

# Religion and the Education of Young People

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In the Name of God, the Gracious, the Merciful.

I am really delighted—indeed, honoured—to be invited here to this assembly. When I was looking at the list of participants I felt how heavy this weight was as far as UNESCO's ideals are concerned, and in particular our educational ideals. I feel here that I am really participating in a mission that is consonant with that of UNESCO. I believe that UNESCO should become more and more connected to real think tanks, such as the IBO council and this gathering, and make use of your organizational experiences.

The topic that I am supposed to talk about, *Religion and the education of young people*, is not an easy one, especially in these days in which we have so many controversies surrounding different interpretations of religious thought around us. I preferred not to prepare a written speech for this meeting as the topic appeals to an open, informal, free flow of thought as if thinking out loud. Of course, I prepared an outline of and some notes about the points I would like to mention. The issue is so delicate that it deserves thorough elaboration and investigation, therefore I expect critical reactions so we can all use each other's deliberations to continue thinking about the issue analytically, perhaps even finally finding relevant modalities.

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In the recent issue of UNESCO's newsletter on education, I read an interesting comment saying: "Schools have changed. Their success is no longer measured just by the number of children they educate, but also by how good they are at turning out responsible and tolerant citizens. Today schools are expected to instil values as well as provide knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

The development of a global society will require an enormous expansion in the access to knowledge on the part of individuals and organizations alike. Universal education will be an indispensable contributor to this process of capacity building. Education must be lifelong. It should help people to develop their knowledge, values, attitudes and the skills necessary to earn a livelihood, and to contribute confidently and constructively to shaping communities that reflect principles of justice, equity and unity.

Education should also help the individual to develop a sense of place and community grounded in the local, but embracing the whole world. Successful education nurtures in individuals an active commitment to the welfare of their families, their communities, their country, indeed all of mankind. However, formal education systems can only promote cohesion if they strive to take the diversity of individuals and groups into consideration, while ensuring that they do not themselves contribute to social exclusion.

Individual talents must be taken into account and there must be scope for qualities such as imagination, a sense of beauty, or an appreciation of the spiritual dimensions of existence and the meaning of life. As well as facing the great variety of individual talents, education has to face the wide range of social,

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<sup>1</sup> Newsletter of UNESCO's Education Sector, April–June 2002

cultural, religious, ethnic and other backgrounds of the groups constituting society. Respect for pluralism—or if I may say, as I prefer, plurality—is a basic principle. Everyone should be enabled to find their place within the community to which they primarily belong (in most cases local), and at the same time be given the means to open out to other communities' values, beliefs, systems and faiths.

In that respect, it is important to establish a form of intercultural and intracultural education based on dialogue that will genuinely contribute to social cohesion and peace. Education must also give everyone throughout their lives the ability to play an active part in envisaging the future of society. As in the case of tolerance, the aim is not to teach precepts and rigid rules that could slide towards indoctrination, but to make the educational institution a model of democratic practice.

Education is therefore a complex matter that includes accepting differing values, acquiring knowledge and learning how to take part in public life. It cannot therefore be considered ideologically neutral. The student's conscience is necessarily challenged by it. To safeguard independence of conscience, education in general (from childhood throughout life) must build up a critical sense that makes for free thought and independent action. Education becomes undistinguishable from democracy when everyone plays a part in constructing a responsible and mutually supportive society that upholds the fundamental rights of all.

Thinking of the theme of my talk today, *Religion and the education of young people*, it seems to be a very modern concept through the distinction it proposes between education and religion.

During the longest part of mankind's history, education, religion, memories, social rules or behaviours could not be dissociated from one another. Even today in many countries, religious education is still an important means, if not the most important, in the process of the development of social integration. Societies in situations of resistance—against a political power or military occupation, or facing the anxiety of losing their identity—often come or return to a marriage between education and religion. This could happen in a revolutionary national context, as occurred in Poland or in Iran at the beginning of their recent movements, or in the more recent context of globalization. From this point of view, religion and education can together form a tool of resistance, within which actions are sometimes considered to be carried out on behalf of God; then each religion appears as “the enemy” in the eyes of “the other”.

From a historical point of view, a distinction between religion and education is made when and where a conceptual dissociation between the community and the individual appears. The notion of the human person is a relatively recent one and is at the source of the Western notion of democracy and/or human rights. Christianity, while having its roots in “communitarist” societies, accompanied this evolution in its area by saying “Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, to God what belongs to God.” But this is not without ambiguity: if the philosophy of Christianity supports the notion of the human person, the history of Christianity was also, at least for a long period, the history of a powerful marriage between political and religious power.

On the other hand, Islam, which is often perceived as the religion of the group rather than the individual, gave room or has given room to other perceptions sometimes not so far from Christianity during the historical development of Islamic culture. History also shows that the same events are presented in absolutely different ways in different educational systems, according to the religion of reference; take, for example, the crusades. Of course, one should wonder whether in such a case

religion itself creates the differences in education or if it is a political use of religion that creates this. In this context, one can ask if religion exists *per se*, by which I mean it being autonomous from society and its tensions. Karl Marx and Ayatollah Khomeini could answer such a question in different ways.

A possible answer could be that it depends on the religion under consideration; some have a mainly ethical purpose, while others are inclined to have a greater influence on the daily life of people and societies. The social role of religion not being the same, the place of religion in education therefore differs in the two cases. Therefore at least four different situations can be envisaged.

First, religion is used as the source of social and political power, as was recently the case with the Taliban in Afghanistan, of course, but also in French Canada, for instance, not so long ago. In this case religion is also education. This can be a source of oppression or of freedom or social harmony, according to the context. In this case the educational system is a part of the religious organization.

Secondly, the religion(s) is (are) officially recognized and admitted but as an entity distinct from civil power. Religion is not in charge of education but can be taught in school to those who want to learn. The schools can be private as well as public.

The third option is that no religion is taught at school, but that the history and philosophy of religion is taught as a subject among others; in this context it is important to know “the other” and “oneself”.

The fourth choice is to follow none of these three different approaches that I have mentioned.

Whatever the context, the important question is what positive contribution religion could bring to education today; of course the answer can differ according to the context. It is a question of ethics and spirituality being understood, so that no one religion in particular, nor the religious spirit in general, could be viewed today as the only source of ethics or spirituality: science, culture and art are concerned as well as religion. Of course here there is room for a thorough discussion, and perhaps a controversial one.

May I digress? I mention science, because science was basically supposed to be neutral in introducing any value system. But later on, because of the marriage, even a causal one, between science and power—which is what we see these days—science is translated immediately into technology, and then immediately into material or military power, and through that it is now introducing a value system. Of course when Francis Bacon said that knowledge is power, I read this as definitely not meaning “science” as such, but “knowledge” in its broader definition. But, these days, it seems that “science” is power. This point deserves more elaboration later on during this discussion, if we have time.

To return to the line of our discussion after this digression, religion could provide valuable support when education aims at developing values of peace, human respect and the culture of peace. At the same time, unfortunately, in practice religion has also played the opposite role in some periods of history; so many people have killed or been killed by virtue of their religion, or one religion or another. Bearing this historical consciousness in mind, it is rather a challenging and controversial task to convince educationally responsible partners that they might achieve better results today.

So it would not be enough to ask what place could be given to religion in education. What matters is if religions, or if I may say more accurately religious paradigms, are ready to take this place, and how they could set about it.

As it is the *raison d'être* of your organization to give a wider common acceptance to different educational curriculums around the world, and if we consider that religion is part of education—or that religion will provide an ambiance, and a paradigm within which we are designing our curriculum for education—then how can we create an atmosphere of dialogue among different religions with the aim of codifying the common core between them to be introduced in our educational curriculum, thus providing a basis for the wider acceptance of diplomas in the eyes of different partners?

To be able to elaborate on answering this question, it helps if we investigate some points.

**Point 1.** If we understand religions as being only their theological *core*, then it is difficult to think of a genuine dialogue between them, since a theological core includes dogmas. Can one hold any dialogue on dogmas? Although dialogue is not possible on theological dogmas, it is definitely possible in the realm of religious *culture* or in the field of religious *civilization*. Religions, in their theological meanings, are divine entities, but what we consider as our religious culture is this worldly atmosphere that to some extent conducts and controls our behaviour. It is not a divine matter; rather it is a man-made product. It is religious civilization, or religious culture that provides the religious authorities with a very powerful influence. It is mainly in this context that the inclusion of a religious education in our curriculum will help us to be more cohesive.

Therefore, to introduce a curriculum for our educational system that is capable of going beyond our national models and gaining a more common or collective acceptance, it is not (for the sake of promoting the spirit of dialogue and mutual understanding) desirable to start teaching religions by focusing on their theological domains. Rather, I would like to encourage that in teaching religions to young people in general, religious cultures, religious civilizations and religious paradigms of understanding should be introduced, instead of theological dogmas. Of course, this will not prevent some people who want to further their religious knowledge from allocating a part of their teaching to theological doctrines, as one possible language for understanding the divine realm, which could be done separately in each case.

**Point 2.** The history of science, according to one interpretation, is the path leaving the less true or more wrong theories behind, moving towards more true or less wrong theories. Of course, when we talk of truth in the realm of science, we definitely mean a greater degree of confirmation, rather than anything more. The true reality before us is nature, the world, and science is nothing but our relative understanding of that reality.

Could I imagine that the same explanation might possibly be applied to the field of religion without aiming to introduce here any comparison between the realms of science and religion themselves? As the history of science manifests our failure to grasp nature in its true reality, the history of the development of religious thought also could, to some extent, manifest our failure to embrace the core of religion in its divinity.

Religion, which came to us by revelation, exists as a divine truth, as a divine entity, independent of our perception, in the heavens, in the consciousness of God or however you want to describe it, but our understanding of religion, or better to say our religious world or paradigm, does not belong to the realm of divinity and truth. It exists in the realm of our mind and our perception. It is a man-made, earthly entity, of course relatively inspired by what we have received from prophets, and that is the reason we can conduct dialogue about it.

**Point 3.** Suppose we ask a fish who was born in the sea, who has been living there in the depth of the water, “What is water?” An honest fish would reply: “I don’t know what water is. What are you talking about?” because it was born and grew up within it. The only way a fish can understand what water is, is for you to take it out of the sea, put it on the shore and say, “Now, this is water,” before replacing it. This is the only possible way that a fish can understand what you mean by your question. Taking the concept of God as the core concept in religious belief in general, and using this metaphor, we can metaphorically say that God is the sea of existence without any shore, so we cannot take anyone out of this sea to be able to teach them what God is. We are embraced by this existential reality within which the main message of religion—at least Islam, with which I am more familiar—is: we do not know. A god that is embraced by our knowledge is our creature not our creator. And, in this sense, by claiming to have access to the absolute truth, we are in fact referring to our own man-made truth that does not belong to the realm of the sacred.

Having said that, can we think that being religious will legitimize our claim to the truth? Can we claim that we are representatives of the truth, or by being religious, are we promoting the claim that we do not know the truth? As the history of religious thought tells us—for example in the case of Islam—a powerful and major interpretation suggests the notion that we do not know the truth, we are not the absolute owners of truth and cannot be so; we can belong to truth and stay within its context, but cannot own it. We are embraced by the truth, by God, but we cannot claim to possess Him. How can we represent Him? This is one way of understanding what has been taught in many ways during the history of religions.

Let me give you an example of this attitude towards religious understanding in the course of history, in my own country. I was born in a small town in north-central Iran, near which—just ten minutes’ drive away—in a village called Kharraqan, a very famous figure of Iranian or Persian culture is buried. His name is Abul-Hassan Kharraqani, and when we were children we used to be taken on pilgrimage to his tomb. Over the entrance to the mausoleum is inscribed this sentence, written by him 1,000 years ago, noting that the place where he is buried was his house and that he was a renowned religious scholar and saint. The sentence says: “Give whoever comes into this house bread, and do not enquire about his faith, because whoever deserved existence from God definitely deserves bread from me.”<sup>2</sup>

Also in our primary school, we had in our Persian literature book this poem by the great Persian poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, narrating the story of a prophet who met a shepherd saying these words:

“Where are you, God, that I may become Your servant and sew Your shoes and comb Your hair, that I may wash Your clothes and kill Your lice and bring milk to You; that I may kiss Your little hand and rub Your little foot, and when bed-time comes I may sweep Your little room; oh You to whom all my goats are a sacrifice, for You in remembrance of whom are my cries.”

The shepherd heartily offered the best of what he possessed—his goats were everything to him. He was speaking with foolish words, in this way contravening all permissible theological modes of addressing God, putting aside all theologically acceptable sets of divine attributes of God and breaking all established clerical arrangements for understanding what God might be. And the prophet, relying on his supposed position as the official grand guardian of the theological domain of religion, and also considering himself as the theological protector of God, said arrogantly to him, “Oh, man, to whom

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<sup>2</sup> Abul-Hassan Kharraqani, Noor al-uloom.

is this addressed?” The shepherd answered in all honesty, “To that one who created us, by whom this earth and the sky were brought to sight.”

The prophet replied, “You have become very backsliding, indeed totally depraved. You have not only failed to become a believer, but moreover you have become an infidel. What babble is this, what blasphemy and raving? Stuff some cloth into your mouth. The stench of your blasphemy has made the whole world stink. Your blasphemy has turned the silk robe of religion into rags. Shoes and socks are fitting for a lowly material creature like you, but how can such things be right for the Almighty, who is sun of existence, the source of all existence? Do you not understand your limits? You understand nothing of him, thus you do not even have the right to address him. And if you do not stop your throat from uttering these words fire will come and burn up all the people.”

The prophet said: “Perhaps the fire has already come to you, otherwise what is this smoke coming out of you? It seems that your soul has already become black and your spirit rejected by God. Do you not know that he is the judge embracing all creation? You are really witless, and truly the friendship of a witless man is enmity. You are indeed God’s enemy, as you dare to totally disrespect his Almighty presence by offering such rude services.”

The discussion between the prophet and the shepherd continues, the prophet continuing in an overbearing manner to criticize and condemn the shepherd, preaching to him in complex theological and philosophical terms. The sincere shepherd, with his simple and natural manner of statement, staring at his garments and heaving a sigh said in shock: “Oh prophet, you have closed my mouth and you have burned my soul with repentance.” Then he hastily turned his head towards the deep desert and went on his way. I do not wish to relate the whole story, but finally, a revelation came to that prophet from God. “What are you doing? You are here to join people together, not to separate them. Do you not know that we have given each group a way of expression? Do you not understand that sentences that are meaningless for you are meaningful for others, do you not understand that you do not own the soul of the people?” And so, after a final rebuke from God to the prophet, the prophet goes and finds the shepherd and apologizes to him.<sup>3</sup>

This was the story we read in our textbook when I was nine years old. Of course such an understanding of religion appeals for dialogue, as in each dialogue we have to consider some cognizance of the truth for the “other”, as well as some contribution to it by the “other”, otherwise dialogue is meaningless.

**Point 4.** However, in the same country, and many other places around the world during different periods of history, there have been other ways of understanding religiosity and teaching religion that have caused some people to simply claim that they know God, that they have access to the truth, and through having faith in Him they represent Him.

This attitude, for many reasons, has been intensified in our time. We need to investigate and discuss the historical reasons for the inclination toward returning to religious values today, which sometimes manifests itself in radical forms. In this context, it will be useful to study the development of thought in recent centuries concerning the place of religion and religious values. Just by way of example, thinkers such as Emmanuel Kant in the eighteenth century believed that the civil conscience, or collective conscience or collective understanding, could replace religious ethical doctrines. Our experience since then tells us that this idea was not a successful one. The events and news of our

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3 Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Mathnavi*, Second Book, Kolaleh Khavar edition, Padideh Publisher, Tehran, 1366, p.105–6.

world in different human societies demonstrates that we are in need of something beyond the rule of law and the police to prevent us from doing wrong. Now it seems clearly established that to control people through religious belief, to convince them not to do what they want, cannot be replaced by the collective social conscience. People like Kant thought that civil ethics, or the ethics of citizenship, which are developed by civil society, could provide us with a set of principles that prevent us from going beyond certain limits. However, this proved to be wishful thinking that caused many people to look again towards spirituality, even sometimes in a very naïve sense. Some people are coming to the understanding that they should return to religious values, and recommending that their teachings be included in the educational curriculum; by this, they think of the possibility of proclaiming absolute truth through their understanding of religion. This could cause, of course, some extremism in the name of divine concepts.

**Point 5.** Another point that we should take note of is that these days religion has become a source of identity. The issue of identity in the globalizing world creates a complex situation. On one hand the forces of globalization are rather pushing towards a common identity; and on the other hand there is a local awareness and local revival of identity, national or otherwise, around the world, as you see in recent elections, in France, in Great Britain or elsewhere in Europe. The paradoxical situation is how we can conceptually solve the problem of keeping our identity, and engaging in a genuine dialogue at the same time.

I have witnessed many, many conferences engaging in dialogue among cultures and civilizations, in UNESCO, in the United Nations and elsewhere. Frequently I have heard people say: well, we should think of dialogue in different fields, in culture, religion and other fields, while maintaining our identity. It is true that if we do not feel we have an identity, it is pointless to start a dialogue. Any conversation needs some points of reference relying on our personal character and social character. Now if from the very first we are thinking of keeping our identity, then conceptually, is there any point in hoping for a fruitful, genuine dialogue? There is a dilemma here. Are we going to think of dialogue as a pathway to gain a greater degree of confirmation of correctness, or a pathway towards keeping our identity while in communication with others? And if we are thinking of correctness, how will its criteria manifest itself in the process of dialogue?

“The more genuine a dialogue is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Partners in a genuine dialogue are far less the leaders of it than the led.”<sup>4</sup> If, during the process of dialogue, we continuously think of keeping our identity, then we will implicitly try to lead the process rather than being led by it, and this is a conceptual difficulty.

**Point 6.** As the contemporary German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer—who passed away three months ago—affirms, in a genuine dialogue it is “questioning” that opens up the subject matter, while fixed opinions attempt to immobilize it. Questioning releases a range of possibilities that rigid opinions would restrict.<sup>5</sup>

To perform the art of questioning, in this sense, we need the ability and the conviction to perform the art of listening, which in turn should conclude in the art of thinking, the nature of which requires openness. “To question means to lay open ... As against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second revised edition, Translated and revised by Joel Weinszier and Donald G Marshall, Sheed and Ward, London, p. 383.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

object and all its possibilities fluid. A person skilled in the ‘art’ of questioning is a person who can prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion.”<sup>6</sup>

By performing the art of listening to each other, especially when we come into the realm of our beliefs and value systems, we may find new layers of meaning in the domain of our values. This will introduce an evolution in our paradigm of understanding which could even transform our supposed contradictory orientations into a harmonized manifestation of a cluster understanding, a harmonized package of values and beliefs rather than a set of separated elements of faith.

We can clearly find strong encouragement in religious teachings to learn the art of listening, as can be seen in an example from *The Holy Quran*: “Give good news to those servants of Mine who listen to sayings and follow the best; indeed those are the ones whom God has guided and those are the owners of knowledge.”<sup>7</sup>

Through the art of listening we can cross the gaps that are created only by our illusions which, in turn, are mainly created through our ignorance of each other’s language of understanding and of living. “Ignorance of each other’s ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of the suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into wars.”<sup>8</sup>

“To conduct a dialogue requires that one does not try to argue the other person down but that one really considers the weight of the other’s opinion ... A genuine dialogue is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one) but the art of thinking (which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter).”<sup>9</sup>

Talking about the art of thinking and the art of listening reminds me of another very telling verse in *The Holy Quran* stating that the people who will receive punishment on the Day of Judgment shall say: “Had we but listened or pondered, we should not have been among the inmates of the burning fire.”<sup>10</sup>

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All the aforementioned points indicate that to secure a genuine dialogue, we need to develop an ethic of questioning and of listening. Bearing in mind the terrible news that we hear every day from around the world, today’s world is more than ever in need of this understanding that human beings can realize their humanity through dialogue and in dialogue; it is dialogue that opens the door for more degrees of confirmation towards truth. Nowadays, dialogue is a necessity that we should pursue, and not an intellectual luxury. To prepare the ground for a genuine dialogue we need to encourage the development of the art of questioning and listening in the domain of our beliefs, religious cultures, value systems and cultural values.

It could be a challenge for UNESCO, especially in the present situation of the world, to invite representatives and scholars of religions and religious cultures to cooperate in a new field of activity

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6 *ibid*, p. 367.

7 *The Holy Quran*, Surah Zumar, verse 39.

8 Preamble of the Constitution of UNESCO adopted in London on 16 November 1945.

9 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 367.

10 *The Holy Quran*, Surah al-Mulk, verse 10.

that would aim not only at establishing dialogue among religions, but especially dialogue towards peace and tolerance on the grounds of religious cultures too.

How we teach religion to young people could contribute remarkably to the above-mentioned goals as beautifully expressed in UNESCO's Constitution: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."<sup>11</sup>

I would like to stop my talk here and leave the rest of the time for discussion and common elaborations on the points I have made. I hope that our deliberations will nourish our vision to be able to discover some of the hidden roots of our problems as we wish to change situations characterized by pain and suffering, war and violence.

May I repeat that, due to the spirit and level of scholarship in this gathering, I have been thinking out loud and putting forward some ideas for more deliberations and investigations in the future. Through your constructive criticism on what I have mentioned, we may be able to shed light on our future discussions on the very important question of how we teach religion to young people so that we can contribute to founding a lasting peace among human beings, bearing in mind that "a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace that could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and the peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind."<sup>12</sup>

Thank you very much for your attention.

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11 Preamble of the Constitution of UNESCO.

12 *ibid.*