

The potential of religion for social action

AMRA PANDŽO

Fruška Gora, October 2010.

God's reward is understood differently in diverse belief systems. Some people expect the reward in this life, in the form of peace and happiness, or some achievement. Others expect it in the afterlife, where justice and tranquillity will be fully accomplished. But the crucial question is whether we believe that following the paths of peace building, non-discrimination, reconciliation and encounter with adherents of other religions really bring God's reward. Or will God more likely reward us only if we firmly cling to our own religious group as devoted believers and uphold the rules of our religious law?

What characterises a person who chooses to worship God by peace building? For me it is my effort to reach out my hand in reconciliation, to make all non-Muslims feel safe around me, to stand up to protect the dignity, right for life, happiness, safety and faith of all non-Muslims, and to teach other Muslims to do likewise. All this is the essence of my faith in God and His reward. I believe that each one of these things is my responsibility. I owe them to the Lord of the Worlds. I am not saying that those believers who think that they need to stick to their own circle are wrong. But life constantly proves us wrong and we have to realise that we can not live separately next to each other, but that we are on the same plane, flying to another world. War, peace, global warming, ecology, and the market are all matters that concern every one of us. For example, if your tyre goes flat, you do not choose the religion of the one who stops first. You really depend upon the decision of the one who could help you, whatever his religion, colour, or ethnic background.

If you trust in God, if you believe that He will reward your intercession for the Other and the one who is different, if your guts react to social injustice, if you want to put an end to that injustice and you do not care that regardless of your great efforts you might remain unrecognised and anonymous, you are ready for the adventure called 'faith-based peace building'.

You might fall somewhere along that road, or not know the methods by which you can act upon social injustice, or you may consider yourself too small to actually make a change. You will then need one more characteristic so as to become a real player in this game which is not easy but is, nevertheless, very fulfilling. You need to know who the key people are in society, meet nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), associations, and foundations, learn how to become part of them, or how to found one, learn to diagnose problems, promote the solution, know how to lobby, write, fight non-violently, educate, teach, work on raising awareness. ... This is the way of becoming one spot on the map of this region of the world which radiates with the energy of good, peace, justice and balance, happiness and satisfaction. A network of these spots makes the world a better place, balances out the dark forces and war so that these forces will not devour everything on their way.

During the past three years, I created a training program to educate Muslim religious teachers about peace building and Islam. Nine hundred teachers have now undergone this program and received a handbook on Islam's peace dimension. Two thirds of Bosnian and Herzegovinian children have in some way during their religious education associated peace with their religion. Many religious teachers continued the peace education. Some even created departments for nonviolence and peace building in their schools, and all of them were reminded that Islam is the religion which holds the right of the Other on the highest level. Our religious leaders do not stand in the way of our work; they do not support us in any way either. While society keeps quiet, we move forward in small steps¹.

It was a long road starting from my inner belief—that as a believer I should do something so I would not feel sick whenever I saw religious teaching being misused as a means of deepening the terrible ethnic-religious conflict—and today. Indeed, it was long and thorny. However, I gained a lot. Whenever I see these familiar faces, my dear friends who live what I am talking about, I must say that I am a rich and fulfilled woman. I will continue the peace building work, in the hope that Allah the Merciful One will on the Judgment Day grant me to what I devoted my whole life.

1 *Small Steps* is the English name of the peace building association founded by the speaker.