

RELIGARE: an EU project of interest for CoGREE

In the past years a wider interest has arisen in religious and cultural diversity as a social reality in Europe. However, the ways in which this diversity is framed and treated in EU policy and across the different Member States raises a number of questions that need further reflection and study.

The **RELIGARE** project is about religions, belonging, beliefs and secularism in Europe. It examines the legal rules protecting or limiting (constraining) the experiences of religious or other belief-based communities. Where the practices of communities or individuals do not conform to State law requirements, or where communities turn to their own legal regimes or tribunals, the reasons behind these developments need to be understood.

The RELIGARE project is a three-year European research project funded by the European Commission Directorate General Research - Unit L Science, Economy and Society. It comprises 13 universities and research centres from across the European Union and Turkey.

On 30th June, 2011 a policy dialogue meeting took place gathering policymakers, representatives of EU level civil society and religions and secular organisations. The theme was "the challenges of Religious Diversity in EU Law and policy". The meeting was hosted at the premises of the European Parliament in Brussels

The main fields of interests in the research are the family, the work place, the public space and the issue of state support. RELIGARE examines the current realities in those fields. The divide between the public and private spheres lies at the core of this research. But these spheres are not clear-cut divided. Can the public sphere be simultaneously be neutral and tolerant? Can new world views, social patterns and lifestyles be accommodated and /or incorporated in the public sphere?

How respectful is the law of the private sphere?

Some voice was heard from the representatives of secular organisations who challenge e.g. direct and indirect state support for traditional religious institutions. A gradual shift in subsidy patterns might well be expected.

The representative of the Equal Treatment Legislation (DG Justice, European Commission) expressed himself clearly that religiously based organisations have a lot of freedom, but that this does not include sexual orientation.

Religious institutions do best to be sensitive towards inherited privileges if it applies to them. However, a voice from a muslim representative in Austria expressed another kind of dynamics which is that religious minorities still have difficulty in entering into the public sphere and get a share in the resources. The level of education in islam is still poor, also in countries like Germany.

From a secular point of view all religions seem powerful, but such is not always the case.

The theme also addresses the issue of visibility of religion and the right to express oneself. Especially adolescents feel a strong need to express themselves which can be threatening for others at the same time. The question in such cases is who deserves protection. The answer of such questions is beyond the scope of the research.

The European Commission takes the fact that the European debate is ever more dominated by values quite seriously. The preliminary outcomes of the research show a multitude of EU normative approaches delineating the relationship between religions and the EU.

Ms. Foblets, RELIGARE coordinator, concluded that presents laws have some anachronisms which gives privileges to some at the cost of others. She also mentioned that legal solutions are limited and that the matter of attitude is more important. On the whole she felt more confident about the project and the meaning that it will have for those in responsible positions.

Why should CoGREE partners pay attention to the RELIGARE project? Education is just the field where the public and private sphere meet and where values and religion matter. A set of comparative studies in Europe will contain relevant data, not just for our information but also for future developments. We should stress the importance of schools paying attention to religion and world views. It is the classroom which offers the unique opportunities for pupils, teachers and institutions to meet and get into dialogue.