

# Our Shared Europe

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The sometime sulphurous gap that is opening up between Muslim Europeans and Europeans of other faiths and cultures is a serious challenge to cultural relations practitioners. Compounded by the impact of political, economic and international events and the deliberate goading of cynical activists on both sides of the gap, the growing tension (of which the Swiss referendum is only the most recent example) is becoming acute. It is not something that a civilized continent can, or should, tolerate.

After extensive consultation with Muslims across Europe, on the north and south shores of the Mediterranean, the British Council has launched its 'Our Shared Europe project'. This is an attempt across a broad front to demonstrate that 'Muslims are an integral part of Europe's past, present and future'. It aims to expand and defend the imaginative, generous understanding of the words 'we us and our' which are vital to civilized society. Above all, it recognizes that this is not just a matter of justice, fairness and decency. Failure to handle well what are often deliberate and malicious (though sometimes simply negligent and ignorant) attacks on the culture and people of today's Europe, endangers the entire liberal society of the West. Attacks come from the nativist right quite as much as they come from the wilder shores of Islamism.

So the British Council has drawn together a number of areas in which it has greatest experience - education, arts, youth exchange, exhibition work, the web and the organisation of serious debate - to deliver a broad impact on this crucial issue. A programme of debates has begun in the European parliament and is moving on to other European cities, including a globally broadcasted debate in March 2010. Research into media consumption of Muslim Europeans and the barriers to Muslim participation in youth exchange is already under way; so is the first stage of multi-country education work and audio-visual material production. Much more is to come.

It is a partnership project, and it will only work well if it works as a magnet for the many organisations and individuals working in the same field. We seek partnerships of every kind from those committed to the same vision of a civilized Europe in which no faith or ethnic group is made to feel that it does not belong.

Above all, 'Our Shared Europe' means what it says: Europe is not to be fought over by nativist politicians, American commentators, and culturally introverted Muslims. It is the common home of people from both sides of the Mediterranean Sea, and from much further afield. We share it, and we glory in sharing it. Europe's past is not the short-term past of the teleological European tradition: it is a part of the history of humanity, and so it must remain. And the same is truer still of our shared future.

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