

The Alternative

Alternative Religious Education
Box 1405, Montauk, NY 11954

September 2008
Vol. XXXVI No.1

Dear Reader:

As is the custom of this Newsletter every other September, we begin with a report on the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values and some thoughts on worldwide religious education:

The International Seminar on Religious Education and Values held its bi-annual conference in Ankara, Turkey during the last week in July. The group started in 1978 with about two dozen colleagues from the U.K. and the U.S. This year the meeting was attended by about 140 members from twenty-seven countries and every continent except South America. There were many new faces, especially from Scandinavia, the Netherlands and Eastern Europe.

One country that was conspicuously under-represented with five people was the United States of America. In recent years there has been a worldwide movement of religious education. The United States has been missing from this movement. The European Union, especially through the Council of Europe, has provided leadership. Ironically, it was the attack on the United States in 2001 that spurred the European interest in working at an understanding of religion and religions.

In the United States itself, the effect has been almost the reverse. There has been withdrawal from the attempt to understand the nation's relation to its own religious diversity and its relation to the religions of other nations. The result is that since 2001 the United States has almost disappeared into the religious myth of America. The level of religious ignorance is staggering. A *Newsweek* poll in July found that one out of ten U.S. citizens thinks that Barack Obama is a Muslim. That means tens of millions of people in the face of all evidence to the contrary believe Obama to be a part of a religion they almost surely know nothing about.

This year's International Seminar was hosted by Ankara University. The Muslims in Turkey were determined to provide the best surroundings possible for the meeting of the group. The accommodations and the spirit of the meeting could not have been better. On the first evening, the country's education minister welcomed the group and spoke of the importance of religious education. On succeeding evenings the group was hosted by the president of the university, the British embassy, and the President of Religious Affairs for Turkey. This last named person forms almost a parallel government with the secular state. Given the history of Muslim Turkey he has influence beyond the country, as in Germany which at present has millions of Turks.

The modern history of Turkey is puzzling to outsiders. The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 by Kemal Ataturk whose picture is everywhere in the country. Turkey was declared to be a secular state. Nonetheless, eighty percent of the people are Muslim and in recent years the expression of religion has become more visible and aggressive. The court and the military stand

guard over the secular character of the state. At present, the democratically elected government has religious leanings. In late July, the court came within one vote of declaring the government illegal and banning the ruling Justice and Development Party. (Actually, six of the eleven judges voted that way but a supermajority was needed). A removal of the democratically elected government by the court and military would have doomed Turkey's desperate desire for entrance to the European Union.

To the outsider, the constant declaration that Turkey is a secular state seems to go against obvious facts of daily life. In Istanbul one gets knocked out of bed at about 5 AM with the call to prayer resounding from Mosques in all directions. The call to prayer is repeated throughout the day. Many women throughout the country wear religious dress in varying degrees. Stylish Western dress is often combined with a traditional headscarf. One charge against the government was that it dropped the ban on headscarves in the university. Schoolteachers are allowed to wear such religious dress outside but not inside the classroom.

One might be inclined to look condescendingly on these peculiar distinctions except that the country which most resembles Turkey in trying unsuccessfully to separate religion and the state is the United States. Instead of Turkey's eighty percent Muslim population, the United States is eighty percent Christian. The United States, since the 1940s, has erected an unworkable myth called the separation of church and state. Using this inappropriate European language, the Supreme Court keeps splitting hairs that are unintelligible; in many places its decisions are disregarded. Sixty seconds of silence was declared constitutional for a New Jersey school but unconstitutional in Alabama where a nod toward the value of prayer accompanied the silence.

Where Turkey has the advantage is that it recognizes the conflict between traditional Muslim language and modern secular government. In the United States, policies of the government are saturated with Christian attitudes and language untouched by "church-state separation." The overarching religious myth of America has absorbed the missionary attitude of Christianity. George W. Bush is not the first but certainly not the least prominent of U. S. presidents who wish to spread the gospel to a pagan world.

Turkey is an interesting case study in that religion has now been put into the curriculum of the elementary and secondary schools as a required subject. One could guess that in many cases the teacher of religion engages in Muslim proselytizing. Nonetheless, religion as a subject in the classroom has the chance of getting understanding to some of the population. Some school teachers are intent on maintaining the integrity of classroom instruction. When Islam is situated in relation to Judaism and Christianity, intolerance can be lessened and an irenic strand of Islam can emerge.

In contrast, the United States simply tries to avoid the academic study of religion in state schools. There is no national discussion of religious education as a concern of family life, religious communities, public and private schools, and public rituals. The result is often a mindless religiosity that affects both domestic and foreign policies.

The International Seminar has no consensus as to what constitutes religious education. It is remarkable that people from twenty-seven countries would try to have a conversation at all on

such an elusive topic. Until the twentieth century the possibility of something called religious education would have seemed neither possible nor urgent. Each religious group had their own language and practices. The United States coined the term “religious education” in the late nineteenth century and it was given an organizational basis in 1903. The hope to bring Catholics, Protestants and Jews into educational discussion with one another and with the state school system proved to be ahead of its time.

The hope for a religious education was picked up by the United Kingdom in the 1940s. To this day the meaning of religious education is almost entirely dependent on what the British have made of the term. The use of the term in the United States – by liberal Protestants in the early twentieth century and by Roman Catholics more recently – has almost no international influence. Many countries are indebted to British leadership in religious education. The International Seminar, whose working language is English, inevitably speaks British English.

In most respects the British contribution has been very positive. But without competing forms of language, the British can complacently mistake their way of speaking for a universal language. There is constant reference to a school subject called “RE” instead of to “religious education” as a lifelong process involving many agencies. One speaker at the Seminar referred to the division of religious education into “confessional” and “non-confessional.” He was not advocating this language but simply using a British way of distinguishing between what is appropriate in a religious community and a state school. A Lutheran professor from Tübingen objected that he was not at home on either side of that divide.

The biggest problem with a division into “confessional” and “non-confessional” is that “non-confessional” is a confessional word; the distinction is similar, for example, to a division of Catholic and non-catholic. Jews do not call themselves non-catholics; only Catholics talk about non-catholic. Non-confessional religious education is still confessional. The additional problem is that “confessional” is mainly central to the self-description of Protestants in the Calvinist tradition. Lutherans, Catholics or Muslims can be induced to use the term but it does not have the natural feel that it does for a Presbyterian.

This first division of religious education is crucial for the possibility of discussion. A division of confessional and non-confessional creates a dichotomy rather than a dialogue. Similarly, one German professor went to great lengths to set religious education and Christian education apart. His concern is to defend the particularity of Christianity against the tendency to overlook differences among religions in the name of equality and tolerance. His concern is understandable but a dichotomy between Christian and religious prevents any helpful dialogue between religions and isolates Christianity. And paradoxically, “Christian” is not particular enough when one is considering the beliefs and practices of a particular religious community.

Islam in Turkey is so interesting because of a concerted attempt to relate traditional, popular Islam and modern Islam. Whether they can manage to do that is unclear but the project is easily recognizable for a Roman Catholic. If intellectual leaders in Islam or Catholicism try to shuck off the past, they may construct a consistent and impressive idea system but they will be left with few practitioners of the religion.

Religious diversity is not just a description of religions but of diversity within each religion. The diversity might extend to the individual member. Religion in the school curriculum need not encompass all religions. The main need is a dialogic attitude that at some points applies to other religions. The bigger test is dialogue within the religious group.

In separate decisions of the European Commission on Human Rights, Norway and Turkey have been judged not to have violated human rights by covering only one religion in the school curriculum: Christianity in Norway, Islam in Turkey. Interestingly, however, in another Turkish case the Commission ruled for the plaintiff. The complaint in this case was that the Alevi movement (a branch of Shia) was not addressed. The message was that there can be dialogue when only Islam is covered in the curriculum but diversity within Islam cannot be neglected.

How far a commission or court may wish to go in judging school curricula is unclear. But a principle of dialogue within diversity is indispensable for any religious education. Meetings such as the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values model a meaning of religious education that needs replication in high levels of diplomacy and in every village schoolhouse. Like environmental preservation, the worldwide task of religious education is only becoming apparent but addressing the issue cannot be postponed to future generations.

INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE: A WHITE PAPER

By Committee of Ministers, Council of Europe

Part of Europe's rich cultural heritage is a range of religious, as well as secular conceptions of the purpose of life. Christianity, Judaism and Islam, with their inner range of interpretations, have deeply influenced our continent. Yet conflicts where faith has provided a communal marker have been a feature of Europe's old and recent past.

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of democratic society and protected by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This freedom is one of the most vital elements referring to the identity of believers and their conception of life, as it is also for atheists, agnostics, skeptics and the unconcerned. While guaranteeing this freedom, Article 9 does allow that the manifestations of expression of this freedom can be restricted under defined conditions. The issue of religious symbols in the public sphere, particularly in education, has been addressed by the European Court of Human Rights. Because of the relative lack of consensus on matters of religion across the member states, the Court has tended to give to states a large – though not unlimited – “margin of appreciation” (i.e. discretion) in this arena.

The important role of religious communities with regard to dialogue means that efforts should be undertaken in this field between the religious communities and public authorities. The Council of Europe is already engaged to this end through various initiatives of the Parliamentary Assembly and the seminars of the Commission for Human Rights, who since 2000 have brought together representatives of religious communities with the aim of associating them with the human rights agenda of the Council of Europe.

Religious practice is part of contemporary life, and it therefore cannot and should not be outside the sphere of interest of public authorities, although the state must preserve its role as the neutral

and impartial organizer of the exercise of various religions, faiths and beliefs. The Volga Forum Declaration of 2006 called for the Council of Europe to enter “an open, transparent and regular dialogue” with religious organizations, while recognizing that this must be underpinned by universal values and principles. This could replicate the round-table approach which individual member states have taken to dialogue with religious communities.

The San Marino Declaration of 2007 on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue affirmed that religions could elevate and enhance dialogue. It identified the context as a shared ambition to protect individual human dignity by the promotion of human rights, including equality between women and men, to strengthen social cohesion and to foster mutual understanding and respect.

In the San Marino Declaration, the religious and civil-society representatives present welcomed the interest of the Council of Europe in this field; they recognized that the Council would remain neutral toward the various religions while defending the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the rights and duties of all citizens, and the respective autonomy of state and religions.

On April 8, 2008, the Council of Europe organized, on an experimental basis, an exchange on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue on the theme “Teaching religious and convictional facts: A tool for acquiring knowledge about religions and beliefs in education; a contribution to education for democratic citizenship, human rights and intercultural dialogue.” Members and Observer states of the Council of Europe as well as the organization’s institutional partners, the European Commission, representatives of the religions traditionally present in Europe, representatives of NGOs, and representatives of the media participated in the “Exchange.”

An innovative and experimental event, its main aim was to promote and strengthen the Council of Europe’s fundamental values – respect for human rights, promotion of democracy and the rule of law – thus contributing to fostering within European society mutual respect and awareness, tolerance and understanding. The exercise associated representatives of religions and other actors of civil society, including representatives of other beliefs, with this objective, by involving them in open, transparent dialogue on a theme rooted with those values. The purpose was not to engage in theological debate, nor to become the framework of an interconfessional dialogue.

Apart from the dialogue between public authorities and religious communities, which should be encouraged, there is also the need for a dialogue between religious communities themselves. The Council of Europe has frequently recognized interreligious dialogue, which is not directly within its remit, as a part of intercultural dialogue and encouraged religious communities to engage actively in promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law in a multicultural Europe. Interreligious dialogue can also contribute to a stronger consensus within society regarding the solutions to social problems. Furthermore, the Council of Europe sees the need for a dialogue within religious communities and philosophical convictions, not least in order to allow public authorities to communicate with authorized representatives of religions and beliefs seeking recognition under national law.

FROM RELATIVISM TO THE RELATIVE

By Gabriel Moran

Pope Benedict XVI's introduction to much of the world was a speech condemning what he called "the dictatorship of relativism." For anyone familiar with Joseph Ratzinger's writings since 1968, the phrase was a familiar reiteration of his central complaint about the contemporary world. "Relativism" for the Pope is the main thing wrong with the world and he sees it everywhere. The Pope is not alone in this judgment. A condemnation of relativism is standard fare for moral and religious spokespersons who long for the moral compass of a past stability.

Not many people would be able to articulate what the abstruse word relativism means. However, people do have a sense that previous codes of morality no longer find acceptance and that no agreed upon new standards have replaced them. There have always been criminals who violated society's rules. But the problem of the last half century has been that many intellectual leaders have declared that any statement of truth is good only for an individual or a group.

It seems that the outlandish doctrine of a few French philosophers of the 1950s has become the standard operating procedure for much of the world. The fifteen-year-old who shrugs his shoulders and says "whatever," is growing up in a world where truth (or "truthiness") is a kind of joke. He is following the example of his elders. For example, Dick Cheney's response to the fact that the great majority of people in the United States want the war to stop was to say: So? Justice Antonin Scalia, when asked is not torture of prisoners outlawed by the U.S. Constitution's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment, answered: torture is not punishment.

At the recent seminar in Ankara, one of the speakers referred briefly to relativism. He made two points about it: a little bit of relativism has to be accepted but obviously every statement of truth cannot be relative. The speaker, a bright and knowledgeable person, surely knew his reference to relativism was not very coherent. But such is the difficulty that people have in coming to grips with a doctrine that seems unacceptable to anyone with a moral sensibility but at the same time seems to be an obvious description of today's world.

Neither of the speaker's two points was helpful and the second – "obviously every statement of truth cannot be relative" – is where the big problem lies. What seems most obvious is not in fact true. All statements *are* relative and that is the alternative to relativism. The first big problem with the term "relativism" is the problem with all words ending in -ism: it situates the problem at an abstract level. If one starts arguing about a philosophical abstraction, called "relativism," the argument is really about who has the power to define abstract words.

The problem with the word itself, then, is the ending – the "ism" part – not with "relative." The term relative is a description of the world, the fact that things stand in relation to one another. When people attack relativism they usually assume that the alternative is some kind of "absolutism," something that is true at all times, in all places, for all people. A favorite is the "ten commandments," assumed to be universally true. Paradoxically, relativism is itself an absolutist claim. It purports to give an all-encompassing answer to how the world is. While "relativism" is an absolute claim, "relative" is not; it is simply a statement of fact.

The worst disease one can have is when the name of the cure has been absorbed into the name of the disease. Thus, attempts to reform pyramidal bureaucracy by “decentralizing” power are destined to fail. Centralizing power is the cure not the disease. One can de-top a pyramid but one cannot decentralize what does not have a center. The cure for a pyramid of power is to develop a center or many centers of power within communal units. This kind of reform does sometimes happen but it is always fragile in that it has no name. The cure cannot be called the centralizing of power so long as that is what the disease is called.

The cure for what is named relativism is the relative. When people resist relativism with absolutism they worsen the problem because relativism is already absolutist. The realistic alternative to “relativism” is to pay attention to the many relatives in every statement of truth. The paradox is that relativism is not relative enough; it stops with the recognition that every statement of truth is relative to one factor or another.

The term relativism made its big splash in the late nineteenth century when anthropologists discovered that there were “cultures” that had codes of conduct very different from the world of western enlightenment. Who is right? Who has the right to judge? Thus was born “cultural relativism:” each culture has its own right and wrong; one culture is not superior to another.

Instead of a shocking new development in human thought, this “cultural relativism” merely revealed the innocence and rigidity of western enlightenment. The trouble with cultural and other kinds of relativism is that it is not relative enough. It is not that some “culture” in the South Pacific is different from “ours.” The problem was the assumption that “we” had already attained an absolute standard which was naively assumed to apply everywhere.

Every judgment is relative to innumerable relations not only in the “culture” but in the individual’s life and the life of various groups. When a group is (relatively) isolated, its judgments are likely to have quirky beliefs, some insightful and some off the wall. The cure for narrow, mistaken judgments is to relate them to a wider field of relations. Justice Scalia ridicules judges for consulting the rest of the world; he thinks that legal and moral truths are obvious if one consults the U.S. Constitution (and gives it his “originalist” interpretation).

Occasionally, one nation or one individual may have to resist a majority opinion. But, for example, 190 nations ratified the Covenant on the Rights of the Child; only Somalia and the U.S. refused to accept it. The U.S. should wonder if it has already arrived at the truth which everyone else is missing or whether further conversation might be useful (concerning, say, a provision prohibiting the execution of minors; a sticking point in the U.S. rejection of the Covenant).

Truth can only be tested by the quality and quantity of its relations. Every statement in the English language is relative to every other statement in the language. Usually we are not aware of this basic guide to truth. When a statement fits comfortably with what we already believe to be true we do not usually reflect on how we are relating the statement to everything else we know. But sometimes we can only accept something as true if at the same time we have to reject a whole pattern of related beliefs that had previously been accepted as true.

We become aware of a false statement if it conflicts with what we know simply by knowing English. If I say “it is snowing outside,” someone who does not understand English will find the statement nonsensical. A speaker of English will find the statement true or false by looking out the window – and assuming the connection of the sentence to all other English sentences. Most of the time we know the truth by this procedure and there is no doubt or ambiguity in the claim.

A statement within a limited range of application can be ambiguous and debatable even when the statement seems to be a simple statement of fact. For example, in Sydney, Australia, during the last week of July it snowed. At least, that is what people said, especially children who delighted in building snowmen. The weather bureau insisted that there was no snow; it was sleet. Who was right? The weathermen were scientifically correct within their range of interest. The children with their snowmen were not wrong; their interest tolerated ambiguity in the meaning of “snow.”

The ambiguity in the word snow (the degree of ambiguity varying according to the region of the world) may seem trivial. But every argument about history or morality involves ambiguity of language. Every historian has to acknowledge that his or her interpretation remains ambiguous to some degree. History is always being revised which is not to say that there is no historical truth. Some judgments can be endlessly debated; other historical judgments approach the certainty of “it is snowing outside.” One historian of World War I was confronted by a critic who said that no historical judgment can claim to be true. The historian replied: I wanted to make certain that no one in the future can say that Belgium invaded Germany. How does he know that particular truth? Because it is the linchpin of a million other statements that cannot all be false.

Truth is relative to truth, that is, to *all* truth. The only absolute certainty would be the totality of all related truths. That absolute is not available and never will be available. Certainty can be increased by increasing the relativity of one’s beliefs. In a world of assumed absolutes, the relative is dismissed as *merely* relative; in a world without absolutes, the more relative a statement is the more certain is its truthfulness. Opening communication between differing groups can lead to a widening and deepening of the relations that are the basis of truth.

There are no statements that can be called moral absolutes but most of the world might be able to reach agreement that certain actions are intolerable violations of a human being. That includes killing and torture but also destruction of the physical environment. Admittedly, the diversity of languages is a big problem. Does the English term “human rights” translate into all languages? The closer one stays to describing relations, the better is the chance of finding agreements.

Much of the world had seemed to be moving in the direction of agreeing about torture. Torture, like most words has some ambiguity; whether some actions should be included under the word is debatable. But other actions are such gross and systematic violations of human integrity that a sane person who understands English would call it torture. The blatant and repeated violation of this agreement by the United States has truly shocked the world. Other nations have committed worse crimes but the United States has directly attacked the fragile moral agreements on which a world society was being built. Bush, Cheney, Scalia and their sidekicks have made it clear that in the mythical place called “America,” it is not necessary to relate one’s morality to other people’s morality and to agreements among nations. *Pace* the Pope, what we have is a dictatorship of absolutism.