



# Comparative religious education and its role in creating a harmonious society

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Ali takes a deep interest in religion and has extensively studied Islam, Christianity and Judaism. He continues to study these religions along with Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism and many other faiths.

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**Education is the strongest and the deadliest weapon that any organisation ever has or ever will possess. As the old adage says, 'the pen is mightier than the sword'. In other words 'education is mightier than violence'.**

The so-called 'Islamic terrorists' (which are in fact not Islamic in any sense of the word) play on people's ignorance and use religious education as a means of deception in order to prepare people to commit violent acts.

Religion is only abused to try and give terrorism a sense of righteousness and a higher sense of purpose.

There is no doubt that terrorism is a barrier to the formation of a peaceful, tolerant and harmonious society. And while religious education has been misused as a weapon to promote acts of violence it can also be a powerful tool used for good to open up people's minds, to minimise ignorance and to promote understanding. In short, religious education has the potential to act as a catalyst for dialogue, peace and harmony in our diverse society (both nationally and on a global scale).

## HIERARCHY OF KNOWLEDGE

Whenever any religion has been exploited by religious leaders for political purposes (and almost all religions have been exploited politically at some point in time), the prime reason that the religious leaders have been able to exploit the religion is due to the *hierarchy of knowledge* that has existed and continues to exist in all major religions.

The hierarchy is ordered such that one individual or a number of individuals in each religious organisation are considered to be most knowledgeable and hence most authoritative, followed by individuals who are considered less knowledgeable and less authoritative, finally followed by those who are least knowledgeable and least authoritative. The majority of religious followers fall into the latter category.

With this hierarchical structure in place, the majority of people who profess to follow a religion are open to exploitation by a minority of individuals within the community ('religious leaders') who are considered to be knowledgeable and authoritative with respect to religious matters. Many people in the community believe what these religious leaders say to be the final word on what their religion teaches. They do this because they themselves cannot challenge the religious leader on any matter because they do not have the religious knowledge necessary to do so.

If ordinary followers of a religion were educated well about their own religion and were well aware of what their religion taught, then it would be very difficult to deceive them and persuade them to commit heinous and sinful actions in the name of God or god/s or in the name of their religion. Hence a Muslim who had a considerable knowledge of Islam and understood Islam properly would be extremely unlikely to ever even consider being a suicide bomber (regardless of what any politically-motivated cleric ever told him) as he would know that both murder and suicide are sinful actions and hence both are forbidden in Islam.

## COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Hence in order to fight religious extremism and in order to prevent religion from being misused to promote acts of violence and terrorism, the most useful and powerful tool we have at our disposal is comparative religious education. The inclusion of effective comparative religious education in primary and high school education curricula would be a very effective way of minimising religious ignorance and intolerance that can lead to extremist or violent activities.

By educating students about their own religion, comparative religious education not only deals with a primary cause of terrorism committed in the name of religion, that is, a lack of religious education about one's own religion, but goes one step further by educating students about the religions of others.

In this way it also helps alleviate feelings of alienation that many minority religious groups experience as mainstream society may not understand their way of life. Such alienation and marginalisation has the potential to push these religious people towards violence, crime or terrorist activity.

Comparative religious education also helps open up dialogue which can many times result in the resolution of historical and territorial disputes. With the understanding that a comparative approach to religious education brings it should be easier to avoid circumstances which lead to the humiliation of a certain religious group and also it should be easier to work together on issues such as elevating poverty as the barriers of ignorance which can currently sometimes make it difficult for people of differing religious belief to work together would no longer be present.

## A TEACHING MODEL

Summarising the above discussion, we can see that if a model for teaching comparative religious education is to be successful, then there are at least three key aims that it must strive to achieve, these aims are as follows:

- To help create a more harmonious, respectful and tolerant community by providing in-depth education on the major religions of the world to all primary and high school students.
- To enable students to better understand the world.
- To educate religious students thoroughly about their own as well as other religions in order to minimise or eliminate the 'hierarchy of knowledge' that exists in all the major religions of the world, hence equipping students with the skills and knowledge necessary to be able to research or think independently on all religious matters.

All of the above aims are closely interlinked and overlap each other in their objectives.

## COMMUNITY HARMONY

Religion actively affects the behaviour of people and their day to day activities, and the way people interact with one another and the world around them. Unless we have an understanding of religion and an understanding of the way different people may choose to live their lives, then it becomes very difficult to tolerate or respect other people's religious practices or way of life.

In an increasingly globalised and multicultural world, this understanding and

tolerance is necessary if we (as a people of many different religious backgrounds or those with no religious background) are to live together peacefully on earth. Hence one of the key benefits of comparative religious education is its ability to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to be able to live together peacefully and harmoniously in a world with people of differing religious beliefs or practices and also with those who are not religious or do not adhere to any particular faith.

Therefore effective comparative religious education helps in establishing community harmony through the understanding of our religious differences and consequently through generating tolerance or respect for these differences. Similarly it also helps us realise our common humanity and also helps celebrate our similarities.

## UNDERSTANDING OUR WORLD

Along the same lines as the role that comparative religious education can play in creating community harmony, comparative religious education through the understanding that it provides should enable students to understand the world better and understand it for how complex it is and hence help students to also effectively contribute and work together towards global harmony and peace. Through recognising that religion has been a major influence on all human societies in the past and continues to play a key role in how the world works today (with the majority of people in the contemporary world aligning themselves with a religion), it becomes clear that to understand the world properly, a solid and thorough understanding of religion is necessary.

In order for students to be able to understand the role religion has played and continues to play in the world, it is first necessary for students to be equipped with the skills and the knowledge required to be able to understand religion itself.

One way in which the curriculum could be structured to enable students to achieve the above objective could be to teach fundamental or undisputed aspects of each religion, (in other words, beliefs, concepts or features of the religion on which there is unanimous or near-unanimous agreement) through a textbook, with the more controversial and disputed aspects using a research-based approach. For example, students may be required to research and provide at least four different religious viewpoints within the same religion when discussing the same issue.

Through following a teaching model similar to the one outlined above, comparative



Photo: Together for Humanity Foundation.

religious education can be delivered in such a way as to help minimise or eliminate the possibility of religion being misused to promote violence, hatred or war by minimising the monopolisation of knowledge. Once followers of various faiths are well aware of what their religion teaches then they are less likely to blindly accept what a religious leader is saying, especially if it contradicts what they themselves have previously read or researched.

Hence, one of the greatest benefits of effective comparative religious education is its ability to break down barriers of ignorance (both between and within religious communities) and hence help create socially more accepting, stronger and friendlier societies. This can be achieved through empowering religious people by providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to be able to think on religious matters independently and also through providing an in-depth education on the major religions of the world to all primary and high school students.

*The above article has been adapted from the document 'Dealing with terrorism committed in the name of religion: Comparative Religious Education and its role in combating terrorism and creating a harmonious society'. Please email Ali on amaj6@student.monash.edu.au if you would like a full copy of the original document. ■*