

## **REPORT from the workshop**

EVENT: MED-HUB Workshop on Values and Religion in the Euro-Mediterranean Region:  
**»Towards the Tolerant and Plural Dialogues of Values and Religions in the Euro-Mediterranean«**

LOCATION and DATE: TWAS, Trieste, September 26–27, 2019

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATOR of the EVENT: Dr. Lenart Škof

The MED-HUB project organised this workshop with the aim of mapping the relevant knowledge and discussing latest research results in terms of values and religion throughout the EURO-MED region, with special focus on contemporary theories and practices of interreligious dialogues in the region. The purpose of the workshop was that by creating a community of scholars, teachers and other relevant stakeholders (NGOs, associations, etc.) will be able to suggest new ways of how to teach future Euro-Mediterranean studies in the field of interreligious dialogue and education. The main topics addressed at this workshop were the following:

- Current theories and practices of interreligious dialogue and related kinds of intercultural communication
- Values and paths of interreligious dialogues in the era of (in)security and fear
- Addressing the limitations and recent cultural criticisms of interreligious dialogue
- Particularities of the history and present situation of interreligious relations in the Euro-Mediterranean and its relevance for the future of interreligious relationships
- The importance of the common values for intercultural negotiation and education, in the context of religious and worldview differences in the Euro-Mediterranean region
- Educational aspects: ways towards teaching youth a tolerant dialogue between cultures, values and religions
- Intercultural dialogue within the framework of changing political paradigms and new connectivities
- Proposal for the »Mediterranean Nathan chair on interreligious education« to be jointly installed in Trieste & Piran

The workshop consisted of panels with presentations by the speakers on relevant aspects, followed by discussions among all the participants, and a roundtable with short statements and a lively discussion was held among the whole group. 14 experts of 9 nationalities were planned as speakers in the workshop (but as it is often the case, the group proved the fluidity of the concept of nationality and provenance). Additionally, 18 participants (many of whom were not just passive listeners) attended the workshop in whole or in part. The group was extremely diverse from the point of view of disciplinary backgrounds, and included representatives of the academia and civil society, young people at the beginning of their professional career as well as established experts. Gender representation was well balanced.

The *speakers* contributing to the discussions on this topic were:

- Rouba El-Helou, University of Erfurt, Germany  
Dunya Habash, Woolf Institute, United Kingdom  
Cornelis Hulsman, Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation (CIDT, company/thinktank) and the Center for Arab-West Understanding (NGO), Egypt  
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elisabetta Ruspini, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy  
Prof. Dr. Romain Murenzi, Executive Director of TWAS  
Prof. Dr. Lenart Škof, Science and Research Centre Koper, Slovenia / Alma Mater Europaea, Slovenia / European Academy of Arts and Sciences, Austria  
Assist. Prof. Dr. Gorazd Andrejč, Science and Research Centre Koper, Slovenia / University of Groningen, The Netherlands  
Dr. Helena Motoh, Science and Research Centre Koper, Slovenia  
Dr. Eugene Sensenig, Notre Dame University, Lebanon  
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Tomaž Grušovnik, Faculty of Education, University of Primorska, Slovenia  
Dr. Maja Bjelica, Science and Research Centre Koper, Slovenia  
Lydia Dionís Giordano, Blanquerna Observatory on Media, Religion and Culture, Spain

## Summary of discussions at the workshop

During the workshop we have received many extremely relevant ideas and suggestions. They are presented here in form of recommendations for action within the EU policies as well as recommendations for future curricula to be implemented. As per the latter, the discussions explored the ideas of including the themes within the existing courses and activities, and strongly supported the idea of setting up new educational activities, focussing specifically on interreligious dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean. **Our recommendations stemming from this MED HUB workshop are divided into 4 main pillars:**

1. Religion, values, and interfaith dialogue
2. The role of gender and generations for the future cohabitation
3. Education and liberal arts and their role for societies
4. The role of NGO and academia and initiatives from the NGOs

**Ad 1)** In light of rising anti-immigration populist politics and growing intolerance throughout the EU, it is of great importance to devote attention to the vital role of interreligious dialogue and intercultural communication in countering xenophobia and promoting justice.

With respect to the EuroMed partners in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean, it is critical to promote interreligious (IR) dialogue and intercultural communication (IC) based on respect for religious, linguistic, and ideological diversity. It is also important to build on the traditional values of tolerance, justice, and mutual respect fundamental to the various Abrahamic and secular traditions in the MENA in order to combat anti-immigrant rhetoric and islamophobia. Finally attention should be paid to the domestic anti-immigrant populist groups within Arab countries and their links to right-wing populist and radical far right groups in the EU. It is important to remember that many anti-immigrant groups in Europe and the MENA abuse religion to promote intolerance. However, scholars and activists alike can combat this intolerance within the Europe-Med region by promoting the very values rooted in Abrahamic tradition that others have chosen to exploit and distort. Faith-based topics which lend themselves well to IR dialogue include business ethics and CRS, youth employment and vocational training, protection of the environment, faith-based social justice agendas, and refugee repatriation.

Anti-immigrant populist policies are to a large extent based on fear mongering, generalizations and distortions of facts, and for this reason, tensions or conflicts rooted in intolerance should be addressed with factual, easily accessible information. The Arab-West Report database in Egypt was created based on this philosophy, providing summary translations from the Arabic-language press about subjects that are most often misrepresented in populist political circles or by political activists. The database also provides non-partisan media critique and in depth interviews that address concerns involving Arab-West understanding, interreligious dialogue, and issues important to Christian, Muslim and secular groups and communities. A key feature of the database is the descriptive, rather than antagonistic nature of the reports, with contributors coming from diverse backgrounds and holding various political or religious perspectives. Rather than contributing to the often

derisive rhetoric of polemics, the aim of the database is to create understanding across various political and religious groups and promote dialogue. The database has become a very effective tool for student interns as well, allowing them the opportunity to contribute published works under editorial supervision. It is highly desirable that similar databases are established in different parts of the EuroMediterranean region and are mutually linked. This will allow for a wider scope of content that can be covered, critiqued, and compared across regions, which in turn will allow the Arab West Report to create an even more accurately illustrated depiction of interreligious and intercultural communication in the MENA region.

**Ad 2)** Intercultural, intergenerational and intersexual relations are of key importance in today's world. We must design or construct new cultural notions and strategies that are able to ensure relationships respectful of those differences in local, regional as well as global contexts. The issue of gender and generational differences and dynamics was one of the key topics at this workshop. The enhanced intergenerational approach and the approach related to the gender policies will be a necessary part in any of the future curricula as installed and related within the EuroMed region and related to the interfaith and broader social issues. For the most part, the interreligious dialogue is being conducted in a way that is largely male and mid-age oriented, and is not sufficiently susceptible to many other segments of societies. Our recommendation for the policy makers and educational programmes (curricula) is that **women as well as younger generations (Millennials, Gen Zeds and younger) need to take a more active role in the interfaith dialogue.** This should be promoted by new strategies guiding towards the recognition of the need for empowerment of women and the youth within societies. Diversity is a keyword that defines these generations. As a result of increasing globalization, population movements, and mobility, Millennials are the most ethnically and racially diverse cohort of youth in history. Over the next 10 years, Generation Z will grow in size and racial diversity to turn today's minority population into a majority. Relying on the findings of some research studies and surveys, these generations hold values that have a great potential for more tolerant societies. The active role of women and young people in supporting interfaith dialogue and education, and emerging interfaith cultures should be promoted by new strategies guiding towards the recognition of the need for empowerment of women and young people within societies.

A better inclusion of younger generations in the practice of interreligious dialogue is likely to affect its substance. Relying on the findings of some studies, these generations hold values that have a great potential for more tolerant societies.

The relationship between the instructor and students should be based both on the promotion critical thinking and mutual caring. Students in the MENA region today are struggling to find a sense of hope. Those of us who have experienced war or sectarian violence in the past can help them to find meaning and grounds to work for a better world. The idea is to be able to address the young generation using technology and adapting it from a classical model of frontal lecturing to an education that has a liberation perspective, allowing not only academic freedom but also speaking truth to power.

**Ad 3)** The topics of the role of liberal arts and art were one of the key issues discussed at this workshop. Various forms of arts (music, painting, dance, digital design etc.) could be crucial for promoting the values (freedom of speech, of religious activities, of faith, of gender identity etc.), and interfaith-based dialogue. **We propose to introduce and promote within the EuroMed region a special tool/approach for communicative action, dialogue, and understanding, called »The Neo-Socratic dialogue«.** It is capable of tackling the presence of our avoidance of the knowledge of phenomena that we do not know or understand. The Neo-Socratic dialogue has a broad potential and wide applicability for curricula of various study programmes not only in humanities but also in social sciences and elsewhere. Our group is able to provide more specific guidelines on introducing this tool. The aim of this tool is in achieving a better understanding among people of various religions and faiths, and of recognizing the principles of tolerance and knowledge. But alongside the promotion of arts, the value of listening should not be disregarded and much more actively promoted. In modern societies focussed on statements and speaking, and concerned with individualistic success, the role of listening is widely neglected. However, this is crucial for achieving understanding and tolerance. Through arts, music, and listening we are creating new communities that are sensitive to gender, generational and cultural and religious differences, and in which subjects act respectfully in intersubjective and intersocial ways towards each other. We also recommend reminding ourselves of the four attitudes targeted by education: creative, critical, collaborative, caring (so called 4-Cs). Often, the curricula and wider societies are focussed on the former two, but side lining the latter two.

**Ad 4)** Recognizing the importance of active cooperation between universities and NGOs (and some of the excellent practices resulting from that cooperation, such as the Arab-West report) we propose a new action within the EuroMed region. The Arab-West Report already exists within the databases as collected and provided by The Center for Arab-West Understanding.

Arab-West Report is a database that was established in 1997 and that hosts by now some 54,000 articles and reports. Most texts are summary translations from the Arabic-language press that provide information about the role of religion in society (Muslim-Christian relationships, political Islam, religious-secular dialogue, and pluralism in societies represent a few of the topics it covers). Arab-West Report has investigated tensions have been reported in the media and demonstrated that issues are always more complex than they appear when initially reported. Arab-West Report has consistently strove to get close to the sources of information and provide in-depth interviews, and it has built a database with extensive search functions such as a Dewey-like index, extensive name lists, lists of organizations, and references in the Arabic-language press to religious texts (Qur'an and Bible). The Center for Arab-West Understanding (CAWU, Egyptian NGO in turn, has built a very extensive internship program around the AWR database for students from all over the world; Egyptians, Europeans Americans and others. Student interns benefit from the very extensive network of CAWU and the highly diverse student population. While building and maintaining the database has been possible with relatively low costs, its role in facilitating different discussions and reducing tensions should not be underestimated. The resources provided by

the database have been used by journalists, scholars, diplomats, politicians and other decision makers.

It is our recommendation to find support creating an even larger database with centers in different parts of the Arab world and Europe which would all contribute to the same central database. This would allow the Arab West Report to translate and publish the most relevant articles and news from the Arab world while highlighting differences in views about various issues, particularly those related to interfaith dialogue in the region.

strengthening the campaigns and initiatives that explicitly target young people with the aim of raising awareness about social injustice and empowering citizens to fight against it. This, in turn, would reaffirm that everyone, especially youth, could be the key for change, play a role in countering entrenched prejudices, and improve understanding and knowledge about different cultures and religious beliefs. The main tools that can be used to achieve these goals are social networks, media, and local entities and institutions. One example of such a campaign is the project called #BeTheKey, which has been developed and practiced in Barcelona by Blanquerna Observatory on Media, Religion and Culture over the last 2 years. This project aims to eliminate islamophobic discourse from Barcelona, and we propose sharing and bolstering this initiative and others like it with other regions and cities where Islamophobia is particularly strong. Initiatives such as these should be linked to the AWR database so that it becomes a hub for information exchange. It is of utmost importance that such initiatives extend beyond short-term projects that live for a few months or years only. To attain the targeted impact, they need continuity of funding and practice.

Recommended *materials and resources* related to the themes of the workshop: [please list at least 6-7 items, they can be online, articles or books.]

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- Arab West Report: Media Research and Commentary from Egypt and the Middle East*. 1997–2019. ([www.arabwestreport.info](http://www.arabwestreport.info).)
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- Lipari, Lisbeth. "Listening Otherwise: The Voice of Ethics." *International Journal of Listening*, vol. 23, n.1 (2009), pp.44–59.
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- Research, ed. Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cooke, pp. 60–84. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Motoh, Helena and Lenart Škof, eds. *Religions and Dialogue. Poligrafi*, special issue, vol. 22, no. 87/88 (2017). ([https://www.zrs-kp.si/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Poligrafi-87-88\\_RELIGIONS-AND-DIALOGUE\\_p.pdf](https://www.zrs-kp.si/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Poligrafi-87-88_RELIGIONS-AND-DIALOGUE_p.pdf))
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- Rockenbach, Alyssa. N., et al. *Best practices for interfaith learning and development in the first year of college*. Chicago, IL: Interfaith Youth Core, 2018. ([https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/resources/IDEALS\\_20182.pdf](https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/resources/IDEALS_20182.pdf))
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Recommended *teaching methods* for fostering the desired skills and attitudes: [please list at least 2 teaching methods]

- **Neo-Socratic dialogue:**

This tool enables subjects (students, other subjects entering the interfaith dialogue - such as the religious leaders and representatives, NGO representatives, media workers, politicians and other relevant stakeholders) to discuss under the guidance of a philosophical method the most relevant topics that they encounter as problematic or that divide societies. »The Neo-Socratic dialogue« enables us to recognize that in the so called »active ignorance« or refusal to believe build on our unwillingness to enter the dialogue with the other as other.

Neo-Socratic dialogue helps people to achieve common knowledge based on rational discussion. Normally, five to seven participants engage in the debate that is led by a facilitator. The latter is usually someone with experience guiding debates; her main task is to make sure that participants do not wander astray and that the debate has a common thread, that everybody participates and that major points are written down (sometimes another person is employed for making notes so that the debate runs smoothly). The main idea of Neo-Socratic dialogue in connection with the interreligious dialogue is to teach participants how to discuss, how to agree as well as to disagree. The atmosphere has to be caring and collaborative, in addition to being critical and creative, for only in a safe environment will people come up with most relevant arguments, based on personal experience. The Neo-Socratic dialogue is thus a great tool for e.g. workshops, connected with interreligious topics, because it helps people create a community of inquiry that contributes to civilized discourse.

- **Active listening:** The gesture of listening can reveal itself as ethical in its foundations and also crucial for establishing intersubjective spaces of mutual acceptance and affection. Listening shifts the attention(s) outside the self, as a call to open listening, to being open to the message of the speaker. This listening intentionally devotes itself to the different, unknown, misunderstood, the strange and splits with familiarity and our knowledge of the world. In this way, the role of speech in society and in the field of ethics is diminished, since it is subordinated to listening directed towards difference and otherness, and not sameness. Learning to listen and hear “here and now,” getting accustomed to this activity again, can contribute to teaching towards a more open perception, regardless of who we meet, without applying to their presence any preexisting idea, considering only what the specific moment of the encounter is offering. Listening is an invaluable activity that can educate future and nonetheless, re-educate present generations, for a multi religious cohabitation of mutual care and respect for each other values, and therefore we should provide space to become re-accustomed to it.
- **Community music methodologies** could provide a space of learning mutual listening: Similarly to the Neo-socratic dialogue, the community music methods include a facilitator that is proficient in music, however, she does not lead the musical invention,

but mainly facilitates it and contributes to it as another participant. Students involved in the process learn how to make music together, how to strive for a common creative output, and therefore are implicitly faced with the act of attentive listening.

- “Truth-telling and intergenerational trauma”: the use of history hikes and other forms of experiential learning to work through past cases of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and protracted violent conflict. ([Link to pre-print article](#))
- Collaborative methods among people of different religions (summer programmes, youth-to-youth mentoring, debate in the public between religious leaders).
- Interview (religious) people that are educated, speak languages – make them appear in a positive way, make them be like one of us, try demonstrate parallels between various parts of the region while fleshing out different religion or social background.
- Documenting these methods in a database for wider use.

The *recommendations for policy-makers* of workshop:

- Women and youth need to take a more active role in the interfaith dialogue. Strategies towards better recognition of women and their empowerment in religious-based societies would include: for example portrayals of the Arab and/or Muslim women that have changed the intersubjective and interreligious connections with their social or political action – **we propose to inaugurate a special book series in which works of/on women actively involved in the sphere of interfaith dialogue would be published.** This book series could be located at ZRS Koper within Annales Publishing House and with the cooperation of the Institute for Philosophical Studies;
- **Promote translation as a tool of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. We propose to establish a database of selected translations from Arabic media into English about subjects that have a relevance about the role of religion and interfaith dialogue in the Arab world and, more particular, in societies across the EuroMed region,** The importance of this database is in raising the objectivity of media reports throughout the region, and as well as in communicating the policies and events to the non-Arabic speaking world that otherwise would not be available to the wider public;
- To establish the web platform for an EuroMed public space and for the possibility for the EuroMed public as such which is able to understand and communicate common issues with each other;
- “Active participation” of young people – to let their voice be heard through social media with posts and videos, sending a message about overcoming interreligious differences based on common values;
- It is important to understand the actual attitudes of the population on how they actually understand religion, beyond superficial statements on being religious or not. One method to achieve this would be to **devote the Eurobarometer to study/assess the status of the interfaith dialogue.**
- Harness modern technology for the promotion of democratic, tolerant values. There are instances of blockchain technology being used in an emancipatory way that promotes human rights for all.
- Promote the (thin) values that are shared across the region, irrespective of the religion, especially human dignity.
- Ecumenical dialogue should be practiced alongside the interreligious dialogue.
- Invite businesses to get involved in the interreligious dialogue and make it be part of social responsibility , where this is appropriate.

The *recommendations on development of new curricula at universities or of reforming existing curricula* of workshop:

- We firstly recommend to prepare **the ground for an instruction in theory of religious studies with practical work in which academics, teachers, researchers and students are jointly involved;**
- Religion in our view must be regarded as a place, where individuals can live through their affectiveness and in close encounters between the sexes, generations, and cultures. **The recommendation is therefore to strengthen the curricula which focus on the practical and intersubjective aspects of religion and thus softer power of religion instead of a more essentialist or strong theory of religion, aiming at raising differences instead of understanding and communicating them;**
- We propose to include into new curricula on EuroMed studies throughout the region the intergenerational agenda in all of the following aspects: ways of intergenerational dialogue; religious communities in dialogue through generations; generations and social justice.
- **Our general proposal is to establish a »Mediterranean Nathan chair on interreligious education« to be jointly installed in Slovenia and in Lebanon.** This chair would be founded in the tolerance principle as expounded by Lessing in his famous play *Nathan the Wise*. All three Abrahamic religions – as in this play – but also broader – all religious communities of the region would be able to present their events, scholarship and dialogues within this chair. With chair we propose to install an academic and research unit within Slovenia and Lebanon (also other chairs possible – in Cairo, for example, or in Tunis), equipped with funding for teachings, events, and annual seminars and summer schools.
- While conducting an effective, tolerant interreligious dialogue, pay attention to not stifle the positive image of a conflict, under ideal conditions a conflict should continue to exist, should be nurtured and managed. Learning how to disagree respectfully is an important goal.
- Blended learning should be explored, involving learning online and among people.
- Programmes, activities should be set up to promote youth-oriented, gender-aware team players, e.g. Leadership academy.
- Joint programmes among the universities are to be further promoted.
- Teachers should reflect on how they could include the Euro-Mediterranean region in their current courses. Many teachers have the potential to discuss the region in their own courses but they do not do so.
- Gender studies, intersectionality, and auto-ethnography all grapple with the issue of subjectivity vs value-free research methods. By positioning ourselves in the middle of

struggles base on gender, faith and world view, social class, or post-colonial perspectives we tap into the potential of religion in promoting interreligious dialogue. As long as social justice is not an integral part of any course objectives, the idea of interreligious dialogue will miss a conceptual paradigm. Students should not only learn and get acquainted with concepts, paradigms and theories regarding religious values, they should also live the situation and understand that the lack of equality among people will always hinder any form of dialogue therefore cooperation between countries will not develop into concrete change.

- When working on IR and IC, the resources provided by the indigenous Abrahamic religions in the EuroMed should be utilized. Furthermore, scholars and activists should use a ‘affectedness’ (Mies 1991) approach, considering how their own experiences with religious faith can enrich their teaching, activism and research. This will enhance both IR between the Abrahamic faith-traditions as well as promote cooperation with secular approaches using the ‘affectedness’ approach, including feminism and gender studies, post-colonial theory, disabilities studies, and critical race theory (Sensenig 2019).
- From the methodological point of view, there is a need to strengthen the investment in comparative research on interfaith dialogue, gender and generations by using both secondary and primary survey data analysis, including the production of global survey data.
- There is also a need to involve several data collection methods: a mixed methods, gender-sensitive design is needed due to the lack of research on this topic and the complexity involved in understanding it. An effort should be made to overcome the quality-quantity dualism in order to be able to grasp the complexity of the issues involved.
- Longitudinal data are particularly useful in identifying emerging interfaith trends among women and men (perceptions of worldview diversity; interreligious dialogue, engagement, and cooperation; religious diversity expectations of higher education institutions, etc.). Longitudinal data make it possible to analyse developments within the institutional, cultural and social context in which an individual’s life course is unfolding because, by focusing on events and transitions in individual lives, the interaction between action and structures can be closely observed. The development of research projects which use longitudinal data also serves to build a ‘bridge’ between ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research traditions and encourages a reassessment of the concepts themselves of qualitative and quantitative research. Within longitudinal research, great emphasis is placed on social and individual life as an interlocking series of events: this emphasis can be seen as a response to the qualitative researcher’s concern to reflect the complexity of everyday life which takes the form of a stream of interconnecting events.
- The auto-ethnographical approach helps scholars link their personal experience with conflict and exclusion to dialogue and transformation. By reflecting on the



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construction of the self in the research process scholars can help their students work on their own life stories and future paths.



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