

# **An alternative way of understanding religions: Religio-drama**

**by Nóra Kuntz**

## ***Short description of the project***

The religio-drama project is an ongoing programme; a pilot is complete, and the next rounds follow. The basic of the program is to work with young adults from many religions, to achieve broader tolerance through understanding of each other's religion. In the center of the project are holy stories from religious books and traditions, which are adapted by the tools of the drama.

## ***Background***

The theory of the religio-drama is rooted in two fields: The first one is the interfaith dialogue. As a volunteer of the International Association for Religious Freedom, I have been actively involved in the interfaith movement, both in Hungary and in some international programs. This project is targeting young adults in Hungary who belong to a religious community. There is no serious religious freedom violation in Hungary, as freedom of religion and belief is secured by the state, the separation of church & state is more or less complete, and there are around 130 registered churches in Hungary, so that theoretically it is very easy to register a new religious community. Still, since the recent fall of communism (1989), most people haven't started to understand religious diversity, and are mostly exclusive with non-traditional religions.

The second field of this project is the drama, as a tool of alternative learning processes. I am a psychodrama therapist, and I am using drama on a regular basis to help the self-knowledge & self-development of group members. In a specific wing of drama, however, the main goal is slightly different: recognition of certain values in ourselves, such as religious values. The so-called biblio-drama (*biblio* is the Greek for books) uses existing stories of any kind. Bible-drama works with stories of the Holy Bible for better understanding of Christianity. Mainly religious people are members of groups of this kind.

This pilot religio-drama project is trying to combine the two abovementioned fields.

Members of the group are religious young adults of today's Hungary, who belong not only to traditional European religious groups (Christianity, Judaism), but to the so-called world-religions, too (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam; I call these religions 'the five world religions') -

with a possible expansion to religions which have fewer representatives in Hungary, such as Shintoism, Jainism, Bahá'í, etc. The group preferably has permanent members who will later be ferments of their own religious communities in initiating tolerance & understanding.

### ***First project***

In the pilot project, each meeting was dedicated to one world religion. Each meeting had two main parts: a presentation by a prominent representative of the religion, with a short & typical religious story included; and in the second part, a drama is played out of the story.

The pilot project took place in *March-April 2004*. There were roughly 14 participants, from Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism & Krishna Consciousness, and an Atheist interested in religions. There were several meetings, and below I describe the three most interesting ones.

***The Islam Evening:*** After a wonderful introductory lecture on this religion, we worked on the following holy story from the Muslim tradition: Mosab, our Muslim group member, told us a story about Caliph Ali, the brother-in-law of Prophet Muhammad. Its chief element was that the Caliph, even though he was the most powerful general in his society, was humble, and subjected himself to the investigation of the judge who was his employee, and came to a decision against his own boss. A picture was given of a peaceful, faithful man who represented Islam as a religion of peace.

***The Krisna Evening:*** Ishvara Krisna das, a Krisna Conscious monk, told us a story about a king & his faithful brahmin. Ishvara played the role of the representative of the religion, the brahmin. Through this story we understood the humility & holistic ideology of Hinduism.

***The Jewish Evening:*** György Gábor, a philosopher & historian specializing in religions, after his extremely interesting presentation, told us a story from the Hebrew Bible - the story of Esther, a Jewish woman who sacrificed herself for her God & her people.

### ***Plans***

The religio-drama project's first pilot session is thus successfully completed, with members from the five world religions. The new plan is to have such five-evening sets of meetings focused on universal religious values such as love, peace, environment, marriage, humility, etc.

## ***Main questions***

The pilot project was rather successful, but it raised a number of questions that are to be targeted before continuing the project:

- 1) *How to organize groups?* We want to target each religious group on both the “liberal” and the “fundamental” sides (if one can make such a separation). However for at least in the first couple of projects it will be advisable not to have ‘too liberal’ & ‘too fundamental’ participants. ‘Too-liberals’ are sometimes not adamant enough about their own religion, they might too easily mix it with other religions; ‘Too-fundamentals’ can be obstacles to any dialogue by only focusing on their own religion, using the meetings for missionary purposes.
- 2) *Where is the best place to advertise?* Through personal relationships & contacts, which risks not getting a professional feel, *or* through media, with the risk that people will join who are not ready for such a difficult “conflict resolution” process. In the pilot project we have chosen the first method, and the presence (turnout?) was not always as expected.
- 3) *Who should be the contact person?* As the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) supported the project with professional guidance & a grant, its representative, Ilona Szent-Ivanyi, was the main contact person. On the other hand, two professionals (I am one of them) lead the group. Organizational issues were thus not all in one pair of hands, and so mistakes have happened a few times (double-organization, missing invitations, etc.)
- 4) *Methodology:* In the pilot project, a combined method was used. In the first part of each session, a lecturer gave a one-hour introduction about the religion, and the group members were invited to ask questions. Incorporated in the religious introduction was the telling of a holy story, which was then the base for the drama part. In the second part, people chose roles from the story (the positive religious role of the given religion was always played by its representative), and there was free time to play the story in a dramatic way. The combined method raised some questions: After the passive part, people were not quite ready to enter into an active play; it was rather difficult to active them. Should we change the order? Or introduce other methods of warming-up?

5) *How to address existing religious tension, e.g. between Jews & Muslims? Is it necessary to address these? If yes, what should be the format? (It was obvious during the pilot project that this remains a hot issue.)*

### ***Current status, & main issues to be considered before continuation***

What are the checkpoints of a new stage in the larger project? For creating a 'business plan' we need to consider the following major issues:

- What is the goal of the project?
- Who is/ should be the target audience? Should the audience find us, or do we actively search for them?
- What outcomes do we expect? How to measure the outcomes?
- What resources do we need for the project? How to raise them?
- What organizational format would be appropriate for such a project, if any?
- How shall we document the project, and appraise it scientifically?
- What social & human elements can jeopardize the project?

### ***Participants in the project***

*Leaders:*

Nóra Kuntz, Project Founder, Psychodrama Group Leader

Viktor Lénárt, Psychodrama Group Leader, Lutheran Minister

Ilona Szent-Iványi, IARF Europe & Middle East Coordinator

*Target audience:*

At least three representatives of the five world religions, aged 20-30 preferably.