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Oddbjørn Leirvik and Recep Kaymakcan:

Teaching for Tolerance in Muslim majority societies

PREFACE TO THE BOOK

Teaching for tolerance in Muslim majority societies (ed. Recep Kaymakcan and Oddbjørn Leirvik), Istanbul: Centre for Values Education 2007.

The present book is based on a workshop held in Istanbul in November 2005 under the title “Learning about the other and teaching for tolerance in Muslim majority societies”. It conveys critical analyses and innovative visions for tolerance education in school, focusing particularly on the role of Religious and ethical education, Social Studies and History teaching in fostering tolerance and promoting inclusive notions of citizenship. Inspired by Istanbul, a city which symbolizes the encounter of civilizations, the contributors search for more inclusive ways of teaching religion and culture in their diverse societies.

The workshop in Istanbul was held as part of a global project called “Teaching for tolerance and freedom of religion or belief” which was launched in 2001 as a follow-up to a Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation with Freedom of Religion or Belief held in Madrid that year by the United Nations. The project was initiated by the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, an academic and interfaith coalition that was formed in 1998 after an international conference in Oslo in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In a global meeting of experts held by the Teaching for Tolerance project in 2004, it was decided that further conferences should take a regional approach, trying to explore obstacles to and resources for tolerance education in specific contexts.

While initiated by the Oslo Coalition, the workshop in Istanbul was hosted by the Centre for Values Education of the Ensar Foundation, a Turkish civil society organization working for the renewal of religious and ethical education with emphasis on character formation. The Centre for Values Education shares with the Oslo Coalition a commitment to dialogue and cooperation between different faiths and a conviction that freedom of religion or belief is a universal standard. The nexus between religious freedom and inter-religious dialogue means that “freedom of religion” is not employed in self-interest as a rhetorical weapon against others. It is rather seen as a universal principle that challenges every society and every state to promote respect for religious difference and interfaith cooperation to the benefit of all.

During recent years, many European countries have seen the need to revise their curricula for Religious Education and Civic Education, in order to bring them in tune with the new religious pluralism in Europe of which Islam and Muslim communities of different backgrounds are an important part. As Christian majority societies, European countries are faced with the challenging task of redefining their sense of cultural community so as to accommodate for ever increasing religious pluralism. In recent years, both Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina (as European countries with a Muslim majority population) have embarked upon similar processes of reform, aimed at new ways of teaching religion and cultural history in school.

The challenge is global in nature, and as pressing in Muslim as in Christian majority societies. In the present book, we have gathered examples of how scholars and educators from Muslim majority countries (joined by two Western European scholars) see the special challenges that these societies are faced with when trying to rethink the way in which religion, history and civics is taught in school. Like in countries with a Christian majority culture, a pressing issue in Muslim majority societies is how the histories and perspectives of the minorities are dealt with in school. In addition to presenting and analyzing new ways of teaching religion and cultural history in school, the book contains also more general reflections on how to teach tolerance in culturally and religiously diverse classrooms.

The notion of “tolerance” is one of those notions that have become thoroughly globalized in late modernity, functioning today as a global point of reference for discussions about cultural and religious coexistence. From the history of ideas, it is well known that tolerance may either signify a minimal type of *political* toleration of religious difference, or expand into a more comprehensive ideal which challenges also our *cultural* stereotypes and our *personal* attitudes towards the Other. The partners behind the Istanbul workshop subscribe to a comprehensive understanding of tolerance which seeks for *respect* and *recognition*. This understanding is well in tune with UNESCO’s “Declaration of Principles of Tolerance” from 1995 in which tolerance is defined as “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures”. UNESCO’s comprehensive understanding of tolerance corresponds with the Turkish word for tolerance *hoşgörü* which literally means “seeing (the other) in a good way”. Also in Arabic, the word *tasamuh* transcends the realm of political toleration and connotes personal virtues such as patience and generosity.

Striving for inter-religious generosity, one has to realize that there are in fact many traditions and trends in today’s world that work against tolerance. In many contexts, tolerance education is hampered or even blocked by a widespread tendency of mobilizing people on the basis of cultural or religious affiliation— a phenomenon often referred to as “identity politics”. However, parallel to the development of confrontational forms of identity politics (in particular, since the beginning of the 1990s), in the same period the world has also witnessed an “interfaith boom” that could in fact be seen as a powerful antidote to divisive trends in religion and politics.

The paramount challenge is to translate lofty ideals of tolerance, respect and recognition into transformative practice – politically, pedagogically and in terms of personal formation. At all these levels, striving for tolerance requires also self-critical scrutiny.

Exploring obstacles and resources for tolerance education in Muslim majority societies, the contributors to this book identify needs for curriculum reform and textbook revision and presents also innovative reforms that have already been undertaken aimed at establishing more inclusive forms of teaching religion and ethics, history and civics in school.

Resisting ideas of a world divided along religious fault lines, the title of this book avoids the expression “the Muslim world” and refers instead to the contextual challenges faced by “Muslim majority societies”, i.e. in countries with a dominant cultural heritage and a majority population that is Muslim (in other parts of the world, quite similar challenges are faced by countries with a Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu majority).

In every majority culture, there are both hindrances to be overcome and specific resources that can be drawn upon when trying to strengthen the culture of tolerance. Like other heavenly inspired religions, the religion of Islam opposes the idea that any human being is superior to the other by birth and aims at the well-being of all human beings. That humanity is created in different nations, tribes, and colours is expressed in the following verse of the Qur’an:

“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).” (The Chambers, 49: 13).

It is not difficult to identify tragedies in human history that were caused by insensitivity to cultural difference, and by the use of compulsion in the field of religion. In tune with the cited verse, however, differences among people and nations need not be considered as a source of conflict but could rather be seen as a source of richness. The religion of Islam appropriates the principle “there is no compulsion in religion” as a golden rule, thus enjoining religious freedom and tolerance as a *divine* principle.

If one looks at the history of Islam one may witness many examples of tolerance and religious freedom that transcended the standards of their time – as in the life of the Prophet. However, when looking at countries with a Muslim majority today one can also easily observe many problems in establishing respect of human rights, democracy, and a culture of tolerance. Instead, being a Muslim is understood by many in terms of conflicts. In some segments of Muslim societies, the social environment is characterised by undemocratic ambiance, denial of basic human rights and lack of critical thinking, entailing a narrow-minded version of religion which does not comport with the universalistic principles of Islam.

When trying to build a culture of tolerance, one must try to seek reconciliation with the past and develop a contemporary approach to religion imbued with empathy as well as critical reason. Negative events that took place in the past, when multicultural societies were homogenised by force, should not be allowed to influence the future. The changing of circumstances in today’s world obliges us to accept that religious plurality and multicultural societies are inescapable realities.

Integration between different civilizations and within Europe can only be reached through respect of difference. Being a unique country among the member states of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) to enter into negotiations with the European Union to be a full member, Turkey has a special role to play among other Islamic countries. This

situation calls upon Turkey to take a leading position in trying to improve the relations between the Islamic and the Western world.

Four contributions in this book deal with recent developments in religious education and history teaching in Turkey, sharing also visions for tolerance education from a Turkish vantage point. Recep Kaymakcan presents recent revisions in the curricula and textbooks for religious and ethical education in Turkish schools, with emphasis on revisions that have been made regarding the portrayal of Christianity. Yücel Kabapınar gives a critical analysis of the image of the culturally and religiously other that has prevailed in History and Social Studies textbooks (“not us, the other is to blame”), and presents new approaches and recent revisions in this respect. In her comprehensive essay, Beyza Bilgin discusses the issue of tolerance education in a broader pedagogical, Islamic and humanistic perspective. Adding the dimension of globalization, Ibrahim Özdemir emphasises the importance of the minority perspective when discussing how to promote a culture of tolerance through school education.

Moving westwards to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nedžad Grabus analyses images of the religiously other as portrayed in the country’s textbooks for Islamic religious education at the elementary level, giving also an overview of the current system of religious education (Muslim and Christian) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In her contribution, Nermina Baljevic shares her experiences from teaching the new subject “Culture of religions” in the First Bosniak High School in Sarajevo, a subject that takes an interfaith approach to teaching religion in school.

Bridging Europe and the Middle East, Fawzia al-Ashmawi presents the results of a UNESCO-initiated project that was carried out in the 1990s, critically examining prevailing images of the Muslim and Christian other respectively in history textbooks from three European and four Middle Eastern countries. In his contribution, the German researcher Wolfram Reiss summarizes some essential findings from a project which examines the portrait of Christianity in current textbooks in Egypt, Palestine, Turkey and Iran. His presentation highlights also obstacles and prospects for curriculum revision from political, theological and pedagogical perspectives.

Four further contributions present and analyse recent developments and discussions regarding teaching of religion, ethics and history in the Middle East. Kawsar Kouchok relates her reflections on how to teach tolerance to young children to a new school subject in Egypt called “Values and ethics”, a subject of which Kouchok has been one of the architects. Sami Adwan presents a study of the current state of affairs regarding religious education (Islamic and Christian) in Palestine, as well as innovative attempts at learning religion in an interfaith perspective in teacher training and with young children respectively. The two contributions from Lebanon are different in nature. In his essay, Munir Bashshur discusses current (post-civil war) difficulties in creating curricula and textbooks for history teaching that can be acceptable to all inhabitants of the most religiously diverse country of the Middle East. In his short presentation, Joe Kreidi gives an outline of an innovative attempt (initiated by UNESCO) at teaching the cultural aspects of Christianity and Islam to Lebanese teenagers (cf. the cited Bosnian experiment in teaching “the culture of religion” in an interfaith perspective).

Aisha Lemu’s African contribution springs from the Nigerian context which is similar to that of Lebanon with respect to the co-existence of large Muslim and Christian communities in the same country. After a discussion of how syllabi for religious education in public schools could better contribute to a culture of tolerance in Nigeria, Lemu presents a concrete example of how private Islamic schools of the Islamic Education Trust teach about relationships with non-Muslims.

Moving eastwards, Golnar Mehran’s contribution analyses the insider- and outsider-problematic as reflected in Iranian textbooks for Religious education, Social studies and Persian language, explaining also how the Islamic Republic of Iran has used school textbooks

as key instruments of identity formation among the young. Nurman Said's essay deals with context-specific problems and resources for tolerance education in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim majority country. He relates his discussion to current forms of Religious education and Civic education in Indonesian schools.

The book's last essay is written by the Norwegian scholar Oddbjørn Leirvik, who discusses the relevance of the concepts of "conscience" and "solidarity" for tolerance education. The overall scope of his essay being that of globalized concepts and their relevance for school education, the essay's contextual testing ground is Egypt.

It is the hope of the editors that the present book may contribute to a realistic assessment of the current state of affairs regarding tolerance education in Muslim majority societies, and inspire innovative efforts at teaching religion and ethics, history and civics in school from an interfaith perspective.¹

¹ The editors would also like to draw the reader's attention to the following books which discuss the issue of religious education, history teaching and citizenship education in Muslim societies:

- Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Gregory Starrett (eds.): *Teaching Islam: Textbooks and Religion in the Middle East*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007.
- Holger Daun and Geoffrey Walford (eds.): *Educational Strategies Among Muslims in the Context of Globalization: Some National Case Studies*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

For an overview of current discussions and developments regarding religious education in Muslim majority countries, see also Oddbjørn Leirvik's article "Religious education, communal identity and national politics in the Muslim world", in *British Journal of Religious Education* 3: 2004, pp. 223-236.

The Oslo Coalition's webpages (www.oslocoalition.org/html/project_school_education/index.html) offer an update of relevant news and reports pertaining to (in) tolerance education in different parts of the world.

