**European Interfaith Workshop ‘Dreaming with Yusuf/Joseph’ 10/2023**

**in Kortrijk, Belgium, Reflection by Anja Stieghorst (Leader/Invited Expert)**

Leading an European Interfaith Bibliodrama Workshop - **Does it worth the effort?**

This question moved me from the beginning of the planning for this workshop. Does the effort I have to invest for Preparing and Leading an European Interfaith Bibliodrama really worth the outcome?

All preparation needed to be pressed in my limited private time and we as a leading-team needed many meetings via Internet to get everything going. We needed to think and rethink much more than on the workshops we usually lead. We had to ask and reask to get as many information about Muslim needs before, to adjust our program in all respect for the faith of others. We really were on an intense journey with us as leaders, with the texts of Coran and Bible and with our thoughts belonging the group and the Bibliodrama-process for months. And added was everything I had to care for my own need of getting some kind of secure interfaith ground to stand on in this adventure of leading an European Interfaith Bibliodrama Workshop.

Does the effect and the outcome really worth this huge effort? Spoiler: Yes!

But lets start this story from the real beginning.

From my view today, my spiritual roots, so to say my ‘frame of perception’, is very important for where I am now on my interfaith journey and how I look on it. I was born and raised in Germany in a family with a protestant lutheran faith. We were part of a congregation with a very ecumenical understanding. Thanks to my parents and my congregation I grew up from the very beginning with an ethical ground in the human rights and the clear understanding, that all humans are equal, have the equal rights and human dignity and are equal relevant – which also includes the different religions. Spiritually my world of growing up was connected to the ecumenical movement of the Conciliar Process for Peace, Justice and Integrity of creation (1983, World Council of Churches WCC) and the Liberation Theology, later added by the Feminist Theology. But nevertheless I grew up as a privileged white Christian girl in a white Christian community-Bubble, even when I had interconfessional experiences and worldwide contacts already as a child, I still was a Christian in a Christian-culture bubble. Centuries ago from today, as I was 14 years old, I have heard a muezzin for the first time in my life – in Tanzania on a partnership-trip. I was touched. I liked it. For me it felt a bit similar to hear church bells. Some sound calling for prayer. So I grew up with some kind of safe spiritual ground and spiritual openness and much curiosity. Through all this as awareness-frame I look to the world and all this influences my understanding of life and my way to prepare, lead and reflect the Interfaith Workshop.

So already centuries ago my interest and openess in exploring my own and other faiths, my curiosity to life, my longing for dialog influenced my ways in the world. Since about 30 years I am now working with children and youth in the protestant church. the first about 20 years, I worked in a very protestant bubble with only some few other contacts in the district. In the last years I am now working in a small unit that is responsible for cooperation with schools. So now I am really regularly working with interfaith groups in a special setting. So with this, my interfaith interest increased again very much. I have explored much in these years, learned so many new things and am longing for more. I realised that my life-bubble was very, very protestant. I took part in an educational program and am now since some months a trained ‘Facilitator for Interreligious Dialog’. I started an Interreligious Dialog Group with Muslim and Christian partners here in my hometown Bremen last year. We are still in the start, but already in good community.

Since over 10 years I am also active as a Bibliodrama Leader. I was trained in an interconfessional group, which from the start made clear that having different views on something is a plus in Bibliodrama world and not a problem like it is in some other settings. This way was enforced by an European Advanced Bibliodrama Training. In my opinion and experiences, Bibliodrama is in itself an interfaith work-philosophy. There is no wrong. The impulse of everyone counts and differences are a plus. Everyone is looking through his or her own ‘frame of perception’ and this is good for the group-process. Respecting own limits and others is essential in Bibliodrama. Especially in the intercultural European Bibliodrama Meetings, I have experienced multiple times that the Bibliodrama-base needs to be Respect and Tolerance and Openness. Thanks to Erasmus-support it was possible for many different people to experience the multiple forms of intercultural Bibliodrama and the work with interconfessional or interfaith groups i.e. with Jews. The first time I have experienced a Muslim participant in a Bibliodrama is not so long ago. It was in the European Bibliodrama Online during the pandemic time. I felt privileged to be able to have this experience too.

All this encouraged me to go on in my interfaith journey and try to prepare a Bibliodrama for an interfaith group with a Coran text and a Bible text.

Luckily, I had curious and engaged partners for this adventure with Agnes Bouwen and Anne Coussement from the Belgian Organisation ‘Het Leerke’.

Nevertheless all preparations were a challenge to me. With working fulltime and having several volunteer jobs my energy felt so limited and my ambition was an up and down. This changed to better, as three Muslim men from my dialog-group here in Bremen signed in. From then on, I was in contact to them and we as leading-team had now a powerful, friendly helping group, whom I could ask everything. I met with them and also asked them questions appearing in preparations via social media. I felt in good helpful contact. What a relief! That encouraged me. As more, my cooperation partners in Belgium took over so much of all organisational things. What a relieve! In my job I am normally responsible for all on my own. This felt so different! As more I got the chance to be an invited expert via Erasmus of ‘Het Leerke’ and my three Muslim supporters had Erasmus-support by the German Organisation GfB. Even more relief! Many people around us were curious about our experience – what a positive Energy! That helped me over some struggles in the preparations.

**In the preparations my personal biggest challenges where:**

* preparing via www – it is really not the same than to prepare in sitting together, it takes much more concentration, patience and time and still is not the same. And I am really not a patient person.
* Knowledge of Muslim needs – I felt responsible for a respectful atmosphere and adequate tasks and texts and habits for all participant. I realized how few I still know of needs from Muslim people - so I was very thankful for the help of the three Muslim participants.
* Offering a Workshop for a very wide European open space - Not knowing who will come is a challenge and feeling responsible about creating a safe space for all, is then even more challenging. We knew, there will be people with very different knowledge of Bibliodrama, of interfaith work, of European work and of languages. How could we care for that?
* Promoting this Workshop offer – the international and national promotion work is always a big challenge. How can the special offer reach the right people? We work already on this on different levels – also national and international, but to me it seems, there is no real solution in view. We all work just as volunteers, so our resources are really limited.

Additional we had all the other ‘normal’ challenges we always have in preparing a Bibliodrama-Workshop like finding a theme, setting ideas and methods, get in contact with the texts, limit our ideas, construct a good process and so on.

Really fast we have had a theme. After the first idea, I met some Muslim friends and in that talk Joseph as dreamer and dream-explainer in prison appeared as an interesting theme to Christians and Muslims. Then we started in the leading duo to set all the data. With that the Belgian team went on research for an affordable, reachable place and so step by step, we build up together our plan, started the promotion. The Workshop-journey was really started and like puzzle pieces, the different steps built our first Workshop plan. We decided to use more easy methods and no so called ‘big play’. We decided to make a constant creative process with puzzle-pieces as reflecting method. I took the challenge to look at the texts and find a good combination of Coran and Bible text and decided to really concentrate on the dream-stories. Still it was much text all in all. I parted it in 5 pieces, each piece one part of the story in Bible and Coran. So we also had the opportunity to let something out in the process without losing our dialog-base. We adjusted our plan together the day before the Workshop started – sitting together analogue in Belgium. Meeting a bit earlier and having that preparation-time together was very helpful!

**In the whole process, there were some special things in our planning in cause of the Muslim participants. We were thinking of:**

**Prayertimes** & needs – in agreement with the Muslim participants, we cared for the reasonable breaks including the possibility for the washing before.

**Bodycontact** between men and women – We were not sure how to deal with the need for some body distance between men and women without making it to a problem. We decided to encourage intensively in the beginning the participants to be attentive with themselves and the others and started with impulses to being in distance/coming close. We put it in the hands of the participants to care for their needs. As more, it influenced the choice of the methods, so that it wouldn’t be too complicated to keep a distance if needed. Maybe there could be a better or clearer solution. But in action I realised that all three Muslim participants had different needs and different feelings with it. So maybe there is no easy way to deal with the distance-needs of some and the being-close-needs of some.

**How to use the texts** – I already knew, that the way we usually use the Bible text might be irritating to the Muslim Participants. So I asked them, how they think about it. Interestingly to play with the text or to use just some words and also the cutting of the text was no problem. Only the handling of the text and the Holy books needed to be kept in good view. Laying a Holy Text on the ground, like we regularly do! - would have been a big irritation. That influenced our methods and also brought some thinking about: are there things that we need to keep in our Christian way? Why do we adjust what and why not? There are some methods, we adjusted and some methods, we didn’t use. We didn’t want to make a problem out of it and not to give warnings or so to the Christian participants. I tried to care for keeping the text-papers on the tables. There appeared only one situation where it became clear: in the final evening ceremony, some Christian participants have put there text-sheet under their chairs on the ground. The Muslim participants intervened very fast, soft and easy and just took the sheets from the ground in a very kind attitude and with just a short explanation. So it was Ok than for all – I think especially in cause of the wonderful group atmosphere and the great attitude of all.

**Dancing, Music** and so on in Warmup-sessions for Bodywork – This was no problem or challenge for the three participants. That was easy. We needn’t adjust something here.

**Playing with the role of a prophet & Playing with the role of god** – I discussed that with the three Muslim participants and it was clear: playing with the role of a prophet would not be a problem, if others would play with the role ‘god’, it would be difficult for them. That influenced our choice of methods. I was not sure what might happen, because we still wanted to offer a freedom of choice. So I felt some tense inside me on the points of the workshop where something could have happened - but no one have chosen to indicate the role of god.

**Creative work** – Because I know, pictures of holy persons might be a problem, I asked: How would it be for you, if there appear pictures of god by others? The reaction seemed to me not clear. I understood: it would have felt not appropriate, but they would have stand it. Also this situation didn’t appear.

**Food needs** – We easily switched to vegetarian food for all – that was an easy solution and even more ‘green’.

**Languages** – We already knew that one of the Muslim participants would need translations and took care for it in our planning and on some special parts I was on his side as translator. What was astonishing: with even more languages in the European game, the Finish participant was happy to find another Russian speaking person in one of the Muslim partners. That was nice!

**Praying together** – We wanted to have a spiritual ending of the day. I had the idea of an interfaith Evening Blessing or Night prayer with a Muslim part and a Christian part. And that was what we celebrated in an easy way together. First I prayed in English and said an more Christian Blessing, than we heard the English translation of an Muslim Blessing from one of the Muslim participants and then another one did a recitation in Arab. It felt right to me, peaceful and respectful. It was astonishing to me, how easy this is, if you have partners who are interested in Interfaith dialog and are open to this as sharing faith.

**Short View on the Interfaith Bibliodrama-process**

The process started Saturday evening with some actions to build a good group. We started the creative reflection-process with the first puzzle-piece and first getting in contact with Joseph/Yusuf. On Sunday we started the day with working on our ‘frames of perception’, then we made an easy entry and concentrated on dreams and dreaming and several puzzlepiece-reflections. In the afternoon we started with a walk in the city and explored also the dreams of spiritual women in the Beginen-Quarter. After that, we entered the Bible- and Coran-story with the first part of dreaming Joseph/Yusuf as a youngster at home. The group moved easily with us through our planning and were very open and interested on all we offered and also on each other. On Monday we intensely worked with further Bible- and Coran-texts about Joseph/Yusuf as Dream-explainer, always combined as parallel views on the story. We gave the group different methods and different challenges to stand. They did it with great joy and easy-going.

That worked very good. I think, it was wise to choose this concrete person and with setting a clear focus on the dreaming and the dreams. For this mixed group and us as leaders the smooth and more easy program was good. With more routine in spiritual interfaith work the possibilities might get much wider. With a special celebration evening we ended the Monday. On Tuesday we gave the group also a home-task and so the contact moved on for some days. This was beautiful.

**All in all: what do I personally take out of this experience?**

**Framing**

I think it is very important especially in international and interfaith work to be aware of our own individual ‘frame of perception’ and being aware how different all our frames are. In my opinion it was good, to start this workshop with that.

**Respect and Openness**

The attitude of us as leaders and the attitude of all participants in this international interfaith journey was essential in my opinion. It needs openness in heads and hearts and respect for the faith of others, to build a safe and courageous group and group-process. Maybe this Bibliodrama-Rule is in this setting one of the most relevant ones: respecting others + there is no wrong + care for your needs and your borders.

**Asking & Listening – being on the way with partners**

It was so helpful to have the support through Muslim people I already have experienced as open partners in interfaith Dialog here at home. It made all preparation easier and our contact also influenced all we experienced in the group. Happily, we want to share together our Workshop-Experiences now also with our Dialog-group here at home and so there is even more benefit! I learned, how important it is to ask as much as possible and to listen attentively.

The Partnership with Jes and Anne was also very important to me. Without them, this Workshop would not have been realized! Thank you, my dear partners.

**Courage and Curiosity**

In all I was so eager to try things. We also tried a method we invented some kind of for our Workshop: a dialog between two open chairs. And the group was doing it easy and with joy! It needed curiosity and Courage in us as leading-team for all that and also in the participants. Without that openness and interest and respect, we couldn’t have worked together like we did. It came to a Group-saying: "We need open minds and open hearts."

**Sharing**

I was impressed, how open all were and how much sharing happened on these days – on the dinner-table and the walks, during the work and with Turkish tea in the evening. It was a joy to experience it!

**My personal Body conditions**

During the workshop I had some hard struggles with a cold and some other body-pain. I didn’t feel stabile and struggled on some points – so my concentration on Monday afternoon was very low. That was not good. Thanks to Jes and the easy group, it was only my personal problem and I had the option to care for me the best possible. A day before my trip to Belgium I was not sure if I should go. I am happy that I did. And it was important that I had some days of for getting better as I came back home. So it was good that I have planned from the beginning to have some free time afterwards for reflecting and letting all experiences become part of my life-journey.

**Not-thought-of**

There was one situation where I realised: we have not thought of something! When we worked with the situation of Joseph sitting in the prison, one of the Muslim participants left the room after a while. As he came back I asked, if everything is Ok and he said: ‘I have friends in prison.’ If we would have been aware of that possible personal experience, we maybe would have changed the method on that point. We didn’t want to bring someone to such a sensitive situation in our Workshop. Something like that can always happen in all different situations. It is not possible to think of all eventualities. But with a bit more thinking of the background of the Muslim participants, we could have thought of that. I have learned from that. And we were able to handle it and luckily also the participant was able to handle it. I am thankful that it went out O.k.

**All in all**

Does the huge effort really worth the outcome for me? Yes, it did. I have experienced encouragement, contact, new perspectives, I have much to think about and I came home with a deep knowledge: we are a tiny Peace-Movement. Especially on Monday-evening were we got news from a shooting in Brussels, were someone has shot to Swedish people and was heard shouting 'Allahu akbar'. We were shocked. Through the whole days, the situation in Israel and Gaza touched us. And now this. We were sitting together, Christians and Muslims, with our Swedish participants and knowing: most of us will pass Brussels on the next day on our journeys home. We became silent. I felt grief and fear for us all and what will happen next and I felt even more: **interfaith work is peace-work**!