

THE NIWANO PEACE FOUNDATION  
THE FINAL REPORT OF RESEARCH/ACTIVITY GRANTS  
FOR FISCAL YEAR 2005

**Title of the project:**

European Project for Interreligious Learning

Training Seminar of the Academic Team for the Study Course 2007 – 2009

**Organization/official title:**

European Project for Interreligious Learning, EPIL

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## **1. Purpose of the Activity**

The Activity has to be seen in the context of the work of the European Project for Interreligious Learning, EPIL, which has for its goal to promote programmes of interreligious learning and in this way to contribute to a culture of peace and social harmony on the European continent. EPIL carried out a successful pilot project of interreligious learning (from 2002 – 2004), which was documented in a book (“In the Mirror of Your Eyes”) and received favourable reviews in a number of pedagogical and theological publications (cf. List attached).

After careful evaluation of the pilot project, it was decided to launch a second study course. *The Activity was part of the preparatory process of the new EPIL Study Course 2007 – 2009.*

EPIL works on the assumption that religion continues to shape people’s identities and to condition relationships. Although religion has been a source of conflict in Europe, it has also inspired people to struggle for greater freedom, human dignity and emancipation. Even in modern Europe’s secular societies, religion continues to influence the formation of values, deeply held convictions and life styles.

Traditionally, Europe has seen itself as a Christian continent, obscuring the roles that Judaism and Islam have played in European history. The religions of the book have traditionally been hostile to each other, and the memory of old tensions lingers, often fed by ignorance, fear and popular prejudice.

This tension has become particularly strong today in the interactions between the majority Christian/secular societies and the growing communities of Muslims in many European countries. Many of these Muslims, who came as migrants, wish to continue practising their own culture and faith. Mutual suspicions surface around everyday issues, such as food, dress codes, education, language and the secular framework of European societies. These suspicions are further aggravated by global developments, such as the growth of fundamentalism in both Christianity and Islam.

Meanwhile a new generation has come of age. They want to know how “integration” and the common future will affect their lives. In order to answer that question, they must learn to perceive ethnicity, religion and culture both as sources of identity and as vehicles for the recognition and respect of differences. In return, the new

generation belonging to the host community should also learn to live with the new pluralism of their societies and learn to respect the new “others”.

EPIL is an educational process created to train students to understand and manage religious diversity in order to build equitable and peaceful communities. It focuses on Christian-Muslim relations and on the role of women in creating a culture of peace.

The process takes the form of a Roaming College that goes to places where particular questions and problems arise and in this way stands by people and communities struggling to live together peacefully.

It aims to:

- Show how Islam and Christianity are “systems of being in the world”
- Explore the nature of religious freedom in the secular and democratic context of European societies
- Build awareness of the historical role of Islam in Europe and the way memories shape today’s relationships in everyday life
- Analyse conditions that may lead to a misuse of religion for non-religious purposes and identify ways to avoid it
- Develop a gender perspective, keeping the viewpoint and contributions of women in focus
- Harness the potential of religion to create an everyday culture of peace and social harmony, and explore the role of women in this process
- Train students in proven methods of dialogue, communication and conflict mediation (as developed in the framework of the MIT Dialogue Project and adapted specifically for interreligious dialogue)

In this framework EPIL organized a planning and training seminar for the Academic Team members that will be the leadership for the Study Course 2007 – 2009, which took place in Boldern/Zürich from June 14 – 18, 2007.

The seminar was essential for the planning process for a number of reasons:

- The evaluation of the pilot project (2002 – 2004) revealed the importance of having a cohesive and cooperative team carry out such a project, one that is demanding, both intellectually, and in terms of human relations. In order to form a competent team, we involved the team members in the planning process by providing them with pedagogical and methodological training

related to dialogue. Team development will ensure the competent running of the new Study Course.

- In the course of planning, the Board decided to change partners and cities. The new Study Course will work with two new partner cities, Vienna (Austria) and Cologne (Germany). While the overall emphasis of these two modules remains the same, they will offer new insights and include in the process new organisations and persons that will need to be accompanied and integrated into a new team.
- EPIL decided to shape the new academic teams differently: Each team now has an equal number of Christian and Muslim women; because the women making up the teams are much younger than those in the pilot project, they need much more training and coaching in the process and also new conditions for participation. The Academic Team has ten women as members. They will alternate their presence at the modules and will jointly lead the local Learning Groups, which will meet for local follow-up and initiatives between modules. Sharing the work will make it also easier for younger and well-qualified women (who need to combine professional development and family duties) to participate in the leadership.

## **2. Content and method of the Activity**

The Activity consisted of two parts:

- *The Planning and Training Seminar, which took place June 14 – 18, 2006 in Boldern/Zürich, and*
- *the write up of the brochure and flyer for the new EPIL Study course.*

It has been EPIL's policy to work with institutions as partners. The main content of the Activity was to bring these partners together in the common framework of the EPIL curriculum and to continue to develop the curriculum with insights and inputs from new partners.

It took longer than anticipated to bring all partners together in the new study course. This was mainly because it proved to be difficult to find a new EPIL partner in both Barcelona and Berlin. It took time to shift the attention to other possible locations and explore new possibilities: Vienna and Cologne.

Thus some partners and dates for running the programme have shifted.

Definitive partners for the new Study Course, are now:

*Zürich (Module I: Identity and Difference)*

The Boldern Protestant Academy,  
The Forum of Religions, Zürich,  
The Association of Islamic Organisations, Zürich,  
The Ecumenical Women's Movement, Zürich and the  
Fatima az Zahra Women's Organisation, Zürich

*Vienna (Module II: Historic Memories and Present Day Realities)*

The Protestant Academy Vienna  
The Protestant Women's Agency, Austria  
The Catholic Women's Movement of Austria  
The Association of Muslim Women's Organisations of Austria  
The Catholic Professionals, Women's Initiative  
The Ecumenical Council of Churches in Austria

*Sarajewo (Module III: Conflict and the Potential for Pluralism- Analysing the Use and Misuse of Religion)*

Islamic Faculty of Sarajewo  
Medica Zenica

*Cologne (Module IV: Concepts of Integration – the Challenge of Migrant Communities)*

Protestant Melanchthon Academy  
Centre for Islamic Women's Research and Encouragement, ZIF

*Beirut (Module V: Reconciliation – Committed to Staying together: One People, Multiple Confessions)*

Lebanese American University, Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World  
Ecumenical and Interreligious Department, Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia

The Academic Team, named by and representing these partners, examined the EPIL curriculum during the seminar, and shared ideas on how best to include local

views and experiences in each of the modules in order to reflect the respective themes most clearly.

To give one poignant example: Module II on “Historic Memories and Present Day Realities” took place in Barcelona during the pilot project. This theme has now shifted to Vienna. But historic memories concerning the century-long Muslim presence on the Iberian peninsula (before the 15<sup>th</sup> century) are totally different from historic memories of the Turkish sieges of Vienna. These sieges are still present in people’s minds and in popular culture. Presently, in Vienna, relations between Turkish migrants and the local population are often strained. In this context “historic memories” assume an important significance. It needs a fresh look at how to overcome old hurts and to make a fresh start. A chance to do so will be provided by the fact that a number of students of Turkish origin will participate in the process.

Further, the basic content of the Study Course 2007 – 2009 was agreed upon at the seminar. Also, Academic Team members were given an introduction to various dialogue- related methods and methodological tools for intercultural and interreligious communication.

### **3. Course of Actual Events**

The training seminar in its very composition was a mirror of the Study Course; it confronted each member of a diverse group of individuals with the challenge to grow into a functioning team that could provide leadership for a group of students from five countries, working in a foreign language on a highly sensitive issue.

The group grew together with the help of the following elements and competent leadership:

- sharing their motivations
- sharing their apprehensions and fears
- hearing about past learnings of EPIL, its pedagogical method, etc.
- finalising the overall planning and providing all necessary material for the new brochure
- going through a dialogue process and sensitivity training themselves
- sharing their methodological competence by pooling their knowledge of intercultural communication and thus creating awareness and knowledge of the competence present in the group itself.

#### **4. Achievements of the Activity**

The seminar was a first important step in creating the Academic Team of the new EPIL Study Course. It enabled the leadership group to clarify their own complex relationships, their competences and what they can bring to the process, and to begin the course with some confidence.

On the basis of the seminar, the brochure was finalised and produced in the course of the summer months, and sent out by late September 2006. Also, members of the Academic Team and partner organisations started five planning modules, a process that is quite advanced for the first two modules in Zürich and Vienna, but is well under way in all the others. Co-directors Teny Pirri-Simonian and Reinhild Traitler-Espiritu are coaching this process and have shared responsibility for modules in the following way:

Modules I, II and IV will be accompanied by Reinhild Traitler

Modules III and V will be accompanied by Teny Simonian.

The co-directors will also monitor the development of new pedagogical approaches to the learning experience.

#### **5. Future areas to be pursued**

*The main purpose of the Activity was to prepare well the ensuing Study Course. Thus the smooth running of the course, along with continuous team coaching and mentoring is EPIL's main concern at this stage.*

For the moment the process of recruitment is underway and will be finished by the beginning of February 2007. The Academic Team will get together again two days prior to the first module for a thorough briefing on the running of this start-up module.

In the longer term the Academic Team will begin and nurture the process of networking in the various locations of the project. They will be supported by EPIL partner organisations, students and alumni. A public event is planned during each of the modules. Follow-up activities may include seminars, exhibitions and spiritual events (such as prayers for peace, etc.)