

Community Volunteers Foundation, Turkey
My experiences with inter-religious dialogue in youth work.

By Sara Albino

The topic on inter-religious dialogue became gradually important for me in daily life, for two different reasons. The first one comes from my catholic societal background, since I have always felt a need for a practical readjustment of this influential religion to the controversial realities of our century, once when taken into extreme, causes both religious based cultural prejudices and familiar planning problems. The second reason is that being a catholic upbringing Portuguese working in a Muslim country always raises curiosity within the local population and sometimes gives place to some uncomfortable faith-based questions and images. Thus, being a foreigner youth worker, working in Turkey has a lot to be told and experienced specially in terms of religious and inter-cultural dialogue. In my opinion, religious dialogue is very important in the Turkish society, as there is a silent climate of suspicion and mistrust between the Islamic civil society groups and the secular institutions and a growing number of incidents regarding civil attacks on religious minorities. Consequently, an increasingly openness of the religious institutions in terms of transparency and accountability, education and dialogue would help to suppress existing misunderstandings and help to demystify prejudices.

Why should we talk about religion and religious diversity in youth work? For the reason, that the function of youth workers is to help the youth to understand their social problems overcoming them in a positive way, as well as to aware youngsters of the diversity around them. Therefore, due to the fact that religion is mostly present at the social and cultural level, it is important to be constructively considered by youth workers, as a device to understand the origin of human rights and ethics in societies. Also, we have seen that the lack of information and education about the various religions and religious tolerance, gives origin to collective conflicts, also as part of sensationalist mediatization of religious incidents and the governmental propaganda towards certain religious and cultural minorities. In such sense, the role play of youth workers is actively important in promoting religious dialogue, based in shared common values, as a way to promote social peace, through communitarian work, study trips and public initiatives for dialogue.

My experience in working with youth and children from different religions had only come so far, to behavioural observation and dialogue. One event that once left me flabbergasted was to see a young girl which was a student of mine spitting on a cross, in a historical exhibition taking place in Istanbul. I was left with no reaction and from that moment on, I personally discovered how important it is to have inter-religious dialogue and education in youth work. Often, when I participate in the meetings of the volunteers working in my host organisation, the Community Volunteers Foundation, I always have to answer to questions, such as: "Why the Christianity is divided into Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants and what are the main differences between them?", "The Christians really drink blood and how strict are they?" and a common question to be asked in a first contact conversation is: "Do you believe in God? What is your religion?". Other foreign EVS volunteers working in the same office, often answer that are atheist and the first reaction to the question is "How come?". Most of the Turkish youth has been raised as Muslims, although it does not mean that they follow the religious dogmas strictly. Islam is in this case more lived as a cultural origin. The same happens in Portugal with Catholicism.

Being able to participate in the Council of Europe's training course "Religion and Religious Diversity in Youth Work" (Strasbourg, 30th May – 6th of June 2007), as one of the representatives of Turkey, enabled me to think more deeply and concretely into the problems and realities affecting religions as well as developing pragmatic views, in terms of finding solutions to the presented questions. The training was rich in active work, opinions and participation. Some new-approaches in non-formal education used by the trainers, such as using the iceberg theory in terms of religion became an important tool in future youth work activities.

The vast diversity amongst participants gave the course a dynamism which raised hot discussions in difficult topics. Although the understanding of human rights is thought to be universal and it should be universal, I realized how cultural relativism plays a big role in the perceptive and practice of human rights specially when related to religious issues, despite the opinion of the Dr. Rui Gomes, the director of Budapest European Youth Centre. Regardless of the language problems and cultural misunderstandings which recurred during the entire training, I have learned how the connection of inter-religious dialogue and human rights can work as a facilitator in inter-religious dialogue and how the psychology within different religions can affect social behaviours and analytical skills. However, from all these learning points, what I enjoyed the most was to gain knowledge of new facts about other religions and to be able to clarify doubts concerning practices and symbols, after visiting the various temples and talking to religious leaders and participants.

Now, that I have returned to my host organization, my head is full of ideas for new projects and I would like to believe that in a way I became more capable of engage in future initiatives for inter-religious dialogue and inter-cultural dialogue, either in Turkey or in Portugal. For me the most important in this area of youth work, is always to present the youngsters with a practical panorama of diversity around them, make them think about the controversial topics and induce them into creating solutions or means for productive self-expression.