



## Global education challenges: Exploring religious dimensions

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### ABSTRACT

Education goals are central to global agendas for sustainable development and humanitarian action, but these agendas tend to deal glancingly, if at all, with religious dimensions. Religious institutions play significant parts in national and international education systems and approaches in many countries, sometimes as critical partners or significant critics. Understanding religious differences is increasingly understood as central to citizenship and peaceful societies. This article explores six topics where religious actors are particularly involved: delivery of education and outreach to underserved populations; specific education approaches for refugees and displaced populations; curricular focus on pluralism and ‘religious literacy’; addressing education challenges surrounding values in education and understandings of citizenship; training of religious leaders; and advocacy for education goals and reforms.

### 1. Education as a right and an imperative: religious engagement?

A high-level international commission report issued in October 2016 (‘The Learning Generation’) highlighted global challenges ahead for education: ‘Unless we change course now, nearly 1 billion school-aged children will still be denied basic secondary-level skills in 2030. Even in 2050, one child in three in Africa will not be able to complete basic secondary education... If we transform the performance of education systems, unleash innovation, prioritize inclusion, expand financing, and motivate all countries to accelerate their progress to match the world’s top 25% fastest education improvers, we can build the Learning Generation’ (International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016). The Commission’s recommendations build on the global consensus reflected in the year 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their successors, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approved by United Nations (UN) member states in 2015. SDG 4 sets out the contemporary framework and bold objective: ‘Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote

lifelong learning’. ‘The Learning Generation’ report’s emphasis on quality and equity likewise reflects contemporary concerns about the relevance of education and deep inequities between and within nations.

Education is widely acknowledged as a basic human right and a critical prerequisite for successful contemporary democracy and for thriving, sustainable, and just economies and societies. The specific SDG education goals have grown out of a decades long, strengthening international consensus calling for joined global efforts to assure ‘Education for All’ (EFA).<sup>1</sup> Broad commitments were launched formally at the global conference in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and both goals and monitoring systems have sharpened since then – for example, from an earlier focus on primary education and increasing enrollments of girls to the current focus on full educational systems, lifelong learning, and broad understandings of inclusion. Current objectives include not only access for all to primary and secondary education but also quality education, addressing glaring inequities, and early childhood education (Pritchett, 2013). Progress toward goals is measured regularly in various ways and debates about the quality and direction of education

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/>.

figure prominently at national and international levels. The goals are justified in ethical (fairness and equity) and material (preparation for employment and citizenship) terms. Education as a right and as a central link in the development chain thus ranks high on most global agendas.<sup>ii</sup>

The marginal treatment of religious facets<sup>iii</sup> in the global discussions is striking and puzzling ('The Learning Generation' report cited above is a case in point as is the 2018 World Development Report<sup>iv</sup>). Religious institutions play major educational roles, and religious beliefs as to educational curricula and pedagogy are pertinent for core education goals and design. One reason why religious aspects have tended to be ignored is that in framing global education goals, the state is seen as carrying the primary responsibility. The assumption is that the state itself will support, deliver, and regulate education. While there is increasing recognition that many sectors of society are involved, notably private and civil society actors, religious actors are relatively neglected.

Reasons for this neglect include historical events that actively separated religious and secular approaches in education, concerns to assure impartial treatment of different communities in public educational systems, and special sensitivities around religious involvement in national affairs in various countries.<sup>v</sup> This includes quite widespread fears that religiously run or shaped education cannot be separated from efforts to convert to a faith (fear of proselytism). The sheer size and complexity of religious communities, beliefs, and educational roles present daunting challenges that range from poor and confusing data to the perils of sweeping generalizations about roles of religion and culture. Lack of engagement with religious actors can also reflect differences in approach, agendas, and priorities among disciplines and communities; these differences can be perceived or actual. For example, the 'Learning Generation' report focuses squarely on four transformations seen as vital to achieving long-term goals: performance, innovation, inclusion, and financing. The SDGs highlight quantitative targets and likewise focus on system performance and equity. Two topics that religious actors highlight often –cultural relevance and values as a goal of education–may be embedded in these agendas, but how is not always obvious. The way goals for inclusion and innovation are discussed by secular and religious actors tend to sound very different even where at their core they address similar issues.

The focus here is on six dimensions of global educational challenges with special relevance for religious actors and institutions. (a) Religious institutions run large education systems that provide a significant share of education in many countries. Parts of these systems are models of excellence, educating leaders and serving as exemplars of what can be achieved; others fall near the bottom of the heap in terms of quality and social benefit. Especially relevant for global development goals are their capacities for innovation, access, and knowledge, especially for poverty-related access and achievement issues. Poor data and understanding of scope and performance often limit constructive engagement of these systems in national policies. (b) Widely varied actors linked to religious traditions play important roles in efforts to address contemporary challenges of assisting refugee and internally displaced

populations with wide-ranging education programs. (c) Religious institutions often do and certainly should contribute to defining what is taught in national education systems about religion–across curricula. Increasing general understanding about religions is a fundamental part of identity and culture for the many world citizens who live in increasingly plural societies. Understanding religious approaches can be critical for social cohesion. (d) Religious institutions commonly highlight their roles in and concern for core social values. They play significant roles in preparing young people to be informed and proactive global citizens. These global citizenship challenges link at a fundamental level to ancient and broad questions about how educational approaches and systems address questions of values and how that translates into educational practice. (e) Training of religious leaders is a generally neglected topic for education policy, yet in today's era of globalization, future religious leaders and scholars need heightened awareness about living within dynamic and plural societies and understanding issues of social change cum development (gender equality, for example). And (f), religious institutions and leaders can be powerful advocates for social justice, including education for all, at global, regional, national, and community levels. Likewise, their opposition or tepid support can slow progress.

From this starting point, the article highlights briefly the extensive experience with schooling at all levels of many religious traditions, and long-standing, sophisticated, and authentic religious commitments to learning and education. This experience and the moral underpinnings of religious support for education are important assets. There are many pertinent models, some well known (Jesuit education), some less so (the Aga Khan Network, for example). Various faith-inspired approaches address the central challenges for global education: service delivery for some of the world's poorest populations as well as shaping elite values. Religious institutions also influence opinions and politics on thorny issues for education policy –for example, standards for religious literacy, treatment of minorities in contemporary plural societies, gender norms, extremist teaching, and shifting expectations and norms on secular versus religious approaches in law and practice. The core argument is that, notwithstanding widely diverse situations and particular sensitivities, religious institutions should be engaged as significant players for achieving global education goals.

## 2. Education delivery: access and integration of systems

Religious institutions and communities run schools, widely varied but covering virtually all types of education institutions from pre-kindergarten through post-graduate and adult education. There are no reliable estimates on the aggregate share of religiously run education (though some broad figures, up to 50%, are fairly commonly heard). World Bank economist Quentin Wodon's review of data from 16 sub-Saharan African countries found that 14% of primary school enrollment and 11% of secondary school enrollment was in faith-inspired schools (Wodon, 2013, 2014; Wodon and Lomas, 2015; University of Birmingham, 2015). This is indicative but a very partial view. The mixed guesstimates highlight serious shortfalls of data on quantity and quality. What is clear is that in some countries religiously run education is a significant part of the education system while in others (especially where religious schools have been nationalized or outlawed) its part is relatively small.

Relationships between religiously run education and the state and more specifically public education systems vary widely. Religious schools are well mapped and integrated within national systems in some instances, but elsewhere they may be highly decentralized and operate quite separately, without official sanction, certification, or oversight. Catholic Church-run school systems are among the largest and most significant. As an illustration, Catholic Church figures put the number of students in Catholic schools in Africa in 2012 at close to 23.5 million (Grace and O'Keefe, 2007). Arrangements vary by country, but governments commonly recognize Catholic schools as private schools.

<sup>ii</sup> See Heyneman (2008b) for a thoughtful critique of the background of Education for All, including its flaws.

<sup>iii</sup> Definitions are contentious where religion is concerned. The terms 'religious', 'faith', and 'spiritual' are used often with specific significance but quite differently in different contexts. 'Religious' often suggests association with a specific religious institution while 'faith' and 'spiritual' may carry a broader and less institutional significance. But there is no consensus on the matter. This article uses 'religious' and 'faith' interchangeably, with an effort to reflect the preference of the relevant institution or community. The term 'religious actors' is preferred to 'religious leaders', reflecting a larger group of individuals and institutions, beyond those with formal institutional leadership roles. See Marshall and Van Saanen (2004), Marshall and Keough (2007), Marshall (2010, 2013).

<sup>iv</sup> The World Bank, *The World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise*. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018>.

<sup>v</sup> Two recent books make the point about the dearth of general knowledge about religion and its negative consequences particularly well: Albright (2007) and Prothero (2008).

A rather different situation applies in various countries for Islamic education (Adams et al., 2016). To illustrate, in Senegal, the large Qur'anic education system is highly decentralized and unregulated. In Bangladesh, part of the Islamic education system (Alia madrasas) is part of the State system, while another part (Quomi madrasas) is not.

Seen from the global perspective, and starkly clear in the monitoring reports of international progress toward education goals, the most difficult challenges ahead lie in assuring access in hard-to-serve regions and communities. That includes countries in conflict and those with sizable vulnerable populations. Religious communities are significant education providers in many such situations (Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone are two examples). Nigeria and Pakistan may be the two most challenging countries today for education goals; in both cases religion is at the forefront of policy debates and religious institutions are significant providers.

For all these reasons, the extensive, complex networks of educational institutions run by religious communities should be part of deliberate efforts to work toward global education targets and goals. Reasons for the partial focus we see today are generally context specific and characteristically complex. In Senegal, debates about whether and how to integrate parts of or the whole of the Qur'anic education system into the very French-style public education system have continued since independence in 1963 and are still unresolved. The upshot is that in many countries representatives of what are often extensive educational systems with vast relevant experience (religiously run systems) are not party to policy reviews and discussions.

The limited attention paid to faith communities as education service providers stems in part from the tendency to focus on public education systems in framing global discussions about education. The presumption has been that, particularly where poverty is a central issue, private education has little relevance. This is under challenge, with mounting recognition of the substantial and growing phenomenon of private schools serving poor populations.<sup>vi</sup> Research (*inter alia* by James Tooley, 2009) has highlighted the blinkers that public policy-makers have worn where private entrepreneurial education is concerned, that have contributed to poor understanding and data gaps. Religiously run systems can fall into similar traps.

The enormous complexity of development assistance today further complicates the matter. Dysfunctional patterns have evolved where numerous, uncoordinated actors operate in countries heavily dependent on development assistance. Many work with differing objectives and approaches, individual monitoring systems, and their own requirements for reporting. Intensive efforts to harmonize aid led to agreements forged in Paris, Rome, Accra and Busan.<sup>vii</sup> Many aid programs have, in response, moved from a 'project' approach to program- or sector-wide efforts involving multiple donors under a single umbrella, with a clearer focus on government leadership and ownership for the respective countries. This trend toward better harmonization is evident in education programs in various countries. Yet faith-run programs tend to be among the outliers in fragmentation in many, though by no means all, situations. With the focus on the imperative need for greater discipline and clear focus on program goals, assessments of progress, and policy instruments, religious actors who aspire to be part of national efforts to improve education quality need to be more actively represented at the aid harmonization tables.

Faith education programs may be marginalized because the systems are so diverse and they often lack mutual contact. Faith-run education systems vary widely in size, approach, and significance, from region to region and also within countries. This author is aware of no effort to estimate their aggregate role in any systematic fashion, and, still less, to engage in comprehensive assessment of relative quality and impact. The situation is well mapped in some places and for some systems. Data on

Catholic Church schools, for example, are well kept and quite readily available (the Catholic school system is the world's largest faith-based educational network, with some 120,000 schools and over 1000 colleges and universities).<sup>viii</sup> There are, however, important gaps in the data (for example, schools run by the dynamic and growing Evangelical churches). Data about Muslim schools run the gamut from fairly detailed and reliable (Indonesia, India) to patchy and uncertain (Pakistan, West Africa). Information about Buddhist education and specific education programs within the enormous social movements with a religious impetus in South Asia is poor, though ambitious education programs are common. In short, the data available are appallingly weak. Gaps in knowledge are a significant explanation for the lack of attention to these important systems, especially at the global level.

Complexity of systems is an obstacle to thoughtful engagement, further compounded, in some instances, by their unofficial status. 'Hybrid' systems are not uncommon, meaning that schools fall somewhere between the public and private systems. This can apply to individual schools or to broad systems. For example, in Cambodia, both Buddhist- and Christian-run schools may receive some public support yet rely primarily on private funding, volunteer teachers, and community resources. The Fe y Alegria system, a Jesuit-led federation of schools serving communities in 16 Latin American countries, supports schools which are generally part of the public education system yet count on extensive support from other sources (church, community, business, international organizations). It may be difficult in such instances to pinpoint the roles of religious actors. In some cases where roles are ambiguous or informal or where conflicts are involved, religious institutions and leaders may elect not to draw attention to their roles.

Where the roles of faith-run systems are the subject of expert or public debate, issues tend to echo broader questions about state/religious relationships or tensions. A dramatic case in point is tensions around schools run by the Turkish Hizmet or Gülen movement, considered today by the current Turkish government as subversive. In some situations religiously run schools are seen as undermining state authority and provoking tensions among communities or accentuating marginalization. In contrast, they can play roles in meeting the needs of minority communities.

The complex and highly varied Islamic education institutions present particular issues; the enormous diversity of Muslim communities and of education systems in Muslim-majority countries complicates the picture.<sup>ix</sup> Systems run by Muslim leaders and community's range from small, largely community-led pre-school institutions to fully fledged systems extending from pre-primary through advanced education (for example, the Al Azhar system in Egypt). They also vary widely in quality, from outstanding institutions (for example, in Indonesia) to poorly resourced institutions where learning is confined largely to memorizing the Qur'an in Arabic, which students may well not understand. Critiques focus on quality of education provided, for example highlighting the tendency to rote learning and weakness of science teaching, and the perils of exclusivity. Textbook content that promotes extremist views is another concern. The perceived link between Islamic

<sup>viii</sup> CARA (2015) is an example.

<sup>ix</sup> Research on madrasa systems includes the following examples. The Religions and Development Research Programme, undertaken with UK Department for International Development (DfID) support by a consortium of universities led by the University of Birmingham, reviewed madrasas in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, with findings highlighting the diversity of experience (see first published working paper: [http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/files/resourcesmodule/@random454f80f60b3f4/1211530945\\_working\\_paper\\_13for\\_web.pdf](http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/files/resourcesmodule/@random454f80f60b3f4/1211530945_working_paper_13for_web.pdf)). The World Bank Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics volume on madrasas is at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/PARTNERS/EXTDEVIALOGUE/0,contentMDK:21955884~pagePK:64192523~piPK:64192458~theSitePK:537298,00.html>. The International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, a Washington, DC-based think tank, has worked to support reforms of Pakistani madras; [http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogsection&id=10&Itemid=149](http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=10&Itemid=149).

<sup>vi</sup> See Tooley (2009) and <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/egwest/>.

<sup>vii</sup> For background and relevant texts, see <http://www.aidharmonization.org>.

education and terrorism, often amplified by media sources and various global leaders, distorts dialogue about the roles that Muslim-run educational institutions do and could play in advancing broad education goals. It is a factor, for example, in European debates about the desirability of allowing or supporting Muslim schools even in systems where the state provides long-standing support to schools run by Christian and Jewish denominations. Sensitivities were illustrated by florid debates about a Saudi-sponsored school in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. While most thoughtful analysts view such concerns as overblown and confined to a small minority of schools (see, for example, McClure, 2009), they complicate reform efforts in various situations.

An important and fairly specific challenge concerns faith-run education knowledge and networks where fragile or poorly performing states are involved, and for ‘the bottom billion’ of the world’s population (Collier, 2007). The well-known irony is that these communities most need assistance, yet governance and conflict make that assistance hard to use well. Conflict and corruption together impede virtually all public services and education almost always suffers. Religiously run institutions are often major service providers, a force of continuity and a support to communities. However, actual and potential education roles are not mapped and analyzed systematically. Promising programs build on deliberate partnerships in countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia, but practical steps to carry the recognition of faith roles and their on the ground experience into broader and active dialogues and partnerships are still quite limited. The upshot of the fractured analysis and dialogue is that much rich knowledge and experience gained in faith-run systems is poorly reflected in policy analysis and decision-making.

Three transnational educational programs with strong faith links illustrate the variety and potential roles that faith-inspired institutions play and their pertinence to global educational challenges. The Fe y Alegria system prides itself on its commitment to serve communities ‘where the asphalt ends’ –in other words, the poorest and least well-served communities across Latin America. Part of the large, complex and very varied system of Catholic Church education, it exemplifies the ancient Christian traditions of education and their contemporary manifestations. Fe y Alegria was begun and is run by priests of the Jesuit order (though its staff is now about 97% lay). It is thus a distinctive Jesuit-run system, though part of the broader Catholic network. It has a strong ethos of serving the poorest communities. Fe y Alegria’s approach emphasizes excellence, commitment to strong values and community involvement, and the system, with its 53-year experience, shows impressive results. Fe y Alegria’s pioneering work in vocational education and radio distance learning is relevant, and Fe y Alegria often runs the only schools available to the disabled.<sup>x</sup>

A very different example that illustrates the pitfalls of politics and religion is the network of private schools run by the Gülen movement. Originating in Turkey, and inspired by Fetullah Gülen, a Muslim Sufi leader, the system has operated schools in some 120 countries. Each is entirely independent and largely financed by local resources, in many cases businessmen (for a general overview, see Hakan Yavuz and Esposito, 2003). The schools stress excellence and have achieved impressive results, with a strong emphasis on science. The schools are private, with some commitment to equity (some scholarships are offered), but above all they reflect a broad commitment to quality education as a general principle, in service to the society. With the 2016 controversy around the failed coup d’état in Turkey, Gülen and his movement were blamed and the future of many Gülen schools is in question.

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) does not consider

<sup>x</sup> The Federation of Fe y Alegria, which served 1.3 million students, has been described as ‘the largest and most successful education provider in Latin America and the Caribbean outside of public education systems’. See <http://www.magisamericas.org/donate/feyalgriabestpracticesvenezuela.pdf>. A Harvard Business School case study on the system is at: <http://harvardbusiness.org/product/fe-y-alegria-one-or-many/an/SKE101-PDF-ENG>.

itself religious, although its leader and founder, the Aga Khan, is the spiritual leader and Imam of the Ismaili Community. Education is a long-standing passion for the Aga Khan and therefore a central focus of the work of AKDN institutions. Their education work is seen in many quarters as ‘best practice’. Projects include universities, academies, and a system of pre-schools. The latter, and particularly a network of madrasa pre-schools in East Africa, offer a remarkable example of a sensitive effort to build on community initiatives, to engage with local faith communities, to work actively with women, and to engage local ideas and meet their needs at the same time as maintaining the highest-quality standards.<sup>xi</sup>

### 3. Religious roles in humanitarian emergencies: refugees and internally displaced populations

Religious communities and institutions (notably faith-inspired organizations like Caritas Internationalis, World Vision, and Islamic Relief Worldwide) play large roles in humanitarian work, and education is often an important focus. Attention to education ranges from advocacy for refugees and internally displaced populations (IDPs) to, in protracted refugee situations, running schools and literacy programs. The focus of the Jesuit Refugee Service on education and creative efforts to address needs in extraordinarily demanding situations is an illustration (McPherson, 2016). In Kenya, faith-linked organizations, international and Kenyan, have developed widely varied education programs, including some that specifically address refugee parents’ demands for religious education for their children (Stoddard and Marshall, 2015).

### 4. Understanding religion, understanding ‘the other’

Many public education systems in different world regions, including prominently the United States, France, and China, have seen a dramatic shift in curriculum over the past decades, away from one where even the primers used for the youngest children were imbued with religion, to a situation where religion is almost totally absent from the curriculum (Prothero, 2008). Other countries may teach religion as part of the official public curriculum but dominated by a single denomination’s perspective. Results include a sharp decline in ‘religious literacy’ among the population. This is of concern because plural societies are the norm today, increasing in significance, yet relations among communities suffer when there is poor understanding across different communities. Social tensions are an almost inevitable result. A further concern is that many people today lack even basic knowledge of their own cultural heritage, which can limit their appreciation of literary references and other elements of culture and identity.

Teaching about different religious traditions is a sensitive topic, easier said than done. It demands sensitivity in approach, across different topics and disciplines, and there can be no single formula or curriculum. Even so, there is an emerging consensus that purposeful efforts to develop sound curricula, particularly at the secondary level, are needed. An example of interesting groundwork to develop appropriate curricula is the United World College (UWC) system, which piloted a world religions curriculum. UWC schools generally offer a two-year program leading to the International Baccalaureate, draw students from some 120 countries, and are inspired by a philosophy to achieve

<sup>xi</sup> Aga Khan Education Services (AKES), a network of educational institutions, operates over 300 schools and manages programs to enhance the quality of teachers, academic resources and learning environments in Asia and Africa. AKES seeks to respond creatively to the educational needs of children in the developing world in a way that will enable those children better to shape their future. Its central premise is that all children must have access to good schools, effective teachers and the best learning resources possible. AKES aims for communities to take responsibility for ensuring that their children receive quality education. AKES is part of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), a group of private development agencies established by His Highness the Aga Khan, the 49th hereditary Imam (spiritual leader) of the Ismaili Muslims. See <http://www.akdn.org/akes>.



international peace and understanding by educating future leaders, together.<sup>xii</sup> UWC is one among many examples of efforts to find effective and appropriate ways to develop curricula that ensure a level of religious literacy that modern plural societies need.

Professional exposure to ‘religious literacy’ is another priority, starting with higher education. The Henry R. Luce Foundation’s initiative on religion and international affairs extends to professional organizations such as diplomatic services and United Nations institutions.<sup>xiii</sup> Ignorance about religion can be a serious obstacle in many fields, ranging from education to business to public affairs to medicine. The challenge of redressing ‘illiteracy’ demands partnerships among secular and religious leaders and institutions. Contemporary efforts to develop religious literacy programs include those of the Harvard Divinity School and the Woolf Institute at the University of Cambridge.

## 5. Thorny questions around values and social cohesion

A vignette: a priest engaged in interfaith dialogue and a World Bank education specialist meet to discuss a forthcoming report on education in the Middle East. The priest launches into a description of obstacles blocking a small theological exchange program he wants to develop that will involve students from a Christian and a Muslim institution. The World Bank specialist’s eyes glaze over, his unspoken question: ‘What on earth does this have to do with the subject at hand?’ The subject turns to how the forthcoming report addresses the question of values in curriculum reform. The specialist says: ‘What we want is values-free education.’ The priest blanches. Impasse.

What the specialist had in mind, and explained cursorily, was that in his view education systems and curricula should be value neutral and impartial; students should learn to think for themselves. A curriculum or system structured around a particular set of values was by implication biased and excluded ideas and people. The priest blanched because to his mind nothing was more important in education than imparting basic values, a sense of right and wrong, preferably in conjunction with a grounding in teachings from one or possibly more faith traditions because they are grounded in rich ethical frameworks. This, he believed, allows an individual to contribute to the society.

This story offers a glimpse of debates that help to explain why the role of religious perspectives and institutions in education is often contentious. Whereas 100 years ago religious institutions dominated education systems in many places and religion was taught without compunction, the situation today is far more mixed. To complicate matters, questions about religion as part of education today are embroiled in broader debates, notably about the respective roles and responsibilities of public and private actors in education and how public education systems address the religious pluralism that is a common characteristic of modern societies. The ‘values’ question described in the exchange between the priest and the technical specialist involves questions about ‘whose values?’ and ‘how can values best be taught?’ Debates about values reflect important policy questions that can and should engage a wide range of educators. They obviously go deeply into questions about the nature of societies and governance systems. They go to the heart of questions about the core purposes of education and the rights of different parties. Education is sometimes seen and approached as a largely technical matter, presenting schooling as geared essentially to preparing students for the labor market (indeed, this is a common negative perception of education approaches expressed by religious actors in various consultations). Preparing students for jobs is plainly a vital function, but the focus on labor markets and utilitarian goals can obscure other vital functions of education, notably in contributing both to social cohesion and to the civic understanding and attitudes that are vital to democracy.

School systems, public or private, can teach in ways that either ease or exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions. Religious leaders and communities see themselves as having a major stake in these issues. Examples from the Balkan countries and the former Soviet Union countries after 1989 include many situations where issues were framed around the social functions of education. Education roles in social cohesion takes on special importance in diverse, plural societies. Education specialist Stephen Heyneman (2008a) stresses that schools influence social cohesion through formal curricula, contributing to social norms, a school climate that conforms to those norms, adjudicating competing group views on what to teach, and convincing students and parents that the educational opportunities offered are truly fair. These questions involve understandings of nationalism and ideology. ‘Throughout Europe the main challenges on school choice today come from the debates over whether Muslims have the same right to their own publicly funded schools as do Jews, Protestants, and Catholics’ (Heyneman, 2008a, p. 95).

Interestingly, there are echoes of these debates in the history of how the Universal Declaration of Human Rights emerged. Reflecting about rights to education, Eleanor Roosevelt commented that in retrospect she understood the reasons for, but nonetheless regretted agreeing to, the provision in the Declaration that specified that ‘parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children’ (Roosevelt, 1949). The insistence on including this provision, she said, came from Catholic countries, and was driven particularly by the fresh memories of totalitarian brainwashing of students before and during the Second World War. What she saw as the tension was between parents’ rights and the rights of both children and society. Fear of religious and ethnic extremism can be so great that it can influence policy on school choice. One possible conclusion is that all schools should essentially teach the same core values – that citizens of all kinds are welcome; that all religions are welcome; that all ethnic groups are welcome; that in addition to the national language, all languages are welcome. But they also need to teach that the obligations on minorities are exactly the same as the obligations on majorities – that is, to conform to social norms. When this happens effectively, schools can add to every nation’s social cohesion (Heyneman, 2008a).

In an ideal world, schools are indeed neutral, not perhaps ‘value free’ but teaching students to think on their own, to respect difference in views and backgrounds, and to work to create new and better societies. There can, however, be significant differences in approach. An October 2016 note by the Holy See representative to the United Nations (Auza, 2016) offers an illustration, in its emphasis on the rights of parents in the content of education:

‘The right to a quality and integral education must include religious education. This presupposes a holistic approach, which is ensured first and foremost by respecting and reinforcing the primary right of the family to educate its children, as well as the right of churches and social groups to support and assist families in this endeavor. Indeed, education, which etymologically means ‘to bring out’ or ‘to lead out’, has a fundamental role in helping people to discover their talents and potential for putting them at the service of mankind: each person has something to offer to society and must be enabled to provide his or her contribution. An authentic education should focus on relationships because development is the fruit of good relations.’

Ignoring tensions surrounding differences in values, pretending that differences are unimportant, cannot serve the ends of dialogue and wider participation. Addressing questions that remain strong beacons of concern is as important as it ever has been.

## 6. Training future religious leaders

Jewish, Muslim, and Christian theological education in the past often included important segments designed to teach about other faith traditions. This, various observers contend, is less the norm today.

<sup>xii</sup> <http://www.uwc.org/>.

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.hluce.org/hrlucerelintaff.aspx>.

Many religious leaders emerge from their advanced training programs with quite limited understanding of other faiths, far less the kind of personal contact that would contribute to real understanding. Given the importance of interfaith relations in plural societies, this is an important lacuna. An area for action in education thus concerns theological training institutions of many kinds.

Promoting exchange programs among institutions and religious communities has significant potential, and important initiatives show what can be done. Examples include the World Council of Churches Institute at Bossey, interfaith programs at the Hartford Divinity School, the interfaith Claremont School of Theology, and multi-faith chaplaincy arrangements at leading universities (Georgetown University is among them). Global interfaith institutions like Religions for Peace, the Parliament of the World's Religions, and the United Religions Initiative all have as a core mandate increasing interfaith understanding and action. Interest in reaching out beyond the boundaries of a single faith and in finding ways to strengthen networks and collaboration is growing.<sup>xiv</sup>

Gaps in understanding among communities and between religious and secular leadership extend well beyond theology. Religious leaders pride themselves on their engagement in virtually every aspect of community life, from sex education and trade policy through housing, water and agriculture. Debates and different approaches can matter: for example, priests or other religious leaders who preach against genetically modified crops (GMOs, or genetically modified organisms) can exacerbate tensions around this technical and ethical issue. Religious leadership on conservation of natural resources can make an enormous difference in shaping public attitudes. Action on child marriage and domestic violence can benefit from better understanding both of rights dimensions of the issues and of relevant religious teachings. Religious indifference or opposition can make it more difficult to tackle the problems. Broadening theological education to address such topics can enhance public and community dialogue and, in some instances, provide a foundation for interfaith cooperation that can have important spillover effects. Various deliberate educational programs in African theological programs on health matters aim to support religious leader engagement with HIV/AIDS, malaria and other health issues. In Bangladesh, Imam training programs have centered on a range of development issues. Preparing faith leaders to address some contemporary issues such as sex education, market functioning and use of social media might well offer wide benefits.

## 7. Engaging religious actors in advocacy and policy debates on education

The right to education is viewed by many advocates both of human rights and of development as perhaps the single most important priority area for action on the global development agenda. It is fundamental to developing human capabilities, seen today as a primary means and end of development work (Sen, 1999), and weighs heavily in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) Human Development Index that ranks country performance.<sup>xv</sup> Viewed from a religious perspective, development of the human person is seen in many scriptures and faith traditions as the core of belief and action; education is a central means to that end. The extraordinary progress that has marked global education over the past century builds on the foundations laid by religiously run and inspired schools and universities, both within their own societies and as missionary ventures. Thus a common shared interest in global goals in education seems a natural path to follow.

Protracted discussions that led up to the year 2000 definition of the

MDGs and to periodic reviews of their implementation, rarely engaged religious actors in a systematic fashion.

The MDGs and SDGs and associated targets, with their elaborate indicators and monitoring systems, global, regional and national, were led almost exclusively through public institutions – governments and international organizations above all. Today's discourse, however, assumes that civil-society and private-sector support for development generally, and for SDG targets more specifically, is essential. Dialogue about global education challenges and policies to achieve them thus takes in a widening range of actors outside official institutions. By 2013, with the SDGs in sight, active civil-society participation was seen as a norm. Religious institutions, especially those represented at the United Nations in New York and Geneva, engaged in the extensive consultations that resulted in the SDG framework. However, education issues have to date received somewhat less attention in these processes than topics like health, where there has been a longer history of engagement. Dialogue and advocacy on education issues has tended to be more focused at the national level.

Direct activism and advocacy among many faith institutions increased over the 15-year life of the MDGs and in the formulation and launch of the SDGs. This heightened interest can be witnessed in a variety of settings, ranging from global interfaith institutions to specific initiatives within denominations or at local level. The Religions for Peace focus on the MDGs (it was in the spotlight at the Kyoto 2006 Global Assembly and in partnerships with the United Nations), the ambitious poverty agenda of the Parliament of the World Religions (at its December 2009 meeting in Melbourne), and the Micah Challenge (an evangelical Church-initiated advocacy campaign) illustrate explicit commitments to mobilizing public support for action on the global goals.<sup>xvi</sup> A task force of United Nations agencies (Karam, 2015) has worked creatively both to highlight ongoing partnerships between religious groups and UN agencies and to explore new areas of cooperation. Various leaders – for example, Archbishop Desmond Tutu – have taken up the MDG/SDG cause as central planks of their ministries. Around the launch of the SDGs, various religious institutions and leaders agreed to support a 'moral imperative' to end poverty by 2030. But these important efforts can be seen as fairly limited when set against the fact that in countless congregations, many have heard little if anything about MDGs and SDGs, much less reflected on their importance and what their community might do to advance them. In sum, despite important efforts and initiatives, religious institutions have in practice been less active advocates and less central players in the global mobilization effort than might be expected.

Notwithstanding daily engagement on education issues at a practical level, broad religious advocacy directly linked to the global education agenda has been quite rare. Even looking to Catholic Social Teaching,<sup>xvii</sup> often the deepest-ranging theological articulation of policy, global education issues have not had a central focus. Education was not a central focus of the (June 2009) Papal Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* – the word education appears only 12 times in this long document, and it is missing any resounding statement as to its central importance for human welfare.<sup>xviii</sup> Education advocacy is less prominent than other issues for several global Muslim organizations, with the notable exception of the Aga Khan Development Network. Even where strong rhetorical support for education by faith leaders is in evidence, putting education at the center of ministries, at the global level, is quite

<sup>xvi</sup> See <http://www.wcrp.org/resources/toolkits/faith-in-action> for a World Conference of Religions for Peace 'Toolkit' on advancing the MDGs; and the Micah Challenge mission and work is summarized on its website at <http://www.micahchallenge.org/>. The Micah Challenge originated as an evangelical Christian effort to highlight global social justice issues.

<sup>xvii</sup> Introduced here: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/>.

<sup>xviii</sup> For text, see: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.htm).

<sup>xiv</sup> The World Council of Churches has taken leadership in one area, HIV/AIDS training. For one example, see [http://www.oikoumene.org/uploads/tx\\_wecdiscussion/HIV-AIDS\\_1-Teaching\\_and\\_Talking\\_about\\_Our\\_Sexuality.pdf](http://www.oikoumene.org/uploads/tx_wecdiscussion/HIV-AIDS_1-Teaching_and_Talking_about_Our_Sexuality.pdf).

<sup>xv</sup> See <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>; also UNESCO Global Monitoring Report, <http://en.unesco.org/gem-report/>.

rare.

The somewhat patchy support for global education goals in some faith and interfaith settings is something of a puzzle. Some reasons are not hard to discern. Finding effective tools to translate good will and intentions into practice has proved a difficult challenge; for many religious actors the path toward meaningful action on global issues is not well marked. Subtle but significant barriers block dialogue and engagement. The dominant paradigm of public provision of education can discourage active engagement of institutions whose focus may be on private provision of services, or where there is skepticism about the legitimacy and caliber of national governance itself. History comes into play in some situations, especially where the spread of modern education was closely tied to missionary efforts. Tensions around education in northern Nigeria, closely linked to the Boko Haram movement, reflect violent opposition to education that is perceived as coming with a western face. Ambivalence on faith roles in public education systems that are built around secular principles both dampens fervor in acknowledging direct religious roles in running schools and poses questions about how religion can and should be taught (witness France, but also Senegal and Bangladesh). In some communities, commitment to equity goals—for example, closing the gap in enrollment of girls—may not rank high among change priorities in religious communities.

Some solutions lie in addressing the perils of generalization – the nobility of the goals may appear self-evident, but tangible action steps need to be defined in plausible and understandable ways to mobilize energies and channel them to results. Focusing on obstacles to progress and on genuine areas of concern (for example, doubts as to the safety of girls' school attendance, poor quality of education in public systems) can help. Increasing transparency and clarity in international and national commitment and disbursements for education helps advocates to press for action more effectively since they can see where shortfalls are taking place. Various efforts are under way to address this challenge, some faith specific, others (like the ONE campaign) spanning a wider range of institutions. The MDGs/SDGs have provided an effective scaffolding to explore practical ways to engage faith energies and to address latent concerns through dialogue that has yet to be fully developed.

Inclusion, a key dimension of global education goals, is perhaps the most significant area where focused dialogue and advocacy with religious communities could be beneficial. Serving excluded communities and the disabled and meeting the education needs of people in conflict situations and among refugee populations are areas where experience, ideas, leadership and commitment are vitally needed. In all these cases, religious institutions play critical roles and have extensive networks of leaders, community groups and media channels that have long involvement in education.

There would appear to be significant potential for deliberately engaging religious communities more actively as partners in mobilizing support for education, both in international and in national settings. Their support can help identify and define new approaches to specific gaps and problems (innovation). This is not simply to advocate a 'cheerleader' function, however vital that role can be in sensitizing communities to global dimensions of issues and in practical mobilization (witness Jubilee 2000).<sup>xix</sup> It is just as important to engage faith leaders in the global policy dialogue about the MDG/SDG mission, including its weaknesses and challenges, and future directions. Major global interfaith organizations and international religious bodies should be key partners, lending their voices and support, keeping tabs on progress, addressing shortfalls and thinking ahead to next steps.

<sup>xix</sup> Jubilee 2000 was an international coalition movement in more than 40 countries that called for the cancellation of Third World debt by the year 2000. For more information, see: [http://www.jubileeusa.org/.CCED\\_A\\_503739.fm](http://www.jubileeusa.org/.CCED_A_503739.fm) Page 285.

## 8. Toward conclusions

"Humankind in a global age must balance and reconcile two impulses: the quest for distinctive identity and the search for global coherence. This challenge calls us to is a deep sense of personal and intellectual humility, and an understanding that diversity itself is a gift of the Divine and that embracing diversity is a way to learn and to grow—not to dilute our identities but to enrich our self-knowledge. What is required goes beyond mere tolerance or sympathy or sensitivity—emotions which can often be willed into existence by a generous soul. True cultural sensitivity is something far more rigorous, and more intellectual. It implies a readiness to study and to learn across cultural barriers, an ability to see others as they see themselves. This is a challenging task, but if we succeed, we will perhaps discover that the universal and the particular can indeed be reconciled. As the Qur'an states: 'God created male and female and made you into communities and tribes, so that you may know one another' (49.13). It is our differences that both define us and connect us" (Aga Khan, 2008).

The Aga Khan frames the central challenges facing contemporary education, in this age marked by forces of interconnectedness that flow from globalization and the increasing pluralism of today's societies. Challenges are quantitative, as exemplified by the access and equity facets of the SDGs, but even more they are qualitative: complex and nuanced with multiple dimensions. Culture and religion need to be seen as integral parts of the challenge. Religious actors therefore belong at the policy tables where global and national educational issues are discussed.

Religious leaders and institutions in some situations and parts of the world can be 'part of the problem'. They represent doubters, even stalling the push for universal education, the most notable example being hesitations at equal opportunity for girls. Significant tensions around approaches to education and curriculum are common. But religious actors can and should, in many instances, be 'part of the solution', actively engaged in reflection and action. That is because religion (and its tightly linked companion, culture) is so vital to people, and because of its rich history and ethical contributions.

Among practical ways forward, information is essential. Better data and better ways to share research and information could change mindsets and mobilize energies. Research—for example, on the benefits of educating girls—provides such compelling evidence that it often counters reticence based on traditions and cultural norms. More positively, most religious traditions, scriptures and leaders have a deep commitment to education. Their history is the history of education, and the oft-stated commitment to human dignity and the development of human potential are what education is about.

There is plenty to debate: about the very purposes of contemporary education (for jobs or citizenship? Social or individual development?), how to teach difficult subjects, and so on. But the values of faith traditions, their extensive and often path-breaking work, and their commitment to human progress suggest that faith communities can be key allies in the global effort to bring education for all. Knowledge and dialogue can and should have global, regional, national and often local dimensions. Interfaith groups, whether bringing parties together to address educational policy matters or promoting active educational and community exchange, can play important roles.

Translating this ideal into practice cannot follow a simple blueprint. History and sociology are deeply imprinted with religious roles, perhaps nowhere more so than in the field of education. Respect for history is an important first step.

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