INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: CHALLENGES FOR SOCIOEDUCATIONAL ACTORS IN CATALONIA

EL DIÁLOGO INTERRELIGIOSO EN EL ESPACIO PÚBLICO: RETOS PARA LOS AGENTES SOCIOEDUCATIVOS EN CATALUÑA

DIÁLOGO INTER-RELIGIOSO NO ESPAÇO PÚBLICO: DESAFIOS PARA OS AGENTES SOCIOEDUCACIONAIS NA CATALUNHA

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the concept and the elements that encourage intercultural and interreligious dialogue, from the point of view of experts involved in the management of religious diversity in the public space: policy-makers, associations and academics in Catalonia. It responds to a comprehensive-descriptive study with a qualitative approach and an hermeneutic-interpretative rationale as the most appropriate methodology to examine the accounts of the three aforementioned groups. Eleven individual semi-structured interviews have been conducted with representatives of each group. The results reveal different but complementary definitions of interreligious dialogue: the relationship between culture and religion, dialogue as a first step of mutual recognition and the benefits of it. The participants contribute elements that facilitate this dialogue. It concludes with a management model of religious diversity in the public space with community and educational proposals to guide future prevention, mediation and social cohesion policies in Catalonia.

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1. Introduction

Differing religious traditions have always been in contact, but their way of seeing each other has always been exclusive and their rivalry has been at the root of many confrontations and social conflicts (Javier, 2014). Currently in Europe contact between religions has increased due to immigration, turning the presence of religion in the public sphere into a more complex issue and confirming Kettels 2009 prediction: “ Debates over the involvement of religion in the public sphere look set to be one of the defining themes of the 21st century” (Kettel, 2009, p1). It is true that religious ideas provoke argument and controversy, often giving rise to extremely strong emotions (Brie, 2011).

Hozu and Frunza (2013) argue that two main principles lie behind the need to debate religion in the modern public sphere, characterized up to now by secularism. Firstly, the rise of the radicalization caused by globalization makes it necessary to reevaluate the place of religion in the public sphere in a non-violent way. Secondly, we should turn our attention to the ambiguous relationships between states and religious organisations. Aaroe (2012) identifies two opposing views of the relationship between the state and religion/s: that religion should form part of the public sphere; and that it should not. Their study reveals that both these postures tend towards religious intolerance, although for different reasons: the first because it projects stereotypes onto minority religions, and the second due to the principle of secularism, which is not always respected in practice, since states often claim to defend it selectively in order to grant more or less rights to different admissions (Bowen, 2008). In this context, religious diversity appears in the public sphere when conflict becomes visible, for example when places of worship are built or in debates around religious symbols.

Given this situation, an interreligious dialogue is needed that would help overcome such conflicts. Prieto (2014), along the same lines, argues that the different cultural and religious traditions of the world should take steps towards accepting religious pluralism in order to strengthen their own identities and to affirm the religious presence in secular societies. For their part, Dupuis (2009) and more recently Tamayo (2012) have shown an interest in bringing religious pluralism and the theology of religious pluralism closer to society. There is a theological reflection on and through dialogue in an interreligious context, built on the basis of a Catholic theology which values religions in themselves.

Interreligious dialogue: towards social cohesion, prevention and mediation in conflict situations

The European Union White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2006) defines dialogue as a process involving the respectful and open exchange of points of view on the basis of mutual understanding and respect between individuals and groups of different origins and cultural, religious and linguistic heritages. The principles of interreligious dialogue aim to foster both an ability to embrace and
respect the diversity of beliefs in order to identify common religious experiences and an openness towards difference from the standpoint of critical and participatory citizenship (Torradeflot, 2012). This presupposes a willingness to rethink one’s own religious ideas in the light of others’, oriented towards mutual enrichment and transformation (Santiago & Corpas, 2012).

This view represents a huge challenge for interreligious dialogue, since it is not based on an exclusive perspective or on the predominance of one religion over another. Faith in the superiority of one religion above all other belief systems can give rise to hatred, exclusion and persecution, causing violent and sometimes extremely violent incidents. Dialogue should seek to overcome these barriers (Tamayo, 2005; Torradeflot, 2011). Intercultural prevention and mediation of conflicts is also useful for averting xenophobia, racism and other religious phobias, especially antisemitism, Islamophobia and Christianophobia. Thus interreligious dialogue is not an exchange of courtesies, traditions or monologues; it involves “an encounter in the depths and richness of humanity’s religious life” (Torradeflot, 2011, p. 5) between people or groups with different cultural, religious and linguistic heritages, in order for the religions involved to mutually understand and respect each other. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue involves receptive, active and reciprocal listening and honest testimony, respect and equality (UNESCO, 2015).

Two types of interreligious dialogue can be defined: the one informal and the other organized (Torradeflot et al., 2012). The first is the living dialogue which arises in the different contexts where people coexist in plurality. Thus, people of differing faiths and beliefs live and work together, sharing their lives and common spaces: shops, parks, school playgrounds, after-school activities, the works canteen, etc. They help eradicate prejudice and false ideas of worship. These dialogues take the form of parades and others of a spiritual orientation meet to exchange the theological-philosophical understanding of different religious faiths. The aim is to reach a common understanding of each religious tradition’s approach to and explanation of reality. These may be single-issue groups discussing peace, the role of women in religions, immigration, etc. They help eradicate prejudice and false ideas by widening views of the topics considered.

In spiritual dialogue groups, believers, mystics and others of a spiritual orientation meet to explain to each other their spiritual lives and forms of worship. These dialogues take the form of participation in practices such as meditation/silence and mutual education rather than debate or common action. According to Pannikar (2005) this is a particularly deep dialogue which reconciles people and inspires other forms of dialogue.

Social cohesion and mediation groups are found in highly culturally and ethnically diverse municipalities and neighbourhoods and are made up of members of civil society organizations and municipal social, educational and health service workers. Their objectives are to foment cohesion and coexistence, to struggle for peace and against discrimination, and to defend civil rights and disadvantaged groups.

Lastly, institutional representation groups are composed of religious authorities: official spokespersons for their communities who organise themselves in councils, forums or assemblies. Their objectives are to make their voices heard and to lead the dialogue of their respective religious communities. They tend to be the preferred groups in communication with the public administration.
Interreligious dialogue in the immediate community is the closest to people’s everyday lives and therefore has the greatest positive effect on residents’ wellbeing. It can also promote and enrich citizen participation, avert conflict or mediate when it breaks out and work towards solidarity and justice (Torradeflot, 2012).

2. Methodology

This article corresponds to the second part of a larger project (Direcció General d’Afers Religiosos, Ref.2014RELIG00019). It adopts a sequential, exploratory (Creswell & Plano, 2011), mixed-method design (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddie, 2010). In this second phase of the study the aim is to nuance the regulatory needs for managing religious diversity in the public sphere identified in the previous phase, basing ourselves on intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and taking as our framework for understanding the issue the views of three collective socioeducational actors: public administrators, community organizers and academics. The specific objectives of the article are:
- To understand these actors’ concepts of intercultural and interreligious dialogue
- To describe the factors favouring intercultural and interreligious dialogue according to these actors
- To identify and propose community and/or policy initiatives that may favour intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

A qualitative study of a descriptive-comprehensive type was chosen to describe and interpret this experience in its real contexts (Maykut & Morehouse, 1999), using eleven individual semi-structured interviews with the specialists from the three profiles identified above. This approach justifies the study’s hermeneutic-interpretative theoretical grounding, which aimed to garner participants’ narratives on the definition of and the factors favouring interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the public sphere, from the standpoint of their own experience and the meaning they attributed to it.

Participants

Eleven participants were chosen intentionally according to criteria such as their calibre and standing as experts and social actors working in the management of cultural diversity in the public sphere. Three were chosen from the public administration, six from the academic field and two from civil society organizations. The data were collected between March and April 2015. Table 1 summarises participants’ professional profiles.

Table 1. Professional profiles of the participants interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Migrastudium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>University lecturer, philosopher and theologian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Lecturer in the Theology Faculty of Catalonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Lecturer at the Centre for the Study of Traditions of Wisdom (CETR).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>General Direction of Religious Affairs. Department of Governance and Institutional Relations, Generalitat de Catalunya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Unesco for Interreligious Dialogue - UNESCOCAT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Lecturer at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Lecturer at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Religious Affairs Office. Councillor for Women and Civil Rights, Barcelona City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Lecturer at the Universitat Abat Oliva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 11</td>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Catalan Islamic Committee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Techniques and procedure

The outcomes of the eleven individual semi-structured interviews (Cabrera, 2011) were recorded on audio in order to obtain direct data. 20 questions following a logical order – starting with sociodemographic, introductory and basic questions – explored five main dimensions of content: (i) the conceptual approach: spirituality and religiosity; (ii) the religious orientation of secular states; (iii) the promotion of interreligious dialogue; (iv) the need for management of religious diversity to counter discrimination, patriarchy and interreligious conflict; and (v) actions, initiatives and development in the educational sphere. In this article we present these socioeducational actors’ views on dimensions (iii) and (v): the concept and promotion of interreligious dialogue and suggestions for action, i.e. initiatives for managing religious diversity with a view to fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue in the public sphere, put forward as proposals in the section on conclusions.

Data analysis

A qualitative analysis of the information taken from the interviews was carried out using the QS-RNVIVO 11 program to facilitate activities such as the segmentation of the text into quotations, coding and the writing of commentaries (Gibbs, 2012).

After the interviews were fully transcribed, a qualitative analysis was undertaken, divided into three phases:

1. Coding. The transcripts were read to create the first codings of the text and to group these into categories. This process began by defining the categories and indicators, which were derived deductively from previously published studies and theoretical concepts (Augé 2001; Gómez, Alonso & Cabeza 2011; Henry 2001). This first reading of the interviews was undertaken by the research team.

2. Category triangulation. The research team reached a consensus on the categories for analysis. Categorization took place through a twofold process: inductive, since the initial categories with their subcategories and the relationships between them were developed from the transcripts; and deductive, since the categories were studied in the light of the regulatory needs identified within the theoretical model in the prior phase of the project (Álvarez & Essomba, 2012; Corbi, 2007; Dietz, 2008; Melloni, 2003; Panniker, 2010; Torradeflot, 2012; UNESCO, 2005). The documentary analysis carried out in project’s first phase lead to the identification of four broad blocks of regulatory needs for managing religious diversity (Vilà et al., 2015):
   - The need to clarify concepts and the religious orientation of secular states.
   - The need for management of religious diversity: discrimination, patriarchy and interreligious conflict.
   - Fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue.
   - The need for actions, initiatives and development in the educational sphere.

Using this model, once the initial, provisional system of categories and subcategories had been set up, the research team coded a small sample of texts individually. This was followed by a group analysis which led to a restructuring and final consensus on the definitive system of categories used to code all the units of analysis from the interviews:
In this article we present the results obtained from the third category on intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

3. Obtaining and checking results. A content analysis was carried out for more in-depth sequencing of the information yielded. For each category the information obtained was analysed on two levels: (a) a general one, to obtain an overall view of the categories specified, and (b) according to the profiles of the interviewees, in order to nuance the data in each of the three categories.

The article concludes with proposals for community initiatives and/or specific formal and informal actions to foster dialogue and favour its management in the public sphere. It should be noted that while private individuals were interviewed, our analysis seeks a transversal dimension among the views of the three groups, but without claiming to represent or exhaust the totality of the opinions of these groups (civil society organisations, the public administration and the academic world in the Catalan context). For this reason a horizontal and perspectival triangulation was carried out whose purpose was to compare experiences and narratives among the different groups, paying attention to both common features and divergences their concepts of and views on intercultural and interreligious dialogue in Catalonia.
3. Results

Definitions of intercultural and interreligious dialogue

The narratives from the three points of view yielded differing concepts of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. As the coding matrix in Table 3 shows, the percentage of the weighting of the coded words in this category (column 3.1) is not the same in all groups: it figures more heavily in the narrative of the academic group than in the other two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3.1. Definition of intercultural and interreligious dialogue</th>
<th>3.2. Factors favouring intercultural and interreligious dialogue</th>
<th>3.3. Existing community and/or political initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>21.65%</td>
<td>2.76%</td>
<td>33.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisations</td>
<td>19.69%</td>
<td>23.16%</td>
<td>22.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic world</td>
<td>58.66%</td>
<td>74.08%</td>
<td>43.41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More detailed analysis of the most frequent words and their meaning from the interviews afforded the identification of varying patterns in the definition of intercultural and interreligious dialogue in each of the three groups.

The academics tended to see interreligious dialogue as that between individuals (of different religious traditions), since it is individuals who of necessity approach each other and respectfully exchange their beliefs. To paraphrase Pannikar (2003: 20): “dialogue should take place on all levels, but in the mystic sense, particularly at the roots of each identity and tradition”.

There are various different levels of interreligious dialogue (form the most institutional to the social and individual) and, as the word cloud below illustrates (Figure 1), in this narrative they appear nuanced by their purposes: the recognition of the other and the synthesis involved in change, transformation and development.

Another thing is that after the first step, your recognition of the other, the second step is that after getting to know each other, can we enrich each other? And also, can we transform each other? (Org. 4, Group 3, ref. 3)

This is the capacity to be called into question by the other while still remaining oneself, and of advancing towards white as the sum of all colours, towards an integrating synthesis of a higher order in which no party is subsumed and which adds up to more than the sum of its parts:

White isn’t purple or green or red. White is another colour, a higher synthesis of all the colours. Mixtures are intermediate situations whereas synthesis is white. So are we moving towards white? Looking at it mystically I would say that we are (Org 5, Group 3, ref. 5).

Thus this is a narrative which shares the UNESCO definition of interreligious dialogue, which brings horizontality into line with equality, and sees dialogue, situated on an individual level, as “the exchange of words and reciprocal listening which commits believers from different religious traditions on an equal footing.” It is also consistent with the concepts found in the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (EU 2006), where it is defined as a process involving the respectful and open exchange of viewpoints between individuals and groups of varying origins and with different cultural, religious and linguistic heritages on the basis of mutual understanding and respect.

Figure 1. Word cloud showing significant terms from the academic experts’ narratives defining the category of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Created by the authors using information generated by Nvivo software (People / We can / of this / dialogue / religions / colour / white / purpose / synthesis / giving)

Interreligious dialogue involves the willingness to rethink one’s own ideas in the light of others’, opening oneself to mutual enrichment and transformation (Santiago & Corpas, 2012):
The public administrators group referred to intercultural dialogue in order to define interreligious dialogue: religious dialogue goes further than intercultural dialogue but is one form of the latter. As the word cloud (Figure 2) shows, “interreligious” and “intercultural” appear next to the word “dialogue,” the most used in the narrative. The relationship between culture and religion was drawn on to define intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Cultural diversity emerges significantly in the diversity of religions and beliefs and should be channelled positively through dialogue between cultures and religions:

I understand that interreligious dialogue can be a form of intercultural dialogue, but it goes a little further (...) because they may also be people from the same culture with different religions (Org 1, Group 1, ref. 1-2)

We live in a diverse, plural society and (...) that means we have to live with this diversity and we have to take advantage of it to enrich our lives, to build a more cohesive society (Org 1, Group 1, ref. 2-3).

Figure 2. Word cloud showing the most significant words from the public administrators' definitions of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Created by the authors using information generated by Nvivo software. (I understand / discussion / debate / interreligious / dialogue / intercultural / beliefs / demonstrate / listen)

The treemap below also shows that the definition and meaning of dialogue in the narrative of the public administrators was closely linked to the value of listening and to understanding others around diversity and different beliefs. Although knowledge of the other in itself does not guarantee dialogue, it is an unavoidable requisite. And if, as Moliner & Aguilar (2010) remark, such knowledge is offered in a critical spirit and with the necessary empathy, it is sure to favour a culture of dialogue enabling coexistence and cultural exchange.

Figure 3. Treemap showing the most significant words from the public administrators’ narratives on interreligious dialogue (Dialogue / intercultural / beliefs / debate / demonstrate / diversity / I understand / interreligious / discussion / listen)
The interviews with the community organisers yielded a narrative of interreligious dialogue which referred less to its purpose and more to the enormous benefits it offers in itself: improved self-knowledge, the relativisation of one’s own point of view, the ability to be self-critical in order to open oneself to others and, in the last instance, its social benefits in terms of enhancing citizenship. In Torradeflot’s words (2012), the principles of interreligious dialogue are oriented towards developing the abilities to listen, to respect the diversity of beliefs, to identify common religious experiences and to be open to difference, giving priority to human rights and democracy and offering solutions to problems from the standpoint of critical and participatory citizenship. One expert from the civil society organisations put it this way:

But when we make an effort to build a relationship, we create contact between the different parties and this enables us to enjoy mutual awareness and recognition, which facilitates all our tasks and turns us into a more organized and civilized society, without a doubt (Org 2, Group 2, ref. 1).

Figure 4. Word cloud showing significant terms from the community organisers’ narratives defining interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

Created by the authors using information generated by Nvivo software. (dialoguing / beliefs / knowledge / talking / person / know / you reach / dialogue / interreligious / religion)

When interreligious dialogue takes place in the immediate social environment, apart from helping avert and resolve religious conflicts, it enriches citizen participation, creating conditions which foster solidarity and justice (Torradeiplot, 2011). These outcomes confirm and are consistent with the three purposes for which UNESCO (2015) understands that interreligious dialogue is practiced and promoted:

a) to live in a spirit of openness and social cohesion, a challenge to society which the public administrators see as highly important in managing cultural and religious diversity.

b) to work together with a view to the comprehensive development of people of different religions, which, in Pannikar’s view (2003), should arise particularly in the mystic sense at the spiritual roots of each tradition and identity. The fear that some groups and communities have of losing their identities, or the natural desire for wholeness, preservation and continuity stemming from a biased, ethnocentric and superior perception of one’s own religion can lead to closed-mindedness, exclusion and even hatred. Interreligious dialogue faces the challenge of finding ways to break these barriers (Torradeiplot, 2011). According to one of the academic experts interviewed, overcoming barriers of difference involves taking advantage of natural opportunities to approach the other in order to create common spaces and promote dialogue:

We have to make the most of the opportunities, we have to get to know each other even more, we’re very reluctant to approach others. Working more on the sensibilities which can bring us together and the naturalness of this because it creates shared spaces (Org 5, Group 3, ref. 2).

c) to appreciate spiritual values and understand in more depth the different religious heritages. Understanding their common features enables us to learn about and appreciate the differences more fully. From this perspective religious dialogue encompasses working on one’s personal spiritual dimension, and not only the aspect of religious practice:

I don’t know how to say this: religious beliefs or the adoption and practice of religious beliefs can really be socially marginal (Org 1, Group 1, ref. 1).

I think that knowing people who think differently from you helps you to question your own faith or way of life, and therefore I think that it’s really important especially for this knowledge that you get to know people who have other ways of life or beliefs (Org 1, Group 2, ref. 1).

Dialogue is the next step after the simple realization that pluralism exists, and dialogue includes an interest for the other and an ability to let yourself be questioned by the other (Org 5, Group 3, ref. 1).

Interreligious dialogue in the wider sense of the term cannot be conceived without including atheism, agnosticism, religious diversity and different beliefs and spiritualities in the conversation.
Factors favouring interreligious and intercultural dialogue

When speaking of the salient factors which favour interreligious and intercultural dialogue, differing patterns can also be observed among the different groups interviewed, as Table 3 shows. Thus, in the academic experts’ narrative the weight of the information coded in this category is significantly higher, particularly in comparison with the administrators’ narrative, where its importance was minimal, in the light of this column’s percentages (see 3.2, Factors favouring intercultural and interreligious dialogue).

In the academic experts’ view, according to their word frequency count, currently interreligious dialogue is an important factor for social cohesion, and is consistent with the need for a new interreligious sensibility (Torradefflot, 2011) and the existence and experience of religious diversity in our context (Figure 5).

Among the main aspects highlighted by this group for fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue, three fundamental points were insisted on:

A) AMONG THE COMMUNITY

- Mutual understanding and the fostering of contact at grassroots level in order to overcome barriers to difference, taking advantage of naturally-occurring opportunities for contact to create shared arenas for dialogue:

In any case we need to work so that the real situation can be expressed, we need to create all kinds of platforms from the arts to the social level (Org 5, Group 3, ref. 2)

B) AMONG THE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

- Communicative competence, knowing how to explain oneself, particularly among religious leaders and representatives of religious bodies, in order to favour intercultural and interreligious encounters:

...the inability of many of the religious leaders and the representatives of the religious communities to explain themselves, and that’s a communication problem, not that they don’t know who they are and what they’re doing, but they don’t know how to get across to the public at large who they are (Org 2, Group 3, ref. 2)

It was also seen as important to train the media to recognize, explain and make intelligible the phenomenon of religion and the diversity of beliefs, since there is wide public ignorance around these issues. The risk, if this prerequisite is not met, is the spread of errors, stereotypes and prejudices in throughout society.

- Formal education in awareness and understanding of cultural and religious diversity. Specifically, one academic expert argued that the lack of religious education in schools results in ignorance of one’s own religious background, thereby obstructing intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

But they haven’t received any of this, normally, from the state schools or some of the private ones, and they know nothing about it, and this means that they’re not capable of understanding the world they live in and the world they’ve lived in (Org 3, Group 3, ref. 1).
C) AMONG POLITICIANS

- The role of the public administration and the government in favouring interreligious dialogue, explicitly recommending independence of the relevant organisations and departments from political parties and tendencies:

  "I'm a bit pessimistic because I think the decisions that have been taken in the last 14 or 15 years have been political, not educational. It's like a game of tennis: the party in power goes one way and the next one goes another and let's not mention the religious question because it's an issue rooted in the culture... it's a difficult issue (Org 4, Group 2, ref. 3)."

The public administrators highlighted the importance of the social and community levels, similarly to those who argue for dialogue between all grassroots agents (religious communities, residents, businesses, etc.) to promote mutual understanding:

"The priority is to be able to open the door of the place of worship every day, if they have one, and do their activities and once you've done that, they don't have many other resources left, right? (Org 1, Group 1, ref. 1)."

There is clearly a need to create instances promoting such encounters and to invite all organisations to participate in this grass-roots dialogue, at the level of the associations.

Lastly, from the standpoint of the civil society organisations, as can be observed in the word cloud below (Figure 6), multiconfessionalism requires us to be aware of differences and to see them positively in order to build bridges through dialogue and to create a public image of religion which is more open to the Catholic tradition.

![Figure 6. Word cloud featuring the most significant words from the community organisers’ narratives on the category of factors favouring interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Created by the authors using information generated by Nvivo software. (Exists / non-confessionalism / difference / Catholic / dialogue / Christian / family / calendar / always / cultural)](image-url)

4. Discussion and conclusions

although the public administration, the academic world and the civil society organisations all defined interreligious dialogue differently, their ideas were complementary. The first group stressed the relationship between culture and religion in terms of the importance of listening and understanding, two significant factors in dialogue. The relationship between religion and culture has been widely discussed in anthropology, sociology and philosophy (Morgan & Sandage, 2016), suggesting a cultural mediation of religious experience. For their part, the academics approached the issue on an individual level, since dialogue is established between individuals. Partners in dialogue should recognize each other mutually and let their beliefs be called into question by the other, which leads to a deepening awareness of one's own identity: belonging to a religious group was seen as a social or collective dimension (Huddy, 2003). Finally, the community organisers pointed out the benefits of interreligious dialogue both for individuals and for society as a whole, since it promotes and facilitates more critical and participatory citizenship, as Torradeflot (2012) argues.

Participants also saw groups for more in-depth spiritual exchange, study groups and in-depth life dialogue groups as different types of dialogue. The public administrators did not explicitly refer to dialogue groups represented in the institutions, but implicitly indicated the importance of creating such instances. It was the community organisations who directly called for these partnerships to be set up.

Lastly, it is important to stress the role of education in awareness and knowledge of cultural and religious diversity, as the interviewees concluded. Knowing about the diversity and depth of religious traditions and traditional wisdom and about one's own religious background allows for personal enrichment and mutual understanding, facilitates intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and averts fundamentalist attitudes. Thus we should offer basic education in the understanding of religious
diversity and non-religious beliefs such as atheism, agnosticism or indifference. Morgan and Sandage (2016) argue that mental rigidity is linked to stereotypes, prejudices and even discrimination on cultural and religious grounds. Thus awareness of one’s own spirituality and of cultural and religious diversity can be a starting point for overcoming such discriminatory trends.

If we see the data obtained in terms of the systems in Bronfenbrenner’s (1992) ecological theory (see Table 3 for the relative weight in the narratives of the three groups of category 3.3, concerning currently existing community and/or political initiatives), our findings shed light on how we should build proposals for managing religious diversity in order to foster intercultural and inter-religious dialogue in the public sphere.

The microsystem is the person’s everyday environment, the level on which a life dialogue can arise. The family is one of the main microsystems; its sphere can be defined as private and it is where a religion, a belief, a spiritual faith or a philosophy of life is experienced and/or shared. The school is a more formal context of religious diversity and should take advantage of this opportunity to foster such living, everyday dialogue. Informal sites such as the school playground are natural areas of contact which can foster mutual understanding, as Torradeflot (2012) remarks, and as some of our participants indicated when describing the importance of the community in fomenting interreligious dialogue. In the formal sphere, the study of religions enables us to understand both religious diversity and each child’s own background, also enabling us to explain their families’ traditions and beliefs, a factor underlined by the academics and in the literature. Thus Moliner and Aguilar (2010) argue that if this knowledge is offered in a critical spirit and with the necessary empathy, it can ensure the fostering of a culture of dialogue enabling coexistence and cultural exchange. Elősegui (2009) advocates intercultural education with a sound pedagogical structure in the area of education in values. This is a basic set of values involving a wide range of elements, from hospitality and awareness of the other to consideration and our unavoidable responsibility for solidarity towards all others. Elősegui calls urgently for a radical ethical education, capable of overcoming all types of selfishness, and thus making rewarding forms of intercultural coexistence possible.

In the mesosystem, the area of relationships between microsystems, groups and/or dialogue initiatives for mutual recognition can be set up. Here also schools represent the ideal sphere for forging links between religious and non-religious organisations and for encounters between students with different attitudes towards religion (Weisse, 2009; Jackson 2015), thus forming a mesosystem which supports mutual recognition. Moliner and Aguilar (2010) and Weisse (2009) suggest that experts from the various communities should be consulted in the development of curricula and educational materials. Schools can organise a range of activities for mutual recognition, not only with students but also their families, oriented towards discovering the other: for example tea parties with typical dishes in which members explain how the food relates to their beliefs, exhibitions with the families’ graphic/plastic expressions of religious art, etc. These are sites which can nurture the identity of each person and group of different beliefs, at the same time as bringing these diverse identities face to face. The mesosystem enables us to set up dialogues in a context of naturalness, closeness to the other, and openness to others in shared public spaces.

The exosystem is represented by the groups for study, spiritual dialogue and social cohesion and mediation described by Torradeflot (2011), since these influence people’s lives more indirectly. These are dialogues promoted by civil society organisations, as they themselves mentioned in our study, but which require partnerships with the state; the public administrators, however, did not position themselves explicitly with regard to this issue in our interviews. The potential of these two categories of participants lies in their power to help eradicate prejudices and foster cohesion in towns and neighbourhoods, amongst other things.

Lastly, the macrosystem consists of society’s overall belief systems: in our case, regarding religion, religious diversity and interreligious dialogue. It is of the utmost urgency that we adopt policies on religious issues which enable us to take advantage of the diversity of our cultural and religious heritage, in line with Buades and Vidal’s (2007) ideas on the diversity of beliefs, which call for the political autonomy and public cooperation of the religions in the quest for common ground. It was for the same reason that various participants in this study, from the political perspective, called for the political autonomy of all organisations, including government bodies such as the Department of Religious Affairs.

One of the limitations of this study can be attributed to the composition of our sample, since it does not represent all of the thirteen faiths co-existing in Catalonia. While on the one hand we interviewed two theologians and one person of Islamic faith, representing only two faiths, it is also true that Catalan society, according to the Religious Map of Catalonia (2014), is mainly composed of Catholics (58%), followed by atheists (16%) and...
agnostics (12%), while Islam, at .48%, is the most represented minority faith. Also we should note that the first steps towards interreligious dialogue in Catalonia were taken by experts either from the Catholic tradition or from a range of different religious traditions.

In the future, interreligious dialogue in Catalonia should provide a platform for all the religious faiths in order not to be biased towards exclusivity or privileging one religion over all others – in our case, Catholicism over the other twelve faiths. This is one factor which may contribute to eradicating the radicalization, particularly among young people, that we are currently experiencing in the European Union.

Notes

1 Partial outcomes of a study funded by the General Direction of Religious Affairs of the Generalitat de Catalunya. If the article is accepted we will provide the title and code of the project.

2 The word clouds and treemaps presented in this article maintain the original words from the interviews, carried out in Catalan. This is why they appear in this language. Among the most cited, we provide here translations of: diàleg (dialogue), interreligiós (interreligious), diversitat (diversity), religió (religion), conèixer (to know/understand).

References


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