RAISING THE NEW GENERATION
WITH A FOUNDATION OF VALUES AND TRADITION:
RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES

Dr.John Taylor

"Places of Worship: supporting and influencing the new generation"

1. Places of worship seen as communities of people

While it is an important right to have or to share a place of worship, it is the community of worshippers, not the building or place, which is the vital element. Communities that are a part of a wider majority may often inhabit a long-established place of worship but newcomers who are in a minority in a wider community will often seek to affirm their identity by opening a new place of worship whether within an existing building or as a new manifestation of their religiously based community. Communities of like minded people who have no place of worship quickly aspire to plan and build and organize a church, mosque, synagogue or temple, however simple or however elaborate. The importance of places of worship in supporting and influencing the new generation is not simply to symbolize the presence of a particular tradition but rather to provide a sensitive and welcoming community for both members and visitors.

One may see a microcosm of a place of worship and of a worshipping community within a family home where a copy of scripture, a prayer mat, a picture of a holy place or, where appropriate, of a revered person may help to invite family members to individual or shared prayer or meditation. The influence of family members, old or young, is often a starting point for spiritual practices and may inspire outgoing service and sacrifice for others. One cannot make a generalized rule from the saying "the family that prays together stays together" but shared worship is often a good basis for human relationships. The family that prays at home may well go on to pray with the wider community in a local place of worship or, beyond that, in some more important place of pilgrimage. Family worship and community worship are held together by the intentions and experiences of each individual, and so the place of worship can be as important for private spirituality as for collective experiences.

The idea of "raising" a new generation should not obscure the fact that it is the young people themselves who rise. The place of worship can assist them in their choices and in their recognition of their traditions and values. It may be wise to speak of both traditions and values in the plural since young people inherit and discover a wide range of spiritual and cultural elements from families, communities, nations and, indeed, from the increasingly globalized and variegated societies in which many live today. A young person may choose for himself or herself allegiance to a single tradition or may appropriate insights from a wider range of traditions; but the choice should be that of the young person and should not be imposed by a family member or religious leader. Parents have rights and duties to enable their children to receive religious teaching in a particular tradition, and schools have a duty to ensure that there are awareness of and respect for a wider range of cultures. Each young person may then choose to adopt values and beliefs according to his or her own conscience.

While families, schools and places of worship can all exert an influence and while a young person can make his or her own choice, there can often be social or political

obstacles. Even where there are constitutional safeguards, prejudiced and ill-informed public opinion can lead, for example, to attempts to ban the erection of minarets on mosques in Switzerland or to the building of a mosque and social centre near to Ground-Zero in New York City. Whereas Qatar has set a good example in allowing the construction of churches for migrant Christians, there are prohibitions for Christians to build churches in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately these examples of restriction and prohibition are better known that acts of hospitality offered to neighbours of another faith in many pluralistic contexts around the world. In predominantly Muslim countries I have worshipped in Christian churches built on land donated by Muslims. In my home city of Birmingham, England, I remember a large under-used church being redesigned so that the central section became a large community hall open to people from all communities; the original choir area became a compact church and the reception area and cloakrooms were refashioned as a mosque.

The right to have a place of worship and religious instruction is an inalienable right protected by international agreements but one of the more sinister violations of human rights which occur in some conflict situations is when desecration is perpetrated against places of worship, cemeteries or religious symbols. In civil wars in places like Cyprus or the former Yugoslavia both mosques and churches were deliberately destroyed bringing a special sense of grief and outrage to the communities that had once worshipped there. Attempts have been made to protect, repair or rebuild, but a deep scar is left on peoples' memories. Whole communities can be left with a sense of bitterness when the place of worship serves to focus minds on human violence rather than on ultimate values.

2. Support and influence from places of worship which honour the rights and choices of young people

When places of worship are properly used to support and influence all generations in their implementation of the values that their religions teach, there is a special need to cater for the needs of young people. Too many places of worship have become protected by sobriety or silence from affording a welcome to young people. Depending upon the local culture there can be artistic works, music or drama that attract young people. The Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church has recently encouraged colourful clothing to be worn in church. Still more important, there are increasing examples of leadership roles in worship and service being given to young people. In education programmes for children and young people they need not have only a passive role of listening but may take part in sharing experiences, raising questions and proposing solutions.

According to Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child education should be aimed at "the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities in their fullest potential; the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate and for civilizations different from his or her own; the preparation of the child for

responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin".

In 2001, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 25 November 1981, an International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation with Freedom of Religion and Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination was held in Madrid. While many of the recommendations are directed to formal school education at primary and secondary level, there is also recognition that "the role of parents, families, legal guardians and other legally recognized care givers is an essential factor in the education of children in the field of religion or belief, and that special attention should be paid to encouraging positive attitudes…" Religious education at every level can uphold the first "end" for the United Nations as enunciated in its "Charter", namely "to practise tolerance"; we may note that this is not lip-service to "toleration" but rather the practice of building mutual respect and partnership.

Religious education, whether in schools or in places of worship, can be undertaken as a preventive measure against intolerance and discrimination. The organization which I represent at the United Nations, the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), was founded in 1900 with a membership across many of the world's religions, and has tried to follow up United Nations recommendations on building tolerance. After the Madrid conference IARF held four regional meetings in order to promote human rights education in support of freedom of religion or belief. Muslims and Christians met in Europe, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims met in India, adherents of African traditional religions met with Christians and Muslims in South Africa, and adherents of traditional religions in Central America met with Christians in Costa Rica. There was wide consensus that families, schools and religious institutions should cooperate in promoting values of tolerance and cooperation.

All over the world and for many centuries religious communities have pioneered schooling whether in the mosque-schools and madrasahs of Africa and Asia or in the Sunday schools of England during the sometimes brutal Industrial Revolution. Today while the work with children continues in a more participatory and exploratory way, there is a growing concern that older student generations should continue their spiritual, moral and religious education. A further example of voluntary religious education and inter-cultural bridge-building in places of worship may be given by citing initiatives in some university chaplaincies. Some institutions of higher learning have a range of confessionally based associations or places of worship. I have seen mosque and church built alongside on some African campuses; I have seen Christians, Muslims and others share the same meditation areas in North American universities; in the British university where I once taught a multi-religious centre was well established and promoted not only separate worship activities but also shared discussion groups and humanitarian social services.

3. Spiritual values and religious traditions that may come from the past but can inspire the present and the future

The concept of tradition/traditions does not refer only to the past. One of the pioneers of Christian-Muslim understanding, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, points to the "cumulative & dynamic" nature of tradition as it is handed down from generation to generation. It is as important to put a focus on those who receive as well as on those who transmit. Young people should have the freedom and the choice to accept a tradition but also to adapt it to the needs of the modern world both in the present and for the future. Religious traditions have sometimes been presented only "in the letter" and not also "in the spirit" of the original scriptural or spiritual teaching. In order to "raise" the young people of the new generation to make responsible choices of belief and life-style they should be given opportunities, according to their own sense of priorities, to learn and to practise religious rituals, to engage in humanitarian activities, to practise contemplation and meditation. Young people themselves can make their own connexions between the needs of the world which they see around them and the spiritual and moral values which are needed to address those needs.

Dr Farid Esack has described his religious upbringing in South Africa and in Pakistan. He evokes the teaching he received in Qur'an schools and madrasahs and the way in which this prepared him for a courageous stand in struggles against racism and sexism. I give a quotation from one of his eloquent works, "On Being a Muslim: finding a religious path in the world today", One World, Oxford, 1999, pp. 160-1:
"It is not enough to say that you were on the side of Islam and the truth. Whose Islam and whose truth were you defending? The Islam of blind tradition, echoing the Quraysh of pre-Islamic paganism ('We have found our forebears doing this'), or the Islam of dynamism, reason and creativity? The Islam of the Shah or of the oppressed? The truth of the powerful or the powerless? The truth of men with fragile egos or that of battered women? The Islam of the feudal lords and the priests or that of Asma Jehangir, the Muslim (human rights) lawyer…?"

It is no accident that Dr Esack gives the example of a woman who has struggled for the protection of human rights for all communities not only in her native Pakistan but also, until recently, around the world as Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief at the United Nations. In her expert work of protecting and promoting the human right of freedom of religion or belief, she has continued the distinguished work of her predecessor Dr Abdul Fattah Amor from Tunisia. Among many contributions to human rights work, he emphasised the importance of education for young people, as a preventive measure against intolerance, and also the need to identify the vulnerability of women, since followers of many religious traditions have misapplied their teachings and allowed sexist discrimination and marginalization. Freedom of religion or belief, including secular belief, calls for protection not only of one's own tradition but also protection of the different traditions of one's neighbours, women and men, near and far.

Choosing positive values and traditions from one's own tradition and learning from similar traditions among one's neighbours of other faiths could help to stem the prejudice and violence between but also within religious communities in places such as Northern Ireland. One welcome development in that country is that new schools are being established which are open to children from different religious communities.

The violent trauma which some children have suffered from being exposed to hate-talk and violence between different religious communities could be helped by mixing at a school age for educational and recreational purposes. Religiously based schools need not restrict their catchment to children from a single tradition but should see the opportunity to teach and live tolerance in mixed classes. In France where some Muslim girls have been excluded from public education because they chose to wear head-scarves those same girls have sometimes found a more tolerant welcome in Catholic schools.

One cannot be blind to the fact that some places of worship sponsor exclusive and prejudiced teaching not only against people of other faiths but against co-religionists with whom they disagree. Such places of worship and education bring religion into disrepute, not least with such young people who may resent what may appear as attempts at brain-washing of themselves or incitements to violence against others. While some young people may be persuaded by such teachings and may join the ranks of extremists and fanatics in whatever religion, many, and hopefully the great majority, will seek a more moderate expression of their own faith and a more respectful approach to the faith of others. But in some cases young people may be turned away from religion by violence which they have seen preached or perpetrated in the name of religion, even if such violence is really a contradiction of what religions should be teaching in terms of values that direct us to treat our neighbour as we would wish to be treated ourselves.

In sensitive and socially active places of worship, young people can be given appropriate roles of leadership, not only in Sunday schools or Qur'an schools, but also in undertaking social service ranging from visits to lonely or needy neighbours to supporting human rights causes around the world. Places of worship can provide teaching that widens their horizons from self-centredness to a vision of the needs of others. Drawing on the resources of religious teachings of compassion and justice young people can be attracted into a sense of their own responsibility for combating discrimination and ignorance and for building peace. Learning from and building on positive traditions and values in our religions we may draw strength, young and old together, to overcome the apathy, selfishness and arrogance which have enfeebled and divided our communities and undermined the credibility of our religions. Worship, whether communal or individual, should not protect us from the sometimes ugly realities of the world, but should invite and prepare us to be more faithful servants of our fellow humans and of our Creator.

Dr John B. Taylor
Representative of the International Association for Religious Freedom
at the United Nations (Geneva)