Globalization and international migration are challenging the nation state and the societal cohesion of a democracy. In this context, democracy cannot be reduced to its institutional minima. Civil society can also contribute to the „democratisation of democracy“ (Merkel/Puhle 1999: 171): In essence, civil society is about societal cohesion and about the democratisation of political action by opening up opportunities for participation for everyone who is interested.

Participation is the core issue for societal integration. Integration itself is a mutual process between majority and minorities. Thus it affects society as a whole. The aim is to open up equal ways to participation in society for every citizen, to reach a share in the offer of chances as equal as possible.

My hypothesis is that interreligious initiatives have good preconditions to contribute to societal integration, thus to provide opportunities for participation. People of different religions and convictions enter into dialogue, thus the initiatives are per se prone to bridge cultural and religious differences and to open up new ways of participation. Identity, though, may play an ambivalent role in this process: By addressing the other as Muslim, Christian or Jew, complex identities are reduced to one single part of them – to religion. This may have negative consequences. Religious identity can be strengthened in a way that reinforces boundaries between the different groups, which is likely to cause conflict. This is even more relevant in a political context, where questions of societal integration are often subsumed under “culture and religion”, and where social and political problems are frequently reduced to cultural and/or religious factors.

These thoughts were the starting point of an empirical study at the Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society at the Humboldt-University in Berlin (supported by the Herbert Quandt-Foundation and the Karl-Konrad-und-Ria-Groeben-Foundation) on the integrative potential of the interreligious dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Germany's civil society (Hinterhuber, Eva Maria, 2009: Abrahamischer Trialog und Zivilgesellschaft. Eine Untersuchung zum sozialintegrierenden Potenzial des Dialogs zwischen Juden, Christen und Muslimen in Deutschland, Berlin: Lucius & Lucius).

The subjects of research were civil society organizations dedicating themselves to the trilateral dialogue between the three monotheistic religions. Methodically, the study is based on a quantitative written survey and on the qualitative text analysis of “grey literature” of and about the interreligious initiatives.

Facing the informal character of civil society, the exact number of how many initiatives are active in the so called „abrahamic triologue“ can only be estimated. The beginning of the triologue in Germany dates back to the 1970s.

The scope of activities of the so called triologue initiatives is very wide: Visiting each other, talking about the Holy Scriptures, praying together, but also celebrating festivals are typical examples. Education and research are also important fields of action. Lectures and conferences, even journeys are organized. Together, activists of the three religions involved try to find innovative answers to societal problems and conflicts. Expositions, concerts, theatre, cinema, even dance belong to the initiatives’ scope of action. Sport events are
popular, too. Only a few initiatives provide grants. So called "Abraham’s Houses" intend to be a conjoint venue for members of the three religions.

It is remarkable, that socio-political topics prevail at conferences and in seminars; among them topics as migration, integration, immigration, religious pluralism, violent conflicts, but also questions of environmental and social policy and even business ethics are dealt with. Moreover, theological, historical, cultural and pedagogical, even gender related topics are discussed. The spectrum covers not only themes, on which consensus might be reached, but also controversial ones.

Both in regard to the form and the content of their activities and even in their goals, the initiatives are oriented rather towards the socio-political and everyday life than towards theological or even spiritual exchange.

The initiatives are grassroots oriented, participatory and inclusive:

- The initiatives are grassroots organizations: They are shaped by the basis, not by the top representatives of the religious groups involved.
- Most of the initiatives, which took part in our survey, do not only deal thematically with the trialogue topic. Representatives of all three monotheistic religions are participating.
- A third of the sample includes also representatives of other religious groups, and in half of our sample people of no confession are involved, too.
- The initiatives of our sample claim to reach all social strata.
- The initiatives also state that women and men participate equally in trialogue.

The trialogue is mainly led at the grass-root level, different religious and even non-confessional groups are involved, class, gender and age are not hindering factors – these facts lead to the statement, that this kind of interreligious dialogue is participatory. It opens up ways of participation even for societal groups that tend to be underrepresented in civil society.

In addition, the trialogue initiatives obviously do not force conflict-laden reductionisms. Indeed, they choose a religious access and communicate also on a theological level, but they frequently broaden their perspective by taking socio-political and other topics into account. By this way, identities are perceived as complex entities, and are not reduced to a single element like religion. Instead, they act in a complex and pluralistic societal reality.

If interreligious dialogue shall serve as a "tool for integration" (Malik 2008), a form of dialogue close to every day life is the most promising one. Thus, in regard to societal integration the stated strong socio-political notion has to be preferred rather than a faith oriented communication.

To sum up, one can say, that interreligious initiatives in the trilateral dialogue in Germany do contribute to the aim of societal integration. On the contrary, it is problematic, if political actors subsume questions of integration or social policy under the aspect of religion. This can be seen as instrumentalization or even exploitation of the interreligious dialogue. In a democracy,
the solution of problems of integration is still a question of social, political and economic chances as equal as possible.