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Identity Formation in Europe by Mutual Recognition in Interreligious Dialogue

1. Introduction

1.1. „Interreligious dialogue can (also) contribute to a stronger consensus within society regarding the solutions to social problems".[1] This quote from the 2008 White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living Together as Equals in Dignity" marks the first instance of religion being addressed in the context of intercultural understanding by the Council of Europe. Since then, awareness of the relevance of interreligious dialogue has grown throughout Europe and the world, a development to which the Council of Europe has contributed significantly. Yet the definition of the term "identity" in the 2008 White Paper remains vague[2] and stands in need of further development. I therefore appreciate the opportunity to offer some thoughts on these questions.

1.2. Instead of "identity", I prefer to use the term "identity formation" which better illustrates the processual nature of individual identity in continuous development. Standing on its own, the term "identity" potentially implies a stable end result as the goal. In the interest of furthering a more responsible and better "living together" in Europe, the term "identity formation" may also prove more useful as a way to highlight potential aims and processes that may aid us in reaching this goal.

1.3. A profound understanding of how identity formation derives from encounters was proposed by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.[3] He argues that the quest for identity cannot be pursued while protectively shutting out others, but only in relation to them. Paul Ricoeur laid out a twin demand: We must both accept the other in his/her otherness and to recognise ourselves as active and responsible subjects in order to achieve mutual recognition and reassurance in the development of our respective identities. With Paul Ricoeur's ideas in mind, I will now present some instances of improving coexistence in the city-state of Hamburg, Germany, which contribute to successful identity formation by building up trust and mutual recognition in interreligious dialogue.

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[1] White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue „Living together as Equals in Dignity". Launched by the Council of Europe Ministers of Foreign Affairs at their 118th Ministerial Sesiion, Strasbourg, 7 May 2008, 22.

[2] Here we read: „Our identity, by defnition, is not whar makes us the same as others but what makes us unique. Identiy is a complex and contextually sensitive comination of elements." Opus citatus, 17.

[3] Paul Ricoeur, Wege der Anerkennung. Erkennen, Wiedererkennen, Anerkanntsein. Frankfurt/Main 2006.

2. The Relevance of Interreligious Encounter for Coexistence in the City-State of Hamburg.

2.1. The city state of Hamburg with its 2 million inhabitants from more than 100 cultural and religious backgrounds is home to a great variety of initiatives have dedicated themselves to improving mutual understanding and coexistence over the past 25 years. Here, strong societal actors work side by side towards the coexistence between religious and secular groups. Frequently, this is not an easy distinction to make: religious and secular are intertwined. This observation bears out the theoretical understanding put forward by the late sociologist Peter L. Berger who identified numerous overlappings and internal diversities in the fields of religious pluralisation and secularisation in his "Two Pluralisms".[4] Thus, we can regard interreligious dialogue as one factor in a broader field of intercultural dialogue with both religious and secular actors.

2.2. Developing the above-mentioned approach following Paul Ricoeur, we can tentatively conclude that identity formation in Europe needs to follow a given path: First, we need to overcome ignorance by coming to know each other better, and from there we must build up trust and mutual recognition. To describe this development in the author's original terms: We must proceed from "*ignorance*" to "*connaissance*" and from there to "*reconnaissances*" resp. to "*reconnaissance mutuelle*". This is a remarkably good description of the developments we can observe in Hamburg. I will briefly mention two examples:

2.2.1.*: Religious Education for all*:[5] In Hamburg, all pupils in public schools are free to choose the subject "Religion" regardless of their religious affiliation or world view (the non-religious alternative is variously called "Ethics" or "Philosophy"). Its curriculum is designed with two priorities in mind: Learning facts on different religions and their ethical implications, and entering into an exchange with the different Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish etc. beliefs and secular world views represented in the classroom. Under these circumstances, the aim cannot be to bring pupils closer to a given religion or world view, but to give them more knowledge on multiple religions and world views, to allow them to contribute their own positions to classroom discussions, to better understand the positions of their classmates with their religious and secular views, and to develop more respect towards each other. This approach holds enormous potential for young people in Hamburg to overcome ignorance about other religions and world views, to gain knowledge, and to develop mutual respect. I do not want to exaggerate the effects this school subject has. There are also pupils in Hamburg advocating the exclusion and condemnation of religious and secular Others. However, empirical research has shown there is a clear tendency for pupils enrolled in "Religious Education

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[4] Peter L. Berger (2014). The many Altars of Modernity. Toward a paradigm for religion in a pluralist age, Boston / Berlin.

[5] Wolfram Weisse (2014). La religion à l'école dans le Land de Hambourg, in: Jean-Paul Willaime (Ed)(2014) *Le défi de l'enseignement des faits religieux à l'école. Réponses européennes et québécoises*, Paris: Riveneuve, 67-81.

for all" classes to overcome prejudice, to reach better mutual understanding, and to find their own position and identity formation strengthened by interreligious dialogue in the class-room.

2.2.2. *Treaties between the Secular Government of Hamburg and Religious Communities, esp. Muslim Communities*:[6] For a long time, Muslims in Hamburg were regarded as mere temporary "guest workers" who would leave the country again after their work contracts expired. Over time, it became clear that these Muslims, most of them from Turkey, had made the city their home, and they now form a significant community making up about 7% of the Hamburg's population. As in many other European countries, there is marked resentment against Muslims in Germany. Talks between the Hamburg government and Muslim organisations designed as a trust-building measure started about 12 years ago, and resulted in formal treaties analogous to Germany's state-church agreements signed in 2012. In these, the Muslim organisations recognized Germany's democratic society as the guiding framework for their members, embracing, among other tenets, equal rights for men and women. Conversely the government recognized the Muslim population as an integral part of Hamburg's society and guaranteed them the right to exercise their beliefs and rites, including traditional Muslim burials. Obviously, such a treaty does not prevent single individuals and groups on both sides from clinging to their prejudices, but they nonetheless constitute a greatly relevant factor of mutual recognition and thus pave the way for a civil and peaceful coexistence of different religions in the secular city state of Hamburg.

3. Conclusion and Vision

The above-mentioned examples illustrate instances of successful coexistence at different levels in Hamburg with reference to the relevance of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Interreligious Dialogue can thus contribute to building knowledge and trust in order to more clearly perceive common ground and differences with the intention of participating in the development of a society that respects differences – and at the same time fosters common values of mutual understanding. This is not always easy. Conflicts will inevitably arise, especially when religion is politicised (e.g. Muslims in Hamburg espousing Islamist positions advocated by Turkey or Iran). But my examples show concrete steps taken to develop values for all citizens in society, values shaping their own understanding and contributing to an identity formation which is of great relevance for improving how we live together in Europe.

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[6] Wolfram Weisse (2016). Religious Pluralization and Secularization in Continental Europe, with Focus on France and Germany, in: *Society*, Vol. 53, Number 1 (January 2016), 32-40. Wolfram Weisse, (ed.) (2016). Religiöse Vielfalt und Säkularität. Die Verträge zwischen Staat und Religionsgemeinschaften in Hamburg, Dokumentationsreihe der Akademie der Weltreligionen der Universität Hamburg Nr. 4, Münster: Waxmann.

Vision: Against this background, I propose to develop a vision: Instead of *one* systematically pursued European cultural "identity", I would posit the pursuit of cultural "identity formations" in Europe, contextually different, but sharing the aim to create awareness and encourage mutual recognition as a vital element of a core European value set. This will be shaped at different levels and by different actors, transferred into daily practice, tested, encouraged, and developed by many, including individuals and groups of different religious affiliations and world views, in an interreligious and intercultural dialogue, shaping and fostering the core value of a European identity formation – *reconnaissance mutuelle*.