

Education for Peace: The Role of Religion

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On the occasion of the opening of the Second Asian Conference on Religion and Peace, I send my best wishes in the name of the United Nations University for the success of this important conference. The awakening of religious values that one sees here in Asia and in many parts of the world is inextricably linked to humankind's yearnings for a more peaceful, just, and meaningful existence at a time of global crisis. This conference is thus addressing one of the central concerns of our times.

In order to guarantee peaceful co-existence among differing peoples, cultures and social systems, thereby fostering global co-operation in solving the many problems that confront today's increasingly perilous, insecure and fragile world, the participation of the world's major religions is essential. They could be a major force in the shaping of a sense of shared humanity and solidarity across the globe and with future generations. To this end they need to establish a creative dialogue, embracing people of good will everywhere, in the quest for a new ethical and transcendental base for global civilization -- one built not on power and profit-seeking, but rather on respect for pluralistic cultural values and concern for the survival and welfare of the smallest, the weakest and the alienated.

Peace education is a concept with many meanings. If focused only on concrete studies of disarmament, mutual defence pacts, or military security considerations, religion may seem to be only a minor factor. But if one recalls the injunction of the UNESCO Charter that war and peace begins in the minds and hearts of men -- where also reside man's sense of the transcendent and the values that spring from his perception of the meaning of life -- then it quickly becomes apparent how closely and inescapably linked peace education and religion should be.

However, it is not only in the mind that war begins -- and to treat it thus might give an overly spiritualistic tone to the search for peace. Conflict and violence also breed in the world's socio-economic, political and cultural realities. Indeed, religion, in its fullest sense, is itself very much a social and cultural reality, whose impact is not limited to the minds of individuals. It also has an impact on social behaviour and human collectivities, helping set the basic value orientations of peoples, nations and civilizations. The role of religion in peace education, therefore, should be seen in this historical context -- where war, peace and religion are recognized as societal phenomena. The spiritual and transcendental dimension is, of course, of central importance, but its true meaning may be lost if we do not also keep in sight the many other realities -- social, economic, political, and cultural -- that cause a religion to flourish or wane, a war to erupt, or peace to be achieved.

Let me first discuss briefly the problem of peace and peace education in the contemporary world crisis before turning to an examination of how religions have functioned as factors for peace and

for conflict. We may then try to relate the two to see what constructive role religions might play in peace education in the modern world.

There was a time when war and conflict was largely a matter of warriors and other specialists of military violence. Civilians were often victims of such wars, but not the main actors in the conflict. Particularly in Europe over the past several centuries, war was an affair of states and the balance of power among them was the determinant of peace. The pursuit of national interests dictated war and peace.

Now, however, war has become total and it is waged by mobilizing total populations. War and peace have become the concern and the responsibility of all citizens, men and women, young and old, rich and poor. Increasingly too, conflict -- both domestic and international -- can erupt due to socio-economic and political tensions and contradictions across class, religious, cultural, ethnic and linguistic lines.

In recent times, peace and war have been perceived as mainly a matter involving the nuclear superpowers only; mutual nuclear deterrence and "detente" between the two camps were seen as the best guarantee of peace, albeit an uneasy and frightening peace. Now, however, war and other domestic conflicts in the Third World occur in situations where the superpowers' capacity for crisis management is virtually inoperative. These conflicts, which virtually always carry the threat of escalation into nuclear conflagration and the extinction of all humanity, are but symptoms of the contemporary world crisis which has deep rooted causes unrelated to the nuclear balance of power. The present wars and conflicts around the globe need to be seen in the context of this international crisis.

This crisis is not only economic but also structural, in that it involves a process of fragmentation of power and dissolution of the existing order -- both within nations regardless of ideology and on a global scale. In such a period of structural transformation, war and peace have come to involve personal choices, perceptions and values over what order is legitimate, just and desirable.

Thus this crisis also involves profound and swift cultural change -- change which, irrespective of social system, is sharply challenging the modern industrial civilization fashioned largely on Western models. In such a condition of global disorder and vulnerability, peace can only be achieved when a pluralistic world civilization replaces one where intolerance prevails, economic and technological competition rule, and the struggle for power is guided by the principle of the survival of the fittest.

At its core, therefore, this is a crisis of basic human values and ideals. It cannot be surmounted by continuing to attempt to slake the thirst for power and profit of those two familiar actors on the world scene -- homo economicus and homo politicus. We will only begin to find our way out of the crisis when we come to recognize, everywhere around the globe, that a shared sense of human dignity and a respect for the hopes and expectation of others are the only possible alternatives to even greater turmoil and disarray and unacceptable costs in human suffering.

Peace education, therefore, will avail us little if it does not recognize the vital necessity of coping with the structural, civilizational and human aspects of the present world crisis. Peace education must be

seen as a learning process which will enhance man's perception of himself and enlarge our capacity for compassion and concern for our fellow men and women on this very small and increasingly crowded planet. We need particularly to involve young people in this process, for it is they who will largely shape the future, and teach them the necessity of co-operation and resolution of conflicts and differences without resort to violence. We are talking here essentially about the ability to care for one another, irrespective of creed, culture, ideological conviction or social status. As Barbara Ward said, unless we learn to love one another, we may all very well perish.

The world's major religions have a major role to play in this global learning process. Despite the tragic record of religious wars, all of the major religions, at their best moments, have displayed a willingness to freely offer the hand, the head and the heart -- indispensable elements in the fostering of human understanding and compassion.

Religion often played a role in traditional societies, for example, in teaching basic commitments to a legitimate order transcending the family, the tribe or other primary social units. It taught that certain powerful people -- such as priests and others -- were meant to serve the common goal of all those professing to be believers. This fundamental sense of common destiny was further combined, through religious teaching, with attention to the good of other members of the family, neighbours, the poor and the powerless. In various societies, this fundamental human virtue of compassion for others was made the basis for peace; it is a virtue that should figure large in the planning of any present-day peace education curriculum.

Religion also played a role in singling out certain individuals as exemplary models of a life dedicated to peace -- as with gurus, the hermits, the saints and the wise people. In both Eastern and Western religions, the mystics were held up as living examples of alternative ways of life and social orders that were most just, equitable, humane and peaceful. Such efforts, while often combined with intolerance, hierarchical religious rule, corruption, and other weaknesses, were attempts at making religions schools for peace.

Unfortunately, historical conditions rule out the hope for an easy recovery of this previous peace education function of religions in the present world crisis. The global process of modernization has made it difficult for religions to play the role they once played. Modernization, starting in the West, has been, among other things, a process of secularization in which religion's influence and control over society has been replaced by the modern state. As religion and the state become separated in Western societies, the latter took over various means of social control and services traditionally in the hands of the former, such as education, social welfare, and other activities that help shape individual values and perceptions.

Beyond this, the nation states demanded total allegiance of their nationals. They replaced the religious ethic with one in which the means justified the ends of economic growth and industrialization. With the exceptions of a few state religions, where religion played a secular function in legitimizing state power, belief became a matter of individual choice. The transcendental, the sacred and the spiritual were all put in the shade of the materialistically-oriented cultures of industrial

societies.

We now, however, see signs everywhere of a questioning of the values of the modern secularized civilization -- it is one of the more conspicuous aspects of the contemporary world crisis. In the West, this is evident in the searching, particularly by young people, after alternative life-styles and new ethical commitments to a transcendental, spiritual world view. The phenomenon of hippies and communes is a manifestation of this as is the interest in Yoga and Zen meditation. There is also, with all ages, evidence of a reawakening interest in Christianity.

Outside the West, there has been a revival of non-Western religious traditions. This has sometimes taken the form of fundamentalism, but the over-all impact on different social groups and new religious orientations is far broader. The Islam revival is a good example of this mounting tide, where the range of religious commitments goes from Islamic fundamentalism to Islamic Marxism.

Thus we can see that a resurgence of transcendental values is taking different form, sometimes forward looking, sometimes reactionary, but always with increasing influence. The problem now is how religions can benefit from this new questing after the spiritual and the transcendent and positively channel it in ways that will help us overcome the current crisis.

One thing seems clear: a return to the role played by religions in traditional society, the frequent dream of fundamentalists, is not the answer. In the past, religions have paid attention largely to individuals' salvation. Now religion must confront squarely the challenge of the contemporary world crisis and seek to imbue efforts to respond to the

crisis with a sense of humanity, dignity, and respect for one's fellow human beings.

Religions, here in Asia and elsewhere, can no longer avoid coming to grips with profound social and political changes and their attendant problems. There is growing awareness that the immorality of poverty and injustice is, to a large extent, the consequence of structural relationships. Religions, therefore need to become aware of the real meaning of their message for this process of structural change.

The changes that Asia is experiencing and will continue to experience in future decades are impelled by the moral rejection of poverty and injustice, and are part of the process of social and cultural self-renewal. No religion can stand aloof from this without losing credibility. At the same time, all such movements are defined by the imprint of their leaders, and by their place in the history of their society, with its own inner contradictions. Thus no religion can fully identify with any particular social movement for change. Rather, through participation in the global learning process, religions should seek to help bring about morally desirable and justifiable change.

While identifying with the moral impulse behind the drive for development, religions, at the same time, will have to realize that the headlong thrust for economic growth may become destructive of the very human dignity, freedom and human rights for which the effort was launched.

Neither can religions afford to be guided solely by righteous indignation at persistent injustice and inequality and the slowness of efforts to overcome them. This could blind them to the dynamics and limitations of power in managing social transformation while maintaining

national harmony, the social fabric of solidarity, unity and a minimum of stability and security. Religions must learn to live with the many conflicting demands of development which can raise a host of moral dilemmas.

Another important role for religions in the learning process will be in assuming part of the responsibility for increasing a nation's over-all capacity to manage the tensions inherent in the development process. This means helping to increase awareness and understanding, at all levels of society, of the complex interconnections and dynamics of these tensions. They will have to abandon much of their traditional role as legitimizers of formal authority and power and become moral counselors helping to channel a difficult process of social transformation and human growth.

Over and above any commitment to change, no religion can escape the responsibility of trying to reduce the social and human cost of change and humanizing the processes of change. This means an insistence on due process, democratic procedures, and the rule of law and human rights, wherever change occurs. Religions could make a major contribution to a world in a state of rapid, profound and often unsettling change by simply teaching the importance of caring about human beings, human costs and civility. The role of religion in overcoming fear generated by the rapidly changing social environment is, indeed, one which cannot be replaced by any other "teacher" in peace education. In fact, human beings can live with fear, and accept others' possibly harmful presence, only when a transcendental vision, call it faith or enlightenment, liberates them from the mundane concerns of an egotistic self-preservation.

Such a role will also require a greater capacity to articulate moral problems in ways relevant to the policy options that are realistically available to both the government and the governed. In periods of social transformation, passionate absolutisms, and inclinations toward violent actions, religion could be a guide star in helping relate the course of events to moral purposes, in reminding man of his inherent inadequacy and thus teach him the humility of mind that is so needed in dealing with history and its massive processes of change.

The impact of the various religions, here in Asia and around the globe, will depend very much on their willingness to subordinate proselytizing to greater solidarity and the acceptance of religious pluralism as an essential condition of a just and equitable global society. They will have to work towards the mutual acceptance of, and trust in, a sense of shared humanity, even with people who have fundamentally different ideological orientations, or people whom we fear or despise. The necessity of sharing this small globe, and a common future, with four billion others, and eight billion during the next generation, forces us to rethink our cultural and social arrangements to enable us to survive with peace, freedom and human dignity. Many in Asia will look to their religions for answers. Those answers must somehow provide a vision for a single humankind without falling into the trap of exclusive claim to truth and legitimacy by a single religion. In addition, we will all have to learn to live with a higher degree of vulnerability as an inevitable condition of contemporary life. This is true for nations, weak and strong, but also at the personal level. Learning to live at this higher level of vulnerability means learning

to live with our fears, and learning to manage our fears, without being dominated by them. At the personal level, our capacity to live with our vulnerability and our fears depends on our own inner sense of security, one of the major sources of which is faith. One important contribution which the world's religions can make to peace education therefore, over and beyond our understanding of the social, political and cultural forces at work, is the strengthening of faith in ways that are relevant to the human problematique of today.

In answering those questions successfully, religions could evolve a new kind of education for peace -- an education which is not just a self-righteous teaching of traditional religious dogma, but rather a quest for pluralistic dialogue among many peoples, cultures and societies, a reaching out for compassion and tolerance without sacrificing one's own perception of truth. Peace education thus should be seen by the religions not as a teaching operation, but as a mutual learning experience linking them to the hundreds of millions on this globe looking for a way out of their hunger, poverty, and despair.

In fostering such a dialogue, the religions could help make peace education a truly meaningful component of the process of global learning -- a process in which men and women of different religions, cultures and ideologies join together in the creation of a more just and peaceful world order, grounded in a civilization free of the festering pathology of the arms race and the drive for power and profits, and openly and warmly acceptant of more humane and secure ways of life and societal organization.

The United Nations University is extremely interested in establishing

a forum where such dialogue could begin, where the world academic and scientific communities could come together with the world's leading religions in search of their common stake in the fate of this planet. That is why we attach such great significance and importance to this meeting. Building a pluralistic world civilization where different religious traditions can co-exist and mutually reinforce the cause of peace and human dignity will be a challenging task. But it is essential to the creation of a sense of shared humanity and solidarity, now and with future generations, that is a sine qua non of our survival in an increasingly crowded and competitive world of finite resources. I commend the dedication of the Asian Conference on Religion and Peace and the World Conference on Religion and Peace to the achievement of that vision -- and I wish this conference Godspeed.