"Visions of religious scholars to the role of educational and social institutions in raising generation"

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For the purposes of this paper, I am not concerned about the notion of "truth" as applied to religion. All religions seek the truth, and all religions consider their own path to be the upright path to the truth they believe derives from God.[1] I am not concerned about whether religion "x" or religion "y" is closer to or further from the divine truth than any other. This is a question that we cannot resolve in this setting, and I believe that we should not waste our time trying to do so.[2]

I concentrate, therefore, on a different question. That question is about the function of religion in contemporary societies – how religion can contribute positively to the larger human community with which it is engaged. Positive religious engagement in society requires that religious institutions work toward the harmony of all of society's members. This requirement is codified in all of our scriptures. I will cite from the three "Abrahamic" scriptures to demonstrate this point.

Deuteronomy 10 [18]Do justice for the orphan and the widow, and love the stranger, giving him food and clothing. [19]You must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.	דברים י (יח) עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפַּט יָתוֹם וְאַלְמָנָה וְאֹהֵב גֵּר לָתֶת לוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה: (יט) וַאֲהַבְתֶּם אֶת הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הֱיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Acts 10[3]

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[1] See, for example, Bruce Marshal, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion For Truth* (New York, 1973); Abul-Walid Ibn Rushd, *Fasl al-Maqal* ed. A. Nader (Beirut, 1961); and a counter-position in Bradford Hinze and Irfan Omar (eds.), *Heirs of Abraham: The Future of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian Relations* (NY: Orbis, 2005).

[2] See Reuven Firestone, *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims* (NY: Ktav, 2000) and translated into Arabic as ذرية إبراهيم مقدمة عن اليهودية للمسلمين http://www.altawasul.com/NR/rdonlyres/9052668D-41C6-4B91-8D57-16DD1BE5311C/0/dhariyatibrahim.pdf; ibid, *An Introduction to Islam for Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2008).

[3] All New Testament translations are from The Oxford Study Bible (REB). Oxford: OUP, 1992. Torah and Qur'an translations are my own.

[34]Peter began: 'I now understand how true it is that God has no favorites, [35]but that in every nation those who are god-fearing and do what is right are acceptable to him.

Qur'an 21 (The Prophets) [105]And We recorded in the Psalms, after the Reminder, that My virtuous servants will inherit the earth. [106]There is indeed in this a message for a people who worship. [107]We have sent you [Muhammad] only as a mercy to all peoples.	سورة الانبياء وَلَقَدْ كَتَبْنَا فِي الزَّبُورِ مِنْ بَعْدِ الذِّكْرِ أَنَّ الْأَرْضَ يَرِثُهَا عِبَادِيَ الصَّالِحُونَ {105} إِنَّ فِي هَٰذَا لَبَلَاغًا لِقَوْمٍ عَابِدِينَ {106} وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِلْعَالَمِينَ {107}

The Torah does not restrict its concern only for Jews, the New Testament does not restrict its concern only for Christians, and the Qur'an does not restrict its concern only for Muslims. All three divine scriptures show that God's universal love embraces all peoples and that the divine goal is harmony and concord within all of humanity. In order to achieve any rudimentary level of harmony, religious scholars must work with educational and social institutions to teach and enable their religious communities to live together with those of other religious communities happily and productively.

All religions strive to understand the place of humanity in relation to the divine. Whether monotheist, dualist or polytheist, and whether Abrahamic or non-Abrahamic, religion focuses on helping people strive to do the good amidst the parallel human inclination to succumb to our natural drives toward selfishness and sin.[4] That universal aspect of religion makes all religions, at their core, good. All religions intend to help humanity live in harmony and peace. We need to take all religions seriously and treat them with respect. All religions, even those with which we do not agree theologically or with which we disagree regarding ritual practice, are worthy of our esteem for this reason alone.

Religions contain within them certain tensions. One is the tension between particularism and universalism. All religions, for example, are concerned for the welfare of the community of believers. They express their right to promote their own community and their own interests. Religions always invest great interest and resources in the community that is defined by the religion – Islam for Muslims, Judaism for Jews, Christianity for Christians, Hindu religion for Hindus, and so forth. This is because religions are inherently and particularly concerned for the welfare of their own community in this world and are also concerned for their welfare in the afterlife, at the end of time, or in reincarnation. This emphasis on concern for the welfare of the religious collective is defined by theologians and scholars of religion as "particularism."[5] It refers to directing energy, resources and concern inward toward the community of believers.

All religions are also concerned for the welfare of the world at large. There is no religion I know of that does not strive, one way or another, for a harmonious world in which peoples of all backgrounds will live in peace with one another and with

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[4] See Mircea Eliade (editor), *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1987).
[5] Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborg (eds.), *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 437.

themselves. This element of concern is directed not only to the community of believers, but to all humans, whether or not believers, in the larger world. This worldwide concern is called by theologians and scholars "universalism."[6]

There is an inherent tension between these two. Sometimes concern for the welfare of the religious community comes at the expense of concern for the world at large, and sometimes the opposite. Religions usually try to balance these concerns. Usually, particularism receives a greater emphasis than universalism. Or perhaps, while universalism is discussed quite a bit in religious sources, the resources of religion are usually expended mostly on the particularist interests and needs of the community.

The inherent tension between these two trajectories is expressed in religious theology, religious law, and religious education. Because the purpose of this conference is to consider our role as religious scholars in educating upcoming generations, I will examine this tension in terms of religious education.

Religious educators strive hard to inculcate in children and youth a positive image of themselves. We want our young people to feel good about their religious identity and we want to ensure that our children continue to believe and practice the religious norms and traditions that we cherish. Unfortunately, religious education in both the religious and public environments (and in many areas where there is no distinction) has tended to take the easy path of defining the self positively by defining the other negatively. Our children often receive the message that they are good because the other is bad. Careful scientific studies and surveys have chronicled this tendency in many areas of the world, including Europe, the United States, the Middle East, and other regions.[7]

This tendency to portray a negative message regarding the religious other would appear to conflict with the universalist concern of religion just mentioned above. If religions are truly concerned for the welfare of those who do not belong to the religious community, how can they denigrate them? Defaming and maligning the religious other goes against the very universalism that religions claim to teach. How does denigrating the other help the world? Such a perspective is only self-centered and represents an attempt to benefit the narrow community at the expense of the world at large. And in fact, this selfish approach is detrimental to the community of believers as well because it creates a world of anger, resentment and tension that can easily slip into violence that will negatively affect all communities.

Some religious leaders have tried to resolve the tension between the particularist and universalist inclinations through mission, or *da`wa*. That is, they claim that the entire world will benefit from the truth of their own particular faith by *belonging* to their own faith. They believe that they will help the "other" by making the "other" into the "self." It is an attempt to resolve the tension between particularism and universalism by creating a universal particularism. If the entire world would be Muslim, for example, or Christian, or any other religion, there would be no more religious argument and religious wars. All

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Wolfram Reiss, "Obstacles and Chances of an International Dialogue on Curriculum Revision in the Middle East: Experiences of a German Research Project on School Textbooks in Egypt, Palestine, Turkey and Iran," The Center for Values Education (Istanbul) and the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religious Belief (Oslo), 2005 (http://www.swedenabroad.com/SelectImage/55984/ObstaclesandChancesprint.pdf); Gamal M. M. Mostafa, "Correcting the Image of Islam and Muslims in the West: Challenges and Opportunities for Islamic Universities and Organizations," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* Vol. 27, Issue 3 (Dec. 2007), 371-386.

would obey the same religious moral imperatives that require ethical behaviors, proper religious practice, etc.

This goal, however, is a total illusion. It can never be fulfilled.

From a sociological perspective, whenever a critical mass of people forms, it always begins to split into smaller groups. From a historical perspective, whenever a religion has been so successful that it has collected a large mass of believers it has broken into sectarian groups that argue with one another, fight, and eventually form independent religions. From a theological perspective, if God had willed that all humanity be of one mind about religion, then we would not have such serious differences between religious communities.

Let us come to an agreement that it is normal, even proper, for religious communities to exist side-by-side despite conflicting theologies and practices. Our scriptures support this position without question. I could cite many passages of scripture but will limit to only one each from the Hebrew Bible (Torah), the New Testament and the Qur'an.

Micah 4 [5]Though all the peoples walk each in the names of its gods, we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever.	מִיכָה ד (ה) כִּי כָּל הָעַמִּים יֵלְכוּ אִישׁ בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהָיו וַאֲנַחְנוּ נֵלֵךְ בְּשֵׁם יְקֹוָק אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:

Matthew 5
[46]If you love only those who love you, what reward can you expect? Even the tax-collectors do as much as that. [47]If you greet only your brothers, what is there extraordinary about that? Even the heathen do as much. [48]There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds.

Qur'an 10 (Yunis) [99]If your Lord had wished, all people in the world would believe as a [single] body; will you then compel people until they become believers?	سورة يونس وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَآمَنَ مَن فِي الأَرْضِ كُلُّهُمْ جَمِيعًا أَفَأَنتَ تُكْرِهُ النَّاسَ حَتَّى يَكُونُواْ مُؤْمِنِينَ [99]

Given these divine messages, how can we, as responsible religious leaders, allow our educational system to denigrate those believers in religions that are different from our own. By not encouraging our religious curricula to respect the religious other we are refusing to accept God's message. This is a sin and a denial of God.

To fix this problem we must all immediately review our school curricula at all levels because the denigration of other religions occurs in many forms. Not only is it taught in classes about religion, but also in literature, in civics and especially in the teaching of history. There is only one truly proper and honorable way to ensure that are school curricula represent the religious other fairly. That is to include representatives of other religious faiths in the committees or boards that review and create curricular materials. How do I know that when I teach about Christianity in a history class or in a class about religion that I am teaching accurately and without prejudice? How do I know

that I am not in some way dishonoring Muslims or Islam in the way in which I teach about Jewish life in the Muslim world?

I will tell you an inspiring story. I am a Jewish educator. I teach rabbinical students – young people who will become rabbis and leaders in their Jewish communities. And I teach professional Jewish educators who teach and administer hundreds of schools that teach many thousands off Jewish children. Never did I consider whether or not our school curricula should be approved by Christians and Muslims, even though we teach modules about Christianity and Islam in many of our schools. Then one day during a period in which I was giving lectures in Singapore, a Muslim company that makes educational curricula for Muslim schools invited me to review the module that they had developed about Jews and Judaism. They wanted me, as a Jew and a rabbi, to make sure that this group was not inadvertently presenting the materials inaccurately. From that day onward, I have been teaching the necessity of having Jewish curricula approved by member of other faiths before it can be presented to our children.

We want to teach our children to love our religion and our religious tradition deeply. It is unethical and sinful to do this at the expense of other religions. Children must be taught that while they can and should love their own religion and religious tradition deeply and have all the right to believe in the unique truth and extraordinary particularity of their religion, they must also accept that other religious faiths are legitimate expressions of the human quest to understand God and the human condition.

Anyone who is a true believer in one's own religion believes that one's own religion is true or is at least on the path to truth. Most believers earnestly believe that their faith is a better faith than the faiths of others. That is acceptable because it is one's own personal belief. But it is not acceptable to teach that one's faith is right because another faith is wrong. Only after we all accept the responsibility to go beyond platitudes and actually ensure that our school curricula are responsible will we be able to come to a better understanding and promote harmony. This is, after all, one of the major purposes of religion.

Thank you

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