



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT *with* RELIGION *and* FAITH *in the* 21ST CENTURY

Religion and Peacebuilding: A Youth Perspective and Vision

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Religion was, is and will always be a part of our lives. Even at the dawn of humanity people believed in supreme Creator and Divine, and today when we are living in a modern age, with advanced technology, when we can explore, when we are even able to travel outside our Mother Earth, we still believe in the Divine, we believe in an Almighty who created us and gave us life. Because we are deeply spiritual beings, we need connection with the Divine to nurture inner and outer peace.

Today spiritual values drive more than 80% of the people living on Earth, giving faith leadership perhaps unparalleled capacity to influence individual behaviors. Faith Based Organizers (FBOs), are close to their communities which see them as being trustworthy with a high level of credibility. This combined with the local networks and dynamism of FBOs enables them to generate action and achieve results in the communities where they operate. (Why Faith: <https://faithfornature.org/why-faith/>) And this must be harnessed for peace.

The connection of religion, peace and conflict is rather a complex one, not a binary one. Religion is neither inherently good nor bad for peace, and the influence of religion on both is undeniable. Religion can be a powerful driver of violent conflict, stoking prejudice, legitimating violence, and mobilizing communities into war. And history and past showed us this. Decades of religious wars that were ravaging Europe, decades of colonization where religion was used as an excuse to spread violence against native communities, wars that were led under the excuse to liberate “our people and our land” from the “other and different” until today when religious extremism is omnipresent and when people are afraid to walk the streets of their hometowns freely. However, religious ideas, actors, and institutions also serve as incredible resources and motivation for peacebuilding, inspiring people to courageous and transformative acts of peace. And we have seen this in numerous cases like South Africa, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mali, Israel and Palestine, Sudan, Nigeria, Indonesia, and many other places. Religion, religious actors, and people of faith saved thousands of lives, rescued thousands of

people and helped in making conflicted communities more resilient to conflict and violence. The field of religious peacebuilding still lacks two important actors: women and youth, so today as members of RfP IYC, as members of the largest multifaith platform, we would like to offer our youth vision of religion and peacebuilding.

In the theory of religion and peacebuilding we can build peace through religion, we can build peace without religion, and we can build peace with religion. Peace through religion would mean that we are grounding ourselves only in our own religious traditions which is not bad per se, but we are risking excluding other religious traditions or even to develop intolerance towards them. In case we want to build peace without religion, we are leaving out a great potential for peace which lies in religious actors, religious values and beliefs that can catalyze peace. So, we are left with the third approach, one called “peace with religion.” This approach focuses on importance of living together and interfaith dialogue and this approach is the one we as young people see as the most desirable and most viable one. This is the approach that requires collaboration across the religious lines, this approach brings to the table religious leaders, women, youth, minority and majority communities and puts them in a position of equal partners. This approach brings people, because people are those who dialogue, not religious traditions, those who preach and those who practice dialogue and they, together, seek solutions and seek ways how to live together despite the conflict, despite the differences and despite the burdens of the past that we as humanity carry as a heavy baggage. And most importantly, the interfaith approach leaves no one behind, there are no better and major religions, there are only different religions that have both similarities and differences. And in this approach, we rely on our similarities and use them as drivers, but we also talk about differences, we listen, we understand, and we accept their existence. One more important dimension . In this approach we acknowledge that our neighbors have the same

rights as we have. We acknowledge that each and every one of us have the right to have religious sites, have the right to congregate and have the right to express our own beliefs in public without fear of being discriminated against or persecuted. And just as acknowledging this, it is important to actively work that our fellow neighbors really fulfil their rights. With this approach, comes the humility and idea that in dialogue we need to enter as equal partners, without patronizing or imposing one religion over the other and we need to make sure that all we do in dialogue is genuine and not for the sake of proselytizing. And this is how we build peace; this is how we harness the power and potential of religious peacebuilding.

In our youth vision we understand peace and peacebuilding in the way how Norwegian sociologist and founder of peace and conflict studies Johan Galtung described it. We understand that absence of direct violence doesn't mean that we live in peace, we understand that peace is much more than that. We nurture the notion of positive peace, which is not a destination, but a never-ending process, and work on peacebuilding never stops. Positive peace is filled with content such as restoration of relationships, the creation of social systems that serve the needs of the whole population and the constructive resolution of conflict. Positive peace means the absence of violence in all forms (direct, structural, and cultural one) and the unfolding of conflict in a constructive way. In the words of Galtung: “By peace we mean the capacity to transform conflicts with empathy, without violence, and creatively – a never-ending process”. So, to make and build peace like this, involvement and interaction of various actors is essential: community leaders, governments, religious leaders, academics, teachers, businesses, civil society actors, women, and youth... and the list can go indefinitely. Faith is necessary to bring the spiritual, empathy driven approach, approach that helps people to put themselves into the shoes of the others, feel their pain, joy, happiness, but act from their own position. And why is youth important? Because young generations are essential

part of the process, those who will continue this never-ending process and those who will support the new generations who will come after them. Young people are not tabula rasa that needs to be just filled with previous experiences and existing knowledge. Young people are independent thinkers, who need support to grow and develop their own ways of acting. Young people are bringing new, fresh, and creative ideas that need to be heard, harnessed, and taken seriously. Yes, we need empowerment, but once empowered young people are equal and worthy partners. And they have proven that.

Here we will showcase just a small part and give you a small glimpse into what young people of RfP are currently doing. As IYC, a committee consisting of 12 youth from various professional, national, and religious backgrounds, committee of young leaders in our respective communities we have issued a Call for Global Ceasefire echoing the words of H.E. Antonio Guterres amid the COVID 19 pandemics. In our respective regions and national chapters, we have helped or lead our own initiatives aimed at helping people to cope with the effects of COVID 19 pandemics. Our colleagues from RfP UK Interfaith Network are doing tremendous job on addressing environmental issues from interfaith perspective. EIYN is at the forefront of countering hate speech by designing and implementing a campaign aimed at Balkans, but also wider European region. They are using the interfaith approach and root their alternative narrative to hate speech in positive speech found in various religious traditions and texts. Besides that, they use the intergenerational and multistakeholder approach by brining together religious leaders, civil society actors, women, and youth to convey messages of hope, understanding and love, instead of divisions, hate and violence.

Together with my colleagues from Youth for Peace I have worked on countless peace initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Balkan region, but also internationally. Our programs and educations reached

more than 5000 young people and the numbers are rising, and we are youth founded, youth led organization, for the sake of youth and we are coming from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina and from different ethnic and religious groups, all gathered around the same goal – to live together and have a better Bosnian/Herzegovinian society. And last but not the least, since 2017 I have coordinated and lead numerous interreligious tours through Sarajevo for young people, but also not so young people from BiH, Italy, Poland, USA, Germany, Serbia, and many other countries from different corners of the world. I would like to convey just a small message for the end: *Without interfaith I wouldn't be who I am today, I wouldn't be able to understand my religion the way I understand it now, I wouldn't be able to embrace my female Muslim identity the way I embrace it now and I wouldn't be eager to speak about my religion so openly and feel belonging to the world, to the humanity and the planet as I feel now.*

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