



## Plenary Session

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 27, 2018 (KECSKEMÉT, THEATRE)

### **Opportunities for Jewish-Christian and Interfaith Dialogue with Youth: Perspectives of Young Professionals**

***By Héctor Acero Ferrer***

#### **YOUTH IN DIALOGUE**

##### **DO WE HAVE THE TOOLS WE NEED TO ENGAGE THE NEXT GENERATION IN THE PRACTICE OF DIALOGUE?**

This morning at 4:30am, after having worked on this presentation for months, I decided to completely re-write it. Following a minor existential crisis, I came to the realization that what I was about to say was not relevant to you -or to myself- anymore. In my original opening, I was going to conduct a brief thought experiment. In such exercise I would ask everyone in the room under 60 years of age to stand up. Then, I would ask those over 50 to sit down, then those over 40, then those over 30, and so on and so forth. This, to show the importance of attending to the generational gap that exists not only in this ICCJ group but in most groups dedicated to interfaith dialogue and cooperation around the world.

At first, a number of informal conversations I have had over the last three days empowered me to go ahead with my original plan. These conversations, highlighting the great need to “recruit” newer generations, seemed to confirm my original approach. There are great pressures on inter-religious activists and scholars to find people willing to undertake the greatly endangered work of dialogue. Are we aware we need to reach out to beyond our usual constituencies? How much time do we have to find this generational bridge? Are we doing enough to attract and retain youth and young adults? These are some of the questions to which we need to attend and that I was hoping to further articulate in my presentation.

If you allow me, I will take a brief detour and walk you through three experiences that changed my mind about the exercise I originally envisioned for this session. All three experiences, I firmly believe, are relevant guidelines when trying to address the generational gap with which we are currently grappling.

First Experience: At the beginning of the week, I had a conversation with my mother. She and I talk regularly about our life events. In spite of 12 years of living in opposite corners of the planet, we have maintained a relation of mentorship and she, as my mentor, recommended strongly that I refrain from doing the exercise I was set out to do here this morning. For her, this wasn't only an “ugly” exercise but it was meant to separate, to discriminate, and to marginalize. She further noted that it would create yet another generational barrier, a barrier already palpable by the uneven numbers of “older” and “younger” people in the room. “Do not set people apart unnecessarily, nothing good has ever come out of anything like that,” she said with a stern voice. With all due respect to those who think that “generation-specific” groupings are needed, I will listen to the wisdom of my mother on this matter. We are in the business of dialogue, in the business of creating spaces of encounter between people who are

radically different. Intergenerational dialogue and cooperation should be as central to our mandate as its inter-religious counterpart and we can use what we have learnt from the latter to inform, enrich, and bolster the former.

Second Experience: Over the course of the week, I have had a number of conversations with people in this room about the need for ICCJ to reach out to a younger generation. “What should this project look like? Which kind of young persons should we attract? How can we identify an outreach program for youth that will guarantee a succession plan for those currently steering this organization?” These are some of the questions that have come up in the context of our discussions. Although none of these conversations has produced significant outcomes, the word “comfort” continues to create a conversational thread.

Reflecting on the content of these conversations, I have noticed that this word has been used in two different ways. In its negative sense, signalling “discomfort,” is it meant to set the minimum threshold needed to know whether a young person is suitable to join us. A young person needs to be OK with being “uncomfortable.” After all, our work rarely happens in amidst comfortable circumstances. Deep dialogue either takes place within discomfort or generates it. When used in its positive sense, as “comfort,” the word referred to the kind of interaction we want with any new members. All of us here know it: this is a community of support, friendship, and care, and should remain one. Therefore, the word “comfort,” in both its negative and positive expressions, points to a larger process with which we are all familiar, that of “community-building.” Thus, when we are seeking younger representatives we would like them to be contributing members to our common project, which seeks to build communities of dialogue within our own groups and between them in a world that often makes such work a very difficult exercise.

Third Experience: Earlier in the week, I had the privilege to present a bit of my research on the reconciliation process in Colombia alongside someone who reported on her own experience as a “practitioner of reconciliation” here in Hungary. My co-presenter and I developed a very close working relationship over the past few months - as we prepared our workshop. It was fascinating to me to witness the way in which the great wisdom contained in her experience gracefully paired her openness to hear the couple of thoughts I offer to the conversation. Needless to say, she and I represent the two sides of the generational divide I am attempting to articulate here.

Through our work together, my co-presenter and I also developed a friendship: she is local and will show me a bit of the city after the conference, and we assured each other that we will keep in touch after the conference. I think that this is exactly what ICCJ does best. It provides people with the platform to intentionally reflect on their dialogue together, overcoming generational, or geographical, barriers. This is a safe space for dialogue about the dialogical practice itself, a platform to mentor and be mentored in, an occasion to make our differences work in our favour.

In light of these three experiences I decided to change the content of my talk. I could certainly talk to you about the impact of social media on young people. I could also talk to you about the rapidly changing world, about the number of influences that constantly pull young people in a million different directions, about the increasing suicide rates among youth in several areas of the world. However, I think that we have to talk about something much simpler, that is, the art of dialogue. How can we apprentice youth into the art of dialogue? How can we continue to create opportunities like the one I experienced with my co-presenter, so that our work, and not our age, brings us together?

I have made a statement here that might be a bit controversial. I have described dialogue as an art - as opposed to a technique. My claim is that what makes dialogue an art is its intensely personal character. You and I know that dialogue varies significantly from person to person and from community to community. Have you ever experienced an awkward conversation with someone with whom, on paper, you are supposed to get along famously? If that has happened to you before, you have evidence that there is nothing that needs to be overcome “technically” in dialogue spaces. It is about perfecting an art! Sr. Mary Boys, one of the pioneers in Jewish-Christian relations, says: “dialogue is the art of conversation across the boundaries of difference.” I believe that this is a statement to which we can easily subscribe.

Dialogue, therefore, cannot be taught in the ways that science curriculum is taught; it needs to be taught in the same way that a performance art is instructed. At least in the case of the performance arts, says the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur in his seminal work *Memory, History, Forgetting*, the apprentice should follow the rules set by a particular tradition to the point that she becomes proficient. And becoming proficient is becoming able to carry that tradition even further, that is, gaining the ability to improvise something that would be recognized as music as opposed to mere noise.

In light of this analysis, in the case of dialogue we can formulate the following two questions:

1. What is music and what is mere noise in the field of dialogue? Just like musicians, we can identify successful dialogue when we see it. Dialogue does not necessarily lead to agreement between the parties. In fact, we can say that the intent of successful dialogue is to achieve genuine communication between radical opposites that would never be reconciled but who would always remain in admiration of each other’s wisdom while deepening the knowledge of their own tradition.
2. How do we apprentice young people into dialogue? Ricoeur seems to think that, at least in the case of the arts, apprenticing someone has a lot to do with memory. He says:

“Arts require of their practitioners a laborious training of the memory, based upon a stubborn and patient repetition, until an execution, at once faithful and innovative, is obtained, one in which the prior labor is forgotten under the appearance of a happy improvisation.... Perhaps, in this, they represent the only indisputable witnesses to a use without abuse of memory, obedience to the injunctions of the work inspiring in them the humility capable of tempering their legitimate pride in the exploit accomplished”(Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*)

This fits quite well with some of our discussions this week, where the role of memory in interfaith dialogue has been highlighted, explored, and discussed. Our apprenticing into this tradition of dialogue depends directly on our ability to remember what Walter Benjamin calls the “wreckage of history,” that is, the piles and piles of horrors our humanity has left behind in its pursuit of progress.

Therefore, if we want to engage young people into this field of work we must be aware that we are apprenticing them into an art-form; into the uneasiness of not always achieving one’s goal; into the discomfort brought about by discovering that the other person is, in fact, so radically different that there is a part in them that we would never fully understand; into the awareness of the fact that knowing us does not necessarily mean loving us. Just like the performance artist, the performer of dialogue needs to be open to a broad range of reactions, to being disliked, and, the most challenging of all, to being ignored. And this is the point where all the clichés about youth become relevant to us again.



Our task is all the more difficult because we are apprenticing young people into discomfort in a society that idealizes comfort. We are apprenticing them into patience in a society of immediacy. We are apprenticing them into radical difference in a society where homogeneity is sought after at every level. Our task is to find those people who are, or have the potential to be, comfortable with all of this discomfort.

I am confident that, as a collective, through the number of projects in which we are involved, we have already been in contact with the young people we want to engage. They are out there, often thinking that they are “lonely rangers;” often victims of a phenomenon for which there is now a psychological term, “cause fatigue;” often in great despair that our world is subsumed in conflict, marginalization, and decline; often having to abandon their commitment to dialogue because of the practical pressures of living in a world that has no space for those who want to do this professionally. My hope is that if we approach them and create for them the spaces for mentorship and collaboration from which we have all benefited in here, they will take us into the era in which dialogue would, in fact, respond successfully to the polarization that our world suffers today.