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The Role of Education in Promoting Interfaith Cooperation*

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We live in a global village that brings people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds into contact. Indeed, plurality is our world context and is the context within many countries.

In this paper, we shall focus on the phenomenon of our religious plurality: the challenge this reality presents, particularly to the Asia-Pacific region, and a vital response that we can make, particularly through education.

Our New Context and Its Challenges

The Asia-Pacific Region is the most culturally diverse region in the world, containing a rich tapestry of languages, ethnicities and religions.¹ It is a religiously plural society, a home for believers of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, Judaism and tribal religions. Sadly, in the past this diversity has often been used as a reason to mobilize people toward rivalry and even violent conflict. It remains as an increasingly significant challenge of our time.

Over the last several years, there has been a rise in extremism and fundamentalist religious movements. The experience of 9/11 and the war in Iraq have polarized religious and ethnic communities and have placed the world in a perilous situation. The credibility of religion as a force that is peace-promoting is now on trial.²

Hans Küng, an authority on world religions, has made the conclusion that "there can be no peace among the nations without peace among religions; no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions."³ This statement has gained acceptance among major religious traditions and now we find a growing inter-religious/interfaith dialogue movement.

As described by various proponents,⁴ inter-religious or interfaith dialogue aims not to convert or to make partners come to a total agreement and establish a new universal religion. Expressed positively, it aims to:

- acquire an empathetic understanding of other religions so that all may live in harmony and with respect
- improve communication and to promote openness and trust
- cooperate with and support each other for the good of society/humanity
- unite people in a common purpose of shared responsibility for the planet

Education as a Vital Response

"Historical experience demonstrates that Earth cannot be changed for the better unless we achieve a transformation in the consciousness of individuals and in public life."⁵ This transformation of consciousness is possible through an education that seeks peace and justice, and an important pathway toward this kind of education is one that supports interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

In the foregoing description of interfaith dialogue we have indicated that among its purposes are to enable the dialogue partners to cooperate with each other for the good of society and to unite people toward a shared responsibility for the planet. How can education

support these purposes? How can it also promote empathetic understanding of other religions and improve openness to and trust for the “different other”?

Below are some suggestions and examples of how education can promote interfaith understanding and cooperation.

1. Integrate into the content of our education (curriculum) the following ideas and perspectives, particularly through subjects in the social sciences and religious studies:

a. Shared values of the world’s religions

An international conference held in Adelaide, Australia in December 2004, “Education for Shared Values for Intercultural and Interfaith Understanding”, called on educational institutions and systems to explore ways of incorporating into curricula the shared or common values of diverse cultural and faith traditions that are essential to preserving the dignity of humans and the harmonious co-existence of people of all cultures and faiths. These shared values include the nonviolent resolution of conflicts.⁶ Other shared values are concern for the other, compassion and justice. Discovering these common values increases one’s understanding of other faiths and the underlying common humanity of all people.

This search for core values that highlight the common humanity of every person and every cultural community was also suggested by one of the leaders of inter-religious dialogue in the Philippines.⁷

b. The need for an enlarged social identification of people

Field studies on intergroup behavior have indicated a striking finding: the propensity of people to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups, between “us” and “them”. Hence, intergroup conflict due to narrow ethnic, religious or national orientations has been a historical problem⁸. This awareness challenges us to enlarge our social identification to include broader human groups and even the whole human community, so that we can transcend the pitfalls of exclusivism, including the exclusion and rejection of those adhering to a different religion.

c. Re-examination and rejection of prejudices against other religions

The age-old prejudices against the “different other”, particularly those against people who are adherents of other religions, have to be challenged because these prejudices can lead to discrimination and conflicts. Such prejudices have also been a hindrance to cooperative efforts among people of different faiths and to the building of a culture of peace. The study of the “Declaration of Principles on Tolerance” made by UNESCO in 1995 would be appropriate here. As the Declaration states, “Tolerance is respect, acceptance, and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience and belief.”⁹

d. Shared responsibility of the religions

It is important to present religions in terms of their search for meanings.¹⁰ As mentioned earlier, religions need to cooperate for the good of society and to exercise their shared responsibility. This is one aspect of that search for meaning. The peace-promoting role of religions and faiths is highlighted: to help reduce tension, build trust, prevent violent conflict

and create conditions for reconciliation. Another form of shared responsibility would be collaborative social justice work.

2. Use a pedagogy or methods that promote interfaith understanding and cooperation

There is evidence that the internalization of values is facilitated by the use of reflective and critical thinking and a dialogical teaching method. The development of intercultural and interfaith understanding is more likely to result when experiential approaches are used, such as cultural exchanges and immersion opportunities.¹¹ For example, one good opportunity might be to have a students' exposure program or service learning in other cultural communities.

Inquiry learning and collaborative learning are recommended as processes that cultivate interfaith insights.¹² Similarly, the use of personal stories as well as stories from the religious traditions, and the communal model/shared learning environment, where there is more social interaction, are also suggested.¹³

Other pedagogical principles used in peace education are also helpful. One of these is the principle of holistic understanding.¹⁴ For example; to improve intercultural and interfaith relations requires us to build trust, mutual respect and understanding of each other's values and traditions. However, building trust and goodwill alone may not suffice. When economic and political injustices lie at the base of the conflict, these also need to be addressed. Hence, the call is for an educational approach that looks at an issue holistically including the interconnectedness of causes and of the effects.

Finally, the so-called "valuing process"¹⁵ is one that would likely lead to behavioral change. This teaching-learning process includes: the cognitive level (for example, knowing and understanding other faiths); the affective level (for example, accepting, respecting and appreciating these other faiths through an experience-reflection activity); and the active level (challenging and inviting learners to act or behave in a way that is consistent to what has been learned in the cognitive and affective levels).

3. Initiate interfaith projects, activities and services for the students and faculty

It is recommended that educational institutions and educators also complement the curricular and pedagogical efforts with an out-of-classroom and even non-school based programs that seek to reinforce the goal of interfaith understanding and cooperation. Two examples from the Philippines of such a program are found in Notre Dame University (Cotabato City in Mindanao) and Miriam College (Quezon City in Metro Manila).

a. Notre Dame University (NDU) has both a Catholic chapel and two Muslim prayer rooms, an indication of its sensitivity to its Muslim student population. The Religious Studies Department of the university offers symposia on Religious Pluralism regularly while the Institute of Inter-Religious Relations conduct interfaith retreats/spiritual recollections for joint groups of Muslim and Christian students. During the Philippine summer, NDU offers a course on Inter-Religious Dialogue for Muslim and Christian teachers of religious studies.

b. Miriam College (MC), a Catholic institution that includes a pre- elementary school up to graduate school, has two ongoing projects that are in partnership with other educational institutions and organizations. The first is its twinning project with a public high school in Pikit, Cotabato attended by Muslim students, the Rajah Muda High School. The project, with the theme, "Building Bridges of Understanding and Peace," started in September 2004 with

the students' exchanging letters. This was followed several months later by their publication of a joint newsletter which expressed the breakdown of their stereotypes and prejudices against each other, a joint faculty seminar between several faculty from the two schools and a joint training on youth peacebuilding for more than fifty students from the two schools. The students' action plans indicated their desire to be youth peace agents in their respective spheres and to either set up or be a member of a peace-oriented student organization. The other project was started in 2003 and is a collaborative one among four Peace Education Centers located in different countries: Miriam College in the Philippines, Seisen University in Japan, Teachers College, Columbia University in the U.S.A. and Lebanese American University in Lebanon. The project involves the development of materials and the conduct of teachers' workshops (including multi-faith groups) on the "Spiritual and Ethical Foundations of Peace Education." These workshops have been held in Japan, Philippines and Korea, and, hopefully, in other places, too, in the future.

4. Prepare and support teachers so they can promote values for interfaith understanding.

The teacher is the agent who will facilitate the abovementioned recommendations and it is important that they are the first to be convinced on the importance of the values we seek. This has implications to our pre-service and in-service training programs for them. Teachers must also be supported in terms of time and resources as they are already saddled with too much work.

The Importance of Engagement with Other Interfaith Groups and Government Agencies

Although this paper has focused on formal education, we have to be aware that there are many organizations that pursue efforts that extend beyond the school or university, offering their interfaith knowledge and inspiration through conferences, training workshops, interfaith prayers, interfaith social action, and/or publication of materials. They also open up their places as spaces for interfaith dialogue and encounter. Among these interfaith groups and organizations are: the Peacemakers' Circle, the Silsilah Dialogue Movement and the Bishops-Ulama Conference in the Philippines; the Multi-Faith Centre based in Griffith University in Australia; and the United Religions Initiative (URI) Cooperation Circles found in many countries of the world. Educational institutions will be enriched by their engagement and cooperation with these and other interfaith organizations.

Engagement with government agencies is also fruitful of results. For example, in the Philippines, the collaboration between civil society groups and government agencies such as the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) and the Department of Education has resulted into the joint development of peace education modules (including a module on appreciating different faiths) and joint teacher-training on peace education for school administrators and teachers all over the country. These efforts certainly help build the culture of peace that is of course supportive of interfaith cooperation.

Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, we have tried to establish the challenge that our cultural and religious plurality presents. We have also posited that one response that we can make is to educate toward interfaith understanding and cooperation. Some call it interfaith education, a branch among many branches of the broader field of peace education.

The ultimate goal of interfaith education, and of peace education as well, is for us to learn new ways of thinking and acting, based on mutual respect and shared responsibility, so that the whole human community can live in peace and can enjoy the fruits of a sustainable and

equitable development. This may sound like a utopian dream, but to think of this goal as impossible will rob us of any hope for the future.

ENDNOTES

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4 Op. Cit., p.4; Francis Cardinal Arinze, Meeting Other Believers (Manila: CBCP Publications, 1998), p. 11; Gideon Goosen, Bringing Churches Together (Geneva: WCC Publ., 2001), p.134; Zuleyha Keskin, "The Present and the Future of Interfaith Dialogue by Australian Muslims" Conference on Fear and Fascination: The Other in Religion, Western Sydney, 2004.

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8 David Hamburg. Preventing Contemporary Intergroup Violence (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1993).

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12 Anna Halaffof, "Interreligious Peace Education Conflict Resolution", In S.H. Toh and V.F. Cawagas (Eds), Cultivating Wisdom, Harvesting Peace: Proceedings of an International Symposium on Educating for a Culture of Peace through Values, Virtues and Spirituality of Diverse Cultures, Faiths and Civilizations (Nathan: Multi-Faith Centre, 2006)

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14 Toh Swee-hin and V.F. Cawagas, Peace Education: A Framework for the Philippines (Quezon City: Phoenix Publ. 1987), pp. 29-30.

15 A discussion of this process can be found in the chapter entitled "The Valuing Process as a Holistic and Integrated Approach to Values Education: Model, Challenges and Implications", in *Learning to Be: A Holistic and Integrated Approach to Values Education for Human Development* (Bangkok: UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 1998), pp. 12-22.