

Olga ISRAEL

## *Inter-religious Dialogue in Europe Today*

*As a child of five driven by curiosity typical for that age, I asked my mother if she believed in God. Her answer was simple and straightforward—she said she did. When asked the same question, my father told me I had to learn, read a lot and grow up so I could understand his answer. So I did, and years went by before I finally grasped what he was trying to tell me. I never asked him that question again, yet his answer has been guiding me ever since.*

### **JOINTED EUROPEAN IDENTITY**

Being Jewish comprises not only belief and religious obedience, but also learning from Jewish history and tradition and acting accordingly. While religious beliefs were constantly challenged in a post-communist country like former Yugoslavia, living proactively made it possible to grow up as a Jew.

With the same sentiments, I approach every challenge in my life, and inter-religious dialogue in Europe is one of them. Without knowing who we are and where we come from, it is difficult to

determine where we would like to be. As youth activists in faith-based organisations it is imperative that we continuously seek knowledge about our roots and about those of different backgrounds.

We live in a Europe that has multiple faces and identities, and it is our task to learn how to best reconcile the differences between us, celebrating the heritage and rich culture each of these identities brings. The richness and the diversity of our faiths should serve as a starting point for a joint journey towards a better future rather than as a reason for division and separation.

There are many ways of engaging in inter-religious dialogue. Each of these methods, however, begins with a very individual introspective process of knowing oneself and understanding one's roots and background before inspecting others.

The topic before us today is a textured one: inter-religious dialogue and its perspectives and outreach. There is, of course, no single answer. I like the saying that there are as many answers as there are students and young individuals in the world.

In a continent with over fifty different countries, each and every young person lives in very different realities. We are a generation of European students that has become highly individualised. We no longer face one single future, for the rally-

ing points of the iron curtain, the Berlin wall and a united Europe are now behind us.

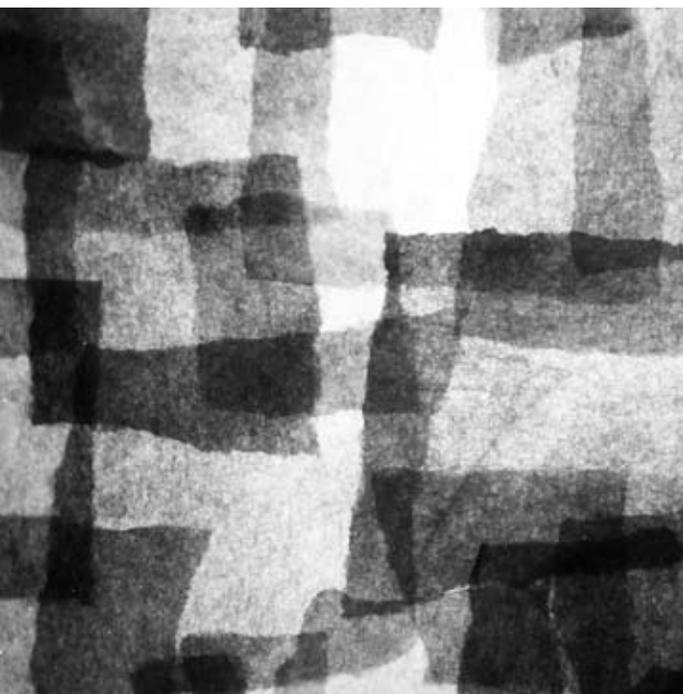
Young people today live in a society with a great variety of choices. Young Muslims in France have a choice—how will they act in connection with a paralysing national debate? Young Jews in Poland need to choose—when homosexuals are marginalized, how are they affected? And youth in Belarus dwell on a choice—what do they do when the voice of dissent and democracy is consistently crushed?

The future of young people is no longer governed by generational debates, but is marked by the choices they make, the obstacles they choose to overcome, and the taboos they vow to break.

### **FIGHTING PRESENT AND FUTURE**

Growing up in Serbia, I too needed to make a choice. Each time I visit Belgrade, I face a father who still bears the scars of the city he and I love so much and of the choices he had to make—a city in which he was repeatedly forced to evacuate his two daughters in order to save them from the turmoil of a war, a city in which he had to face Slobodan Milosevic himself as a kidnapped dissident.

In a country still laced with stereotypes and with old wounds, I chose to move myself beyond a national classroom still defined by difference and by division. I can still hear my elementary school class reciting the poem that says "Volim Tita vise nego roditelje - I love Tito more than my parents".



Olga ISRAEL is the chairperson of the European Union of Jewish Students, an umbrella organisation for 34 national unions of Jewish students across the continent. She was born in 1979 in Belgrade. She graduated from the Universities of Belgrade and Munich with degrees in banking, insurance and finance and was awarded a Fellowship with the Ford Motor Company that enabled her to study as a "Community Leader" at the School of International and Public Affairs of Columbia University in New York, USA. She was evacuated

from Belgrade twice, once in 1992 and again on the eve of the NATO invasion in 1999, both times seeking refuge in Israel. In August of 2000, she returned to Belgrade and re-invigorated the Union of Jewish Students of Serbia and Montenegro. She left Belgrade in March 2003 to work in the private sector in Germany while she pursued her graduate studies. After being elected as EUJS vice-president in 2004, she was elected Chairperson of EUJS at the EUJS Congress in Zagreb, Croatia in August 2005. She began her term in Brussels on January 1, 2006.

Engaging a set of values and ideals beyond those haunting lyrics may be second nature in some places, but in Serbia and many other European countries it was and it still is a very profound choice.

I come from a mixed marriage—my mother was an Orthodox Christian and my father was Jewish—so I was always privileged to have a very close insight into what the vast diversity of different faiths, religions and related customs can offer. My home was a sanctuary for inter-faith and inter-religious dialogue where I was first taught about the choices I could make—to learn to understand and respect even if I didn't necessarily agree.

A year ago, the European Union of Jewish Students (EUJS) organised a mission where 10 Jewish leaders joined 10 Rwandan-Belgian students on an unparalleled journey: together they traveled across Rwanda, listening to the stories of survivors who were of our own age. They learned about young Rwandans who have also made a choice: to embrace a path of peace and reconciliation in the face of unimaginable wounds.

This past December about 60 young leaders of different faiths from all around Europe came to a seminar organised by the European Union of Jewish Students at the European Parliament in Brussels. They sought to build

strong coalitions and take the lead in expressing the views and concerns of young people who are proud of their religious identity on a continent where “being religious” is associated with extremism and fundamentalism. They each made a choice.

Later on that month, EUJS brought a Darfuri Muslim refugee to the Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council on Darfur, who addressed the plenum on behalf of a group of Jewish organisations. Joining forces and raising our voices before genocide was a conscious choice we all made.

The increasing number of opportunities for young people in the world today prevents us from chartering one single future. What we can do, what we must do, and what we should all strive to do is to offer young people the courage to take the road less traveled.

And our future is formed by the choices that we make today.

The foundation of a peaceful future is laid when young Europeans trapped in cultural conflict channel frustration through dialogue rather than violence. The guarantee of a tolerant future is drafted when Serbian, Macedonian, Croatian, Bosnian and Slovenian youth meet in Brussels, and commit to meeting more often at home.

The future of Europe is grounded in helping young people to make the

right choices in this very complex and varied world. Together, we must continue to move beyond our constituencies in our respective organisations and to bring new and broader voices to the table—voices that will help us develop greater opportunities for the millions of youth who were not privileged to grow up with the values we all see as natural.

Our challenge is to take this message of choice, born and matured in the corridors of Jewish, Christian and Muslim humanism, and bring it to young people in the suburbs of Paris, in the fractured landscape of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the rural communities of Poland—across the continent.

When the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) organized a conference in Copenhagen in October 2006 and invited me to speak on an Inter-religious panel together with a Muslim colleague, I rushed to accept the invitation as I saw it as the best choice anyone could make. And the right choice leads to all the right steps needed to make one's individual contribution to pluralistic and diversified Europe.

Although it sometimes feels like fighting Goliath, it was at a very early age that I learned from my father: one is what one chooses to be.

