

on, it may help to engage in two preliminary discussions. The first, should review Edward Said's seminal work on *Orientalism*.¹¹ It should be conceded that Said raises important issues about how people study other cultures, especially when their own culture is politically dominant, and this is pertinent to some of the recent revisionist histories of early Islam. However, the book is seriously flawed. Scholars writing in German made major contributions to Islamic Studies but Said ignored their work as irrelevant because Germany did not impose its rule on the Muslim world. Furthermore he castigated 'Orientalists' for treating the East as monolithic but then made a similar mistake by treating all western scholarship as essentially the same.

The second preliminary discussion should examine the way in which the unthinkable becomes thinkable for members of religious bodies. I have long maintained that the conceptual and analytical tools used in the historical-critical study of the Bible should be deployed in studying the Qur'an. However, living in Kazakhstan has made me acutely aware that Orthodox Christians reject western biblical scholarship wholesale, including textual criticism. I do not believe that Germans and Anglo-Saxons are more intelligent than Greeks and Slavs (or that they are more subversive!) or that Orthodoxy is intrinsically more anti-intellectual than Protestantism or Catholicism. It is rather that the Orthodox countries did not experience the conceptual shifts that occurred in Western Europe at the time of the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. The causes of these great cultural awakenings were highly complex but a common denominator in all three was the rise of affluent independent cities whose bourgeoisie rejected the interference of religious authorities in affairs of state and their monopoly of education.

Having prepared the ground in this way, I would proceed cautiously with the historical-critical investigation of the Qur'an. The obvious starting point is textual criticism because the discovery in Sana'a of early Qur'anic manuscripts that differ from the Uthmanic text have made this an urgent priority.³⁴

INTERRELIGIOUS Learning and Citizenship Education in Multicultural Society

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Societies go through changes. Many societies have become more multicultural over the last decades. Nowadays we find a **diversity of identities** and conflicting interests of groups or cultures. Religious diversity is a fact of modern/postmodern life. For some it could be a threat to cherished beliefs, tempting them to retreat to the security of the absolute certainties of their religion. For others, it could be a challenge either to test their faith or to create new meaningful relationships within the plurality of beliefs, with no one faith pretending to be superior over the others. Recent and current research

31 Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: Dorset Press, n.d.) 18.18

32 Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 2nd edition (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2004) pp. 100-146

33 Edward Said *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978)

34 The manuscripts were discovered in 1972 but much of the information about them has not been made public

studies, carried out by some anthropologists, scholars of religion, and theologians, have come to judge the view of the superiority of a religion over others as contestable, even unacceptable, and smacking of arrogance and pride.

The presence of citizens with more **varying religious affiliations** and with different understandings of the role religions are to play in society, pose new questions for societies and their citizens to respond to. Within the academic community, issues like these are more and more researched and discussed. The context, that social changes are brought to have a bearing on in this paper, is **interreligious education**. The plurality and ambiguity of postmodern society present unique challenges for religious educators who wish to foster interreligious education and dialogue. How to respond to pluralism/diversity while cutting across the different cultures that rupture society, and at the same time, preserve certain core traditional values, represents a challenge for educators.

From the passing wake of the colonial era and the Cold War, **ethnic and religious conflicts** have re-emerged as one of the most significant threats to the **internal stability of many states** as well as peaceful relations between states. The last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first have borne witness to a renewed emphasis on **expressions of extremisms** defined in terms of religious and ethnic identity. Each of these conflicts is, of course, different. Each one emerges from and responds to its own complex historical, political, cultural, and religious context. However, there are important similarities. Many of them, for instance, have emerged in ethnically diverse states that are themselves artifacts of colonialism, either of the West or the former Soviet Union. That imposition of colonial power established hierarchies of *the colonizer and the colonized*, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressor and the oppressed that inspired, dialectically, nationalist aspirations in subject peoples throughout the twentieth century. While it would not be accurate to say that any of these conflicts are purely religious in nature, it is fair to say that in each of them religious differences are mapped onto ethnic, political, linguistic, and class differences in ways that seem to make them more virulent and perhaps intractable. In 1903, at the height of the colonial era, the African American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois declared that the problem of the twentieth century would be the “color-line,” a problem intimately intertwined with colonialism, as he and later anticolonial intellectuals would come to recognize. One century on, it seems reasonable to ask whether the problem of the twenty-first century will be the **religion-line**.

As our interactions with people of various ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds increases, generating respect for those who are different becomes vital. Mutual respect is enhanced when opportunities for dialogue and understanding increases; lack of knowledge of the other leads only to distrust and disrespect. Engagement leads to an awareness of others: an embrace of similarities and a respect for differences. Finding a means to enhance interaction will serve to break down barriers and create opportunities to explore the cultural and spiritual wealth and wisdom possessed by religious and secular communities far and wide.

What, we might ask, then has education to do with such matters? Surely armed rebellions and terrorism are military and law enforcement problems, not the responsibility of schools. Surely political questions of independence, democratization, or human rights are the purview of political leaders, not teachers. Economic policy makers are surely better equipped to address matters of poverty, economic

underdevelopment, and unemployment than educational policy makers. *And questions of religious belief and attitudes are widely seen as off-limits for public education in many modern democratic states.* What does education have to do with any of this? **A lot. Education and educational policy**, while certainly not the only or even the main factor, are nevertheless **significant players** for good or ill in such conflicts.

The significance of education in such contexts stems from its function and location in society. Along with families and religious institutions, the school is an institution charged with the socialization of the young into the life of the larger community and society. It sits at the nexus between the private world of the family and the public world of the state and holds within its walls that which is most precious to us—our children. Thus education is inevitably a contested terrain. Because of this, it offers a unique window to the fears and aspirations of a society. It offers insight into what a community wants to change in itself, what it aspires to be, and the nature of the disagreements over just what these points are. As an institution of the state, **public education** is an instrument for **the expression of state authority**, the inculcation of **national identity and loyalty**, and the implementation of state policies designed to effect **social control and change**.

While it is no sole cause or a remedy for all, education can play an important role in exacerbating or mitigating social conflicts. Thus, inquiry into the role of educational policy and its relationship to ethno-religious conflict is relevant to understanding and responding to them.

As for the **'higher learning'**, **it is about increasing knowledge, enhancing critical thinking, and developing skills and abilities. Yet, it is about much more. It is also about nurturing in students a sense of meaning and purpose, obligation and responsibility, right action and behaviour, and hope for the future. In essence, it is also about engaging the existential questions of life, those that befit the human as human.** Wrestling with these weighty matters is no easy task.

Engaging the existential questions is not limited to **the academy or secular thinkers**. It has preoccupied the great religions, many of which established universities to aid them in greater understanding of their visions of life and ways of life. As such the link between religion and education has been long-standing, for both have common interests and shared concerns. Higher education has, however, undergone monumental changes over the past century and more, and on at least two important fronts. First, the worldviews of choice in the academy have changed significantly – from the religious to the secular – as many universities drifted from their earlier moorings. The secularization of the academy has had a considerable impact on religious matters and not least the approach to studying them. Theology, once regarded as “queen of the sciences”, has been reduced to a sub-section of religious studies if not eliminated from the university altogether. Second, with the emergence of the modern research institution, **disciplinary specialization** has come to characterize the university and **subject areas are readily segregated from one another. As a result, the university has moved away from questions of ultimate meaning and separated religious/spiritual engagement to other areas of academic studies.**

Human intelligence is able to find its happiness in the happiness of others and at the expense of its own satisfactions; in the same way it is capable of finding its happiness above itself in its celestial personality, which is not yet completely its own.

From this specific nature, made of totality and objectivity, come the vocation, rights, and duties of man. (Frithjof Schuon)

It is exactly here that interreligious education comes in the scene. The question is: ‘what is interreligious learning’? Can we really speak of some kind of interreligious learning? The question of how religious education today addresses multi-religious and/or secular classrooms requires dealing with the question of how the religious education teacher is to be trained at the university level. What kind of teacher is needed for realizing interreligious learning? This is **the academic side of the broader question**. However, before going into this question, various theoretical hazards need to be addressed. One of them is the question of whether, by ‘interreligious learning’, we mean to ask, for example, a Muslim teacher to keep his/her religious and philosophical convictions out of the classroom, and to teach in such a way as to give no one grounds for accusing him/her of using his/her unique position to indoctrinate the young. Should a teacher working in religious education doff his or her religious commitment before setting foot in the classroom? Is it even possible that he/she can? It is difficult to see how any teacher could do this for long, even in earnest of professional competence, however conscientiously he/she may try. Surely the separation of personal religious commitment from professional responsibility is recommended as the best way of safeguarding the autonomy of the pupils and of promoting the development and integration of their personalities. However, the irony here is that if it is through this approach that one hopes to account for the multi-religious and pluralized reality, then it can only be said that those who take such a view have no clear idea of what religious commitment entails. Or perhaps it is that they are contending for a different kind of commitment.

It is well enough understood today that it is a sound educational principle to start where the child is (and, for that matter, where the teacher is). What is then the purpose of interreligious education? Why introduce new ‘languages’ of greater complexity into the lives of young people? Are we talking about the progressive introduction of world religions into the curriculum in a new form, or the introduction of a new approach to the study of religion itself? By interreligious learning, are we aiming at creating some kind of ‘religious hybrids’ in the name of plurality? The approach of the author to the problems and opportunities which face teachers who are interested in interreligious learning is influenced by the conviction that **it is only by a frank declaration of commitment and an open recognition of continuing religious and philosophical differences that we can come to and bring pupils into the kind of tolerance and understanding which is the hall-mark of the open society**. Anything less than this may support for a time an uneasy consensus approach to religious education, but in the long term it may do real disservice to the children. As Huston Smith, in his great work entitled *The World Religions-Our Great Wisdom Traditions*, reminds his readers that the only unqualifiedly good thing is extended vision, the enlargement of one’s understanding of the ultimate nature of things. He also points out that teaching world religions should take religions seriously. The study of world religions is not a tourist adventure. Therefore in line with Professor Smith’s point I would say that interreligious learning can or should be an approach that does *not* allow itself to be a shallow pandering to curiosity seekers, riffling through peoples’ faiths to light upon what has shock value; no ascetics on beds of nails, no crucifixions among Penitentes in Mexico, no parsi Towers of Silence that expose the dead for vultures’ consumption, no erotic sculpture

or excursions into Tantric sex. The great religions house such material, but to focus on it is the crudest kind of vulgarisation. (*Huston Smith*)

We do live at the edge of the history of the future. In the radically changing social, technological, economic, political and religious context where we find ourselves, religious educators must necessarily approach their work in some new ways. Religious educators must be fluent in an interreligious educational language to engage each other respectfully and reverentially across various traditions; fluent in a public religious educational language for native and interreligious conversations in the public square about the economic, political and social forces affecting people's lives; fluent in the languages of a post-religion religious education in order to engage in conversation those who dismiss, critique, or despise religious perspectives and practices, traditions and institutions. Religious educators must be bilingual. We come to religious education with the languages of our religious communities originating in deeply rooted communal experiences of the holy and embedded in ritual practices and sacred texts. **The language of religious education** emerges with the first stirrings of comparison between religious languages that reveal, with increasing consciousness, the vulnerability of those languages. From this perspective the language of religious education is both 'communal' -focused on the continuity and renewal of particular religious communities - and 'inter-communal' or 'interreligious' - influenced by the presence of the religiously 'other'.

In fact, religious education must be more than bilingual; it must be **multilingual**. Human mobility, global economic and political interdependence, new information and communication technologies, emerging alternative world views, and the shifting religious landscape create a radically new challenge for religious education in theory and practice. The future of religious education, I contend, must be concerned not only with the education of particular religious communities, but it must also equip people in and beyond those communities for religious thinking and acting in what many have called this 'postmodern' world. One needs to be attentive enough to the vulnerability of religious communities in the global marketplace, the **marginalisation of religious knowledge** in scientific discourse, the **privatisation of religious experience** in public life, and the **trivialisation of religion** generally in the media. These are not abstract or distant issues.

The question of how religious education today addresses the multi-religious and/or secular classroom requires dealing with the question of how the religious education teacher is to be trained at the university level. What kind of teacher is needed for realizing interreligious learning? This is the academic side of the broader question. Those of us who reflect on the languages of religious education - their assumptions and practices - need a certain language. This is the language of religious education as an academic discipline or field. This language provides a vocabulary for exploring the interplay of issues, contexts, resources, and practices for teaching and learning in and across the various religious educational contexts I have been outlining. Through an academic religious educational language, we engage colleagues in the construction of knowledge across the disciplines of the university. We explore with policymakers principles for religious teaching and learning in both religious and secular communities. We join administrators in the development of strategies or curriculum and supervisory patterns of education in religious traditions and the religious in all other forms of

education. We challenge the opinion makers of culture to provide a critical perspective on the forces that enhance and diminish the whole religious education enterprise. And we listen carefully to the other languages of religious education for both resources and critiques of our creative efforts. An academic religious education, in other words, not only contributes to the continual revisioning of religious education, it also provides a corrective to any preoccupation we might have with any of the other religious educational languages.

Interreligious learning requires reflexivity and can be based on what we label ‘phenomenological theology’ through ‘methodological agnosticism’. Phenomenological theology is different than phenomenology as such. It has a hermeneutical dimension which takes the ‘sacred’ seriously. Descriptive interreligious learning can be followed by the hermeneutical dimension of phenomenological theology, depending on the level of the pupil’s and even the teacher’s perceptiveness. In our official role as teachers, we simultaneously know more and less than the ‘faithful’. The red line runs between teaching and preaching, professing religion and religious confession. What is required here is ‘**reflexivity**’, that is becoming aware of our awareness, reflecting on our reflections. **Reflexivity means that ‘knowing all’ is subjective, and the ‘objective world’ is what knowers claim to know about.** Knowledge, like any other social tool, while it can be critical, is never neutral.

The student of religion, however, must remember that interpretations and even descriptions have significant impacts on both official culture and general thought. It is well enough understood today that it is a sound educational principle to start where the child is (and, for that matter, where the teacher is). What is then the purpose of interreligious education? Why introduce new ‘languages’ of greater complexity into the lives of young people? Are we talking about the progressive introduction of world religions into the curriculum in a new form, or the introduction of a new approach to the study of religion itself? By interreligious learning, are we aiming at creating some kind of ‘religious hybrids’ in the name of plurality? In this perspective interreligious learning implies either that understanding religion without religious understanding is possible through the practice of *epoch* from a phenomenological perspective, or that one has to develop a new approach to ‘understanding religion’. The question, ‘**does understanding religion require religious understanding?**’ can, it seems, be persuasively agreed upon either negatively or affirmatively. Another question is: ‘how can teachers use their experience as insiders or outsiders to inherited religious traditions as a resource to engage students in theoretically self-conscious studies of religion?’. It is generally agreed upon that no intelligent person could study other people, their culture, and religion, without establishing at the same time a distance also to himself, his past, his surroundings, and his involvements. The really interesting question, however, is what kind of distance he establishes and what he has in view when doing so.

Here I would like to propose the ‘**comparative perspective**’ in teaching religion. The point of my comparative exercises in the teaching of religion is to broaden my students’ appreciation of what is at stake in having a world of any kind whatsoever and to clarify the distinctiveness of their own. This exercise in appreciation has - or ought to have - an unsettling intellectual consequence. The ability to grasp the coherence of diverse world images and to see when, where, and how they begin to lose their coherence for those who live within them, presupposes on the student’s part a certain state of ironic

detachment from Truth. By reflecting upon the most comprehensive constructions of the world's order, one cannot escape an impression of the historically contingent character of all worlds, including one's own. Therefore I conceive the Comparative Religions classroom as a place to model a theoretically articulate pluralism regarding the cultural definition of Truth. But I also see it as a place in which the study of those who have certainty of Truth (or who seek to live richly with its loss) draws attention to a crucial issue: namely, **the moral consequences and rhetorical dimensions** of the very theoretical positions that enable our perspectives. Obedience to the morality of the classroom's intellectual project, it seems to me, institutionalizes and privileges ironic distance as the normative standpoint for interpreting the world. This is what our students usually mean by 'objectivity', until we remind them that objectivity is itself a point of view grounded in a commitment to a cultural form of Truth.

A sensitive and intelligent person today who is touched by the complicated sets of factors and forces of modernism cannot but be concerned with the multiplicity of sacred forms manifested in world religions. And the more post-modernism spreads and the secularisation of life increases, the more this concern and awareness grows and even changes in nature and kind. A Muslim in a traditional village in southern Turkey or in Kazkahstan is aware of the presence of Christianity in a manner which is by nature different from the concern of a college student in Belgium or the Netherlands for, let us say, Buddhism. (*Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Knowledge and the Sacred*) At least for that reason, religion in education can no longer imitate the believing community. It cannot hold that a spire, minaret, or rock points the way to salvation whilst the rest of the curriculum, the school staff, and society as a whole states that there are many ways - or perhaps none at all. Crucial, however, for this point of view is an inner commitment to the Truth of the religious thing that one attempts to understand. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, perhaps the most influential exponent of this view, has put it quite sharply:

No statement about Islamic faith is true that Muslims cannot accept. No personalist statement about Hindu religious life is legitimate in which Hindus cannot recognise themselves. No interpretation of Buddhist doctrine is valid unless Buddhists can respond, "Yes! That is what we hold".

Inter-religious learning originates in respect and reverential mutuality. It takes place where we meet each other. It calls for new ways of thinking about who teaches and who learns, what is taught and how, where teaching and learning occur and when. Its contribution to the future of religious education is significant; it challenges the proclivity in our religious traditions to intolerance and oppression and nurtures empathy in us towards religious sensibilities.

There are many ways of dying. There is, however, only one way to live; through discovering what the self and other and their ever changing natures, are really about, to understand how much of the other is really in us and to find out what it is that we have in common in the struggle for a world of justice and dignity for all the inhabitants of the earth. To do so requires transcending theological categories of self and other that were shaped in and intended for another era and context. What is needed is an interreligious learning and this is possible only by recognizing the significance of 'spiritual dimension of humanbeing'. In Islamic terms, the divine roots of the **spiritual dimensions of man** are the hypostases of "Power" (Qudrah), "Wisdom" (Hikmah), and "Compassion" (Rahmah), the last of which is polarized into the two Divine Names:

“the infinitely Good in Himself” (Rahmān) and the “infinitely Merciful” (Rahīm). We can interpret these Names by saying that “Beauty”, which is intrinsic, and “Goodness”, which is extrinsic, constitute “Beatitude” (Rahmah, the equivalent of the Vedantic Ānanda).(*Fritjhof Schuon*)

The question is this: Can students, “without reference to organized religion”, really “make sense of the culture and politics of the present age”? **Can they adequately discuss existential challenges, citizenship responsibilities, meaning and purpose – all of fundamental importance to humans in the twenty-first century – without reference to the great religious traditions?** The real challenge for today’s colleges and universities, especially of the secular variety, is to enhance dialogue dealing with religious and spiritual matters.

Therefore this paper proposes that it is only by a frank declaration of commitment and an open recognition of continuing religious and philosophical differences that we can come to and bring pupils into the kind of recognition and understanding of the ‘other’ which is the hall-mark of the open society. This is also the only way forward for a **citizenship education in a religiously diverse society**. Anything less than this may support for a time an uneasy consensus approach to religious education, but in the long term it may do real disservice to the children. Scholars who speak for their own traditions so as to privilege their claims to truth in competition with other such claims have moved from ‘professing religion’ to ‘religious confession’. Those of us who pursue what conventionally passes for ‘faith’ are not privileged to obscure the difference between confessing the meaning of that pursuit in our own lives and our professional concern to articulate in publicly accessible terms what is at stake in the worlds constructed by the ‘faithful’.

The debate about the place of religious faith in democratic societies is an important one for those societies and, in particular, for educational policy makers and practitioners. The position taken on **the place of religious faith in democratic life and civic engagement** will have significant impact on the form and practice of citizenship education. The participation of religious adherents as people of faith in **civic life** is not a threat to democracy but a matter of simple justice. Recently (January 2013) I was at the European Parliament to participate in a conference on Islamophobia and Living Together in inter-cultural societies. It has once more shown that we are in desperate need of intercultural and interreligious learning in public education. This is necessary for a **citizenship education** in multicultural societies. Interreligious learning puts forward a pedagogical/curricular model that engages students in knowing self and others: exploring beliefs and values of self and others. Lastly, it introduces **worldview frameworks and worldviews types** as means to assist in identifying, describing and analyzing various worldviews of today, be they one’s own, those of others, or those that hold sway in the public square.

What we should overall be caring for, perhaps, is not ‘religion’ as such but students’ spiritual and moral needs. Will then interreligious learning help this? Interreligious learning can be considered as a method not a paradigm. If there is a ‘truth’ in what is taught, interreligious learning can convey this truth to the hearts of students. In this delicate pedagogical method much depends upon the teacher’s intellectual honesty and the cultivation of the student’s capacity for informed disagreement. It is a task that demands all of the resources not only of our academic training, but of our whole selves.