

# What is the role of religion in education?

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Thank you indeed Mr Raymond Jourdan for your introduction. I must confess that I feel rather nervous and somewhat guilt ridden too—which, of course, is a very healthy religious feeling—having heard about my fourteen years at the Royal Academy, five years at Trinity College Dublin, and three years at the University of Geneva. Looking back on it I admit that I spent most of my time trying to avoid any form of learning whatsoever, and the best commentary on my university career was that of my father who thought that sending me to Trinity was a very expensive way of getting me to play rugby and to learn how to play billiards. So I admit that I am with you this afternoon rather like a deserter in the middle of a battlefield: having avoided education myself I am now condemned to speak about it. I feel that there is some form of justice in this!

I am very glad to be with you for other reasons, because the International School of Geneva has played a very important part in my own past. When I was a doctoral student at the University of Geneva, trying to avoid work as usual, I spent my time in other pursuits and met Carolyn Johnstone who has been my wife for 33 years and who at that time worked for the international school. The other link with your organization is that my elder son, William, studied for the International Baccalaureate diploma. So I feel close to your movement and was very glad to receive and to accept the invitation for this afternoon.

In education, religion, as has already been mentioned, is not a word that is easily defined, but I am not going to try to define it. I think you know what we are talking about when we talk about religion—the role of religion in education. What is the meaning of religion in this context?

I think that once humanity has met its basic needs of food, sex, shelter and security and when humanity starts to sit back, to look, to imagine, to start wondering about the next day's hunting, to wonder about the stars in the skies, to wonder about the seasons, and to wonder even more about life, that religion is the most powerful force in the history of humanity.

You cannot understand human history if you do not have some knowledge of religion and you certainly cannot understand today's world if you do not have some knowledge of religion. The trouble is that this is a vast and a very complicated field, so I spent some time wondering how religion might be a subject for academic study at school level. Why should we study it, what might be studied and indeed what might be the aims?

Our world, the world in which I grew up, was a world of the Cold War. We were convinced that we were in what were largely secular societies; you might even say “profane” societies because “profane” means that which is outside the temple. So we were in societies where religion had a role, but it had a private role; it had a family role, it had a community role. But we are now in a world where religion seems in many senses to be moving more to the centre of the stage. We are having to re-examine our “profane” mindset that there is a secular world, which we study, and that there is a religious world, which is a matter for the religious person, religious institutions, religious communities and the family. We are sometimes embarrassed by the questions that come up in public debate.

One question that has interested me recently is the use of the term “god” in the European Constitution. Now to me, this is not a very big problem. It is not the use of the word “god” that changes a document from being secular to being a spiritual document or a religious document. The word “god” in European history is a word that has been much misused and much maltreated by various political systems and nations. So that is one embarrassing contact between what might be called “religious” and what might be called “secular”. But there are many other embarrassing contacts.

There is the contact between “religious” and “secular” regarding the study of creation in schools in the USA, where an interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis seems to come into conflict with scientific knowledge. There is the matter of Islamic headscarves in French schools. How does the wearing of a scarf affect lay society in France? What has this to do with religion? What has this to do with *laïcité* in French terms? Here again, you have an embarrassing debate because no one is sure on what basis this debate might take place. You have debates on abortion that have a religious element. This even came up in the recent British general election. You have a debate on euthanasia in many countries. The most recent case was that of Terri Schiavo in the USA. What is the value of life? What is the sanctity of life? These are issues that cannot be solved simply by legislation or by right thinking. There is an instinct to appeal to some kind of higher authority of one kind or another.

So I would like to divide my talk into these three parts.

1. Why should we study religion?
2. What can be taught?
3. What might be our aims?

It seems to me that at the beginning of the third millennium, our embarrassment about the division between what is religious, and what is secular, is something which our young people are going to have to face or perhaps are already facing. I believe it is part of our responsibility to try and imagine what guidelines we might give them to produce intelligent attitudes—attitudes that are not based on ignorance, but on knowledge and rigorous academic standards.

## Why study religion?

So first of all, why study religion? As a religious minister I have a very simple answer. Why study religion? Because it is interesting. This is as good a reason as any other. It has always dealt with fundamental questions. What is there before birth? What is there after death? What are we doing here? Is there a god who is a creator (not all religions say this)? If there is a god who is a creator does he or she keep an interest in that which he or she has created?

Can we find out something about the Creator from studying creation? Can we find out something about God by looking at a beautiful sunset? Or can we find out something about God by looking at mathematics, by looking at physics, by looking at what they are doing at CERN [the European Organization for Nuclear Research] just a few miles away from here? There is a fundamental question: can we enter into communication with God in any way? Can we enter into communication with God through prayer, through meditation, through liturgy? Obviously all religions will say Yes to these questions. Or is it through prayer and liturgy and meditation that so many people become aware of the existence of a force beyond themselves?

Another fundamental question is: does God have rules for the human race? Is a divine will a kind of scale of values against which human laws should be based? Is this a way of saying that the God who has spoken and who gives the Ten Commandments is a god who expects to be obeyed? And if God expects to be obeyed, as many systems of religion profess, then what is the role of man? What is the role of the person who decides to disobey and to use his brain—a brain which by definition God himself has given—and to ask very difficult questions of God? What is disobedience? What are the ethics of disobedience and what is the scope of human liberty? What is the scope of freedom of choice? Because in the last hundred years we have become aware, through psychiatry and through other forms, that our choices are not necessarily very free anyway. Is there a spiritual element in our choices, and if our choices are wrong does one imagine that there is a divinity who is ready to punish us because we are wrong? Or do we imagine a divinity who offers us some kind of understanding and pardon and, above all, is there a divinity who is capable and willing to help us when we are in trouble?

It has been my experience (and not only my own) that I became very spiritual before examinations. At this point, having realized that I had played too much billiards and too much rugby, this was a time for some divine help to come and comfort me. But what is this kind of request? Is this simply me projecting my ambitions and hoping that there is somebody out there who can hear me? These are questions that I think are unavoidable. I think that in an educational system perhaps the most important thing is not to give answers to religious questions but to help our young people to know what questions are worth asking. And obviously all the questions I have mentioned cut across almost all the varieties of faith families that you will find in the world today.

The second reason for studying religion is a question that comes from Malinovsky. Malinovsky was an Austrian sociologist who, as an enemy alien, was interned in the Trobriand Islands in the Pacific in the first world war; he studied the society and he became aware of the role of religion in the society of the Trobriand islanders. But of course, by extension, he then began to question the role of religion in the lives of other communities and other societies. Now I think that this is a very important question for us because, with the recent upgrading of religious language in the public affairs of this world, it is important that we should consider what is the role of religion, or what might be the role of religion, or what should be the role of religion in the global affairs of our world today. We hope we are trying to prepare our young people to face a world in which religious questions simply will not go away. We shall ask them to consider what questions are worth asking and, also, what might be the role of religion and of religious institutions in their lives, and in the lives of their communities. This is not to make them turn against anything that they might have learned in their families or their communities, but it seems to me that it is part of the intellectual equipment of a young person at the present time. It is simply not sufficient to say that religion does not interest me, or that religion is a private matter, because religion impinges on the affairs of the world—and I rather think that it will continue to do so in a very powerful way for the rest of our lives.

Why study religion? One reason for studying religion is that there are so many other subjects that you cannot understand if you do not understand religion. Why study religion? What about art? You cannot understand the art of the Renaissance if you do not understand the histories of the Bible and the Apocrypha, and you cannot understand what is going on in the paintings. So to understand Renaissance art you have to have at least some form of religious reference. And it goes much beyond this, because even in many paintings that are not specifically religious, you will find a religious element. One that came immediately to my mind when I was thinking about this was the Goya

painting [below] of the executions of 3 May 1808 after a revolt in Madrid, with French soldiers shooting Spaniards. There is a Spaniard dressed in white in the shape of a cross and you immediately think of the crucifixion. This is a symbol that will not go away. I do not think that you can understand Goya's painting without it, whereas it is a more obvious necessity if you are going to start looking at the paintings in the Sistine Chapel.



*The Execution (of Rebels of 3 May 1808)* by Francisco Goya

Then there is a matter of literature. I am more interested in English literature, though I mostly write in French these days. You can hardly read an English detective story without coming across quotes from the Bible. The whole of the history of English language is very much influenced by the English of Thomas Cranmer and by other religious works like *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The English language is, it seems to me, deeply influenced by these sixteenth-century religious languages, which were actually developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to make the Word of God sound more impressive when it was read in public. Nobody ever said "Verily, verily I say unto you" but it comes up in the translation of the Bible; it comes as part of the heritage of the English language. It is rather like my Goya, because you also find religious elements in works that are not specifically religious. An example that came to me was Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hemingway is nobody's idea of a religious writer, but the very title of the book is a line from a meditation by John Donne, who was a cathedral dean. It has its sense in a Christian idea of life and death and no man being separate from the rest of humanity; therefore send not to seek "for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee". The very story itself, where the hero sacrifices himself at the end to save his friends, I have seen before somewhere in the life of Jesus. So this is a secular story that has elements of religious culture in it. I am not sure how aware Hemingway was of what he was doing but it is quite an interesting question of any book that you might read to ask what is the author's theology, what is his moral basis, what is his world vision?

Then there is a matter of political science. One of the few elements of my misspent youth as a political science student in Dublin was that I studied communism because I found it a great deal easier to study than democracy or socialism. So I read a great deal of Marx. You have not gone very far in Marx before you become aware that this is someone who comes from a family of rabbis and whose mode of thought is based on the Old Testament. What is important is the idea that history is not just "one damn thing after another" but that, if you look in history, you can find patterns. In the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy finds patterns concerning the activity between God

and his people; Marx transforms this into economics. So here you have a religious influence on a political and economic system. Similarly the Irishman Edmund Burke, one of the founders of British democracy in the eighteenth century, produced a series of wonderful quotes. He said that all it takes for evil men to succeed is for good men to do nothing. But you cannot understand what he means if you do not know what “evil” and “good” meant to an eighteenth-century, Protestant, Irishman. These are again words that have a religious weighting.

My feeling is that it is easy to imagine the separation between secular and profane, and to identify what is religious, but my experience is that it is not always that simple, even in the matter of the history of economics.

You have the forbidding by the Latin churches of usury, of charging interest, which was not applied to the Jews and was completely rejected by the Protestants. You are near Geneva this afternoon. All the old banking families in Geneva are Italian families who became Protestant. They are mostly from the city of Lucca, apart from the Fatios who came from Sicily and the Lombards who came from Naples. They moved out of Reformation Italy and came to Zurich and Geneva. In the matter of human rights you have Elizabeth Fry working for prison reform because of her Quaker beliefs in human rights. Or you have the anti-slavery people (the Presbyterians and Methodists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) working against the slave trade and against slavery itself because of their belief in the value of human life. This continues to the present day. I was involved last year in discussions between the International Labour Organization, the World Council of Churches and a number of other inter-religious bodies on the decent work agenda: can we find common values? And these values, when you look for them, are very often found in religious experience or texts.

And in psychology and psychiatry. What about sin and guilt? Are these, as has so often been said, simply the result of a Judeo-Christian form of ethics or is this a basic human condition? Freud saw religion as leading man away from reality when he wrote *The Future of an Illusion* in 1927. Other people, like William James before him, draw on the varieties of religious experience to point out that religion helps us lead positive and courageous lives.

And what about women’s history? Can you understand the history of women if you do not understand Confucianism and Catholicism? What about the great change in the status of women in China and Korea before and after the introduction of Confucianism, where women become less important, in terms of political, economic and even military life. Then there is the Irish Queen Maeve and the other women in the Irish folktales who ride their horses and lead their armies into battle. This is a pre-Catholic form of Irish society. There are parallels with women in the Philippines or in South America. For example, the Mapuches in southern Chile where, to this day, the religion is organized and run by sorceresses or by priestesses as was most pre-Colombian religion. In women’s history, then, you cannot simply say that religion was not part of it. I am not making any value judgments, but religion is there and you cannot avoid it. It has radically changed the status of women.

## What can be taught?

What can we teach our young people that helps them make sense of their society and of themselves? Obviously they can rely on their own families, on their own religious communities for teaching in their own tradition. But it seems to me that we could very well bring young people to understand the different kinds of religion that humanity has found over the last hundreds and thousands of years.

The idea, perhaps the earliest idea, is that there exists a spirit in a place, in a tree, in a spring, in an animal, or in thunder and lightning—and these beliefs are by no means finished. This is part of the experience of millions of people throughout the world. Animism still exists, shamanism still exists. These are not religious institutions, but they are very widely held beliefs.

Then there is a period of the Ancient World—Greece, Rome and Egypt—where you take a human quality, or a human attitude or a human capacity like love or war or justice and you universalize it and you create a whole pantheon of gods who are what you could never be: they represent total courage, total love, total justice. Then come the forms of religion that are familiar to most of us—the great monotheisms—a god who reveals himself to humanity, a god who reveals himself to Moses, a god who reveals himself through Jesus, or a god who reveals himself through Mohammed. These are revealed forms of religion. It is always very interesting, if I have a class of young people who have come to me for instruction, to ask them what is their definition of God. You can always divide them into Hebrews and Greeks. If their god is a god who does things, they are Hebrews. Our god led us out of the land of Egypt out of the house of bondage. This is a god who does things for us. But if somebody else in the group says our god is all power, all beauty, all forgiveness, these are Greek concepts that you will find in the New Testament rather than in the Old.

And so you get this great system of monotheisms that I feel should be part of young people's understanding because they largely dominate the thinking of our planet. Here, too, there are developments that should be noted. We do not know who wrote Deuteronomy, whether he was a person or a group, but he produced a system of history and it is a very powerful system of history. It is a kind of four-fold movement that is present in the Old Testament and in many parts of the New Testament and other forms of human life. First, the people of Israel sin against the Lord. Second, the Lord is cross with them and so he punishes them. Because God has punished them, they do not like it. He sends a cloud of locusts or a drought, or he sends the Assyrians or the Moabites. Third, the people of Israel repent, come back and promise to be good in the future. The fourth movement is that God forgives them. It is a great system that repeats rapidly when they have forgotten what happened. This is a marvellous system—this apostasy, punishment, repentance and forgiveness—and of course it could go on for ever. I think that there are elements of this in most of our lives. But what happens is that the Jews in Babylon come across another religion—that of Zoroaster—which had a particular attitude in that it imagined the end of the world, and a final battle between the forces of good and evil. This is part of the general culture: young people should understand that there are these different patterns that pervade not necessarily one religion, but many religions. The Deuteronomist certainly influenced Marx with the idea that history has meaning.

In Geneva for many years now, we have worked within a group of major world religions: the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Jews, the Christians, the Muslims and the Baha'is. The study of these six world religions could be part of a curriculum. It would be interesting for people to know about the founders of these faiths, about their history and development, about the different varieties within these faiths. It would perhaps be important to many young people today to understand the difference between Sunnis and Shias, as between Catholics and Protestants, or between orthodox and liberal Jews. There is the problem of which texts are regarded as being authoritative and how their authority is interpreted. This is often a matter of very intense debate within religious systems, for example, the debate within the Christian Church as to whether the Bible *is* the Word of God or *reveals* the Word of God. And the attitudes of these world systems to creation, or to evolution, to ethics, to sex, perhaps to homosexuality, to war, to tolerance, as well as attitudes to justice, attitudes to charity,

attitudes to life after death and to salvation. It would be interesting to have a sort of grid in which the different faith families could be understood a little bit better—not with the idea of trying to persuade anybody, but simply providing knowledge of other systems.

There is the matter of sects, of which we have had a number of very troubling episodes in the history of Switzerland in recent years with the Solar Temple. What is a sect? What do we call a sect? What is the difference between a sect and a religion? What is the role of a guru? What is the role of secret knowledge? What is knowledge, and what is the desire to possess truth?

There is a whole matter of proto-religions. How many of you know your astrological sign? How many of you read your horoscopes? How many of us have superstitions? How many people believe in magic? Then there is a matter of popular religiosity: ideas of hell, ideas of the devil, ideas of playing your harp on a cloud—which has always seemed to me a pretty uninteresting way of spending eternity. There is also the matter of political and economic fields in that you have, especially in the nineteenth century, many secular alternatives to religion: the great museums, the great opera houses, the systems of nationalism. I think about this every time I go across the border to St-Julien-en-Genevois [in France] and read what is on the war memorial; the nation merits the sacrifices of its young men. This is a religious language that has been transposed to a secular situation. You cannot, I think, understand many political systems, be it Nazism or Communism, if you do not admit that there was a religious element in much of what they said: a sense of belief, a sense of faith, a sense of guilt if you did not come up to the level of what the party expected of you.

## What might be our aims?

I feel that we have to prepare young people for a world that is plural. All over the world people at school are meeting children, other children who come from other traditions. It is possible either to regard the other person as an enemy, as somebody you should fear, or to regard the other person as somebody who is different from you but whose experience can enrich you. It seems to me that another aim might be to draw attention to the fact that religions are very different among themselves. There are religions with a priest as an intermediary, very often in a building with images or with statues; and there are other forms of religion—such as Judaism, Protestantism, Islam—where you have an empty building and somebody who is not a priest but a teacher. You have religions that proclaim individual responsibility and you have religions that would like to control a great deal of the private lives of their members.

There are religions that are shared experience, reactions to danger. The best known example of this is Judaism, but there are other examples of peoples whose historical experience links the faith, the race and the language. This occurs in Tibet and among the Hungarians in eastern Europe. So we have religion as a force in the modern world.

I remember in Northern Ireland when the Troubles broke out. We were deeply concerned by what was going on because this was a struggle between people with different identities. We were using the names of religious groups—Protestant and Catholic—even if these were not exactly correct. It seemed to us at the time (and this still horrifies me) that there was something wrong with us during the Cold War. Struggles were between right and left, between free world and Communist world. What was this? Why were these people using religious terms? But since the fall of the Berlin Wall we have come to be aware that, in terms of human identity, religion, for good or for bad very often plays a role in what is happening.

This brings us of course to fundamentalism. I think that there has to be some understanding of fundamentalism if we are going to teach anything. What is fundamentalism? Fundamentalism exists as a percentage within every church and within every religious organization. It is very often a reaction to a pluralistic world, a desire to possess the truth, a fear of not being acceptable to your god. So you surround yourself with rules that you have to keep. Professor Thierry de Saussure at the University of Geneva did a great deal of work on this. It is worth reading what he said about fundamentalism and fear. Very often there is a sexual element; most fundamentalisms are anti-feminist. There can be selection: the same people can object to euthanasia and yet believe in capital punishment. People are not always logical. Sometimes there is recourse to the use of a biblical text. You can talk about the creation of the world in six days in Genesis, but this is not a scientific account. This is a hymn of praise to the Creator for what He did. But if you treated it like a scientific account then it changes what you are talking about. The same applies to the often-quoted verse “an eye for an eye”; this was not a matter of vengeance, this was a matter of insurance. If you are responsible for somebody else being damaged you have to make good what has been damaged. Very often ancient rules are used by fundamentalist groups in a rather selective way, for example, to forbid homosexuality. I have not heard many fundamentalist groups quoting the lines in the Old Testament that allow you to sell your daughter into slavery—even if most fathers have probably thought about this when they got their telephone bill.

I think we could help young people to understand the forms of religion and religious institutions. I suppose they are all reading *Angels and Demons* by Dan Brown. I could not help giggling about Cardinal Camerlengo in the recent election in the Vatican. This was not perhaps very dignified on my part, but, having read the book, it seems there should be some information given on the work of religious institutions that does not come from video games and from sensational literature. There might be some interest in religious sights, in Stonehenge or in Borobudur, or even in Geneva with the Cathedral on the hill. The Cathedral on the hill has a nave and aisles. The nave is *navis* in Latin—you are actually in an upside down boat and the aisles, *aelae* in Latin, represent the rising and falling of the banks of oars in a Roman galley. So you are in a boat and you are rowing. But where are you rowing? Towards Jerusalem, because the building is pointing towards what they thought was Jerusalem, just as a modern Mosque is oriented towards Mecca. This is part of a wider knowledge of religious culture that our young people could well acquire. They might have some knowledge of religious symbols, their meaning and their history; whether it be a kippa worn by a Jewish boy, or a headscarf worn by a Muslim girl. There might be some consideration of deity laws. Of what is “halal” and what is “kosher”. Why did Lent become a Christian fast when it was, of course, the period when there was the least food available in medieval times? Because last year’s food was finished and the next year’s food was not ready.

There ought to be some consideration of religion in the sense that we all want to maintain our own identities. There is no serious desire to promote some kind of a global world religion. Religions are just too different; their value systems are too different, their histories are too different. They are at different stages of their own learning curves. But there is fundamentalism in all churches and in all religions. This has very often been manipulated for political purposes. It frequently relies on gross oversimplifications. I was amazed at a senator who said at Davos this year that there are fourteen million potential Muslim terrorists in Europe. I am not quite sure where he got his information. But there are many inter-Christian and inter-church organizations, for example, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the Lutheran World Federation, but there is not as yet a good inter-faith organization. I am quite sure that this will come because there have been too many situations where

the religions have had to work together to try to diffuse a situation. Two years ago I spent quite a long time in the Island of Sulawesi in Indonesia as part of a team that included Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Protestants because there had been trouble at Poso between Muslims and Protestants and it was important for people from outside to come in and say, “Look, you don’t need to have this kind of conflict”. A new religious centre is developing. Our problem in moving forward is largely a problem of the media. The media prefers sensations. They prefer violent talk, violent language, violent deeds. But you have hope coming sometimes from unexpected sources like the World Economic Forum with its group of inter-religious leaders who meet at Davos every year. There is inter-faith cooperation, not just between themselves, but between themselves and the world of politics and business. I have been lucky enough to be involved in their search for common values in a global world.

Your chairman has already quoted the Geneva Spiritual Appeal. What exactly is the Geneva Spiritual Appeal? It is a document that we produced in 1999. The first major inter-faith service in the Geneva cathedral in modern times was after the crash of a Swissair jetliner in the North Atlantic, Flight 111, in September 1998. This much impressed many people: the fact that all religions were there; the fact that we were able to organize the service in 36 hours because Geneva is a small place and we all know each other. People came very willingly and we prayed together for the victims. The then Swiss Ambassador to the United Nations, to the International Organizations, Walter Gyger, came to us and asked us to produce a text and an inter-faith service at the cathedral for United Nations day in 1999. We thought about it and then put religious people together. They wrote a text as follows, appealing for:

- a refusal to invoke a religious or spiritual power to justify violence of any kind
- a refusal to invoke a religious or spiritual source to justify discrimination and exclusion
- a refusal to exploit or dominate others by means of strength, intellectual capacity or spiritual persuasion, wealth or social status.

This was signed in the Geneva Cathedral in 1999 by ourselves as a Protestant community, by the Muslims, the Jews, the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Baha’is and since then by many other people. But also, and this is particularly significant, it was not only religious leaders who signed it. It was signed by Mary Robinson, who was the High Commissioner for Human Rights; it was signed by Madame Ogata, who was the High Commissioner for Refugees; and it was signed by Cornelio Sommaruga, who was the head of the International Red Cross. This, it seems to me, is the kind of acceptable inter-religious, inter-faith searching for common ethical values in a very confusing world. It is important that our young people should not only hear about fundamentalists’ violence, crude religious ideas and get their images from the media, but that they should have a more profound system of learning as a preparation for tomorrow’s world.

Thank you very much.