

**Religions: Conflict and Resolution—An Educational Approach**  
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CONFLICTS between human groups or communities have many different roots, both historical and in existing situations. But they reach tragic and bloody levels only when several factors interact synergistically in causing them. In most cases one factor is religious intolerance. Ethnocentrism, racial prejudice, country loyalty and land-owning ambitions, social class struggle and ideological polarization are also prominent factors. But very seldom, throughout history and in the contemporary world, can we find examples of cruel and inhuman conflicts between large groups of people where the religious factor does not strongly operate. Bosnia, the Middle East, Algeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka are among the most obvious examples. Note that in Sri Lanka the conflict is between Hindu Tamils and the Buddhist majority, in spite of the fact that Buddhists usually refrain from violence.

If the previous statements are correct (as I firmly believe), we must ask how it is possible that religion can play such a destructive role in human interactions. Religions usually preach peace and mutual understanding, hope in a happy future for all—usually for all “true believers.” And for others? During the ages of Enlightenment and humanism, the concept of “tolerance” did not imply real equality, but only advice to tolerate people who professed faiths different from the dominant one and not to persecute them. People not professing any faith (atheists) were often not to be “tolerated.” This was nonetheless an important achievement, of course, but was far from representing a general order of mutual understanding. Such an order would imply appreciation of religious faiths different from our own, and even of people not believing in any specific religion, but only in a general moral law. In some cultural spheres, such as China and in particular Japan, religious syncretism has largely developed. In Japan, for instance, one can be Shintoist and Buddhist at the same time. But even there in the recent past, religion and Buddhism repressed and even persecuted.

We have in the world a number of examples of syncretism, such as that in Brazil, between Christianity and old African polytheistic faiths. But in general we find that the paroxysms of conflict concern the monotheistic religions which, as the “religions of Abraham,” have much in common: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The most heated antagonism is presently between Judaism and Islam, which are divided by certain mythical and ritual differences, but have a very large and solid common core of beliefs. This can only be explained by considering that people tend to become emotionally attached to the ritual dimensions of religion rather than to its rational constructs.

**Religion As Humanity’s Spontaneous Need**

IN order to understand all of this, I think we must go deeper in analyzing the anthropological foundations of religious experience. Otherwise it is difficult to see how education can overcome the potential and often tragic emergence of conflicts between different religious allegiances.

As palentological evidence shows, religion seems to be a spontaneous need of humankind, at least of Homo sapiens. The explanation is not difficult to understand even from a naturalistic point of view of human evolution. A key factor in people’s

survival lies in their capacity to imaginatively anticipate the consequences of their own behavior. Other main traits that enhance this value are the capacity to learn through playful exploratory activities not directly useful in practice as well as strong pro-social attitudes and affective family links. Therefore, the human being is the only animal that: (1) worries about the uncertainty of the future; (2) is aware he will die, (3) is painfully stricken by the deaths of parents and relatives; (4) is inclined to conceive through his rich imagination some continuity of life beyond death, and also (5) finds relief and even gratification in the complex interplay of rituals, stories and legends (including funerary banquets) that accompany ceremonies related to death.

But life, not only death, is also an important impetus toward religious beliefs because (6) as social beings, humans develop a sense of responsibility toward other beings, and need rules from a parent-like authority. As *homo faber* (human as craftsman), (7) humans have developed conceptions about cause-effect relations, and a Supreme Cause, of either personal or cosmic nature, seems necessary to them.

Religions, even the animistic ones, give answers to all or to a majority of the different needs listed above. They often promise to help believers in fulfilling their hopes and defeating their enemies. A frequent outcome of this last characteristic, which is certainly not essential to religion, consists in identifying enemies with "nonbelievers." And thus religion becomes one prominent factor of the warlike, often cruel and destructive, human group behavior.

### Toward a "Common Faith" for Humanity?

CAN education prevent such a perversion of religions? Can it do this without denying any true religious value? I think this is possible and therefore a duty for all people involved in educational activities, first of all teachers and professors. But this is not an easy task. I refer to the list of seven natural human needs very sketchily outlined above. In order to make students fully aware of these, we should develop different subject matters in the framework of a large inter- and multi-disciplinary approach, possibly eliciting interests through research and problem-solving group work.

History (and particularly the history of religions), geography, civic and political concepts, natural history, evolution theory, anthropology, philosophy and even astronomy and cosmology would have their place in such an endeavor. But some families and religious groups in society are against such teachings. Fundamentalists with similar attitudes exist among Jews, Muslims and also Christians. And even in many religious schools, both Koranic and Hebraic, closed sectarianism often prevails. Most fanatic "kamikaze" terrorists come from these.

HOWEVER, the recent trend of such perversion of religions does not represent the worldwide mainstream of religious life. On the contrary, recent decades, especially the last few years, have seen a series of more or less "official" initiatives oriented toward mutual acceptance and even cooperation among different faiths. Sometimes this involves only Christian denominations, sometimes all "the religions of Abraham," and has recently included virtually all of the world's religions, including Buddhism. The theologian Hans Kung has published a book, *Toward a Global Ethic (An Initial Declaration)*, about the common ethical rules adopted at the 1993 convention in Chicago of the unofficial representatives of about 100 different religions. More recently, at conventions in Assisi and Rome, official representatives of the major

religions of the world agreed on a set of common values. In December 1995, several thousands of believers and nonbelievers convened in St. Giovanni in Laterano (the oldest cathedral in Rome) to compare their views on the question of world peace.

As long as such processes of interfaith dialogue continue to develop, formal education will have a successful lateral role in solving conflicts among religions, in affirming their right to diversity, within a context not only of full tolerance but also of mutual understanding and appreciation. This will also mean that the spirit of secularization and laicism will no longer be in conflict with religion, and that the "common faith" proposed by John Dewey, the American philosopher and educator, and somewhat later by the English writer Aldous Huxley under Leibniz's expression "perennial philosophy," will permeate more and more of humanity. (As was recently mentioned in a lecture by Daisaku Ikeda, president of the Soka Gakkai International, the founder of the association, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, was a deep admirer of Dewey's thought.)

Of course this is difficult to promote a "common faith" for humanity, its premise being a large, almost universal diffusion of the type of scientific knowledge specified above and the consequent attitudes of openmindedness and human brotherhood among people. A difficult task, but not a utopian one. My personal faith is centered on the possibility we have of achieving it. □

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