

Why Do We Need Active Policies for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue in Europe?

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It's a pleasure to have you all here, as a Co-ordinator of the project it is wonderful to see what a great audience there is: post-graduate students, Phd students and junior researchers, coming from different cities and countries and from many fields of study, such as education, social work and international mediation.

Objectives: IDEAL project intends to give participants a European perspective to the studies of society, education, and social work and also an Intercultural perspective. How? By linking together two main topics: *Europe* and *Interculturalism* across different disciplinary perspectives: so we will go out of here becoming more "European" and "intercultural" than we were before. In fact, the IDEAL experience will make us able to cooperate with colleagues from different EU countries (Spain, France, Belgium, UK, Hungary and Switzerland).

Background: I want to remind everyone the main reasons that took us to make up this project.

Firstly, the common agreement that history of Europe is a long attempt of cultural and social integration in itself; the current debate around the European citizenship and the hitches of the Union that we experience today clearly show that integration is an ambitious project, addressed more to future generations than to the present ones.

Secondly, since 2008 the political agenda of the European governance includes the "intercultural issue" (see CoE, 2008) but the domestic curriculum is still not largely focused on this topic, whether we believe this is a specific mandate of University, and particularly of a Catholic University as we are. If we think, debate, and act little to make people from different cultures crossing one another, Interculturalism as a common achievement will never occur.

Thirdly, the current situation in Europe is worrying, both for social, demographic and economic factors. The age of "welcoming immigrants" has declined because of the stopping of the job demand for foreigners. The average standard of living worsened (or the outlook of economic development stands stationary) and the welfare level decreases for everybody. The public debate on the enlargement of the European citizenship stuck (due to the Brexit), and the pressure of new immigrants inflows on the European borders, from the East and from the South, still increases while the governance of the migrants crisis looks less effective day by day (Zanfrini, 2017). Let me only mention two empirical evidences of the migrant crisis: a) the paradoxical solution of the externalisation of the refugees' camps in Turkey, and b) the failing "relocation" of the recognized refugees. In all of Europe there is a resurgence of xenophobia and religious phobia, also pushed along by the populist campaign of the nationalist parties.

Statements: This is bad news for the intercultural dialogue. We are all aware that the migrants issue (I underline, "migrants" and not "migration" issue) is sensible, ambiguous, and counterproductive. It becomes

pervasive and salient across mass media and social media, and has the power to remove or “dissolve” the basic idea of an open society, which originated the European project in the Nineties. We want to stop now in neglecting these issues, and reflect on what is happening in Europe at a cultural level, as a consequence of all these trends. And how we could provide new materials, new ideas to stimulate the public debation around “what it means to be Europeans” in times of great contradiction and uncertainty for the social cohesion itself.

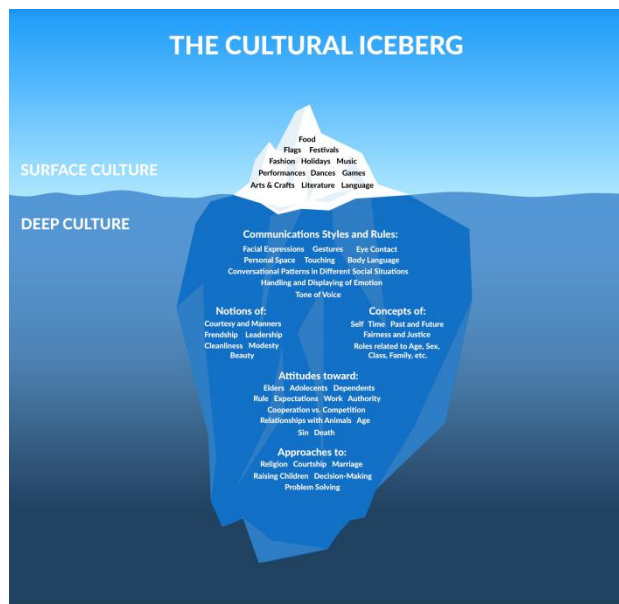
On behalf of my colleagues, I argue firmly that *Interculturalism is a priority for the future of Europe* and *we don't have any alternative approach to cope with the cultural and religious diversity*. The more Interculturalism creates fear and distress among the native population (Colombo, 2016), the more it is ineluctable to get more sophisticated interpretative keys, and comprehend causal correlations, explaining all these negative feelings before projecting any initiative or policy for intercultural dialogue.

The task of education: Recently in Europe, as well as in Italy, the public opinion has shifted from general (or tacit) agreement or neutrality towards immigrants, as “welcome low-cost labor force”, to an explicit refusal of asylum seekers, and the cultural/religious intolerance became stronger especially against Muslim people (Eurobarometer, 2015; Forquet, 2016). The new evidence is that close-minded and selfish attitudes are now widespread not only among low educated people but even among the more educated and skilled. Unceasing changes challenge most of us to adapt rapidly one to another and to recognize the Otherness beyond the “cultural suspects” and the “fight for resources” (the two main factors that spring racism and xenophobia). As a matter of fact, *few of us can “wear” Interculturalism as a natural habit; mostly we need to learn it through practical experiences.*

Where: Practicing Intercultural Dialogue occurs in many spheres: in neighborhood, public services, workplaces and educational contexts – both formal and non-formal, and overall where interaction and interpersonal communication are concerned. Education is the means to cultivate it, in three fundamental lines: 1 – contrasting *discrimination* in any forms and social environments; 2 – making the threshold of *tolerance* higher where the coexistence between population and minority groups becomes critical; 3 – removing the *fear* of others. If we will produce a positive impact (even little) on at least one of these points, we would have fostered Intercultural dialogue a step forward.

How: The growing of an intercultural mindset and behavior comes across the consciousness about what challenges our routine when we are facing a stranger: fear of changes, defense of one’s security, “dark” reputation of poverty, illiteracy, war, desolation and crisis (which are normally attributed to immigrants’ background). Paradoxically, a *sense of foreignness* (Nagy & Dobos, 2014) grows within ourselves when we interact with a foreign person: selfishness, lack of solidarity and lack of civility, are not only features of the Other, but also parts of ourselves - more than imagined. The real Stranger, as Julia Kristeva (1991), is Myself. Then, acquiring correct attitudes for Intercultural communication means to reflect about oneself’s culture, habit and judgements. There is no intercultural competency without cultural competency.

During this Module we cannot set up all this work, because it consists of academic lectures, but we can start by evoking and suggesting the complexity of “becoming intercultural” : it requires developing a set of knowledge (ideals), attitudes, and behavior. In this classroom we have a group of participants, who attend the Master in Intercultural Competences, and can witness how hard and how long the way is to Interculturalism: the best representation of this complexity is that by Edward Hall (1976), the cultural *iceberg* .



In the light of this, the learning track designed for the IDEAL Jean Monnet Module has to be coherent with its content. It is interdisciplinary (history, law, ethics and philosophy, sociology, psychology and pedagogy), it promotes exchanges of viewpoints between speakers and participants. I hope nobody will hesitate to express a different opinion in this classroom, especially if that difference will come from a diverse national, cultural or religious belonging. Thanks to JMM each of us may broaden his/her knowledge, with more information, new basis for judgment and wider cultural horizons.

Thematic focus (2018): This year we will pay attention to a specific field of application for intercultural dialogue: inter-religiosity. Religion, even in a secularized society that we live in, has a central role for citizens. Religion includes: moral values, definition of truth, prohibitions and permissions (life style), the outlook towards the future and the loyalty to a given community of brotherhood in faith. In the past, belonging to a religion was the result of a family tradition, and it implied to share the same set of values and behavior with a “birth community”. Nowadays it is a choice, it has a «private» meaning (rather than to be a public status) and it turns to be part of the *personal identity*. **Individuals feel free to believe;** to attend worship, regularly or not, and they join the religious community in several ways (e.g. contacts with a religious ministry can occur via web), and also the predication style has changed significantly from the “door-to-door” religion to the “free-market of religion”. As a result, the historical narratives of a religion tend to be bypassed by the new discourses and many young people seem “illiterate” in their own religion (Bignardi, Bichi, 2016; Garelli, 2016).

Then, secularization, post-secularization and customization of the religious belief and worships are going to shape a new social landscape, in which the “crash of civilization” occurs and some people (especially the youngsters) try to copy with uncertainty by sticking to a sect or a jihad movement (Gambetta, Hertog, 2016). How does Europe respond to all these trends? How can secularized societies make a peaceful co-existence possible for people with different lifestyles and beliefs? How to guarantee these rights, in the light of egalitarian principles, by protecting the safety of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community at the same time? We still do not have the definite answer to this question. Many countries in Europe adopted different solutions, both at a formal and an informal level, but we still do not know the “alternative way” beyond *assimilation* (laicism or religious state) and *segregation* (when religion become an excuse not to integrate oneself) (Pace, 2008).

Final purpose: *We do believe that Europe is the common house for all cultures and religions.* So our final purpose is to make everyone more convinced about her/his European roots (becoming more “Europeist”).

As scholars, engaged in the academic field, we aim at making us aware of risks and pitfalls of the “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003) that many studies and policies are based on. Methodological nationalism is a mainstream intellectual orientation within the social sciences, which gives “essentialism” to the Nation-State and leads scholars to study a society as if it overlaps to its national boarder. As a matter of fact, most of the subjects taught in many courses are still focusing on national matters, neglecting the European discourse and cross-national comparisons. This attitude is so rooted in academic practices that we are not aware of it. As future social workers and future educators, you will meet the migration issue not only at a national but also at an international level, then we would like to prepare our students as “global professionals”.

Be more active? In our perspective, attending IDEAL Module should lead us to become more active as “social promoters” of Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue in Europe. What does that mean? To be competent in:

Firstly, correcting one’s own communication in international contexts (in academic, business, network and interpersonal situations, etc.). Using a proper language is more than a starting point, because often many barriers and impediments to reciprocal understanding lay in words (Biraghi, Gambetti & Tassone, 2015).

Secondly, promoting “educational experiments”, based more on curiosity and experiential learning rather than stereotypes (Reggio, Santerini, 2014; Onorati, Bednarz, 2010).

Thirdly, in working in (and with) the local community. Local community can be an optimal learning space, where social ties appear in their authentic strength or looseness and every person can act and be understood beyond ethnic origins, family condition and structural bonds. For sure, the local and the “street” levels are embedded in a wider frame of social interrelations, but it is at this level that intercultural skills will be implemented first.

During the Study visit (the 30th of may) we will meet some local representatives of churches and religious organizations, who are engaged in significant actions.

"Any culture, religion or tradition can overcome the troubles of the world in isolation. East and West are neither geographical categories (because the earth is circular), nor historical references (because the destiny of the East is at stake in the West and reversely). In every human and in each society there is an east, an origin, a downing light, as well as there is a west, a sunset, an evening light» .

(Panikkar R., *Kierkegaard e Sankara. La fede e l'etica nel cristianesimo e nell'induismo* (a cura di Milena Carrara Pavan; Jaca Book, Milano, 2017)

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