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Strengthening the ties that bind

Training bring Jews and Muslims together to fight discrimination



Flanders' Muslim and Jewish residents face similar sorts of discrimination to each other in all walks of their daily lives. Personal or institutional, it crops up in places of study or work, when travelling, participating in cultural activities or accessing social services. Then there's also anti-Semitic and Islamophobic attitudes in political discourse and in the media to contend with. Saffina Rana reports

This common ground is the starting point for both communities to tackle the problems together, say Ruth Friedman and Hassan Amaghlaou, who lead the new anti-discrimination workshop taking place in Brussels this month.

The pilot programme has been developed under the auspices of the Jewish-Muslim dialogue activities at CEJI, a Brussels-based Jewish NGO that engages in advocacy and education to foster religious inclusion and diversity in Europe. The workshop is largely funded by the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation, an organisation resourced by the governments of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership (all EU countries plus Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Syria and Turkey). The foundation was created in 2005 to support intercultural exchange.

Open to both Jewish and Muslim men and women, the trainers are hoping to attract people of different ages and backgrounds to the workshop. Working with roughly equal numbers of both communities, they feel that participants will emerge with a range of strategies for raising awareness and dealing with prejudice – wherever it occurs.

The two communities not only share similar contemporary experiences of discrimination but also a common religious and historical base. “Jews have historically been made scapegoats in Europe, and now Muslims are being made scapegoats. We want to show solidarity with Muslims,” says Friedman, who is a dialogue co-ordinator at CEJI.

Both workshop leaders observe that many Muslims and Jews keep to their own communities. It’s that lack of contact between the groups that can foster misunderstandings and stereotypes. In extreme cases, that leads to prejudice and xenophobia. “We are creating an opportunity to meet on an equal basis, share experiences and recognise similarities,” says Friedman.

Dialogue is essential, says Amaghlaou, who was a social worker before taking up training and consultancy. “Many prejudices exist between Muslims and Jews about each other. I very strongly believe that if we hold the doors of communication open, it is possible to make a difference in how we think,” he says. “That’s the main reason I’m working as a Muslim with a Jewish organisation – to build bridges.”

The two-day session begins with a period of self-reflection. “How can you begin to understand other people if you can’t understand yourself?” asks Friedman. “It will look at identity, how easy it is to pin things on other people and how prejudices are formed.” Having discussed best methods for coping with discrimination, there will be a focus on action. “These are the individual steps on what participants can do,” Friedman explains. An evaluation of the workshop based on feedback from the participants will determine the scope of future joint activities.

CEJI has been offering diversity trainings for over a decade, working with schools and other NGOs to help educators create inclusive intercultural environments. Training activities are underpinned by advocacy at European level. Both aspects are crucial defences, claims CEJI, against a surge of support for extremist right-wing views, which bring racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism into mainstream European politics.

The workshop itself has been developed from a set of studies mapping successful practices in establishing dialogue between Muslim and Jewish communities in five European countries with significant Jewish and Muslim populations, including Britain and France. “Although there are many projects on the ground, they are hardly ever brought into the public eye,” says Friedman. The reports were published last April at a European conference on Jewish-Muslim dialogue, which also led to the creation of the European Platform for Jewish-Muslim Co-operation.

Although the workshop tackles anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, CEJI notes that these are not issues for Muslim and Jewish communities to deal with alone. Like all forms of hatred, they are problems of the society at large.

Anti-Discrimination Training: Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, 21-22 May, €25, email training@ceji.org
by 5 May to register

Online

www.ceji.org