «Nous ne coalisons pas des états, nous coalisons des hommes, tous et toutes comme partenaires, tous et toutes inclus».

In this spirit, I thank you and wish you fruitful discussions on this issue and every success in your studies.

