

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

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Summary:

International understanding depends in part on a meaning of religious education that relates the religious life of humankind and lifelong education. This essay explores some of the political implications of religious education, a project for which John Hull has been a worldwide leader.

The essay has two parts. The first deals with the main United Nations documents that refer to religion and religious education. The two human rights Covenants include a parental right to the religious education of their children. While this acknowledgment is progress for religious education, there is a need to recognize a fuller meaning of religious education. The UN is a kind of religious education association, constantly dealing with religious conflicts and looking for non-violent or educational solutions.

The second part of the essay explores five examples of inadequate choices of language in the UN documents. Like much writing in the modern world, there is a desire to reach unity, harmony and peace but without going through the educational struggle to find solutions for deep-rooted conflicts. Thus, the UN affirms rights *without distinction*, which is not a realistic principle. Likewise, religion is to be taught *generally and objectively* which is not to face up to the nature of religion.

Tolerance and pluralism are also highly praised in the modern world. Tolerance can be based on skepticism and indifference or tolerance can arise from a desire to understand the other. A truly pluralistic society would include a tolerance for religious differences and an educational attempt to understand those differences.

The thesis of this essay might seem strange to some people. My claim is that religious education is one of the central issues of international understanding in today's world. Future peace and security depend on, not only politics, economics and technology, but on the successful transformation of religious education.

This claim does not get denied by political leaders or economic experts; they may never think about religious education. Indeed, even religious leaders and educational experts tend to think in very parochial terms about religious education. In some parts of the world, religious education connotes initiation of the young into the Christian, Jewish or another religion. In other places, religious education refers to a minor, often optional, subject in the school curriculum. Neither meaning can do justice to the task of relating the religious life of humankind and a lifelong process of education.

In the last half century there has been some progress in acknowledging that religion is central to international conflicts and that education is the key to resolving such conflicts. There has been less progress in tapping into the positive possibilities of religion for national identity and international cooperation. Here, too, education is needed for showing the tolerant and pacific side of each of the world's main religions.

For the exploration of religious education in its political and economic implications, John Hull has probably been the most important person in the world. While exemplifying a deeply rooted Christian life, Hull has led the way toward an educational approach to the religions of the world. Not only in the United Kingdom but in many countries on every continent, John Hull's influence has been impressive. But as he would readily agree, we still have a long way to go in shifting the term religious education so that it is recognized as a serious participant in worldwide struggles for peace, justice and freedom.

This essay has two parts. First, I will survey what has been accomplished to protect the right to practice and to teach one's religion. Second, I will examine the need for religious groups to achieve understanding and tolerance in their practice and teaching. In the first part, I will look at United Nations documents that deal with religion and religious education. The second part will take its lead from the ambiguities and inadequacies in the language of the United Nations documents. Those of us concerned with religious education have to work at improving the language. One cannot expect the United Nations or any national legislature to develop an adequate language for religious education.

United Nations Documents

The United Nations, without being aware of it, is a kind of religious education association. That is, it is regularly immersed in religious issues and in conflicts between religiously inspired groups. The United Nations is always in search of nonviolent - or educational - means to reach understanding and avoid war. From its beginning, the United Nations has had a fragile existence; its ability to solve any problems has often been hopelessly compromised. Nation-states jealously guard their sovereignty which hampers every move that the United Nations makes. Nowhere is this more true than in the United States of America where the right wing has fought the United Nations from its inception and has become more stubbornly opposed in recent years, just when the United Nations might finally be effective.

Despite its limitations, the United Nations is the most visible and stable institution of

international order. Much of its difficulty is simply the result of taking on problems that no one at present knows how to solve. The proliferation of United Nations documents often seems to undermine its credibility; the writing is inflated and sermoniac. Nevertheless, a few of the key documents form the basis of today's international law. I will summarize and comment on references to religion and religious education in five of these documents from 1948 to 1998.¹

1, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). This document, which originated with the organization's founding, is the basis of human rights legislation. The importance of the document has continued to increase throughout the last half century. The fact that the document was composed, debated and approved in 1948 (without a negative vote and only 8 abstentions) was an amazing accomplishment. Eleanor Roosevelt shepherded the document through the process but the authors were Lebanese, Canadian, Chinese and Chilean. When religious controversy arose during the writing, Roosevelt decreed that religion would be excluded. The decision may have been necessary to arrive at agreement but it merely postponed facing up to religious issues in the conduct of nations. (Glendon 2001).

A reference to God in the first article was explicitly rejected. However, there are four places in the document where religion does get referred to. Article 2 says that 'Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion....' I think that the use of the term 'distinction' here is peculiar and unfortunate. I will come back in Part 2 to comment on its significance.

The Declaration includes reference to religion in Article 18: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and, in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'

The wording here provided the standard formula used in subsequent documents: 'Thought, conscience and religion.' The most crucial word in the article is 'manifest,' the assertion of an individual right to openly practice a religion.

2. The first step to seeing that this right was observed came from the Subcommittee on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. It appointed a committee headed by Aron Krishnaswami of India to do a study of religious rights. In 1959, Krishnaswami produced a careful and comprehensive report of 82 countries. Krishnaswami recognized the possible conflicts entailed by a right to 'manifest' one's religion. He noted that there are permissible limitations upon the right so long as a minority group is respected and the decisions further the freedom of the society as a whole. One group's right to 'disseminate' their religion can conflict with another group's right to maintain their own 'uncoerced opinions.'

The Krishnaswami Report also catalogued a list of practices that might be included in the manifesting of one's religion: worship, pilgrimage, processions, holidays, marriage and divorce arrangements, dissemination of the religion and training of personnel. The last two items are of particular significance for the practice of religious education. Krishnaswami also made the important point that differential treatment of individuals or groups is not always evidence of unfair discrimination.

3. *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966). While only a

A declaration was deemed possible in 1948, the plan was to give legal force to rights by way of an international covenant. That task proved to be long and difficult. Because of conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, two covenants eventually emerged. The Covenant on Civil and Political Rights reaffirmed the Universal Declaration's freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It also named some of the reasons for limitation of this right: protection of public safety, order, health or the fundamental rights of others. National security is not listed as a reason.

Article 18 of the Covenant is of special importance here. It affirms the liberty of parents...to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions. A recognizing of the right to religious education is remarkable progress. The drawback is that religious education is addressed only in the context of a parental right to choose for their children. I will suggest in Part 2 that the United Nations, having affirmed religious education, will have to discover the need for a lifelong religious education as included in a comprehensive freedom of thought, conscience and religion. International peace and stability require nothing less.

A committee clarification of the Covenant ruled that public school instruction related to the general history of religion and ethics is permitted if given in a neutral and objective way. Instruction in a particular religion is not acceptable unless there are non-discriminatory exemptions or alternatives for those who want them. (Lerner 2000 p. 18)

4. Declaration of the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion and Belief. (1981). The unwieldy title of this document is indicative of the difficulty that existed in getting consensus on how to state the question. The United States and the Soviet Union squared off over whether the phrase religion and belief covered atheism. The resulting compromise was to include the term whatever before belief in Article 1. This Declaration furthered the work of the Universal Declaration and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in cataloguing the religious rights that need protection (Article 1 and 6).

The document affirms that no one shall be subject to discrimination by any state, institution, persons, or groups of persons (Article 2). At the same time, it recognizes that religious institutions need leeway in hiring personnel, mandating dress or organizing observances. (Article 6). Progress is shown by the document's recognition that protection of rights has to be accorded to groups and communities, not only individuals.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights had placed its emphasis on the rights of individuals. Exclusive concern with individuals is insufficient for the maintenance of religious communities and their institutions. The Declaration on Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion and Belief is the most important international document for the protection of religious rights.

5. Finally, I would take note of the reports submitted by Special Rapporteur Abdelfattah Amor since 1994. The Report of 1998 is especially noteworthy. Amor surveyed 77 countries regarding the observance of religious rights. What he found was not every encouraging either in the protection of the right to practice one's religion or in the practice of religious education.

Many states, Amor found, have compulsory religious instruction in the religion of the majority. Most states do not provide for any exemption from this instruction. There is a

very limited teaching of what he calls *Acomparative religion*.@ And minority religions often find it impossible to have their own religious institutions. Evidently, many states are oblivious of what constitutes religious coercion.

Part 2: Religious Understanding

Some of the language adopted by the United Nations can hinder the project of religious understanding. There may never be an entirely adequate language to cope with the differences among religions and the paradoxes within each religion. Trying to achieve a less inadequate language is a continuing challenge for the disciplines of religion and religious education. I will comment on five problems of language reflected in the documents cited above: general vs. particular, distinction vs. discrimination, subjective vs. objective, one tolerance vs another tolerance, and pluralism vs. relativism.

General vs. Particular. In the brief reference above to what is permissible and impermissible in the state school, the United Nations committee assumed an unhelpful dichotomy. The choice, they asserted, was between *Ageneral history of religion*@and *Ainstruction in a particular religion*.@ The former has to be done in a *Aneutral and objective*@way. The latter's way of doing things is not described but one might infer that instruction in a particular religion is assumed to be *Abiased and subjective*.@

The United Nations is not especially at fault here. It has adopted language that has floated through Western languages since the time of the European Enlightenment. Events of the last century should be enough to spark realization that our language is inadequate to deal with religion, especially the living religions of living people. The phrase *Ahistory of religions*@has made successful inroads within respected scholarship. Why is there no *Ageography of religions*@that would seriously examine the present along with the past?

A religious education that is adequate for the future has to examine religions in particular not in general. But one particular religion has to be related to other particular religions. This principle allows for considerable leeway in a lifelong and life wide process. A small child, for example, need not be exposed to a multiplicity of religions; that will come soon enough. The International Covenant is legitimately concerned that parents (rather than the state) have control of the religious education of their children.

It can hardly be expected that Christian parents would choose other than Christianity as the religion which their children first experience. But as with all education, parents are the first but not the only educators. Schoolteachers become partners to parents in the education of children. The school raises questions and stimulates inquiry in ways that most parents cannot. This partnership can run into problems if parents neglect their duties or if schools become too far separated from the communities that support them. But even in the best of cases, the young person's thinking should and does diverge from that of the parents. Religious education cannot be subsumed entirely under the right of the parents to *Aensure the religious and moral education in conformity with their own convictions*.@

A number of parent groups have claimed on the basis of this statement in the International Covenant that the school's teaching violates their religious rights. The most common complaint is the school's teaching on homosexuality. Some Christian groups protest that an approval of homosexuality is in violation of biblical teaching and

therefore an attack on their rights. This protest has not received much attention in the press but it is a lively movement made possible by the Internet. Families in Alberta, Canada are able to share strategy with parents in Tasmania, Australia. It is a fascinating development to see conservative groups asserting their rights by appealing to United Nations documents. Although such protests are upsetting to some schools, the positive possibilities are obvious. Why shouldn't there be a worldwide discussion of the rights of parents, the rights of school people, the basis of human rights, and the applications of the International Covenant?

Distinction vs. Discrimination. I noted one glaring inadequacy of language in the Universal Declaration: its use of *distinction* in Article 2. The document says that all of the rights apply *without distinction of any kind.* It then proceeds to list some of those distinctions, such as race, sex, nationality. One distinction that is not listed is age. I think it is obvious that age does make a difference in how rights are applied. The United Nations document, *Convention of the Rights of the Child,* does make a distinction between adult and child. But I would argue that that document still suffers from a lack of distinctions. It stipulates that *child* means anyone below the age of 18. Surely one has to distinguish how rights apply differently at 7 months, 7 years, and 17 years.

I use the example of children as illustrative of the problem of saying *without distinction of any kind.* Surely, making distinctions is necessary for any process of thinking. In dealing with religion, it is important to distinguish differences and respect the distinctions. To disallow distinctions is to pronounce that education is unnecessary. This peculiar modern approach to complex problems tries to get rid of the problem by declaring that there is no room for discussion. Education is replaced by political lobbying.

What the Declaration was presumably trying to oppose was not *distinction* but *discrimination.* The latter term has become fixed in the twentieth century as negative in meaning, even though *discriminate* is sometimes used positively and *discriminating* almost always so. It would probably be quixotic to try to rehabilitate *discrimination* but the negative meaning of a term such as this one is what makes development of a language of religious education so difficult.

Objective vs. Subjective. The committee document refers to the teaching of religion that is *Objective* and neutral. Here, I think, there is an inbuilt ambiguity that cannot be entirely overcome but should be noticed. The claim that the public or state school instruction in religion should be *Objective* may seem self-evident. Surely, one cannot advocate a proselytizing or indoctrinating attitude. However, the choice of alternatives should be carefully considered.

In many contexts, the term *Objective* represents the ideal to be achieved. In experimental science or in legal proceedings, one's feelings and private opinions should be put aside. They are considered *subjective,* an interference with seeing the situation as it is - seeing it objectively. This ideal is beyond dispute in those situations where the task is to see or measure an object, a thing, that stands before the examiner.

There are other situations, however, that demand a different, possibly opposite, attitude. If the *Object* is another subject, that is, another person, one achieves little

understanding by looking and measuring, or bracketing one's feelings. Sometimes understanding demands trying to put oneself into the place of another subject and listening to the person(s). The ideal is not captured by either 'objective' or 'subjective' the closest term is perhaps 'intersubjective' which can include dimensions both subjective and objective. Sciences such as psychology, anthropology and sociology have struggled to include the inner dimension of human life along with their respective claims to be a modern science. Professions such as medicine have to live with the tension between scientifically objective research and the inescapably dialogic element of medical practice. Objectivity in some situations can be horribly inappropriate. (Price 1992).

At Rudolf Eichmann's trial, his lawyer often made the point that Eichmann was proud of his objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*). Hannah Arendt brilliantly portrayed Eichmann as attending to all the details of his job with no feeling for the 'objects' of his decisions. Ironically, Arendt was herself criticized for her objectivity - for not passionately denouncing Eichmann as the incarnation of evil. But I think Arendt was trying to do a proper journalistic report amid emotions run rampant. (Arendt 1992 p. 287)

The understanding that is appropriate to religion is on the outer extreme of the tension between objective elements and the attitudes, feelings, motives and decisions of human subjects. The demand that religious education be 'objective' can collapse the tension into a single misleading dimension.

In a state school, there has to be emphasis upon the factual and a wide range of facts. But teachers and students still have to try to get inside the subjects involved. A Christian has to ask not only 'what do Muslims believe?' and answer with a text from the Qur'an. The Christian also has to ask 'what does it feel like to be a believing Muslim?' and 'Can I understand the world as a Muslim does?'

In a religiously affiliated school, the objective elements may be narrowed so that teacher and student can mainly attend to one religion. The perceptions, beliefs and emotions of that religion's devotees may be specially emphasized. Nonetheless, the treatment should maintain the tension of objective elements and subjective life. A Christian cannot attend to details of the Christian religion without, for example, immediately encountering Jewish religion. The contemporary context (economic, political, military) of Christian belief and practice is indispensable in trying to understand the lives of Christians. In the course of study in a Christian school, a question might be 'how does Christianity appear to a Muslim?' or 'how do Jews view Christian attitudes to Judaism?'

Instruction in a single religion is not necessarily 'indoctrination', which is one of the most damning words in educational literature. The danger is admittedly present in any Christian, Jewish or Muslim school but indoctrination is also a danger in the teaching of economics, political science or psychology.

Tolerance vs. Understanding. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights refers to 'understanding, tolerance and friendship among...all religious groups.' (Article 13). The insistence on friendship may be demanding too much; friendship cannot be mandated. However, the second term, 'tolerance', is a central concept of modern times that is linked to understanding and is a prerequisite of friendship.

Tolerance has two quite distinct paths. What has largely triumphed in the Western world is a form of tolerance based on skepticism. We should tolerate different views because no one can be certain of the truth. This attitude can be refreshing in the midst of clashing certainties that have sparked religious wars in the past and continue to cause bloody conflicts. Isaiah Berlin is probably the best known exponent of a tolerance based on the limits of knowledge. (Berlin 1991). Religion, in this view, is a problem because of its passionate claim to know the truth. Voltaire believed that with the decline in the strength of religious creeds there would be a concomitant decline in human hatreds, in the urge to destroy another man because he is the embodiment of evil or falsehood. Indifference would breed tolerance. The gruesome tale of torture, killing and hatred in the last century does not seem to bear this out. (Steiner 1971 p.47).

Some of the intolerance of the twentieth century was religiously inspired; much of it was not. At least, Nazism, Communism or Fascism are not officially known as religions. Perhaps indifference would breed tolerance if people did not have to interact with each other. But indifference is not an option for Palestinians and Israelis, for Christians and Muslims in the Balkans, for Indians and Pakistanis in Kashmir. In fact, given worldwide travel and communication, it is increasingly difficult to be indifferent to anyone who is intolerant of your very existence.

There is a different path that tolerance could have taken and eventually must be developed, a toleration based on understanding rather than indifference. The earliest move toward toleration was not based on indifference. John Plamenatz notes that in Locke, Milton and others in the seventeenth century there was a religious underpinning to tolerance. The move was from faith is supremely important, and therefore all men must have one true faith to faith is supremely important, and therefore every man must be allowed to live by the faith which seems true to him. Plamenatz concludes that liberty of conscience was born, not of indifference, not of skepticism, not of mere open-mindedness, but of faith. (Plamenatz 1963 p. 50).

We cannot simply resurrect the seventeenth-century context but it might give us hints as to the direction needed today. The link between the two attitudes to tolerance is a humility about anyone possessing the whole truth. Faith can include a skeptical (questioning) element. Faith, if genuine, is based on the experience of trustworthiness. To believe in someone is to trust beyond the edge of rational certainty. I can tolerate differences if I can trust that the other is not out to destroy me. I can lessen the fear of difference if I can get some understanding of the difference.

One ought to be skeptical about any formula that claims to be the final truth, but that is not equivalent to giving up the search for truth and the conviction to live by the truth as one knows it. The inevitable occasions of conflict in differing views can then be the subject of negotiation, debate and compromise. A religious education not only requires this kind of tolerance. Religious education ought to be the practical embodiment of this attitude.

Pluralism vs. Relativism. The term pluralism has become one of the most prominent terms of approbation in discussions of ethics and religion. Isaiah Berlin was particularly instrumental in the emergence of the term pluralism. Berlin and most of those who have followed him assert a sharp distinction between pluralism and relativism. Both relativism and pluralism are said to be alternatives to absolutism. Relativism is usually

condemned as a nihilistic denial of truth. It is unclear, however, that a pluralism based entirely on skepticism can offer an alternative. A few truths have to be smuggled in to shore up the wall between pluralism and relativism, and pluralism then becomes the one absolute. The question has to be raised whether pluralism is plural. Is pluralism just another ideology that dictates that only one way of thinking is acceptable? That is a serious question for many religious people who find that a secular pluralism has no place for them.

For example, Diane Orentlicher, in an essay entitled *Relativism and Religion*, takes issue with Michael Ignatieff's pluralism in relation to human rights. While Ignatieff says that every voice has to be heard at the bargaining table, only religion seems to be excluded. Orentlicher rightly argues that human rights need to exist *within* religious traditions, not just against them. (Orentlicher 2002 p. 149) The exclusion of religion from the discussion suggests that pluralism is not open to all plurality.

Perhaps the dichotomy of pluralism and relativism is itself problematic. Two terms ending in -ism are an unhelpful abstraction from which to start. *Plural* and *Relative* are not opposites. *Relative* is a reductive term only in relation to *absolute*. If one begins with the assumption that all truth is relational, then the greater the relationality, the closer one comes to the truth. The plural can be maintained only if the parties are seen as relative to one another. The multiple parties have to be engaged in dialogue, or at least have an openness to dialogue. Otherwise, one has a pluralism that is not plural because it lacks the relative.

Many religious thinkers have latched on to *pluralism* as the only acceptable place to be these days. Pluralism is said to be necessary for tolerance and ecumenicity but the claim can nonetheless be heavy-handed. John Hick, for example, lists three approaches to religious study as exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. He clearly prefers pluralism. But he cannot avoid the paradox that his pluralism is either exclusive of the other two or inclusive of both of them. In either case, his pluralism is insistent on only one approach being legitimate. (Hick 1998).

It might be more helpful to acknowledge that language always includes and excludes at the same time. Simple factual statements exclude other facts. There is nothing wrong with that element of exclusivity. Some language, however, can be very inclusive in seeing another level in ordinary experience. That kind of poetic language passionately affirms the particular while intimating the universal. The language of art, friendship and love are affirmations of the particular which point toward the universal. Northrop Frye referring to *Macbeth* writes: *If you wish to know the history of eleventh-century Scotland, look elsewhere; if you wish to know what it means to gain a kingdom and lose one's soul, look here.* (Frye 1964 p. 64).

Religious language is both inclusive and exclusive; how the two are related determines whether the language is tolerant or intolerant. There can be a plurality or multiplicity of tolerant positions in which there are exclusive elements of religion, as well as an inclusive attitude. The term *pluralism* can be helpful only if it does not flatten out the paradox, namely, that the exclusive and inclusive are not the alternatives to the plural but the inner working of the plural.

In the United Nations document cited above, religious education is to be allowed if given in a *neutral* way. It is difficult to see how religion can be approached *neutrally*,

that is, from neither side. The fear, once again, is a proselytizing/indoctrinative attitude, but one has to approach the teaching of any subject with a passion for getting it right. Asking a teacher not to take sides makes no sense. In a pluralistic attitude the teacher takes both sides: inside and outside. The principle holds whether one religion or several religions are at issue. The task is to provide appreciation of how the religion is actually practiced, while at the same time providing a critical angle provided by a different religion or by secular society.

I think there is a lot of good religious education being practiced, most of it outside the spotlight. One can find examples in every continent, at every school level, in religiously affiliated institutions and secular education. The biggest need is to break down some of the categories which encapsulate these efforts and which prevent people from finding partners in trying to help people live intelligent, free, peaceful, faithful, loving lives.

I am not surprised that we are still at the beginning of religious education; its importance is still only emerging. In the future, religious education has to be interreligious and international if it is to make sense of ordinary experience. Political leaders are going to need basic training in religious education to carry on the duties of national office.

1. The documents referred to here are available on the United Nations web site: www.un.com.

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