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## Religious education in violent places: Telling stories to unlearn violence

Religious education takes place in a range of contexts both explicit and implicit. This workshop will explore the role of the religious educator and religious education in places with a long history of violence. One such place is Ukraine which within living memory has experienced major inter ethnic conflict, the horrors of the Holocaust, decades of oppressive totalitarian rule and now serious political instability. One way of doing religious education in this context is to use story and narrative to open up discussion, dialogue and mutual reflectivity.

Religious education needs to engage with both explicit and implicit cultural contexts. Both inform the assumptions that teachers bring to the classroom. One especially important cultural factor is the level of violence and conflict present in a society. In many places the level of this violence has been a strong formative influence for many people. We can think of countries such as Nicaragua, the Central African Republic and Cambodia. From a European perspective one such country is Ukraine. In the wake of the collapse of the Austro Hungarian Empire serious inter ethnic conflict broke out all over the country but especially in the west region. During WW2 some of the most brutal *Einzelgruppen* actions took place there. Over 80% of its Jewish population were killed in this period. In the Stalinist era the country was ruled by a suffocating totalitarian regime. In recent times serious ethnic conflict has again emerged particularly between Russians and Ukrainians.

What does all of this mean for religious educators? Violence leaves a strong, indelible mark on a culture and a people. In the first instance the depth of this feeling needs to be acknowledged and addressed. This cannot be done in a way that ignores the depth of emotions that are involved here. At the same time it must be faithful to the historical record and address questions such as, "What happened?" "Why did it happen?" and "What can we learn from these experiences?" At its core religious education in this context must take place within a dialogical framework. One way of encouraging such a framework is to use stories and narratives.

There is a wide literature on use of narrative in the classroom. **Stories can be interpreted at different levels and this is a great advantage in accommodating different students. Narrative also establishes a strong cognitive basis for**

**further exploration and questioning. The major challenge is to find or create good stories. It is also a wonderful way to encourage students to share their own perspective on a range of topics.** Story and narrative can open up discussion, dialogue and mutual reflectivity. Stories can also capture complex information and present it in a fashion that is both respectful but also stimulating and informative. And this is very important in dealing with sensitive issues such as long mistral memories of violence. In this workshop a series of indicative stories will be used that will model how religious education can address the realities

### **Some indicative references**

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