I. *Cultural Diversity, Religion and Anti-Discrimination,* Elina Stamou, SHRG

In my presentation I would like to make a few introductory comments that might be useful to bear in mind during our discussion today. Cultural diversity is one of these terms that although it's acknowledged as being important, for many, its meaning is apparently 'elusive' and therefore not very useful. Attempts to bring the terms 'culture' and 'cultural diversity' in the political discourse are met with suspicion and fear of a potential controversy they might raise. It is true that both terms have been used with various different meanings in mind, yet it's also true that the reason why they remain 'elusive' and controversial is because so far not adequate attention has been paid on trying to bring them into the political discourse; at least not as mere decorative terms that will add a positive vibe to the discussions but as meaningful and crucial concepts that will add weight to the discussions of any future policy that aims to bring about community cohesion on the basis of equality and human rights.

Having said that, cultural diversity in itself does not presuppose equality or a
n 'automatic' state of harmonious co-existence of different cultures and communities. It needs to be accompanied by the understanding, acceptance and promotion of cultural differences on the one hand, and the tackle of racism and discrimination on the other.

In this, religion as a term and concept is often avoided to be associated with discussions on community cohesion. When it does get discussed, it is often outside the discourse as something separate, that does not concern public policy. Nevertheless, religious consciousness and belief for a lot of people is important. It is a crucial aspect of their individual and group identity that is more often than not seen as an integral part of their culture. As such it cannot possibly be left in the margins of discussions around cultural diversity, anti-discrimination and community cohesion.

So, what is the position of 'culture' in the anti-racism or anti-discrimination discourse? Before moving into discussions on this I feel that it's important to make a brief note in relation to the 'anti-racism' or 'race' discourse, for in order to deal with racism we need to consider its sources and for that we have to look at the genealogy of the current discourse. It is a field that refers or reacts to classifications that were once constructed in order to exclude and dominate. Had such classification evolved as a means of seeking better co-existence and real understanding, we may not have had to be here today. We need to question the basis of terms such as race, racism and racial discrimination. We also need to undertake a more thorough analysis in order to unravel the multiple definitions conflated within these terms and their use to human society.

When we talk of equality we have to ask the question «equality in relation to what and whom?». Is it the concept of equality that has developed as part of the western dominated discourse on 'race' in which we somehow refer to equality of all in relation to the 'white race'; or is it equality without reference to any specific group or culture, in which case we accept that all races and cultures have the same weight and importance in our equation. SHRG's position is the latter and it is within this context that we feel that culture is an integral part of the 'anti-racism' or perhaps better 'anti-discrimination' discourse[1] and that the recognition, acceptance and promotion of cultural diversity could be the antidote to racism and discrimination.

Although there is by now literature that discusses the importance of bringing 'culture' into the 'anti-racism' or/and 'anti-discrimination' debates, in practice public policy has somewhat changed in order to accommodate colour and to some extent descent/ethnicity but very little has been done in relation to protecting people's and group's cultural identities.

Discrimination and racism occur primarily because people are fearful of 'the different'. In this sense, people that come from different cultures are perceived as a threat to what is thought to be a

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[1] For by using the term 'anti-discrimination' instead of 'anti-racism' it is easier in many ways and of course in some contexts to avoid all the limitations and racist connotations of the discourse as they have developed through time.

'homogenous national culture'. This is the case because homogeneity is being treated as an indication of 'normality', whereas cultural diversity is approached as a result of the 'invasion' of the different into the 'homogenous' whole. However, a thorough look into the British society can convince people that diversity and not homogeneity is the starting point of a dynamic process that involves a wide variety of perspectives, ways of life, individual and communal identities and economico-political circumstances that blend together and change through time. When this is accepted, cultural diversity will cease to be perceived as a threat and it will be approached as an opportunity for the equal and peaceful co-existence of different peoples.

Another point that is important to bear in mind is that when the importance of cultural diversity is acknowledged, it is usually in relation to the act of 'tolerance'. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily promote the co-existence of different cultures on an equal basis. The concept of 'tolerance' suggests merely a political 'recognition and accommodation' of different ways of being while it still presupposes cultural homogeneity of the 'nation-state' and assimilation of the minority cultures into the majority, 'tolerant' one. An alternative to the passive practice of 'tolerance' would be the active promotion of the more inclusive and dynamic concept of 'cultural diversity' that promotes respect for different cultures and protection of their rights on the basis of the human rights principles.

The WCAR provided us with a unique opportunity to discuss such issues and so SHRG raised them from the beginning of the process. The initial reluctance we were met with in Geneva, August 2000, slightly changed after persistent lobbying and an awareness-raising campaign through the organization of group discussions in Europe, Canada, US and India. Towards the end of this process, the conference was a little bit more prepared to accept the importance of embracing cultural diversity and the need to systematically challenge the idea of the existence of apparently 'a-cultural' civic structures in societies. We worked together with a wide network of NGOs from around the world. The final conference document included a few references to the importance of cultural diversity and now it's up to us all to make them meaningful.

Racism and discrimination go hand in hand with people's frustration of having to deal with an apparently 'a-political' and 'a-cultural' civic structure and anti-discrimination discourse. The issue here is the non-existent, limited or bias knowledge about different communities and the lack of a sense of belonging for all, combined with bad and inadequate public policies; vast relative economic disparities and the liberal model of governance according to which there is no space for 'culture' in the public sphere but it's something that concerns only the private life of people. This generates broadly speaking two main reactions that take place simultaneously, creating tensions and conflicts, much like those we witnessed last summer in the North of the country. The first one is rooted in the nationalist approach whereby the functioning of the British society is not and should not be 'a-cultural' but reflect the 'white-English, majority culture'. The second reaction comes primarily from non-white communities that in all this feel excluded and marginalized.

All these issues are far from new, they have been analysed by a wide range of experts. We have the B. Parekh and Ousley reports, the Cantle and Ministerial reports and many others that have discussed community cohesion, the issue of British civic identity as well as that of the common values included in this identity. The questions however that come to mind considering all this work that has already been done since the 70s, is why are we still here today discussing such issues almost on the same basic level that we did all those years ago? Have we not progressed at all? If not, why?

As a follow-up to the WCAR with a focus on cultural diversity and community cohesion, this conference will attempt to deal with these questions. Although an undoubtedly difficult task, we do believe that finding out how cultural diversity and community cohesion can be embraced and realised in today's Britain and how this process can be improved, is possible as it is crucial for the multicultural future of the British society.