

CASE STUDY OF “RELIGIONS AND MEDIATION IN URBAN AREAS”

Descriptive title of the case:

Muslim community needs more space to pray.

Location (including brief description):

Township on the north of a southern European country, about 150,000 inhabitants, with a rate of immigration of 4% in 2010, and a population of immigrants over the total population of 21% (Idescat, 2011). In the past 10 years, the city has seen a sharp increase in immigration and organized religious diversity. The city is attractive to immigration, despite the severe economic crisis in the country, because its economy is based primarily on the food industry that works from small and medium enterprises that practice low-skilled seasonal hiring. In general, this is one of the cities in the region (one of the most developed and industrialized in the country) with a lower unemployment rate. Most of the immigrants, about 36% are from Africa, Maghreb and Sub-Saharan; 15% are originally from America, 3% are Asian and the rest are Europeans. Most immigrants are Muslims and some are Christians, Roman Catholics or Protestants. The atmosphere shows a clear socio-religious and historic-cultural predominance of the Roman Catholic community, which possesses many buildings and facilities such as schools, elderly homes, museums, hospitals, social services etc. Its relationship with the government is privileged for historical reasons, by a law based on an international concordat with the Vatican and by the clear identification of some political leaders of the municipal government with this majority religion.

Approximate start and end dates (if applicable) of the mediation process:

2007-2010

Different organisations and people (religious, interreligious, political, etc.) involved (including their main characteristics and the reasons for the involvement of the mediating actors):

Actors directly involved:

The imam of the city's main mosque, which we will call MOSQUE 1, which binds mainly to Muslims of Maghreb origin and some of sub-Saharan origin. This mosque is pietistic Salafist. Their community was invited from the beginning to take part into the Religious Diversity Assembly of the city. They usually couldn't pray in their oratory because the number of worshipers was much higher than the allowed by the rules and the oratory could not accommodate them. This community has more than 4.000 people.

The socialist council of the city, especially the mayor and the Humans Rights and Citizen Participation alderman, as well as a technician from the council in charge of the Religious Diversity Council of the city.

Political opposition to the council, basically center-right and liberal, and the ecologist and independence left.

Other actors less directly involved:

The media of the city.

Other more moderate Muslim groups which are politically perceived as better connected with the government and municipal technicians. Among them there is the other mosque or oratory of the city (MOSQUE 2), where mostly sub-Saharan Muslims meet and some so-called cultural (non religious) associations.

Mediators:

The Assembly of Religious Diversity in the city, coordinated by the City Council, through the Department of rights and social and civic participation and with the advice of a Catalan institution recognized by the civil society (that we will call Civitas) –without presence in the city- which is dedicated to promoting interreligious dialogue and the management of religious diversity.

Civitas, the expert entity, pioneer at the statewide and international level and connected and recognized in the field of promotion and management of religious diversity, initiatives of interreligious dialogue and so-called

interreligious conflict mediation. They were asked by the City Council to help encourage and coordinate the Assembly of Religious Diversity in the city.

Other religious and Interreligious bodies members of the Assembly of Religious Diversity. This assembly is coordinated and directed by the City Council, which summon it and decide its agenda without prior consultation with religious communities and interfaith organisations members. Civitas only affects the agenda very occasionally and always related to issues of information or training in the knowledge of religious diversity and its sociological and legal framework. A regional association of interreligious organisations assists the Assembly with voice but no vote.

Key information related to the background and the context of the case (before the mediation process):

The society of the state where the city is situated has formally ceased to be Roman Catholic, but continues to have a cultural identity linked to the traditional Catholic history. Much of the political class is aware of this and, given the preponderance that the concordat between Church and State grants to the Catholic majority, this majority ends by being favored mainly for electoral reasons. Religious minorities are perceived as awkward and are unknown by the majority of the population. Especially, information and knowledge of professionals in politics and administration on religious diversity and their rights are really limited and self interested. There is also citizen hostility toward non-Catholic places of worship, which politicians fear and which they tend to concede –in a headlong rush to see who does it first, more and better. The populist electoral and political struggle has made the issue of places of worship and its ideological trends used in election campaigns and primaries, especially citing arguments that refer directly or indirectly to citizens safety, the model of society and Christian and Western values, fostering prejudices and stereotypes that allow us to speak clearly of a growing Islamophobia. Statewide and in this region in particular, the political use of religious diversity has come increasing xenophobic, specifically where religious differences are concerned. When a political agreement has been proposed to avoid this partisan and self-interested use and promote living peacefully, it has not been well received. The

appearance of extra-parliamentary political parties that have entered the political scene especially using Islamophobia as a tool of propaganda has aggravated the situation and has caused a viral mimicry in other more moderate parties and even in left-wing parties. The right-wing parties, picking up the discomfort of some Catholic authorities, nostalgic of the influence and social prestige lost, pose positions that want to promote or legitimize the asymmetry (different treatment of religious traditions based on its historical weight and influence and its legal uniqueness within the existing legal framework) and an attitude of condemnation and judgment of the behaviors and attitudes of the religious communities that may seem contrary to Western values, democracy and human rights, especially as regards gender equality

In 2007 an agreement to transfer the oratory or MOSQUE 1, that gathers believers mainly from North Africa, is established. In 2008 the agreement was formalized with the City Council's concession to the community of a site in an industrial area for a period of 50 years in exchange for an annual payment of 8,000 euros.

In November 2008 the City Council already had the mosque project, which envisaged a two-stores temple, plus underground parking spaces. In total amounted to a total of over 2,000 m². There were projected, among other places, two prayer rooms, a minaret, cafeteria and restaurant, offices, library and workshops for women.

Throughout 2009 the City Council reclassified the polygon from industrial land to land for facilities with the subsequent acceptance of a planning commission. The entrepreneurs of the polygon, who opposed the installation of the mosque in the area, did not agree with this reclassification and filed a judicial review. However, Muslims did not step forward and the mosque remained only a project.

Meanwhile in mid-2010 in the MOSQUE 1, which was clearly insufficient for the number of believers, by request of the mayor, local police took a control of capacity and presumably counted 1,200 worshipers, when the permitted

capacity was 250 people only. The imam of the mosque denied it, but, according to local police, excess capacity had been exceeded several times, and this put at risk the worshipers inside the mosque and would difficult their evacuation in case of emergency. As a result of this excess capacity, authorities sealed the mosque for two weeks.

The Imam of this mosque, which had defined himself as a follower of Salafism, was known for his extremist ideas and lead the ranking of the ten Salafi clerics most controlled by national security. This imam had fueled a bad atmosphere when he didn't agree to an interview with a journalist from a local television channel because she wore makeup or when he refused to talk to the neighbor's association of the neighborhood of the future mosque because it was headed by a woman.

15 days later the MOSQUE 1 was reopened after the temple leaders committed themselves to control the access to it. Despite this, only a month later an excess of capacity was again detected in the local. This brought about a new temporary closure of the mosque. From the new closure of the mosque the believers, led by the Imam, prayed in two different places. The first few days they prayed in a sports hall and later in a plot. The last prayer of Ramadan brought together about 4,000 Muslims.

It is at that time when a leader of a Muslim association in the city, that we will call MOSQUE 4, without any linkage to the mosque that needed more capacity, begins to offer the council to take over the construction of a new mosque funded by Morocco in different possible locations of the city.

In late September, an independent expert report commissioned by the High Court of Justice of the region discourages the location of the mosque on the site for being too far from the users, because it didn't favor the relations with the rest of the citizens and social cohesion, because it difficult traffic, because the parking wasn't big enough and because the area, given the storage of chemical and fuel, was too dangerous.

Finally, at the beginning of October, the Muslim community of the oratory or MOSQUE 1 announced the imminent construction of a provisional mosque (MOSQUE 3) in the space provided at the polygon. It would be a prefabricated temporary mosque until they find a suitable larger space appropriate to the planning regulations and places of worship needs. The decision came after the Council pressure and the mediation of a regional deputy of the same party as the mayor of the city. In fact, the council had hinted that it was difficult to reopen the oratory, which had been closed because of repeated breaches of standards of capacity and noise.

The Muslim community, but, although they considered the site too small, had no alternative and took advantage of the opportunity. They continued praying where they could, in some waste ground or under the bridges of a park, given that the City Council would give them only the parking of a sports hall on Fridays.

Against the mayor and his political group, other municipal parties in the opposition rejected the location of the new mosque because they felt it was not the right place. On the other hand, entrepreneurs of the polygon reiterated their opposition to the installation of the mosque in the area because they said the polygon was not prepared for large crowds of people, especially with respect to traffic flow. Moreover, they offered to the Muslim community legal and technical advice to consider other locations. Unions also opposed to the location of the mosque in the polygon. The council warned that if the works of the mosque at the polygon didn't start in the spring of 2011, they would rescind the transfer of the site.

Initial objectives of the mediation intervention:

- To identify the needs of the Muslim community, especially those related to the worship.
- To identify and to contact the community leaders, chairperson, board and Imam.

- To identify municipal officials dealing with the relationship with this community and to try to establish a joint work plan to enable the mediation.
- To create a climate of trust between the entity that will conduct the mediation, Civitas and the municipal administration
- To create a climate of trust between the entity that will conduct the mediation, Civitas and the Muslim community affected.
- To encourage or to restore a climate of trust and dialogue between the Muslim community and the affected local government.

Brief description of the development of the mediation carried out and of the case itself:

After the initial agreement between Civitas and the City Council, Civitas started through multiple steps of two experts of the team at its headquarter, a process of selection of local technicians who should carry out the mediation. The 4 initial candidates failed the selection or didn't accept the conditions (it was the case, for example, of the –well-qualified- husband of the main municipal technician involved in the project), which were not too generous due to the tight municipal subsidies. In the end a municipal candidate who didn't speak Arabic, who did not know about Islam and without experience in the field of religious diversity was selected. It was decided to offer him an intensive training and careful support and monitoring from the Civitas headquarter, which is 150 km far from the city. For the rest of the program a woman in the field of social work and interested in cultural and religious diversity was selected.

During the first months, the municipal technician-newly-hired by Civitas in the city, who had attended only part of the training in religious diversity offered by Civitas, visited the community and their place of worship. After some initial cold interviews, he tried to contact the community by telephone and limited his physical presence in the community to exceptional situations and events. The technician did not meet the initial expectations of the Civitas Headquarter. Experts from the central office responsible for coordinating the project, monitored carefully the local technician repeatedly trying to get him to take further training, consult the documentation from Civitas and ask for assistance

to the support technicians to make arrangements with the Salafi community. They failed because of lack of motivation of the local technical produced, it seemed, for lack of resources and personal skills, the rejection of Salafi Muslim community, lack of technical and political cooperation at the municipal level, and communication difficulties between Civitas headquarter and himself.

In parallel, the council did not provide any information about the community, or on its official and unofficial relations with it. Civitas knew that the council was consulting advisers on immigration of their own political party, without notifying or informing Civitas. Responsible of the Civitas headquarter soon realized a kind of hidden agenda of local government and a real lack of confidence from it to the professionals of Civitas.

After expressing their concern about this to the municipal authorities, they argued recognition of a certain division within the municipality between municipal managers and technicians as well as a clear dissatisfaction with the chief technician of Civitas for the work (not) done and an unmet demand of immediate results. After an attempt to redirect the case in different –and dilated– talks between municipal authorities (the sector most favorable to the mediation) and Civitas, they decided to end the agreement. The feeling was that, apart from the reasons already stated, the lack of confidence was crucial.

Mediation and its original goals were not accomplished.

Shortly thereafter, the council closed twice the MOSQUE 1 referring to excess of capacity. The Muslim community ruled out building a new mosque (MOSQUE 3) on an industrial polygon, but then changed its mind and decided to settle temporarily in the polygon. The municipal government defended this location on grounds of the infrastructure at the site but all the municipal opposition and other entities opposed. Soon, and after the actual impossibility of the Muslim community to build the new place of worship within the terms of the agreement and the conditions set, the city transferred the right to establish a mosque in that place to a new community ideologically less awkward and more welcomed by the council.

Mediator resources mobilised (human, spiritual, community, etc. resources belonging to the involved organisations and people or resources of the mediating actors):

- A local chief technician of Civitas.
- A responsible of Civitas in the city.
- The central staff of Civitas.
- A municipal technician.

Expenses related to the mediation intervention (working hours of the mediators, materials needed...):

- Salary of the Chief Technician (10 hours per week).
- Trips between Civitas headquarters and the city.
- A certain number of hours worked by the team of Civitas per week (about 3).