

EPP working group on intercultural and religious dialogue

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Distinguished Members of the European Parliament, panelists, colleagues, guests,

I'm very grateful to be here today and I would like to thank the entire EPP working group on intercultural and religious dialogue, for organizing this webinar on antisemitism. I would also like to thank the previous speakers for their contributions; and express deep gratitude to the European Commission Coordinator for Combatting Antisemitism and fostering Jewish life Katharina Von Schnurbein as well as DG Justice as a whole for their continuous work and their progress on this issue.

B'nai B'rith Europe's mission is fully aligned with today's theme. It includes the fight against antisemitism and enhancing knowledge of the Jewish presence in Europe.

I would like to briefly share with you my personal background in order to explain what has built my perspective.

I was born in an orthodox Jewish family and grew up in a religious environment in France, near Paris. About 10 years ago, I revisited my belief system and experienced my Jewish identity through diverse angles. Intercultural dialogue was a key element in my journey. It allowed the integration of concepts specific to my own culture, through the mirror held up by the other.

Therefore, addressing the topic of antisemitism within the framework of intercultural dialogue means a lot to me.

I will start by sharing a few examples of the impact of antisemitism drawn from my personal experience and my professional research. I will then show how fighting antisemitism could be turned into a contribution to society as a whole. Finally, I will elaborate some areas of action and present ongoing projects.

Apart from direct and frontal attacks, antisemitism can also be experienced through the use of stereotypes and insults that are part of everyday vocabulary such as "Fais pas ton Juif" or in English: don't be such a Jew.

People often don't realize that when they use an insult related to a Jewish stereotype, even when it's humorous, they are reinforcing discrimination.

I have never been insulted and called a dirty Jew like my son has, nor have I been stoned like my friend who was on his way to the synagogue, in Brussels, on a Saturday morning. However, I remember that as a child I would clearly feel a difference between being in a public space with my mother, who as a woman displayed no recognizable signs of Jewishness, and being there with my dad, who wears a beard and a Kippah. I was then looked at with curiosity and sometimes with animosity. This had a direct impact on my sense of security.

In fact, when I chose my children's names, I wondered how they would feel about being identified by their Jewish names and whether this would make them targets in certain circumstances.

Today, depending on the news, I can be on alert when I shop in a kosher supermarket.

Sometimes, people do not realize that they experience a certain form of violence, because it has always been part of their daily life. Acknowledgement is the first step to repairing discrimination. It instills a constructive and a resilient dynamic, and it is true of discriminations of all kinds.

If we look at the reactions of people who have been victims of antisemitism, many will minimize the facts. Others will speak of a vicious circle: by reacting and pointing out that a remark is antisemitic, they reinforce the cliché that Jews see antisemitism everywhere.

I would like to share a point about clichés. The cliché often reflects the need or the fear of the person stating it. For example, if a person states that Jews are too protected by the police, they often feel that the police is not protecting their own community enough.

A cliché highlights a specific need for equity. The difference between equality and equity is that equality is giving the same rights to everybody, while Equity is giving each person what they need in order to be successful.

Recognizing one discrimination does not minimize others. On the contrary, addressing discrimination in its specificity could contribute to the reduction of all inequalities. Therefore, we must address this issue by building bridges between the different communities.

Sharing Jewish culture allows to deconstruct stereotypes by changing the narrative linked to Jews.

For instance, Judaism has nothing to do with the Shoah or antisemitism.

Jewishness is a philosophy. It is traditions, customs and religious practices. It's a kind of humor, a language, food, but also music and arts. It's a rich intangible cultural heritage that is fully integrated into the European identity.

I would like to mention The European Days of Jewish culture, a project of AEPJ, the European Association for the Preservation and Promotion of Jewish Culture and Heritage, an organization founded by B'nai B'rith Europe among others. It highlights the diversity and richness of Judaism, through a festival which take place each year, all around Europe. The theme for this year's edition will be dialogue, which leads me to my last point.

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue can take place in many settings: schools, sports clubs and also through religious education.

The involvement of religious leaders is crucial. They have the responsibility of identifying stereotypes that may be conveyed through the way their faith is transmitted. Emouna, an organization founded in France, trains religious leaders for dialogue and inspired such trainings in Belgium and The Netherlands.

I would like to underline that even if intercultural dialogue does exist in Europe today, it should not only preach to the converted or address only the politically correct topics. It needs to be broadened and deepened.

A research we conducted the past few months shows that intercultural and interreligious projects are often initiated by communities with their own funds and reach only a small part of the society.

To achieve goals, dialogue must be institutionalized at all levels of governance. In many European countries, dialogue is not integrated into school curricula yet and does not benefit from substantial budgets. Moreover, there is no appointed political position specifically dedicated to this topic.

To conclude, I would like to share with you one of the values that has been engrained in me since childhood. I was taught that it is not about fighting a problem but about overcoming it, by developing more strength. In this way, a problem is transformed into a source of evolution and renewal.

I will now give the floor to Melissa from CEJI, who will present a project we are currently working on together, with the support of the European Commission. It is the NOA project which stands for Networks Overcoming Antisemitism.

Thank you for your attention.