

Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Education¹

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Charles Kimball, a scholar of religious studies and author of *When Religion Becomes Evil*, lucidly expresses his observation about Christian-Muslim encounters, which could be applied to other religions: “One overriding impression remains front and center: the large majority of Christians and Muslims continue to view each other with ‘detailed ignorance’.”² What he calls detailed ignorance refers to the concept that Christians and Muslims are actually aware of many details, ideas, images, and sound bite impressions of each other coming mostly from mass media, but not the broader, more coherent framework of understanding them. Furthermore, he states: “the obstacles are larger than a simple lack of knowledge. Much of what many people think they know is incorrect or rooted in a long history of misunderstanding and bias.” This is a very good reason for religious education.

To make the above title more specific, our main question is “how can interfaith dialogue be part of religious education?” This can also be rephrased as: “how can interfaith dialogue be commonly understood, and the benefits which are commonly expected from such dialogue be present also in religious education?” By using the word “commonly”, I don’t intend to bypass the debates about the proper goals of interfaith dialogue, but I will attempt to begin from a less controversial starting point. If we understand the aim of interfaith dialogue as not limited to cognitive understanding of others (as I shall discuss shortly) then the goal of religious education should also be not limited to understanding – it should play a transformative role, just as interfaith dialogue does.

While “dialogue” can be understood broadly as a form of education for the actors involved, this paper concentrates on formal religious education as taught in schools. In doing so, I will illustrate some points with Indonesian practices but also consider other illustrations. But first, some important preliminary points about both interfaith dialogue and religious education.

Different contexts and forms of interfaith dialogue

Broadly speaking, interfaith dialogue is commonly understood as aiming to facilitate understanding and tolerance between different religious communities or traditions. Although understanding seems like a personal enterprise, dialogue is seldom done only for personal objectives. In different historical and political contexts, that understanding is expected to serve different purposes.

A recent census in New Zealand found that 40% of the people did not specify any religious affiliation—despite that interfaith dialogue has now been developed in response to the

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) 4th Interfaith Dialogue, held on 3 Jun 2008 to 5 Jun 2008, in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

² Charles Kimball, “Toward a More Hopeful Future: Obstacles and Opportunities in Christian-Muslim Relations”, *The Muslim World*, July 2004; 94: 3, 377-385.

multicultural development of the country in the past few years. The same situation can also be said about Australia as well as many countries in Europe and North America. The main source for this diversity is immigration. Interfaith dialogue in this context often functions like sensitivity training: the police, social service workers, prison officers, school teachers now have to understand new kinds of clients for whom religion is an important part of their cultures. For the new minorities, they are involved in dialogue to understand the culture and customs of their newly adopted countries.

In Indonesia during the New Order era, dialogue was promoted by the government partly as a tool to maintain “religious harmony” —in another word, stability—and religious institutions were used to lend the regime some legitimacy. Indeed, it succeeded in calming those communities, and Indonesia was hailed as an example of religious harmony, albeit a domesticated one. But when freedom of expression became available, after the popular movement in 1998 which forced the president to step down, communal conflicts increasingly took a quasi-religious undertone.

Right now, it seems that we are trying to understand “dialogue” in different ways. Indonesia is an interesting example, as dialogue has been propagated by government, under several regimes; by NGOs, which started with quite different assumptions and for different aims than those of the government; and it has also been part of the academic activities in several universities. The dialogues organized by the NGOs try to touch religious people, not only the leaders, and take place at forums such as seminars, conferences and live-in situations.

In the Philippines, it is quite interesting to see how the government frames interfaith dialogue, which reflects their domestic as well as international political concerns. In the opening speech by President Arroyo at the March 2006 regional interfaith conference in Cebu, terrorism, not surprisingly, ranks the first of such concerns. Speaking about challenges of interfaith dialogue in the country, the President referred specifically to Mindanao, where there is decades of conflict with Muslim groups, and the communist movement (characterized with “godless ideologies”), which is a threat to security in many areas in the country. Interfaith dialogue is a kind of soft power to complement military forces. In the same forum, Indonesian Foreign Affairs Minister Hassan Wirajuda linked interfaith dialogue as a reinforcement of the fight against terrorism.³

In a post-9/11 world, interfaith dialogue has acquired new meanings—for better or worse. In the world of “war against terrorism”, interfaith dialogue could also (and in some cases has) become an additional instrument to calm the excessive religious sentiment which is suspected to be the root of the hostility against the religious others.

But dialogue (as a movement led by leaders of different religions) can also be subversive, as happened in apartheid South Africa and in several other places. Nelson Mandela acknowledges that religious institutions—more specifically, inter-religious solidarity—played a major role in the fight against apartheid in South Africa. During the 1999 Parliament of World Religions, the former political prisoner said, “Without the Church and religious institutions, I would never be here

³ I discussed this issue briefly in Zainal Abidin Bagir, “Interfaith Action for Peace and Security: Challenges and Opportunities”. This paper was presented at the 3rd Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue in Waitangi, New Zealand, May 2007.

today."⁴ From just these few illustrations, we can understand different contexts of interfaith dialogue.

In another example,⁵ echoing what have been said by many veterans of interfaith dialogue, I argue that dialogue can only be effective if it aims not only at understanding but working together for the creation of social and political justice, which is at the root of many issues involving people of different religions. "Understanding" does not simply mean knowing the teachings of other religions, but also understanding the common fate/predicament that we (our religions/religious communities) are in together right now, and how, using our different resources, that predicament may be transformed. This surely has an implication for thinking about religious education, which will be considered later.

Different contexts and forms of religious education

Just like interfaith dialogue, education about religions also takes different forms in various contexts. A number of secular countries in Europe or in the North America, in which government is not allowed to become involved in matters of religion, have what is called multicultural or intercultural education, which may contain religious education as a subset. When religion is included as part of multicultural education, the starting point is to understand the (religious) others. And, similar to interfaith dialogue, the context of multicultural education is mainly, though not exclusively, diversity resulting from immigration; its main issue is race. Religion becomes an issue when the immigrants carry with them different cultures, of which religion is an important part.⁶ In this context, religious education (if it exists at all) is understood as a multi-religious education.

In Indonesia, religious education is part of the national curriculum and has a long history. To put it briefly, the government policy on religious education in schools started soon after the 1945 declaration of independence, but in the beginning it was not as "rigid" as today. By this I mean the present format which makes it mandatory since the first grade of elementary school up to the first year university level; all schools without exception have to have at least a minimum number of hours for religious education. Before 1966 some variations were allowed, and students (or their parents) could choose to take the religion course or take an alternative course ("moral education").⁷ The present format, in which the policy applies indiscriminately to all schools and the course is made compulsory for all levels of schools, is an outcome of the transformation which took place in

⁴ Quoted from <http://www.onecountry.org/e113/e11301as.htm> (Last accessed: May 8, 2010). The story of inter-religious solidarity against apartheid is also recounted by Farid Esack, a South African Muslim, in his *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997)

⁵ See footnote #3.

⁶ Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity, The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, Longman, 2000; and Robert Jackson, "Religious Education's Representation of 'Religions' and 'Cultures'", *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 43: 3 (September 1995), 272-289.

⁷ In the 1960 regulation, for example, there's a clause which gives an allowance that "students have the right not to take a religion course, if they or their guardians (for younger children) state their objections." (TAP MPRS No. II/MPRS/1960 Bab II Pasal 3). In the 1996 decree, that clause is dropped (TAP MPRS No.XXII/MPRS/1966). Cf. Abd. Rachman Assegaf, *Politik Pendidikan Nasional – Pergeseran Kebijakan Pendidikan Agama Islam dari Pra-proklamasi ke Reformasi*, Kurnia Kalam, Yogyakarta, 2005.

1966, after the bloody September 30, 1965 event. Since that time, many things related to religion were changed by the Soehartoregime, and this includes the policy on religious education as well as interfaith dialogue.⁸

This religious education is understood as about one's own religion; it is a mono-religious education (or some would say *instruction*). The subjects taught in the course are meant to internalize one's own religion. Implementation in schools involves students being separated in different classrooms based on their religion, to receive instructions about their own religion. The starting point is explicitly exclusive; undoubtedly when other religions are taught, they are also taught from the perspective of a particular religion. The challenge about "interfaith dialogue and religious education" in this context is how to make it more inclusive. This kind of education has actually been challenged, especially after the 1998 political reformation. Yet as far as the government's policy is concerned, there is no significant change—some even perceive a move toward making the policy even more rigid.⁹

In the meantime, after the reformation, some schools have tried to re-format their curriculum with different degrees of success, while trying to follow the requirements of the national curriculum. In Yogya¹⁰, for example, some schools have tried to have one religion class for all students so they may learn the universal values of other religions together. In an Islamic school, there was an experiment at creating a more inclusive RE at the high school level. But its success really depends on the teachers who have the initiative, and it does not seem to have been institutionalized. There is also "religiosity education" developed by the Archbishop of Semarang, Central Java, and implemented by a few Catholic schools in Yogya. One of the problems they had was compromising the time for the teaching of Catholic faith with the new course. The Archbishop has also published a compilation of the teachings of many religions. Some schools add field trips to

⁸ The new policy on religious matters in the Soeharto era is understood as a response to the perceived communist threat. Following the September 30 movement, the Indonesian Communist Party (the third largest in the world at that time) was banished. Since then the new policies related to religion, especially in its relation with the state (whether it is about the religion column in the identity card), the encouragement given to religious organizations to propagate their religion to those perceived as having no religion (which was most effective for the Christian mission and the Islamic da'wah), inter-religious marriage, religious education, or the government-sponsored interfaith dialogue, all should be understood in this anti-Communism context.

⁹ In the latest bill on national education (2003), which was controversial when it was about to be legislated, there is a requirement that all schools without exception (including private Christian and Islamic schools) have to provide teaching about any particular religion for the students who hold that religion by teachers of the same religion. So, in Christian schools Muslim students have to get a separate class on Islam taught by Muslim teachers; Christian students in Islamic schools have to get a class on Christianity by Christian teachers. This became a sensitive issue since the Christian schools have many Muslim students, but not vice versa, except in a few places where Christians are the majority.)

¹⁰ My sources for this are two recent research studies on religious education in Yogya. *First*, a research study done by the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS), Gadjah Mada University; the result was reported in a manuscript "Religious Education in Indonesia: Implication for Inter-religious Relations in a Plural Society", (2007, not published). *Second*, the research study on religious education in schools in Yogyakarta, 2004-2006, by Interfidei, a prominent interfaith NGO in Yogyakarta; the result was published in Listia, Laode Arham, and Lian Gogali, eds., *Problematika Pendidikan Agama di Sekolah*, Interfidei, 2007. The book contains a good section on the history of religious education in Indonesia since 1945 and descriptions of some models of religious education in some schools in Yogyakarta.

places of worship to the usual RE. However, we have yet to see whether these new experiments work well. In the research by CRCS (see footnote #10), it was found that despite those attempts, the teaching of religion in the schools, including those which try to make innovations, still shows a discernable degree of religious exclusiveness.

There are many more varieties than the two illustrations discussed above (RE as a subset of multicultural education and the kind of RE in Indonesia as part of national education system). At this point it is worth noting that looking at the context of interfaith dialogue and religious education, the two can be juxtaposed in a number of ways. Nevertheless, there are many issues that can be discussed in general.

Characteristics of religious education in a world of many religions:

A useful way to look at and evaluate religious education in responding to religious diversity is to see it in three possible models: mono-religious, multi-religious and inter-religious models.¹¹ The ***Mono-religious model*** sees that the aim of religious education is internalization of a particular religious tradition held by the students. If other religions are introduced, they are also placed in the perspective of that religious tradition, which may imply the superiority of the tradition. This model either assumes homogeneity in a society, or acknowledges plurality but the religions are kept in relative isolation from the other. All may exist, but each exists in its own closed-world.

The ***Multi-religious model*** offers knowledge about all religions and doesn't seek to internalize a particular religious tradition, because it lacks attachment to a particular tradition. Sterkens sees that the normative basis for this is religious relativism (not pluralism), in which all religions are seen on an equal footing and none are superior to others. The main characteristic of this model, which distinguishes it from the mono-religious as well as inter-religious, is the detachment from any particular religion. The religious traditions are ideally to be understood cognitively from an objective, neutral standpoint, not something with which one may be personally involved. As such, dialogue seems not relevant—everything is accepted as it is (which is in danger of simplifying religions).

The ***inter-religious model*** may have similar basis with the multi-religious model: a kind of religious pluralism, but one which sees the possibility of mutual enrichment. It doesn't take religion as a closed, finished system which has to be accepted as it is, but opens it up for contact with others because there is an expectation of mutual enrichment. This is achieved through interfaith dialogue between people representing, and committed to, particular religions. Ideally, these people are open to other perspectives and possible enrichment by others.¹²

¹¹ Here I am referring to the three models discussed in Carl Sterkens, *Interreligious Learning, The Problem of Interreligious Dialogue in Primary Education*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 2001, p. 47ff, which refers to J. A. Van der Ven and H.-G. Ziebertz.

¹² At this point it's important to note a tacit assumption that dialogue is done only by people committed to particular religious traditions. Whether this is the case, it's open for discussion. See a recent article by Siti Sarah Muwahidah, "Interfaith Dialogue at the Grassroots Level: A Case Study of an Interfaith Empowerment Program in East Java Indonesia," published in the journal *Political Theology* 9.1 (2008) 79-92. The article takes up this issue in the context of interfaith dialogue in a village in Indonesia which was traumatized by the government's anti-Communist policies in religion. The policies partly shape how the villagers defined their

It is best to see these models as ideal-types. These are ideals which may not, and do not have to be, reflected in reality; but certain combinations of the models are possible. Ideal-types are also useful to help us see the range of possibilities and can be used as a basis to evaluate the existing RE.

Looking at the contrast between the three models, we may say, from the above discussion, that the model endorsed by the Indonesian national curriculum for religious education is closest to the mono-religious model. Since one's own tradition is already regarded as superior, this model is much less threatening for many believers. The drawback is less motivation for people to engage in dialogue. Yet, even in this model there is actually still a possibility of "dialogue", at least to the extent that better knowledge of others may be gained.

The example provided earlier, of schools which adopt a mono-religious education, but include field trips to different houses of worship, shows that significant improvements can be made even within an exclusive RE. So, even in this model, *if done in a right way*, many aims of dialogue can already be achieved, such as to gain a more accurate understanding of others, to dispel stereotypes and to foster tolerance—even though without the aspiration for change and possible enrichment by others. I would argue that for the Indonesian case today, if only such modifications of the existing mono-religious model can be done, we will already have achieved a lot. Strategically, it is also more realistic than attempting to change it into an inter-religious model. The inter-religious model assumes quite a different approach to religious education and probably also a certain theological perspective which may be too "liberal" for many Indonesians now.

In the improved model, for example, besides the exclusive sessions in which students are separated into different classrooms to study their own tradition for the sake of internalization, there should be some or as many sessions in which all students sit together and discuss problems of common concerns or compare certain religious understandings on non-contentious issues. The physical act of students of different religious traditions sitting together in a room, listening to others and discussing issues that matter personally to them would already have a very significant impact. Or things as simple as visiting different places of worship may significantly impact students' understanding and positive attitude toward others. Such a visit immediately humanizes the religious others—beyond abstract notions that come from "detailed ignorance".

One objection to any such attempt is that it deprives the student the needed time to understand their own religion. But this assumes that all knowledge about one's own religion should be provided by schools. Shouldn't the family or religious organizations also bear responsibility in a student's religious education?

Improvements such as these require less revisions of the existing RE than changing the model completely into, say, an inter-religious model. With this, I want to emphasize that the present RE in Indonesia is far from satisfactory not only because it follows a mono-religious model, but *because in general it is not done properly*. The fact is, even outside the question of understanding of the religious others, but limiting our attention to RE for particular religious groups, the present religious education in Indonesian schools needs to be reformed. For example, in the case of Hinduism for Hindu students taught by Hindu teachers, we can raise the question about the kind of

religious identity, which is "unorthodox", to say the least. The dialogue brought up issues which touch on the land reform policy in the area.

Hinduism represented in those teachings, what dimensions of religiosity are aimed at—only cognitive, or also the affective and the psychomotoric? The emphasis on the formal, outer dimension of religion has made much of what is valuable and meaningful in religion without time and space in classroom teaching or textbooks.¹³

That is, if RE is to be useful and meaningful for students' personality development, it cannot stay at the confine of normative dimensions of religions. The normative is important, at least as a source of identity formation of the students as members of their religious communities. But surely it is not the only thing one can say about religion. Learning about religion may reach deeper to its spiritual roots, but also to the question of how to bring knowledge, feelings, and attitudes shaped by religions to the world in a constructive way. In short, religion is ultimately existential. Good education is also existential and as such should fulfill the cognitive, affective and psychomotoric aims.

Needless to say, trying to fulfill those aims is not easy at all. At this point, it is interesting to note that in the research about the effectiveness of religious education in Yogya schools (state-funded as well as private schools; general schools as well as those with religious affiliation), findings show that while in terms of cognitive aspect the education was effective, it is not so in the affective aspect.¹⁴ An experimental research at the level of primary education in the Netherlands shows that the effect of the treatment in the form of inter-religious education given to Christian and Muslim students yield different results. For the Christians, the inter-religious curriculum is effective in changing their knowledge, feelings, and attitudes toward the others. But for the Muslim students, it was effective only in terms of their knowledge about the others, but not the feeling nor the attitude.¹⁵ Whatever explanations are given to these interesting findings, at least it shows that developing an effective RE which comprises all aspects of education may be complicated. But difficulty is not a proof for impossibility. If RE is expected to matter, then all the dimensions of education somehow have to be taken into account.

This concern surely can be posed to RE in the context of all religions. What aspects of the religions should be included? Only the normative aspects, or more? Are they sufficiently accurate? What parts of each of the huge traditions are selected to be presented or emphasized? There is

¹³ Haidar Bagir, "Gagalnya Pendidikan Agama" (The Failure of Religious Education"), *Kompas*, February 28, 2003, which invited many responses. See also his "Menemukan Kembali Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Untuk Pengembangan Multikulturalisme" (Reinventing Islamic Education in Indonesia for the Development of Multiculturalism), in *Reinventing Indonesia* (Mizan, 2008) In his article the author thus rhetorically asks what use is religious education in a country which prides itself as a religious country (and the largest Muslim country), if corruption keeps on rising even after the political reformation!

¹⁴ "Religious Education in Indonesia: Implication for Inter-religious Relations in a Plural Society", research done by Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies, Gadjah Mada University (2007, not published); see footnote #10. This finding comes from the fact that while, in terms of the way the religious others are seen (cognitive aspect), the religious education in the schools which are studied are all relatively exclusive (in different degrees), yet in the affective dimension the students are not exclusive. One possible explanation for this is that, in the affective dimension, the students are more influenced by other factors, such as home, neighborhood, and friends—in many cases, all these factors are already multi-religious. I'd like to express my thanks especially to Mohamad Yusuf for sharing and discussing this research.

¹⁵ This research was done by Carl Sterkens (University of Nijmegen), published in *Interreligious Learning, The Problem of Interreligious Dialogue in Primary Education*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 2001.

diversity even within a particular religion. Would this diversity be acknowledged? Or would there be selection? Who does the selection? How? One may say that presenting all the diversity for students of elementary school, for example, would confuse them. But the problem is that if they don't get it from schools they would get it (or a distorted version of it) from other media. Besides, since we live in a plural world, it is (almost) impossible to avoid speaking about other religious traditions even in a subject about a particular religion, since the others are part of one's way of self-identification. The question, then, is not whether the diversity has to be presented (even at an early age), but how to present it in a good way. If possible at all, a deeper understanding, one that reaches to the spiritual roots of the religions, would enrich students' religious understanding. But, again, things as simple as visiting different places of worship sometimes may already create a big impact for students' understanding and positive attitude toward others.

Last but not least, in addition to understanding of (other) religions, students need also understand our common predicament—problems shared by all religions such as environmental crisis, poverty, etc. Of course, depending at the level of education, non-religious (political, social, economic) issues that affect religions can also be taken up by all students together. Discussing about conflicts involving different religious communities, for example, should not be avoided. In any case, it has appeared everywhere in the media, young children already ask questions about it, and some may even be impacted by it. Giving *good* answers to questions such as these would require considerations beyond the (normative dimension of) religions, but would also involve questions about the relation between religion and other sectors of society. The qualification “good” has to be emphasized, because teachers may easily give too normative answers to complex issues.

We have discussed the curriculum, the contents of RE and pedagogical method. Other important components in religious education, which I shall just mention briefly here, are:

- **Teacher:** the requirements for a good religious education, especially one which explores relation between religions, or even dialogue between them, would immediately require strong qualifications on the part of the teachers to understand religious traditions other than their own well enough and ones which would enable them to facilitate such dialogue. Yet, the very fact that such a good religious education has not existed in many places means that the teachers have not been well prepared to undertake the job. As such, one of the most important parts of improvement of religious education is teacher education.
- **Textbook:** similarly, the existence of textbooks which could take up the difficult issues about different religions in a good way is a necessary requirement. Such a book ideally would be the result of a collaborative project. In Indonesia such an attempt was attempted by the Archbishop of Semarang (Central Java) under the title of “religiosity education”. But it was not as successful as expected, since it was basically a compilation of excerpts taken from existing textbooks of religious education in particular religious contexts (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism)—which themselves were written for different purposes, i.e. in the tradition of religious education as internalization of particular religions, and for a different audience, i.e. students who are already part of the traditions.
- **Students:** The whole idea of a “multi/inter-religious” education starts with the belief in the fact of diversity as experienced in society. As such the students themselves obviously have their

own experience of diversity and in one way or another have responded to it. As shown very well by Sonia Nieto (*Affirming Diversity – The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, 2000), students' experiences are a very valuable source of learning. Yet it seems in many discussions about religious education this personal experience has not been tapped properly. Students learn from each other, just as teachers can learn from students. Learning about religions in plural is best done in a plural, multi-religious setting. This fact alone actually would make the idea of separating students based on their religions, as in the case with religious education in Indonesian schools, unthinkable. It is not too speculative to surmise that the fact that many students (at least in Indonesia, as found by the research in Yogya mentioned above) do not find religious education in schools interesting at all may be caused by the fact that they are not involved and their needs are not fulfilled.

Beyond school education

Some sociologists of education have actually questioned the commonly held assumption that “what we do in schools actually makes a difference.”¹⁶ The issue may have to do with how that education is done and what is being taught. But in general, education is not an isolated sector, but interacts with and is influenced by other sectors in society. RE would be effective if other sectors work in the same direction. To take an example, we may see the limitation of education when it is juxtaposed with the other, mighty source of “knowledge”: mass media. Shallow images and fears related to the religious others are continually reinforced by media, especially television. School education somehow has to compete with it—at times it even has to respond to it.

Governmental policy is another important factor. That is, policy in religious education, but also policy towards religion in general in a multi-religious country. Policies which hinder meaningful communication between religious communities would be counter-productive to religious education. Indeed, power relation ultimately impacts education, and as such education is never an apolitical enterprise.

This takes us to a pedagogical approach which has been developed for a long time, *critical pedagogy*. In general, but more so in a situation when other sectors works *against* the objectives of interreligious education, a good religious education has to involve critical pedagogy. That is, empowering the teachers and students to take a critical stance, to “critically analyze different perspectives and use them to understand and act on the inconsistencies they uncover.”¹⁷

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¹⁶ Quoted from Robert Jackson, “Religious Education’s Representation of ‘Religions’ and ‘Cultures’”, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 43: 3 (September 1995), 272.

¹⁷ Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity, The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, Longman, 2000, 317