

“Role of schools in raising children and acceptance of the other”

Dr. Armando Bernardini

President : “International Foundation for Interreligious and Intercultural Education IFIE”

Rome , Italy

Rationale

Most of nowadays nations are the result of millennial interweaving of disparate people. Likewise is Modern Europe which is witnessed interactions of religions within a cradle molded by Christianity and other religious-cultural traditions (in particular Judaism and in Southern Europe Islam). During this period Europe has experienced civilizations alternatively fighting each other as well as prospering together, thus exhibiting examples of both tolerance and intolerance.

Muslims in Spain were to leave a legacy which still endures in the arts and architecture. Furthermore, they aided the transmission to Europe of classical texts from Ancient Greece. Nowadays, Islam is the second largest religion in Europe. The presence of Muslims (coming from many different countries, traditions and cultures) and other religious traditions makes the teaching about religions and cultures very significant. This is particularly important to raise individuals able to accept the other and to diminish the risk of misconceptions about the other. In fact It is widely recognized that there will no peace among the nations without peace among religions.

In this presentation I shall cover some basic principles which have to be considered in establishing an effective teaching program on cultures and religions. These principles I am sure are shared by everyone and can be considered as obvious in many cases. In addition however I shall also make a special emphasis on some concrete applications and examples of good practices.

Aims and purpose of an effective religious education

Fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding requires to raise new generations with an improved understanding of world’s religions and cultures.

What is the foundation of a good religious education ? I am sure we all agree on the fact that the foundation of a good religious education rests at first in the knowledge of one’ s own religious tradition. This responsibility belongs in many countries to the schools (public or religious) and in addition – in every society - a fundamental role is played by the families and religious organizations.

This basic and fundamental rooting in one’s religious tradition should not however be conceived nor conveyed in opposition to the religion of the other. In fact, within each religious tradition, it is possible to find the seeds for mutual respect and dialogue.

Effective educational programs should therefore endeavor to make sure that the following outcomes will be assured :

- increased respect for human dignity and for everyone’s right to freedom of religion
- reduction of harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes
- an appreciation of the role of religions also in the literature and arts

Some concrete applications

The preparation of curricula, textbook and other educational material for teaching about religions should take into account religious views of the other in a way that is inclusive, fair and respectful. Special care should be taken to avoid inaccurate material or prejudicial material which could reinforce negative stereotypes.

The implementation of curricula – developed in accordance with professional standards – should also include the opportunity to offer comments and advice.

In my view curricula should give attention to key historical and contemporary developments pertaining to religion and interreligious dialogue and reflect global and local issues.

In particular some documents which have been produced during the recent past by the different religious traditions should become part of the curricula to be studied and commented. They are powerful documents which foster reconciliation and respect among religions and unfortunately and perhaps because of their innovative nature they are not yet fully utilized.

I would like to mention here just a few of them listing them chronologically and quoting selected salient parts in order to illustrate the tremendous potential they offer for reconciliation and acceptance of the other:

1. “Nostra Aetate (*In our times*)” Declaration on the relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions – October 1965

The declaration – issued by the Vatican II Council - was originally intended to deal with the Catholic theological standing towards Judaism but became in the course of the works of the bishops during the Council the significant document which challenges Roman Catholics to rethink their attitudes towards all other religions, and consider that all human beings are "but one community". The declaration is considered therefore the first significant step in promoting the culture of dialogue and respect of the religions. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, *Nostra Aetate* is the *magna carta* of the Catholic Church in terms of Muslim-Christian relations. I shall quote below what it says in regard to the Moslems:

".....3. The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."

And in regard to the Jews it says:

"..... The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles. Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles..... God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers;.... Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone..."

As the title of the declaration implies other religions are also covered in the declaration and I shall not mention other details here in the interest of time.

2. "Dabru Emet (speak the truth)" Statement - September 2000

A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity which represents the most positive affirmation of Christianity ever made by a committed Jewish group. It states unequivocally that Christians worship the God of Israel and legitimately draw on the Hebrew Bible: contradictions notwithstanding. The statement affirms Christian ethics and praises the possibility of a Judaic-Christian partnership for justice and peace. It assesses Christian guilt in the Holocaust while correctly separating

Christianity from Nazism. This document has been signed by 220 rabbis and intellectuals from all branches of Judaism as individuals.

It says “....Jews and Christians worship the same God. Before the rise of Christianity, Jews were the only worshippers of the God of Israel. But Christians also worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; creator of heaven and earth. While Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews, as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel..... Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace. Jews and Christians, each in their own way, recognize the unredeemed state of the world as reflected in the persistence of persecution, poverty, and human degradation and misery. Although justice and peace are finally God's, our joint efforts, together with those of other faith communities, will help bring the kingdom of God for which we hope and long. Separately and together, we must work to bring justice and peace to our world. In this enterprise, we are guided by the vision of the prophets of Israel...”

3. “Amman Message” - November 2004

An initiative of the King Abdallah of Jordan, the Amman Message is a consensus document that has sought to tackle the theological basis of religious extremism in the Muslim world. Over 500 of the most senior Islamic scholars from around the world, representing all the major branches and schools of Islamic thought, have endorsed the Amman Message and its *Three Points*, which clarify, among other things, who is a Muslim and who has the right to issue fatwas (legal rulings).

Organizers of the Amman Message describe it as good news not only for Muslims, for whom it provides a basis for unity and a solution to infighting, but also for non-Muslims. It thus assures balanced Islamic solutions for essential issues like human rights, women's rights, freedom of religion, legitimate jihad, good citizenship of Muslims in non-Muslim countries, and just and democratic government. It also exposes the illegitimate opinions of radical fundamentalists and terrorists from the point of view of true Islam.

Quote “.....We are aware of the dangers and challenges the Islamic Nation is facing today at this difficult juncture of its course. Evils threaten its identity, incite disunity, tarnish its religion and assail its tenets; they attack fiercely the very message of Islam. Some who attack Islam imagine it is their enemy. But it is not their enemy. Others, who claim to belong to Islam, have done gruesome and criminal acts in its name. The message that is under attack is the message of tolerance, revealed by the Almighty to His prophet Muhammad, God's prayers and salutations be upon him, and carried after him by his orthodox successors and household members: a message of brotherhood and humanity; forming a righteous religion that embraces the entire sphere of human life, upholding what is good and forbidding what is wrong, accepting of others, and honoring all human beings....”

4. “A common Word between Us and You” – October 2007

In this letter 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals – from more than 40 countries - have unanimously come together for the first time to declare the

common ground between Christianity and Islam. The signatories to this message come from every denomination and school of thought in Islam. Every major Islamic country or region in the world is represented in this message, which is addressed to the leaders of all the world’s churches, and indeed to all Christians everywhere.

“.....Whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions—and whilst there is no minimizing some of their formal differences—it is clear that the Two Greatest Commandments are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur’an, the Torah and the New Testament. What prefaces the Two Commandments in the Torah and the New Testament, and what they arise out of, is the Unity of God—that there is only one God. For the Shema in the Torah, starts: (Deuteronomy 6:4) Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! Likewise, Jesus said: (Mark 12:29) “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one’. Likewise, God says in the Holy Qur’an: Say: He, God, is One. / God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all. (Al-Ikhlās, 112:1-2). Thus the Unity of God, love of Him, and love of the neighbor form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded.....”

5. “The Mecca Appeal for Interfaith Dialogue” - June 2008

The Appeal is the result of an initiative of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia who gathered, in Mecca, in a conference Muslims from around the world to exchange views related to the legitimacy for Muslims to engage in interreligious dialogue. The King’s intention was to initiate dialogue not limited to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but extended as well to the followers of other religions who are concerned about humanitarian and ethical issues. In this sense, the Mecca Appeal is broader in scope than the “Common Word” initiative, which consciously chose to limit its appeal to Christian leaders and called on their Christian counterparts to recognize with them the basic elements of love for God and neighbor that characterize the two religions.

Quote from the Appeal:

“.....The conference discussed the legitimacy of dialogue, Islam’s promotion of dialogue and the numerous texts that promote dialogue and set forth its rules and manners:

- ② *First - The cause of the differences between nations and peoples, as well as their religious and cultural distinction is the will of God, the Most Exalted and His profound wisdom. This requires that they know one another and cooperate in order to serve their interests, solve their problems and cause them to live under good manners and vie with one another in constructing the earth and performing good deeds. (The Holy Quran, 5:48)*
- ② *Second - Dialogue represents an authentic Quranic methodology and a Prophetic tradition through which the Prophets communicated with their people. The biography of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) presents a clear methodology in this regard through the dialogue of the Prophet and the Christians of Najran and his correspondence with great emperors and monarchs.....” Unquote*

Additional concrete opportunities

I would like to briefly discuss some “difficulties” which can be encountered and which can and should be transformed in “opportunities” for achieving acceptance of the other.

Negative Moments in History - In the course of a teaching program it might be necessary - for sake of objectivity - to raise issues concerning a negative role that members of a religious group may have played at certain moments of history. The case must be dealt with by encouraging critical awareness based upon objective and well confirmed historical data. In this manner the case will be positively dealt by making the students aware of patterns of behavior which can lead to intolerance, conflict and violence.

Opt-Out Situations - Another situation might arise when there are compulsory courses organized within the schools based exclusively on one religious tradition which is not part of the background of all the students. In this situation a suitable opt-out right must be recognized to the students who desire so. The opt-out must be structured in a manner which does not discriminate against the students opting out and must avoid the risk of labeling them as “different”. A solution for this case can be found by providing positive alternative curricular activities.

Religious holidays. There are many instances where religious holidays represent an issue. Since religious freedom should be taught not only by curricular offering or during the course of religion teaching, but also by teachers of disciplines other than of religious natures. They should seize the opportunity to illustrate the particular festivity in a culturally sensitive ways. This will demonstrate to the students the school implicit respect of differences of religion.

Examples of Good Practices

I would like to briefly mention here some practical examples of good practices which – in my opinion - represent a good contribution towards the search of common and shared values amongst different religions. In different ways these initiatives do produce documents, reviews or web programs which can be of great help to educators. I shall list them chronologically starting from the most recent ones. There are many which could be quoted but I limit myself to only a few which are *multilingual* and could therefore be utilized in different countries

- “Adyan Understanding Program” is an Intercultural initiative awarded by the *Anna Lindh Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures* and supported by *Feed the Minds Foundation*. It joins together six academic and NGO partners from the Arab world (Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon) and Europe (France, Italy and Poland). Its aim is to promote a better mutual understanding regarding cultural dimensions of religious issues between and within Arab and European societies. Once fully developed, this program will offer courses on the web -

<http://www.understandingprogram.net/> - in Arabic and English covering the following issues:

- 1.Christian Diversity in the Middle East,
- 2 History of the Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue,
- 3 Muslim Diversity in Europe.

A draft of the courses are already available at the web address mentioned above.

- “International Foundation Oasis” Venice. An institution initiated by the Dioceses of Venice assisted by a wide International scientific board of scholars, theologians and journalists which promotes the mutual knowledge and encounter between Christians and Muslims, by organizing Symposia and editing a bi-annual publication “Oasis/Al-Waha/” . The aim of the review is to become a bridge between West and East. It offers contributions on integration, coexistence and interreligious dialogue. It is published in four distinct editions (Italian, Arabic-English, Arabic-French and Urdu- English).

- “ABC to understand the Muslims”. This 63 pages booklet has been written by Fr. Maurice Borrmans, Professor Em. of the PISAI, founder of the review “Islamochristiana” and well-known promoter of the Islamo-Christian Dialogue. It offers with a simple language the basic information to know the history, the religion and tradition of the Muslims. The author is a guarantee of a correct and scientific value of the content. Because of its format this publication is suitable for educators and cultural mediators. It is published in Italian. The French edition will appear in October 2010 and future edition in English is under planning.

Conclusions

Our globalized world requires harmonious relations which would promote understanding of religious differences, acceptance of the other thus promoting peace. The contribution to this effort, represented by education programs and initiatives, is of foremost relevance in delivering consistent dividends in terms of social cohesion.