Religion/s and Politics: How is Multiculturalism Possible?
17 - 23 October 2015
Litomysl, Czech Republic
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The World Student Christian Federation in Europe (WSCF-Europe) and European Union of Jewish Students (EUJS) organised the conference "Religion/s and Politics: How is Multiculturalism Possible?" on 17 - 26 October 2015 in Litomysl, Czech Republic. It was held in a small town in the YMCA Europe Training Centre situated next to the Litomysl castle.

29 students and young people from 16 countries came together to present, discuss and analyse the relationship between religion and politics and how religion can or cannot be part of our multicultural society. The participants looked at several cases of how cultural minorities and majorities can be best recognised in state policies.

Five-days meeting included keynote talks from the invited speakers and presentations from the participants, workshop sessions facilitated by the leadership team members and a lot of informal time for getting to know each other and insightful conversations. The conference created a space for participants to engage in an open and honest dialogue and debate on different ways in which religion and politics can converge, clash and where an intersection is lacking (e.g. religious/secular, private/public and belief/practice).

The project empowered and equipped young people with necessary information, skills and knowledge to become confident actors in their local and national contexts. The event helped them to kick start meaningful conversations on different religious and non-religious value commitments and rights in public disclosures.
THE PROGRAMME AND MAIN CONTENTS

The leadership team opened the conference with an informal welcoming evening for participants. They received some technical information about the venue, programme and organisational issues. Several team-building exercises served as a starting point for a group-building process.

The initial sessions of the conference were designed for participants to open up, get to know each other and become aware of some key concepts that would form discussions and reflections during the entire conference. The introductory session with a keynote address: “Multiculturalism and Secularism in Europe today” was lead by the project leadership team member Dennis Goldstoff.

His presentation gave an interesting insight to the participants on the relations between a state and religion and explained to what extent multiculturalism is really possible in today’s Europe. After the plenary session the participants went on to work in small groups on the cases prepared by the speaker that were linked to the topics and issues of the keynote speech. The day was very productive and participants appreciated the possibility to reflect and share their views and knowledge from their own personal and country experiences. Moreover, it contributed to the building of a common understanding among participants of the conference topics and ultimately that evolved into a fruitful discussion during the rest of the week.
The focus of the second day of the conference was to inspire a conversation among participants about how to accommodate the needs of religious and non-religious communities in the public discourse. At the morning session, the participants were engaged in role plays representing people living in societies that either respect or disrespect their needs and explored the topic critically. The role play itself and the discussions after the activity were very productive. As the participants were split into two small groups, it ensured that all of them were active involved in the working process. Each group was led by the leadership team member. The participants were able to experience how multiculturalism can actually be made possible and sustained through concrete laws and practices.

“Besides listening to presentations we also discussed about the issues, e. g. we all took part in a role play. The role play was set in an imaginative town. We had to decide whether we want to build a mosque or not. Another topic was euthanasia and if it should be allowed”

-Miriam Schubert & Malena Tara, SCM Germany
“How much room should there be for religious argumentation in the public sphere?” with this question started her presentation our next speaker Roosmavijn Goldback from the Netherlands. Roosmavijn talked about two main trends in religious argumentation in liberal political philosophy and explained some cases when there is a limitation or room for the religious argumentation in the public domain. Discussions on moral controversies in deliberative democracy was concluded with concrete possible solutions. The session received high appraise from the participants as they continued discussion on the concrete examples and cases in smaller groups.
The exposure day was highly evaluated by the participants. The meeting with Mr. Sanka, the head of the Muslim community in Prague, was a dynamic and interactive session as participants were able to put in practice the knowledge and information received during the conference. In addition, participants were able to hear more about Muslim perspective on the intersection between religion and state and learn a real-story case of living religious life in the most secular country in Europe. A walking tour in the historic part of the Jewish community in Prague gave another valuable experience to the participants. The day ended with sharing experiences and emotions joined by the local community representatives from Jewish and Muslim communities and the guests speaking next day of the conference who joined us for an informal evening in Prague.
At the next stage of the conference the participants were given a comprehensive overview of the legal side of religious freedom and secularism. The keynote presentation from Daniel Barton was well balanced in terms of its theoretical input, relevance to the conference topics and new insights for further reflection in small groups on two case studies.

“I have studied Religious Law I knew most of the thing that were taught already – which speaks for the quality of the lecturers who explained the difficult topics so that also non-lawyers could understand it”

-Mirjam Meindl, SCM Austria

The day was closed by a panel discussion with all guest speakers. It was attended by the representative of Muslim community in Prague, Zuzana Amrani and by rabbi Tanya Segal from Poland. Hearing various perspectives from secular as well as from different religious representatives resulted in an extremely interesting and informative discussion. Different perspectives were discussed and everyone felt comfortable to voice up their opinions. In order to strengthen individual learning aspect, we purposed short expert-led workshops on specific issues where the participants were split into four small groups according to their interest and experiences.
The last day of the conference was dedicated to participant-driven sessions. The conclusive thematic session of the event was debate on various controversial issues where the participants presented their views on these issues and argued their points.

Participant-led workshops provided a space to share personal skills and experiences on topics chosen by them. The day affirmed the idea of youth leadership and capacity-building in general.

“Euthanasia, same-sex marriage, sex education in public schools, ritual slaughter - these and other issues became the subject of outstanding conference debates. It gave me a wonderful opportunity to look on these issues from different perspective; I found a lot of new arguments which I did not even reflect before to be ‘in favour’ or to be ‘against’ a certain position”

-Ivan Kuks, SCM Belarus
MAIN OUTCOMES

In overall the conference was successful in achieving its initial objectives. Throughout the event the participants were actively engaged in plenary and small group discussions on various issues related to religion and politics. There were some concrete outcomes of the project in terms of increased awareness of young people and strengthened youth participation in public debates. The project empowered and equipped young people with necessary information, skills and knowledge to become confident actors. The event helped them to open up to conversations on how different religious and non-religious perspectives can be taken into account during public disclosures. Participants learnt about different perspectives, diverse social, cultural backgrounds and basic values the legal system is based on.

“It’s amazing how talking with people from different backgrounds and religions can make you realize that there is not a true and only point of view. It’s necessary to listen and to put yourself in the other person’s position and especially, respect each other. In the conferences I learned many things about subjects that I had never heard of but that were really interesting such as the Palestinian movements, the influence of religion in other countries or the customs of other cultures”

-Ana Fernàndez-Mayoralas from France

“This Conference gave the opportunity to participants from three continents to share their visions and ideas in an environment of mutual respect and consideration. Everybody had the chance to speak and there was many debates where I understood how wonderful ideas people could have”

-Patrick Vokouma from Burkina Faso/Ukraine
The participants were asked to defend or challenge various statements that would not necessarily reflect their personal opinions in real life. It was the opportunity for the participants to challenge their own views on certain issues and discuss and analyse possible ways forward to the building of multicultural societies. Many participants noted that the conference had a strong impact on some of their opinions and ideas. All participants were keen to hear each other’s views and experiences from other countries and were able to connect the keynote presentations to their own local context.

Many of them used their informal time to continue discussions about the topics and have more informal sharing with the speakers. Participants were encouraged to continue reflection and follow-up on the topics learnt during the conference in their local and national context. The conference contributed to bringing an abstract concepts to everyday lives of young people and participants developed competences in influencing public discourse.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

The participants of this conference came mainly from the networks of the two partner organisations: WSCF-Europe and the EUJS. Applications from outside of these networks were also considered and number of young people representing various youth secular organisations were invited at the conference.
On top of their personal interest, experience and relationship to the conference topics other selection criteria were also taken into consideration. A priority was given to the members of youth organisations with the aim to achieve wider outreach of the outcomes of the event in the participants’ own contexts back in their countries.

The leadership team put its efforts to make a good balance between participants’ gender, age, social, cultural, religious, national backgrounds. They came from different religious groups (Christian, Jewish and Muslim), Christian denominations (Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic) as well as non-religious organisations. Thus a broad range of perspectives and opinions were presented at the conference.

Having three participants from the WSCF member movements from Chile, Indonesia and USA/Philippines was one of the exciting and inspiring opportunity for the conference. Not only they gave broader international dimension to the event, but their contribution to the discussions were added value to critical points and diverse perspectives. The participants learned more about their own country experiences by learning how other countries deal with certain issues.

“The warm atmosphere and happy smiles of participants make us feel close to each other; united here, we are really engaged for the common aim, because we are many we are one”

-Salma Charaf from SCM France
Participants’ feedback and evaluations explicitly pointed to the improvement and positive change in their attitudes. The programme of the conference, its flow and the logic behind it was appreciated by participants. Everyone felt involved and guided through the learning process and differences in experience and knowledge became an inspiring part of the event. All participants felt they gained by sharing and showing their own opinions and perspectives. WSCF-Europe received numerous letter of appreciation towards the organisers and donors of the project for giving this experience and opportunity to them.

A special thanks to our donors and to all individual supporters for making this event a success!

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RELIGION/S AND POLITICS: HOW IS MULTICULTURALISM POSSIBLE?

A joint conference on religion and politics in Europe by WSCF-E and European Union of Jewish Students

17-23 October
2015, Litomysl, Czech Republic

Are you interested in religion and politics?
Are you up for controversial, challenging moral discussions?
Would you like to learn more about multiculturalism, European laws and religions freedom?
Would you like to meet fellow students from all over Europe and of different faiths?