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Role of educational, social and media institutions in raising the new generation

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At the French bishops conference

Introduction

Eminences, excellences, dear friends,
It is a great honour for me to have been invited by DICID (Doha international center for interfaith dialogue), and specially Prof. Ibrahim al-Naimi and Prof. Aisha al-Mannai to participate to this 8th Doha conference on Interfaith Dialogue and to be one of the speaker for the second plenary session. Many thanks to them.

I will focus my speech on one of the elements of this session : the role of the educational institutions in raising the new generation to be able to live in a world where cultures and religions are plural and where they (the new generation) will have to live together with esteem and respect. These two words are used in the declaration of Vatican II, *Nostra aetate*, about the attitude of catholics towards the others religions.

My words are based on my personal experience, first as a teacher both in France and in Egypt, then today as responsible in the catholic church in France (at the bishops' conference) of the relationship between catholics and muslims in our country.

First, I will notice what are, in my point of view, the main challenges for educational institutions in raising a new generation opened on the others cultures and religions.

In my second point, I will pay attention to some characteristics of the context in which lives this new generation.

Then, third point, I will give some educational aims or purposes.

And to conclude, as a fourth point, I would speak about some institutions or initiatives in which this is done in France : schools, scout movement or initiatives coming from the new generation itself.

1 Principal challenges for educational institutions from an interfaith point of view

- The main challenge for educational institutions is how to prepare the new generation to live together, when people living in the same country, as France and many countries in Europe and over the world, are from different cultures and religions.

In fact, educational institutions are the place where, in most countries, young people live daily together belonging to different social classes, different cultures and also different religions. So, as they live during their school and university periods, they will live during their adult life : or they will be able to share and live with the others, different from them, or they will remain closed in their own community.

So, this is a big challenge : How do educational institutions prepare the new generation to live together, taking in account what are the common values and believings but also what and where are the differences ?

- On this way, we have to help the new generation to pass from the tolerance to the respect of the others.

Certainly, tolerance is a progress, if we consider wars between religions. But tolerance is the situation in which people live next to the others but without any consideration for them. It is a kind of juxtaposition. Often, in France, young people says : « This my choice ... yours is different ; it doesn't matter. » They say such words for clothing mode but also values and for religion. So as our educational responsibility is to help them to pass from the tolerance to the respect of the others which means to pay attention to what say, do and believe my neighbour and to do this I have to get in touch with him.

- Another challenge for educational institutions, from our point of view as believers in God, is to be witness of God in a secularized world. In our countries, on the north side of the mediterranean sea, it is a tremendous challenge. Secularization of our societies is a long process from years. We may be sorry of this situation. But the challenge for us is not to speak about this situation but to testify to the faith in God in the middle of such secularized societies, to testify that the spiritual dimension is essential for every human being if he wants to be really a human being, according to his vocation as creature of God.

How do educational institutions to enter not only in their curricula but also in the organization of school or university life this opening to the spiritual dimension and to the responsibility for believers in God to be, in our world, witness of the Almighty and only God?

- Where are the educational institutions which face this challenge in common program and activities to young believers of different religions together ?
- 2 **Some considerations about the context of this new generation**

- **Globalization**

The new generation is borned in a world of globalization. So, in most countries, they learn what happens in the other part of the world at same time that people living in the place where the events happen. But they get all the amount of news with any distance. They are able to get via Internet the best and the worse.

Where will they get the discernment?

Globalization means also the extension of marchandizing to everything : goods but also values and even spirituality or religion.

In our economical and financial worldwide system, money seems to be the first value and to get money the only goal proposed to the new generation.

How educational institutions will propose them other values? How they will propose to put the human being , created by God, as the main criterium for any social any system or project ?

- **Clash of ignorances**

I share the opinion of one of my friends, Tareq Oubrou, imam and rector of the great mosque of Bordeaux, important town in the south-west of France, who says « In France, and perhaps in the world, we have not «the clash of civilizations » but « the clash of ignorances ».

I testify that, among the new generation in France, both, young christians and young muslims do not know a lot about their own religious tradition. Often they carry misunderstanding about their religion and prejudices over other religions.

This is another big challenge for, both, educational institutions an media.

- **Life in the moment**

What we have said about globalization and culture of Internet leads us to notice that the new generation is living in the moment. They are not only in the present, ignoring the past, without big interest for future and utopia, but in the present they are living the present moment.

With this relation to the time, what becomes the place for history and the importance of the memory in each of our traditions. For jews, christians and muslims God reveals himself in the history of men and his Word is transmitted to generations in this human history. The roots of our religions in Abraham, Ibrahim, story and the perspective of last judgement common to our three traditions, link the history of men with the revelation of God in this history.

So, how to do if past and future have no importance for the new generation ?

- **Pluralism of cultures and religions**

In some parts of the world, pluralism of cultures and religions is the environment in which people are used to grow and live, for example in Indian ocean as in island of Mauritius.

But, in european countries, this pluralism is a new situation and the new generation do not know well how to live in such pluralism. Some young people are attracted by relativism « All religions are the same », some others are frighten by this situation and they are attracted by fundamentalistic groups in every of our three religions.

3 **About some educational aims to face these challenges**

- To face these challenges, I propose, first, a reflection based on consideration about three forms of the french verb « connaître » which give us three actions and thoughts that have to be conducted in the same time and especially towards the new generation :

In french language, the same root of verb « connaître » may have three forms, and it would be the same thing in arabic language with the differents forms of verb « arafa ».

- first meaning, first educational step : « connaître », it means to know the religion of the others,
 - then, in french we say : « se connaître » which means to meet people of an another religion and become friends with them and develop a relationship, so the second action is to know one another.
 - last step, in french we say : « se reconnaître », and I add « se reconnaître différents ». In english, it means that, in this process, we have to recognize that we have differences between us and according to the truth of this relation, we have to recognize that we are friends or brothers not in spite of our differences but through our differences.
- A second educational aim is to give to the new generation the sense of history. The main purpose is not to give them a lot of knowledges about history that they can find in books or Internet. But more difficult is to guide them on the way of an understanding of the history so that they get a memory of what happen in humanity before them, to understand the roots of the present moment and situation. Our three religious traditions tell us about our fathers in the faith. For every one here, the history is a sacred history because it tells us the relationship between God and humanity. And specially for us as christian, the revelation of God takes place in the human

history and in a special time : at the first century, in Palestine, in life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So the second educational aim is to help new generation to get the sense of history and to project themselves in the future because we get from God the responsibility of the future of the creation and the world. What they will do with the earth given to the man such as he transforms it so that every human being can live on it?

- Third educational aim would respond to this domination of the immediate moment without any capacity of distance. To face this situation, I think that educational institutions have to give to the new generation the sense of capacity of criticism and personal judgment. When teaching is only based on repetition it does not give to a new generation the capacity of understanding new situations and mutations.
We have to help the new generation to use reason, and to combine it with the religious faith.
- In the same order, to face civilization of images, educational institutions have to teach to new generation how to read the amount of pictures that they see all the day long. In past times, we learn at school and in university how to read a text and to interpretate it, nowadays the same task has to be done with pictures and images. Always in order to be able to understand what happens and to make their own judgment.
- Last point, raising a new generation on the point of view of interfaith dialogue, I would ask a question that I often ask to my muslims interlocutors and friends in France. What place do we give to the other religion in our teachings and seminars with the new generation ?

How do a christian student listen to a muslim explaining the importance of his own faith in his life or presenting his religious tradition ?

And also, how a future imam during his years of formation listen to a christian person explaining what is his faith ?

These are examples, the idea is to listen what the other man or woman says by himself of his or her faith.

4 Some institutions or initiatives that faces these challenges

- **The role of the schools**

The situation is very different according to the different countries. But the question is the same : how to face, in schools, the ignorance about religions ? In France, because of the laws about laïcité, specially in educational institutions, in governmental schools what can be done is teaching religions as facts, as culture.

But in the national service for education, according to the law, take place religious schools. They have the possibility to introduce in their curricula special programmes about religions.

First, the french law obliges any religious school with contract with government to welcome any student without any consideration for his religion. This is one of the reason why a number of muslims schoolchildren study in catholic schools.

Some of these catholics schools have the preoccupation to introduce their students in the interfaith dialogue. Teachers think that it is important not only to study in same classrooms, but because of the presence of jews, muslims, christians together in the same school to organize interfaith meetings. In these meetings, students, at secondary school, explain to the others what say their own tradition of faith on one subject, listen to the others and then have exchanges between themselves about what have been said by the others.

I share to such interfaith programme in a secondary school in Paris for nine years but I am sorry that this rich experience is done in only few schools.

- **The role of youth movements**

Youth movements are other educational institutions were the new generation in a good interfaith environment or in one country or during the several opportunities of exchanges between scouts of different countries and religions.

A good example is given by the scout movement. In France, the catholic scout movement, years ago, support the fundation of a muslim scout movement in France. They still have good relationship between the two movements. But in the same time, some muslims families to put their children in the catholic scout movement, especially in popular districts and suburbs of great towns. Leaders of this scout movement have a reflection on both sides : not to make any differences between young people during scout activities and in the same time to respect differences of religion and times for prayer and so one...

International exchanges, for example between french scouts and scouts from Marocco, give opportunities to realize the programme and the pedagogy that I have explained in my third point about « connaître, se connaître et se reconnaître différents ».

- **Initiatives from the new generation**

Raising the new generation is not only to think for them or to build programmes for them but it is also to support initiatives coming from them, from this new generation.

I would like to give only one example, in France. Some young students, living in the same district of Paris have the idea in 2008 to create an association called « Co-Exister ». They are less than ten young boys and girls, some students in last year of secondary school, some students at the university. Some are christians, some jews, some muslims.

Their goal is to propose to young people to know their three religions by sharing together some activities in different worship places. It is also to propose symbolic events as to ask people of the three religious traditions to give together blood for transfusion center because there is no difference between the blood of a christian, a muslim or a jew. One of their rule is that every activity or programme is done by members of the three traditions. For communication, they use media use by their generation : blogs, facebook and twitter.

This association of young people gets the support of some adults of « Religions for peace » (some of them are parents of this young people) and of the main religious authorities in our country, involved in interreligious faith dialogue. One reason of this support is to encourage young people to have initiatives on this field.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, raising a new generation cannot be the task only of the family, or of the school or media or religious institutions but must combine all these institutions and projects.

We have also to pay attention to combine what has to be done by the new generation itself and what is to do on an intergeneration level. Initiatives must be taken on the both sides.

And as a link between today and to-morrow, I will conclude by some words of Pope John Paul II in his speech at the great Omayyad mosque in Damascus : « *It is in mosques and churches that the Muslim and Christian communities shape their religious identity, and it is there that the young receive a significant part of their religious education. What sense of identity is instilled in young Christians and young Muslims in our churches and mosques? It is my ardent hope that Muslim and Christian religious leaders and teachers will present our two great religious communities as communities in respectful dialogue, never more as communities in conflict. It is crucial for the young to be taught the ways of respect and understanding, so that they will not be led to misuse religion itself to promote or justify hatred and violence. Violence destroys the image of the Creator in his creatures, and should never be considered as the fruit of religious conviction.* »¹

¹ Pope John Paul II, Meeting with muslim leaders, Omayyad Great Mosque, Damascus, 6 may 2001,