

## Civil Society and Dialogue after 9/11

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The notion of a dichotomy or even an antagonism between “the West” and “the Orient” has a long history<sup>1</sup>. However, after 9/11 it became dominant in shaping contemporary political debates and the perception of global power structures both in the media and in the cultural field. Since then, media representations, political debates and academic work on 9/11 and its repercussions are characterized by their focus on Muslims and Islam which – even if connected to a well-meaning awareness for stereotyping and discrimination – excludes a range of issues and leaves blank spaces.<sup>2</sup>

The decade following 2001 has been shaped by a paradigm shift: immigrants in Western European countries were increasingly perceived and debated as Muslims.<sup>3</sup> The trend to discuss immigrants as Muslims has been followed also by a shift from xenophobia to anti-Muslim sentiments, as has been documented by a set of quantitative studies. Even in North America, Australia and New Zealand, where Muslims are far from making up a large part of the immigrant population, a new awareness has been given to Muslim residents<sup>4</sup>. However, 9/11 is merely strengthening this shift in perception and serves as a subsequent legitimation. For Western Europe, at least, this new awareness has been described before 2000. In an article that appeared three years before 9/11 under the title *Why Islam is like Spanish*, Aristide R. Zolberg and Long Litt Woon reveal a fundamental similarity in the categorization of Spanish language speakers in the United States as “Hispanics” and immigrants and their descendants from majority Islamic countries in Europe as “Muslims”, while already

Yasemin Soysal speaks of “Europe’s rediscovery of Islam” back in 1997,<sup>5</sup> Tariq Modood traces the British attentiveness to the religious affiliation of many South Asian residents back to the Salman Rushdi affair in 1989, and in France the *affaire du foulard* – the debate on the headscarf in French schools – began.<sup>6</sup>

The focus on Muslim immigrants and their descendants has become an issue of investigations into Islam and subsequent political policies as reactions to terrorist attacks.<sup>7</sup> What is often neglected, however, is that 9/11 and the new tone among policymakers afterwards had grave effects on the lives of non-Muslim immigrants as well. Many of the anti-terrorism laws target (pheno)types that also match immigrants from other parts of the world. The debates on security gaps led to a tightening of migration laws for which the argument was directly tied to issues of national security and fear of Muslims.

Last but not least, academic research is predominantly focused on rising conflicts, legal restrictions and increasing anti-Muslim sentiment<sup>8</sup>, but rarely on the many initiatives in civil society and government administrations that try to counter negative sentiment and foster understanding at the local level. Recounting the history of Christian–Muslim interaction, the historian Jørgen Nielsen strikingly remarks that “the conflict is remembered and restated, while the positive interaction and interdependence is so easily forgotten.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the media fascination with negative news highlights the problems, conflicts and the deterioration of civil rights. Hitherto, the unwanted positive effects of 9/11, so to speak, have been neglected including the voluntary engagement of thousands of lay people and religious leaders and citizens who consciously ignore the fear-mongering by the media and political debates and reach out to those who are labeled as ‘others’ in their neighborhood, school or city.

This paper is dedicated to addressing the desideratum last mentioned and shed light on some of the many personal initiatives of citizens, religious leaders and even political authorities. It chooses a set of examples from different fields of encounters in order to show the power of individuals in resisting the dominant narrative of enmity between

“Western” and “Muslim” people and civilizations. As many researchers have exposed, Muslims are presented as the new “others” or even the new enemies, complicating the lives of domestic Muslim populations.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, in the Muslim World a reverse story is being told by media addressing Muslim audiences, portraying “the West” similarly as a homogeneous block with an aggressive attitude towards Muslims both in “the West” and “at home”. Again these two notions complement and feed each other. Acts and speeches of hatred, public displays and the publication of demeaning pictures and narrations of the “other” are fuelling responses. What is most remarkable is that these stories are exchanged on a global level. They travel through different media and languages and are retold and remembered repeatedly.

Therefore, it becomes relevant to ask which stories are *not* being told, or, if they are being told in one place, why they do not travel the globe? Hate speech and hate crime do not only incite further hate, they can also bring about positive reactions that stress a humanist ideal of belonging and foster a sense of neighborhood or unity beyond ethnicity and religious affiliation. These positive stories are reported in significantly fewer cases and so far they are attracting less attention from researchers. European and American media have for a long time not been reporting on civic initiatives aiming at inclusion and understanding<sup>11</sup>. As Kai Hafez argues, Islam made it to the front pages framed as ‘political Islam’.<sup>12</sup> However, within the US media this seems to have changed slightly. Lately, stories of Muslim communities congregating at churches or synagogues and mosque communities lending their places of worship to Christian faith groups or inter-faith meetings are receiving growing attention from the media. As counter narratives to anti-Muslim hate speech, these initiatives themselves became news content to a certain degree, although considerably smaller than stories about conflicts.

### *Dialogue: A Civil Reaction to Conflict and Aggression*

Immediately after 9/11 various heads of government not only condemned the terrorist attacks but also stressed the differences between Islam as a

religion and the terrorists' acts. A few days after the attacks in the United States, the US president George W. Bush visited the Islamic Center Washington, DC and declared in his speech, "The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace."<sup>13</sup> Several national leaders in Europe and North America pronounced the need for dialogue as a preventive measure against the rise of religious conflicts. A new field of public diplomacy – inter-faith or intercultural dialogue – took shape. As a measure against terrorism – or at least a direct reaction to the new situation after the 9/11 terrorist attacks – the German Foreign Ministry established a department for "Dialogue with the Islamic World" in early 2002. Embassies in Muslim-majority countries were supplied with additional staff to act as dialogue officers and were employed to assist the embassies in monitoring relevant developments, promote contacts with important civil society actors (including the media), and initiating and steering dialogue projects.<sup>14</sup>

International exchange was sustained by a variety of means including an Internet platform called *Qantara*, which published essays and interviews on Islam-related issues in German, English and Arabic; the magazine *Fikrun wa Fann*, which translates and publishes opinion pieces from German public debates in Arabic; and an art gallery in Berlin specializing in curating exhibitions that bring together artists from Muslim-majority countries and Germany. Other states followed and funded local and global initiatives such as the Austrian Foreign Ministry's program called the "Dialogue of Cultures" in 2007. On the multinational level several institutions have also become active in the field of dialogue. After the bombing in Madrid in 2004 the president of Spain proposed an "Alliance of Civilizations between the Western and the Arab and Muslim worlds",<sup>15</sup> which soon found the support from the president of Turkey and has since then become an initiative of the United Nations. In 2004 the World Economic Forum (WEF) initiated the "Community of West and Islam Dialogue," with the aim of "promoting dialogue and cooperation between the Western and Islamic world" and included more than 80 leaders from business, the religious community, the media, academia and civil society.

However, many of these dialogue projects have been criticized as being elitist<sup>16</sup> on the one hand and on the other hand of perpetuating the notion of two entities that need to be reconciled in order to prevent war and conflict. Dialogue, when referring to “the West” as one block and “Islam” or the “Islamic world” as the opposite block simply serves as the two sides in the “clash of civilizations”. The German scholar of Islamic Studies, Jamal Malik, points out that this idea of dialogue as a counterweight to a “clash of civilizations” stems from the same notion of closed cultural entities.<sup>17</sup> It tends to ignore the diversity within “Western” countries and the religious plurality in countries with Muslim majorities. Last but not least, the extensive usage of geographical terminology combined with the notion of civilizational clash and dialogue creates a concept of religions as being bound to territories while in fact religious diversity shapes European countries as well as the Middle East. This diversity is often ignored, as the German-Iranian writer, Navid Kermani, points out. The frequent calls for dialogue between Germans and Muslims might be well-meaning, he argues, but they deny the possibility of dialogue for Germans of Muslim faith who combine nationality and religious affiliation. “For approximately three million people in my country this would mean that they ought to engage in a dialogue with themselves.”<sup>18</sup> For them, as for millions of other residents of Western Europe, the divide between “the West” and Islam or the “Islamic world” does not exist because they embody both.

The following examples will also show how a divide that is often evoked in the Arab media does not fully comply with reality—that of Europeans and Americans being hostile towards Islam. Even though the incidents of insults or violence against Muslims that are reported are certainly real, they do not represent the state of mind of a majority of Dutch, German, Danish or American people. In this respect democratic states are struggling with the tensions between freedom of opinion on one side and hate speech and acts on the other. The line between banning images and arguments or allowing a pluralist debate about relevant challenges often appears to be quite narrow.<sup>19</sup> In order to make clear that extremist positions are not the only ones out there or even dominant, civil

society initiatives in Europe and North America see it as their responsibility to raise their voices and take a stance against hatred and exclusion. Extremist and hostile positions so far have a greater appeal to the media while the tolerant majority seems to have problems getting heard with their message of solidarity and support of minorities, even though these counter narratives are often full of creativity and depth.

*Narratives of Inclusion  
against Narratives of Exclusion*

During the last two decades Islam and Muslims in Europe have sometimes become a heated issue of debate over the notion of “belonging” as well as national and supra-national notions of identity and values. The discussion is sometimes framed by the question whether the European Union is a “Christian club”. Even though the reality of millions of Muslims and adherents of many other religions living within the EU and the ideal of European religious freedom would be strong arguments against such a notion, political movements which maintain the idea that people of certain beliefs could not be “real Europeans” are enjoying increasing popularity. Moreover, even in the established parties and mainstream media one can find rhetorics that are exclusive of Muslims; yet the same parties and media also contain individuals and platforms that lobby for narratives of inclusion and draw on the historical presence of Muslims in Europe and the long history of dialogue and cultural exchange.

One example is the debate about a statement by the German President Christian Wulff. In his speech celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the German reunification on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010, Wulff stated that “Islam has now also become part of German identity,” thereby linking the issue of German unification after four decades of Cold War with that of contemporary challenges of integration and religious plurality.<sup>20</sup> Even though he had only repeated a sentence which had been uttered by previous Ministers of Interior Affairs, the president’s statement triggered immense disagreement from his own party, the Christian Democratic Union. Some months later, the new Federal Minister of Interior Affairs,

Hans-Peter Friedrich, stated at a press conference in early March 2011 that while people of Islamic belief would belong to the country there was no historical evidence for the fact that Islam belonged to Germany. With Hans-Peter Friedrich, the issue was turned into a matter of historical depth when he introduced the difference between the contemporary presence of Muslim subjects and the historical past of German culture and national values. The minister is drawing on an idea of an unchangeable past in a debate on narratives of “belonging” today.

Historians have stepped up the argument by pointing out that one could find proof of a history that ties not only Europe and Islam but even Germany and Islam together. The Museum for Islamic Art at the Pergamon Museum, located on the renowned Museum Island in Berlin, is one of the venues for such an inclusive approach. Its current director, Dr. Stefan Weber, took his new position in 2008 with the aim of drawing new visitors to the Museum Island in Berlin’s city center. Attracting thousands of tourists every day, the museum does not lack visitors; however, the new director called for a different goal: he aims to attract Muslims, especially those with an immigrant background and from socially challenged environments and wants to turn the museum into a “symbolic home for Muslims in Germany”<sup>21</sup>—a space of belonging that provides links to a positive identification with the cultural heritage of Islamic regions. Since 2009 the museum opened its gates beyond school classes and also for cultural events during the festival of Ramadan and for the capital’s “Islamforum”, a consultation council between representatives of Muslim communities and the state’s government. Each year during the month of Ramadan it hosts events presenting contemporary music and performance.

In his guided tours Stefan Weber leads visitors through all three collections of the Pergamon Museum—the Collection of Classical Antiquities, the Museum of the Ancient Near East and the Museum of Islamic Art. His tour program comprises carpets, porcelain and wooden handicrafts from Spain and Aleppo, and also leads through the monumental reconstruction of archaeological building ensembles including the Pergamon Altar, the Market Gate of Miletus, the Ishtar Gate, the Processional Way of Babylon and the Mshatta Façade. All of these

monuments that contributed to the Pergamon Museum's global fame were excavated in countries that today have a majority of Muslim inhabitants.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout this tour, the director of the museum embeds his presentation of Islamic art into a broader narrative pointing out commonalities in architecture and aesthetics as well as historical connections in trade and philosophical exchange. Why should Greek monuments and ideas be inherited only by "the West" or Europe? If they represent "our" roots, aren't these roots clearly shared with Islam? By asking these questions Stefan Weber dismantles some presumptions of exclusive narratives. Most of all, he presents his museum not necessarily as a *lieu de mémoire*<sup>23</sup> but as a *lieu d'identité*. Whether this presentation will be accepted and the museum turned into a space for Muslims in Berlin and Germany is difficult to foresee and most probably will be connected to many other factors including the development of national and European debates on belonging and identity.

### *Our Shared Europe and Our Shared Future*

Another initiative that engages in an inclusive narrative was launched by the international cultural relations body of the United Kingdom. For several years now, the British Council engages in projects to promote a history of Europe and "the West" that is inclusive of Muslims. In 2007, it started preparations for *Our Shared Europe* (OSE) with a series of consultations and the project began in 2009 with diverse events in its branches throughout Europe. In 2011, *Our Shared Europe* was extended to the United States in a project called *Our shared Future* that included a cooperation with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the Carnegie Foundation. In his foreword to the introductory report on the project that was published prior to its first events, Stephan Roman, the British Council's regional director for West Europe and North America, presents the initiative as a reaction to the changes in societies at the national and the local level:

Globalization, migration, climate change, the energy and food crises, and the constantly shifting nature of international events are propelling us into a more uncertain and less stable future.<sup>24</sup>

These changes, unstoppable and challenging at the same time according to leading personnel of the British Council, made it necessary to engage in new narratives for a sense of national and supranational belonging in order to uphold a sense of social order. In a video presented on the *Our Shared Europe* website, the British journalist and science writer Ehsan Masood, who was a key figure in planning and shaping the project, describes its initial motivation as connected to the negative media representation of Muslims in the aftermath of terrorist acts in the United States and Europe.

Especially in the initial weeks, months and years after 9/11 and then the London bombs and the Madrid bombs where there was just almost a rainbow shower of headlines and really quite vulgar reporting and coverage on Muslim communities around Europe.<sup>25</sup>

Martin Rose, director of the OSE project, mentions that “a widening division between Muslims and Non-Muslim Europeans”<sup>26</sup> is a consequence of these developments. Therefore, since its beginning the OSE project has been exposing two narratives that are contributing to the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims. One is the skepticism held by non-Muslim Europeans towards immigration, perceiving Islam as an effect of migration and furthermore the cause of “incompatibilities of culture and attitudes (to gender, sexuality and freedom of expression, in particular). This narrative trails radicalism, backwardness and violence as hallmarks of Muslims in Europe.”<sup>27</sup> The other one is skepticism held by Muslims over the notion that Europe or ‘the West’ is morally deficient and anti-Muslim. Often this skepticism is fuelled by actual and perceived exclusion “that subsumes all the very real affronts and difficulties that Muslims face into a single, purposeful hostility that it claims to perceive towards ‘Islam’ and draws together all the foreign wars of Europe, the US, Russia and Israel into a single story of aggression against” the Muslim community. Interestingly both narratives are constructing the self as a

victim of global developments and actions of political and sometimes even religious elites. They are both heavily engaged in constructing an “other” who is to blame for any misfortunes and challenges and thereby widening the divide on the basis of religious identities, while these identities do not even need to be filled with religious practice or theological arguments. Already the claim on one side that “the others” are doing certain things “because they are Muslims”, or on the other side the claim that “the others” are treating “us as they do because we are Muslims” reveals similarities between these two narratives—the main one being the focus on (sometimes only alleged) religious affiliation. Martin Rose has a dark outlook for Europe if this trend cannot be reversed:

The danger for Europe is that the coming years will entrench a largely artificial, and deeply damaging binary divide between ‘old-stock’ Europe and the youngest, liveliest and largest of its minority demographics. At its worst, the rhetoric of today is reminiscent of the 1930s. It is vital to Europe’s future that we do all we can to confront and reverse this dangerous trend.<sup>28</sup>

The core of these exclusive narratives is their adherence to old concepts of national order or white supremacy and their aim at restoring a situation of national purity, which is often understood as connected to ethnic and religious purity. Cultures and civilizations are in these cases understood as distinct unities that can co-exist, communicate or be in conflict with each other. According to the understanding of the British Council, cultures are not the actors but are used or misused in the interest of individuals and groups. Hence, culture(s) as such is neither good nor bad, as Stephan Roman maintains:

Equally, culture can also be misused so that it becomes a vehicle for fuelling fears and tensions that can corrode trust between peoples and communities. In fact, culture and cultural identities are used to exclude as well as to include.<sup>29</sup>

Promoting narratives of inclusion is the core of the OSE program in its Western European branches in order to respond “to one of the major cultural challenges facing our continent today—the growing mutual

mistrust between Muslim communities and wider European society” by “building a new narrative about how we can all best live together in the Europe of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”<sup>30</sup> and “help to change the way we understand and think about one another as fellow Europeans.”<sup>31</sup>

The British Council’s counter narrative to comments of antagonism or incompatibility of Islam and Europe, which lie at the heart of scenarios of an “Islamization of Europe”, highlights the assets of diversity and the contributions made by certain Muslims to the development of Europe in science, arts and even military conflicts. However, this narrative also rejects the notion of an exclusively Judeo-Christian basis of Europe that is frequently asserted in negotiations on the identity of the union of states. Project director Rose argues that, “what we tended to do is to forget about the contribution that Islamic culture has made to the modern European mind,”<sup>32</sup> and the slide presentation shows a list of carriers of the Victorian Cross honored for their service in the British Army during World War II led by Fazal Din, followed by a picture of a South Asian division of British soldiers wearing turbans and arms and finely colored arabesque ornaments. The project’s focus on science history highlighting certain Islamic contributions to mathematics and natural sciences and addresses a fundamental account of European enlightenment based on reason. Similar to the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, this narrative refers to common sources and long-lasting exchanges as arguments for compatibility in the present, or as Rose sums up the aim of the project: “our job is to remind Europe today that its own mind, its own mentality is a joint enterprise.”<sup>33</sup> It is this thought that leads to the focus on the diversity of European roots as its strength and not its weakness.

The Europe of today is what it is thanks to a complex set of cultural influences. These include the ones commonly known: Christian, Jewish and secularist. [...] It is from this conglomerate of cultures and influences that Europe derives its beauty, its strength and its multiple identities.<sup>34</sup>

This notion of an inclusive Europe developed on the basis of a shared historical past and a joint present and future hence differs considerably

from the one following the idea of separated cultures. The British Council seems careful not to phrase its initiative as one that supports Muslims but as one that supports a certain notion of Europe. However, OSE addresses existing discrimination and deprivation of Muslim communities, individuals and families, but counters the perception of Europe being generally hostile to Islam and Muslims. In this way the inclusive narrative of the British Council rejects both narratives of exclusion and suggests a notion of co-existence that bridges the divide between Muslims and Non-Muslims.

However, by reacting to narratives of Europe that are exclusive of Muslims and by targeting Muslims and only Muslims, both *Our shared Europe* and *Our shared Future* are still not leaving the discursive frame of religious dichotomies, rather than promoting a new concept of diversity. This approach holds the danger of only reaching a certain set of likeminded people on one side while simply inflaming the debate about religious identities still further on the other side, even if positive aspects of Muslim life or contributions of Islam to the development of modern societies are included. This project reveals the dilemma of the current situation. Exclusive narratives and anti-Muslim hate speech as well as acts of hate are calling for decisive reactions not only by state institutions but also by fellow citizens and civic initiatives. Yet, narratives of religious identities – be they positive or negative – feed into a variety of identity politics with religious categories at the center of attention. This is why activities that bring together people of different faiths and convictions while highlighting the commonalities as humans, citizen or neighbors rather than disparate religious, ethnic or national identities are of special interest in the following accounts of small initiatives against hate and exclusion.

### *Standing Up Against Hatred*

On a rainy day in 2006 people in the US town of Fremont came together to commemorate the death of a member of their community. “When Alia Ansari, a resident of Fremont, California, was shot to death as she walked

her daughter to school, community members feared she was targeted because she was wearing a hijab,” a video on the website of ‘Not in our Town’ (NiOT) reports. It documents the initiative of Ansari’s neighbors, political leaders and religious minorities to support the victim’s family, the Muslim community and stand up against prejudice and violence. The video shows women wrapping a scarf around their heads, standing together with men under umbrellas protecting them from the rain. They all followed the call for a “Wear a Hijab Day.”

Today we have come together to honor the death of Alia Ansari. We are also here today to talk about race, racism, prejudice and privilege. Please join me for a moment of silence to honor all victims of hate crimes and all victims of crimes against humanity.<sup>35</sup>

In this speech of one of the participants at Fremont’s “Wear a Hijab Day,” Alia Ansari is not only remembered as a Muslim or a victim of a crime, but as an equal member of the local community. By wearing the piece of cloth that might have been the cause for the death of the woman, the female participants not only show their sympathy but they symbolically make it impossible to differentiate between Muslim and non-Muslim women. Alia Ansari becomes “one of us” and thereby the aim of hate crime of this kind that goes beyond the destruction of one individual and aims to destroy community cohesion and prevent people who share certain features with the victim to feel secure or even at home, is rejected. In a short interview a participant with a black scarf wrapped around her head explains why she is at the event: “What happened to Alia hurts their community but it hurts us all.” While often after such events discussions start about whether an insult – or in this case a murder – has really been an act of hate against a certain minority or just a random incident, on this occasion community members refused to engage in such a debate. It was much more important that it *might* have been one and most of all that other Muslim women *felt* threatened by what has happened. That alone was reason enough for Herman Rosenbaum, a representative of the Jewish Community, to participate in the “Wear a Hijab Day,” declaring that:

The entire community of course was shocked by the murder of Mrs. Ansari. We don't know that it was a hate crime. But irrespective of whether it was a hate crime it is very important to all of us to stand with the victims and stand against hatred.<sup>36</sup>

This event remembering the murder of Alia Ansari brought together the most diverse people, among them Christians, Jews, Sikhs and Muslims. A woman from the victim's community explains that this has been the major aim of the initiative.

We're here so we can turn this tragic moment into a learning experience. Not just for Freemont, for the whole world.

This is also the motto of *Not in our Town* (NioT), a US-based NGO that collects stories of this kind, creates short documentaries in order to spread them on video or making them available online. Thereby, the initiative aims at breaking the cycle of violence that answers one act of hate with other acts of hate, but instead inspiring reunions of different ethnic and religious groups and individuals. The initiative started with a documentary series about American communities fighting hate crime on the national television network PBS. It then developed into a campaign that combined public television broadcasts with grassroots events, educational outreach and online activities to help communities battling hate and to communicate with and learn from each other.

After collecting several stories of communities standing up against all kinds of hate attacks and distributing them on DVD to schools and interfaith groups, NioT launched a website to make a collection of short documentaries available online. Additionally, this website aims to connect those interested in this kind of communal work. On its website the initiative explains its objective: "While hate violence makes headlines, the positive actions of people across the country are creating a different story."<sup>37</sup> Patrice O'Neill, filmmaker and one of the initiators of NioT, explains the need for ideas such as those promoted by the short films of the movement. Individuals and communities can take other examples both as inspiration for their own creative ways to answer difficult situations in

their neighborhood or classroom and as a comfort and support in times of alienation and tension.

Not in our Town [NioT] highlights communities working to stop hate together. Many media outlets cover hate crimes by reporting the violence, but Not in our Town looks for stories that show what people can do to both respond and prevent hate crimes (Patrice O’Neill, June 2, 2011).

Many surveys have shown that perpetrators and even sympathizers of violence are a very small minority, but despite that the peaceful majority tends to be silent or overheard. One of the core ideas of NioT is the belief that the passivity of the many could be overcome and large parts of civil society can be activated to counter violence, bullying and exclusion of marginalized groups and individuals. Furthermore, in the movement’s understanding, acting against hatred is not simply a charitable act on behalf of the marginalized but a contribution to the cohesion of the whole society. Hatred, especially in form of acts of violence, affects not only the direct victim but has larger effects and actually addresses the plurality of society, or as Patrice O’Neill puts it: “An attack on any one of us [...] is an attack on all of us.” Therefore it is so pivotal how other members of this collective react:

Hate crimes cause terrible pain to those who are directly attacked, but the harm of hate spreads across entire communities. Every time we hear a story about a woman who is attacked or harassed for wearing a hijab, we know that it can create deep fear and anxiety for every woman who expresses her faith in this way. A hate crime murder, such as the one in Dresden, or the killing of an Afghani woman in Fremont, California a few years ago can affect entire communities. A community response is vital. In Fremont, civic leaders and people of many faiths gathered to support community members who felt vulnerable in an event called “Wear a Hijab Day.” The message to the Muslim community was simple: You are not alone. An attack on any one of us because of our race, religion, gender or identity is an attack on all of us. We are invigorated by

stories like these, which so often go uncovered (Patrice O’Neill, June 2, 2011).

The website of NioT ([www.NIOT.org](http://www.NIOT.org)) provides over 50 short films and Patrice O’Neill expresses her hope that people will be inspired to use these films “to stop hate in communities around the world.”

Violent attacks not only create pain and fear but also a sense of powerlessness. Creative acts of support as well as making these supportive acts public and becoming part of a national or even global movement against hatred are ways to gain a sense of empowerment. NioT does not initiate or organize these activities; they come from the grass-roots level and need to be entrenched in the specific local context, inspired and arranged by local actors. NioT assists communities to connect, provides platforms to meet virtually on social networks like Facebook and Twitter and documents some of the many incidents where ordinary people felt it is necessary to stand up and support those who feel under attack and show them that they are not alone. The short videos are handed out as teaching material for schools that can also invite workshops on bullying into the classroom.

The videos at NioT’s website highlight the many different communities in the United States which are attacked – because of their religion, color or family background – by groups that threaten pluralist communities aiming at creating an atmosphere of mistrust. These videos also show that there are many creative ways to stand up against them and support one another. During the last few years contacts have been made between initiatives of this kind in the United States and Europe. Patrice O’Neill had been invited in 2011 to speak about the work of NioT at the “Kirchentag”—the biannual national Protestant congregation of lay people in Germany. During the five-day event organizers of the Kirchentag<sup>38</sup> had arranged a commemoration at the place of the murder of a Muslim woman killed two years earlier in a courtroom while witnessing in a case against an offender.

### **The Murder of Marwa El-Sherbini in Dresden, Germany**

In early July 2009 a woman was killed while wearing a headscarf. This case shocked people in her community and entered the consciousness of Muslims around the world as an instance of anti-Muslim hatred. Marwa El-Sherbini, an Egyptian pharmacist and mother, was stabbed to death in a courtroom in the southern German city of Dresden during a trial against a man who had insulted her because of her religion. While the news quickly reached her home country Egypt, it took a week for German media to report it and understand the incident as a hate crime.<sup>39</sup> Muslim communities were shaken and interestingly the first community to come forward to join the Central Council of Muslims in their grief and rage about what had happened was the Central Council of Jews in Germany. However, they were not the only ones who mourned the murder. Hundreds of people came together a few days after the attack at the court house where it had happened. Among them were regular inhabitants of the city, court personnel, engaged activists from the immigrants' council of the city, immigrants from all around the globe and representatives of different faith groups and leading members of national political parties. Since then several initiatives are keeping up the memory of Marwa El-Sherbini and the crime that ended her life.

While her murderer has received the maximum sentence under German law of 18 to 25 years in prison, people from the city of Dresden and all over Germany gather in an annual memorial honoring Marwa El-Sherbini. A year after the murder the non-government organization "Bürger Courage" (Citizen Courage) created the artwork *18 Stiche* (18 stabs) by the artist Johannes Köhler, which represents 18 symbolic knives cast in concrete stuck in Dresden's soil in front of prominent buildings throughout the city including the courthouse where the murder took place, symbolizing that the city of Dresden itself was hurt by the murder.<sup>40</sup>

### **An Attack Against a Buddhist Temple in Turku, Finland**

Muslims are by far not always and only the victims of xenophobic or anti-religious attacks in Europe or North America; this also means that in

many cases they get the opportunity to reach out and comfort communities that are under attack. The following example describes an attack on a house of worship by another religious minority. On September 11<sup>th</sup> 2010, nine years after the 9/11 attacks, a Buddhist temple in the small town of Turku in Finland was vandalized, sprayed with swastikas and set on fire. Soon afterwards other religious minority groups declared their solidarity with the community that consisted mostly of Vietnamese immigrants. Ruth Illman reports in her analysis of this incident as a story of “the changing face of and conditions for inter-religious dialogue”, and one of the first groups to come forward was the Islamic Community of Turku.<sup>41</sup> A group on Facebook that had reached 3,000 members within days was the main forum for inter-religious support for this minority. Members of the Buddhist community valued this, as Ruth Illman established in an interview: “Of course it is important; it felt like getting 3,000 hugs!”

### **When A Whole Town Rose Against Hatred**

In 2008 the city of Cologne was facing the height of a controversy about the building of a mosque. The Turkish-German association Diyanet İşleri Türk-Islam Birliği (DITIB) – Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs – was planning to tear down a factory building in the borough Cologne–Ehrenfeld that it had used for decades as a home for a mosque and its national headquarters in order to erect a purpose-built mosque with a dome and two minarets. DITIB had successfully invited leading politicians including the mayor of the city on to a board to support the building of the mosque. Nevertheless, once published the architectural plans were debated heavily. Opponents of the mosque were found in many circles of the city. However, most of them engaged in a critical dialogue with mosque builders, which was carried out through established national media outlets and in various inter-religious platforms. Muslim voices were given a fair amount of airtime to present their views on such a mosque.

Under the headline “Who Says the Majority is Reactionary?” the German–Iranian author Navid Kermani, himself a resident of this very neighborhood of Cologne–Ehrenfeld, describes his impressions at a town-

hall meeting on the mosque building project. He emphasizes that the media's concentration on the comments of critiques of the mosque, who argued the building of the mosque in Cologne would be the first step towards the creation of a parallel society, were not representative of the high levels of common sense and support for religious rights shown at well-attended public meetings on the plans for the mosque.<sup>42</sup> Certainly neighbors raised doubts about the construction, they mentioned problems in the district such as heavy traffic and noise, but all in all this debate was constructive, as Kermani noted.<sup>43</sup>

The members of the majority society did not only accept this symbolic building of a new minority, no, they said: 'Yes, such a mosque, well if it looks that magnificent, we want to have it'. Applause. 'These people have to pray somewhere.' Applause. 'We can't tell them to integrate and at the same time demand them to stay in factory buildings with their faith.' Applause. 'We are Ehrenfeld.' Ovation.<sup>44</sup>

During this time the political party Pro Köln started to get engaged in the conflict and took a strong stance against any such building. They claimed to represent the majority of Cologne's inhabitants whereas the leading elite was acting against ordinary people's interests. Pro Köln had planned to host an "International Anti-Islamization Congress" on September 20, 2008. The list of invited speakers announced for the conference came from the European network of right-wing populist parties including politicians of the French National Front (*Front Nationale*), the Austrian Freedom Party (*FPÖ*), the Italian Northern League (*Lega Nord, LN*) and the Belgian Flemish Interest (*Vlaams Belang*)<sup>45</sup>. Finally, the event had to be cancelled because of strong opposition by civil society in Cologne. Even citizens of Cologne who continued to have doubts about the planned mosque united to prohibit a public demonstration by the radical far right in their town. A broad spectrum of civil actors called for an act of resistance including Christian Democrats, trade unions, Social Democrats, left wing party members and students, Christian churches and Islamic groups. Critics of Islam, as well as mosque supporters, participated in a demonstration against the Anti-

Islamization Congress. It appeared that the city refused to host such a congress and hence, those who wanted to exclude a religious minority had to face exclusion themselves. Media reported that taxi drivers refused to transport the well-known delegates; hotel owners cancelled their rooms and bar owners displayed banners stating that they would not serve their local beer to right-wing populists. In 2009 Pro Köln once again invited an Anti-Islamization Congress and this time succeeded in holding it. In the same year the local party won 5.4 percent of the votes and re-entered the city council with five representatives. Since 2011 Pro Köln has been under surveillance by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which considers the party as potentially anti-constitutional. The architectural plans of the mosque were slightly altered and in autumn 2008 the Islamic community received permission to build the mosque. It celebrated the laying of the first stone in November 2009 and is planning the inauguration of the building in mid 2012.

### **A Ramadan Story of Two Faiths Bound in Friendship<sup>46</sup>**

The friendship of a Christian and a Muslim congregation was the unusual headline of a news story from the US public broadcaster NPR. A Christian pastor in Tennessee had put a sign outside his church before the month of Ramadan 2010 that read, “Welcome to the neighborhood, Memphis Islamic Center.” As the radio show reported, Pastor Stone invited the Muslim community to celebrate their holiday inside his church while their own cultural center was under construction nearby. When the Muslim community did not know where to accommodate the usually bigger number of attendants during the month of Ramadan, this visible message not only offered them a place to worship but also demonstrated solidarity in a time that was shaped by rallies against a mosque building project in New York and a town 200 miles away. The radio report calls this welcome sign the beginning of an “unusual alliance” that’s still strong a year later. Accordingly, the Christian and the Islamic community continue to get together and jointly work for the neighborhood.<sup>47</sup> However, a short Google search in US news and an in-depth research into the history of

Muslims' presence in Europe indicate that such an alliance is not that unusual. During the first years of the arrival of Turkish guest workers' in Germany, churches provided them with spaces to mark Ramadan. There is also the story that in the late 1960s the Catholic Church had offered them a space in the cathedral of Cologne; a similar story from Berlin is also reported. Another example of a long-term relationship is the soccer championship that have brought together teams of imams and teams of clergy in the cities of Leicester (UK), Berlin (Germany) and Gothenburg (Sweden) over the past few years, establishing not only contacts but lasting trust between the individual participants.

A local newspaper from the Washington, DC area awarded a rabbi and an imam the title "Washingtonians of the Year 2010"; for nearly six years Imam Mohamed Magid, spiritual leader of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society, and Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk, leader of the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation in Reston, have been holding public dialogues. Every Friday afternoon about a thousand Muslims use a room in the synagogue for weekly prayers. Once Rabbi Nosanchuk addressed the Muslims at a prayer service and at the same night Imam Magid spoke to the Jewish congregation gathered for a family Sabbath service.<sup>48</sup> This article is striking in another respect—the comments board under those on-line articles with a positive approach towards Muslims are often filled with offensive remarks. However, this article proved the opposite; the comments board included remarks such as: "This is the only way!"; "Now that is the best article I've read in a long time, it's what Washington should be all about!"; "That's my Imam!"; "Great stuff! Religious tolerance and cooperation is the way to go. Please come to Utah and spread the message here too brothers!!!"; and "Congratulations and I wish both individuals much success."<sup>49</sup>

*Global Connection: Establishing  
Links Between Universities and Students*

Sonja Hegazy, a German political scientist, reflects on the deficit – and the potential – of dialogue initiatives, in particular the neglect of young

people that could present a strategy to reach out beyond religious and political elites to common people who are not only curious about the world but who also represent its future.

Surprisingly, the work with and on young people has been sadly neglected to date in the dialogue with the Islamic World. The focus on institutions has long since blended out a large majority of the population.<sup>50</sup>

Europe's internal divides after hundreds of years of violent conflicts have been mended by grand projects that targeted the youth of neighboring countries such as France and Germany. International friendship organizations have been bringing new generations together in holiday camps and school exchanges, allowing them to build long-term relations with the descendants of their ancestors' former enemies. A similar idea has been taken up and translated into the new age of social online networks by "Soliya," a non-profit organization using new technologies to facilitate dialogue between students across the globe and is supported by the United Nation's Alliance of Civilizations. The *Connect Program* uses the latest web-conferencing technology to connect university students in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and the United States and form a learning environment over large distances.

In a time when media plays an increasingly powerful role in shaping peoples' viewpoints on political issues, Soliya provides students with the opportunity, skills and tools to shape and articulate their own viewpoints on some of the most pressing global issues facing their generation.<sup>51</sup>

Participating students are not alone in this; a cross-cultural team of young leaders drawn from over 25 different countries facilitates online meetings over the course of at least one university semester that sometimes lead to meetings in person. Participants form research and study teams to work together on solving a problem and present their results in online meetings to the whole group. Participation is facilitated by universities that join the program and consequently invite their students to follow a course online. The results of their work are later shared on the

Soliya News Network and the Common Ground News Service, with support of active and former news correspondents. According to the organization's statements, it aims "to build confidence and support the efforts of peaceful co-existence and mutual respect between nations."<sup>52</sup>

This cross-cultural education program allows university students from the United States and throughout the Middle East collaboratively to explore and discuss controversial issues, mostly as part of an accredited course at their universities. According to Soliya, by 2011 over 400 students and 20 universities from the United States, Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait have participated in the program. Internet-based links between colleges and universities provided by the non-profit organization allow students to jointly compile documentaries. The short films cover major events at the root of current conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Iraq, the Madrid train bombing or the 9/11 attacks. The outcome is twofold: students learn how the same events can be presented differently by the media and at the same time get a voice and while producing their story discuss why they view these events differently. This process enables students to see global developments from different perspectives and build up empathy for people that are usually presented as enemies or at least members of different cultures and entities.

### *How to Foster Understanding: Some Concluding Remarks*

There are many more stories and examples of activities initiated by political leaders, engaged citizens, religious authorities or lay members of faith groups that could serve as accounts of engagement for mutual understanding and resisting the extremists' narratives of irreconcilableness of different faith groups. These many stories and initiatives show "the West" as not suddenly appearing as one block looking down upon people of other colors and faiths. Some of the examples mentioned highlight how more or less direct reactions to a tragic event or an act of hatred have in effect brought people from different faith communities together. These cases show us, in an unexpected way, that acts of hatred can be the spark

to begin a long-term relation. Another effect of 9/11 cannot be denied; it led Muslims in minority contexts to become more engaged in various dialogues, fostered the institutionalization of Islam in minority situations and the opening up of mosques, or as Liyakatali Takim phrases it:

The increased dialogue and interaction between Muslims and Christians represents a significant paradigm shift, a shift from attempts at ‘conversion of’ to those of ‘conversation with’ the other.<sup>53</sup>

Likewise, European and North American governments became more aware of Muslim minorities living in their countries. This has negative effects such as the stereotyping and profiling in anti-terrorism strategies, but also opened up opportunities to raise concerns of these minorities in dialogues with political authorities. In this way the new visibility has contributed to a development of mosque associations; more professionalism in public relations and media contacts; and an enhancement of inter-Muslim debates and communications. In some European countries such as the Netherlands, Austria and Germany this process has led to the foundation of state-funded chairs for Islamic studies aiming at educating future teachers of Islam in schools and religious leaders for European Muslim communities. Even though this process will doubtlessly be accompanied by conflicts about the content of these studies, not only between different Muslim communities and interest groups but also between Islamic organizations and the funding institutions, it still is a step towards consolidation of Muslim life in these societies.

Besides governmental and academic initiatives to invest in the future intellectual development of Islamic thought, we find civil society, administrations and state-funded institutions investing in the creation of inclusive visions of living in diverse societies that are characterized by religious plurality. Explicitly or implicitly these initiatives counter or are countered by exclusivist understandings of the nation state, especially by anti-Muslim expressions. Jamal Malik calls for a cautious reply to these dividing forces that does not simply take up simplistic explanations for conflicts.

While making policies, they [policy makers] should avoid simplistic paradigms of understanding the conflicts, e.g. Islam versus West, religion versus secularism etc. All such terminologies carry a danger of boxing diverse people and a complexity of issues into only one category.<sup>54</sup>

The dilemma still remains unsolved: how can hate speech against a specific religious group be answered without contributing to the dividing trends of identity politics? Citizens' and neighborhood initiatives that bring together people from diverse backgrounds, without denying their religious and ethnic affiliations, have developed methods of reconciliation on a small scale in personal interactions. They are trying to re-establish the trust of verbally or physically attacked minorities and build up long-term relations and cohesive atmospheres in order to prevent such attacks in future. So far, these initiatives have been neglected by researchers and have not entered the global consciousness. However, many engaged people are showing in daily practice that the line of enmity does not pass between people of "the West" and Islam.