

Education for All: where does religion come in?

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What roles do religions play in meeting global education challenges? This article explores five potential avenues for action: advocacy, service delivery, pluralism-focused curricula to further religious literacy, theological training for social justice, and addressing values challenges in education. Despite growing contemporary advocacy by religious institutions – individual as well as interfaith – for global education objectives, the effort is suboptimal. Faith institutions play important but complex and often under-appreciated roles in overall global education. Poor data and controversy about public and private roles in education can contribute to religion's exclusion from many influential debates. Outstanding institutions that strive to increase access to education and exemplify quality can better serve as models of excellence. Faith leaders and institutions offer particular advantages in meeting the pivotal challenges of education for marginalised groups and conflict-ridden societies. Education about religion is a thorny contemporary challenge, yet religious 'illiteracy' can be an obstacle to social harmony and enrichment. Religion is very much at issue as explicit and shared values are increasingly seen as critical to democratic societies and to reinforcing social cohesion.

The task

Education is widely acknowledged as a basic human right and a critical prerequisite for successful contemporary democracy and for thriving economies. The global consensus on education's role was reaffirmed in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), agreed upon by the leaders of the world's nations in the historic year 2000 United Nations Assemblies. They provide a framework designed to promise for once and for all, with specific deadlines (notably the year 2015), a translation of global ideals about ending poverty as a matter of rights into reality. Among these goals, education figures prominently.

The MDG education goals grew out of a decades-old international consensus calling for joined global efforts to assure 'Education for All' (EFA), the commitment that was exemplified and formally launched at the global conference in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. Beyond the ambitious if fairly straightforward goal of assuring education (at least through primary level) for everyone, plans to enhance the quality of education, to address the world's glaring inequities in education, to extend the reach of much needed early childhood education, and to increase access to secondary and higher education all figure on the agendas of various international development fora. These are worthy goals from many standpoints – ethical and

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economic, social and political. Yet they are far from being achieved. More worrying is evidence, for example in insufficient budget allocations at national levels and spluttering attention to issues, that the consensus on education as a true imperative may be more fragile, less robust than speeches by world leaders would suggest.¹ Even so, education as a right and as a central link in the development chain ranks high on most global agendas.

Yet faith institutions, an important set of partners, are little engaged at a global, systemic level in furthering the goals and removing impediments in their paths. That is not as it should be.

Faith institutions play vital roles in at least five dimensions of these global educational challenges: (a) faith institutions and leaders can be powerful advocates for action to achieve social justice, with EFA a prime example. This is true at global, regional, national, and community levels. (b) Faith institutions run large education systems that provide a significant if very poorly measured share of education. 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. Of special relevance for global development goals are their capacities for innovation, especially for poverty-related access and achievement issues. Faith leaders and institutions can also undermine commitment and implementation if they are not engaged. (c) Faith institutions often do and certainly should contribute to defining what is taught in education systems overall about religion – across curricula. Increasing general understanding about religions deserves high priority², because it is a fundamental part of identity and culture for many world citizens. (d) Training of religious leaders for today's era of globalisation should involve heightened attention to living within dynamic and plural societies and understanding social change-cum-development issues (for example HIV/AIDS). And (e) faith institutions have roles to play in finding creative approaches to preparing young people to be informed and proactive global citizens; this takes on heightened importance in the light of the challenges facing plural societies. Faith institutions have key parts to play in building social cohesion. These global citizenship challenges come back at a fundamental level to ancient and broad questions of how educational approaches and systems address questions of values.

Taking these five dimensions as the starting point, the article underscores the longstanding commitments to education that are fundamental to many different faith traditions, notably Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and their vast experience with schooling at all levels. This experience and the moral underpinning for supporting education offer important lessons for education policy discussions. For example, pertinent models like the *Fe y Alegria* and the *Christo Rey* systems in Christianity, and the *Gülen* movement and varying Islamic systems in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and India, illustrate the constructive roles faith institutions can play in meeting service delivery challenges for the poorest populations. Faith institutions are central players in important, often thorny issues for education policy and thus need to be constructively engaged in relevant dialogue. Topics at issue include discussion of standards and mechanisms to enhance religious literacy, addressing values challenges for contemporary plural societies, responding to concerns about inflammatory teaching in some schools, and shifting expectations and norms on church-state relations. The exploration thus endeavours to highlight how faith institutions can be more significant players than they are today in achieving global education goals.

Education for All

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. Education lies at the core of developing human capabilities (seen today as a primary means and end of development work), and weighs heavily in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Human Development Index which ranks country performance.³ 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 surely a central means to that end. Extraordinary progress has marked global education over the past century, much built on the foundations laid by faith-run and faith-inspired schools and universities, both within their own societies and as missionary ventures.

But there are enormous problems and gaps in the global picture, best exemplified in estimates that some 75 million children today are not attending primary school and that over 776 million adults are illiterate.⁴ Girls attend school in significantly lower proportions than boys, with large gaps in some societies. Quality of education in many countries and systems is so poor that outcomes fall far short of goals. Education offered is often not deemed adapted to either the economic or social needs of societies, leaving graduates unemployed and unemployable. There are enormous disparities in the education that is available and in achievements across communities and nations that make increasing inequities in the future nigh inevitable.

The MDGs and associated goals and targets, with their elaborate indicators and monitoring systems, global, regional, and national, have been led almost exclusively through public institutions – governments and international organisations, above all.⁵ However, a progressive expansion in understandings of why broader partnerships are needed is altering that picture. Today's discourse assumes that civil society and private sector support for development generally, and MDG targets more specifically, is essential. Dialogue on global education challenges and policies to achieve them takes in a widening range of actors outside official institutions.

With some significant exceptions, faith-inspired institutions were relative latecomers to the global mobilisation for the MDGs but, as in the case of civil society, activism for MDGs among many faith institutions is increasing. 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 WCRP (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 (December 2009) meeting in Melbourne, and the *Micah* Challenge (an evangelical church initiated advocacy campaign) illustrate an explicit commitment to mobilising public support for action on the goals.⁶ Leaders like Archbishop Winston Njongonkulu Ndungane and Lord Carey of Clifton have taken up the MDG cause as central planks of their ministries. But these are fairly isolated examples. In countless congregations, many have not heard of the MDGs, much less reflected on their importance and what their community might do to advance them.

In sum, despite important efforts and initiatives, faith institutions are in practice less active advocates and less central players in the global mobilisation effort for education than might be expected. Education is surprisingly little the focus of the recent (June 2009) *Papal Encyclical Caritas et Veritate*⁷ – the word education appears

only 12 times in this long document, and there is no resounding statement as to its central importance for human welfare. This is especially surprising given the extraordinarily important role that the Catholic Church plays in education. Education advocacy is less prominent than other issues for several global Muslim organisations. And even where strong rhetorical support for education by faith leaders is in evidence, efforts to put education at the centre of ministries, at the global level, are quite rare.

There are ample reasons for this situation. Overall the MDGs are not an easy 'sell', given their breadth and the fact that what may seem a bold goal at a global level (halving poverty) may have less appeal in speaking to a congregation (what happens to the other half?). Finding effective tools to translate good will and intentions into practice is a difficult challenge and for many faith leaders the path towards meaningful action on global issues is far from clear.

Perhaps more significant are several subtle but significant barriers to dialogue and engagement. The dominant paradigm of focusing on public provision of education in many instances has discouraged more active engagement of institutions whose focus may be on private provision of services. History comes into play in some situations, especially where the spread of modern education is closely tied to missionary efforts; tensions around education in northern Nigeria, where some groups forcefully denounce education they see as coming with a western face, illustrate a broader issue in a dramatic fashion. Ambivalence on faith roles in public education systems that are built around secular principles, dampening fervour both in acknowledging direct religious roles in running schools and posing questions about how religion can and should be taught, are further explanations (witness France). In some communities, commitment to equity goals – for example, closing the gap in enrolment of girls, may not rank high among change priorities in religious communities.

Looking more specifically from an MDG and EFA perspective, the somewhat patchy and sometimes tepid support for global education goals that emerges in some faith and interfaith settings is a concern and something of a puzzle. Part of the solution lies in addressing the perils of generalisation – the nobility of the goals may appear self-evident but tangible action steps need to be defined in plausible and understandable ways to mobilise 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) also can help. Increasing transparency and clarity in international and national commitments and disbursements for education helps advocates to press for action more effectively since they can see where shortfalls are taking place.

A diverse range of efforts is underway to address this challenge, some faith specific, others (like the ONE campaign) spanning a wider range of institutions. Efforts tend to concentrate on key review points, such as the round number years of MDG review (2010, for example) and meetings of the G8 and G20, where a tradition has emerged of faith leader meetings on the eve of such meetings, whose purpose is to highlight faith commitment to global agendas and to frame discussions in a more explicitly ethical context.⁸ The Africa Monitor, an organisation inspired by former Archbishop of Cape Town Winston Njongonkulu Ndungane, offers an example of a pragmatic yet visionary potential tool for holding international actors to account in delivering on MDG promises.⁹ The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD),¹⁰ initially a forum for exchange among faith and development leaders established by then World Bank President James D. Wolfensohn and Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, has evolved as an entity whose goal is to catalyse support for constructive action towards development goals and dialogue that can improve programme

quality. In this effort, the MDGs have provided an effective scaffolding for exploration of practical ways to engage faith energies and to address latent concerns through dialogue. Another example of an effort to grapple with the question of translating broad goals into practical options for action is a small, pithy book edited by two activist Anglicans, Sabine Alkire and Edmund Newell (Alkire and Newell 2005).

The most difficult challenges ahead seen from the global perspective, and starkly clear in the recent monitoring reports of international progress towards education goals, are to assure access in hard to serve regions and communities. That includes countries in conflict where faith communities provide much education (Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone are two examples). The two most challenging countries today for education goals are Nigeria and Pakistan and in both cases religion is at the forefront of policy debates. Serving excluded communities and the disabled are major areas where experience, ideas, leadership, and commitment are vitally needed. In all these cases, faith institutions already play critical roles and have extensive networks of leaders, community groups, and media channels. Framing advocacy and engagement around such specific challenges may help in the broader mobilisation effort.

In short, the potential for engaging faith communities far more actively as partners in mobilising support for education is highly significant, if complex, both in international and national settings. Their support can help also in identifying and seeking resolution to specific gaps and problems. This is not simply to advocate a 'cheerleader' function, however vital that role can be in sensitising communities to global dimensions of issues and in practical mobilisation (witness Jubilee 2000).¹¹ Equally important is engaging faith leaders in the global policy dialogue about the MDG mission, including its weaknesses and challenges, and future directions. As the 2015 MDG deadline approaches, the major global interfaith organisations and international religious bodies need to lend their voices and support to keeping tabs on progress, addressing shortfalls, and thinking ahead to next steps.

Faith service delivery

In working to meet global education targets (see Figure 1), the extensive, complex networks of educational institutions run by faith communities should play important roles. Yet in analysis of global education targets and goals, they have received little focus. Rarely are representatives of what are often extensive educational systems with vast relevant experience (faith-run systems) party to policy reviews and discussions.

The limited attention paid to faith communities as education service providers stems in part from the tendency highlighted above 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 presumption is under challenge, with mounting recognition of the substantial and growing phenomenon of private schools serving poor populations.¹² Tooley's (2009) research (*inter alia*) has highlighted the blinkers that public policy-makers have worn where private education is concerned, contributing to poor understanding and data gaps. Faith run systems fall into similar traps.¹³

Complicating the matter is the enormous complexity of development assistance today. The development community recognises the dysfunctional pattern that has evolved where numerous, uncoordinated actors operate in countries heavily dependent on development assistance. Many work with differing objectives and approaches,

Education for All Goals

- 1 Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- 2 Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- 3 Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.
- 4 Achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
- 5 Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
- 6 Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Figure 1. Education for All goals.

Source: http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=43811&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

individual monitoring systems, and their own requirements for reporting. Intensive efforts to harmonise aid have been underway for some time, with agreements reflected in the Paris, Rome, and Accra Declarations.¹⁴ Many aid programmes have, in response, moved from a 'project' approach to programme or sector-wide efforts involving multiple donors under a single umbrella, with a clear focus on government leadership and ownership for the respective countries. This trend towards better harmonisation is evident in education programmes in a growing number of countries. Yet faith-run programmes 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 programme goals, assessments of progress, and policy instruments, those faith actors who aspire to be part of national efforts to improve education quality need to be more actively represented at the aid harmonisation tables.

A third reason why faith education programmes figure relatively lightly in the global discourse is the diversity of these systems and their general lack of 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 any comprehensive assessment of relative quality and impact. There are clearly some places where the situation is well mapped. 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 120,000 schools and over 1000 colleges and universities).¹⁵ There are, however, important gaps in the data (for example, in schools run by the dynamic and growing Evangelical churches). Data

about Muslim schools also run the gamut from fairly detailed and reliable (Indonesia, India) to patchy and uncertain (Pakistan, West Africa). The roles that Buddhist education plays, and of the enormous social movements with a religious impetus, in South Asia are barely mapped though they run many schools and other education programmes (adult literacy, for example). Aggregate estimates are entirely lacking. In short, the data available is appallingly weak. Gaps in knowledge are a significant reason for the lack of attention to these important systems.

A fourth set of explanations for lack of focus is the complexity of systems, further compounded, in some instances, by their unofficial status. In a significant number of situations, 'hybrid' systems are the rule, meaning that schools fall somewhere between the public and private systems. This is the case, for example, in Cambodia, where 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, is comprised primarily of schools which are part of the public education system yet count on extensive support from other sources (church, community, business, international organisations). It may be difficult in such instances to pinpoint the roles of faith actors.¹⁶ And in some cases where the roles are ambiguous or informal, the faith leaders may elect not to draw attention to their roles.

A special set of issues arises for the complex and highly varied institutions inappropriately lumped together under the heading Muslim madrasas. In fact the word *madrasa* is simply Arabic for school. The enormous diversity of Muslim communities and of education systems in Muslim majority countries complicates the picture. Systems run by Muslim leaders and communities vary widely, ranging 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 (these exist, for example, in Indonesia) to poorly resourced institutions where learning is confined largely to memorising the Koran in Arabic, which students may well not understand.¹⁷ Critics focus particular concerns on questions about the quality of education provided, for example highlighting the tendency to rote learning and weakness of science teaching, and the perils of exclusivity. A more serious vein of concern is whether madrasas contribute to teaching hate and forming terrorists. Most thoughtful analysts view such concerns as overblown and confined to a small minority of schools (see, for example, McClure 2009). But the concern impedes efforts to support reforms in many situations. The image has caught the attention of global media and many leaders, severely distorting 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, and clouds debates about a Saudi sponsored school in the Washington DC metropolitan area.

A further, important, dimension of concerns that are not entirely confined to but are concentrated around Muslim education systems is debate about whether distinct faith-run schools contribute to or detract from social cohesion in plural societies. An example is the above-noted concern that some madrasas convey messages of hate, or that some Christian schools entrench exclusive tendencies for communities to identify with their own members. Faith-run systems are seen in some situations as undermining state authority and provoking tensions among communities in plural societies.

An important and fairly specific challenge is to explore the roles that faith-run education knowledge and networks can play in addressing the critical issues in a critical group of countries, variously termed the failing states, poorly performing states, low income countries under stress, states in conflict, and 'the bottom billion'.¹⁸ The irony is that these countries and their people most need assistance, yet governance and conflict make that assistance hard to use well. Conflict and corruption together impede most programmes and education almost always suffers. Faith institutions are often the major providers of services, including education, a force of continuity and a support to communities. Their actual and potential roles in addressing the challenges of education in the world's poorest and most challenged countries is recognised in some institutions (for example, the Netherlands government) and there are promising programmes in countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia, but practical steps to carry the recognition of faith roles and of their on the ground experience into a broader and active dialogue and partnerships are still quite limited.

The upshot of the fractured analysis and dialogue is that much of the rich knowledge and experience gained in faith-run systems is poorly reflected in policy analysis and decision-making. To illustrate the relevance of experience, three transnational educational programmes with strong faith links highlight both the variety and potential roles that faith-inspired institutions play and their pertinence to global educational challenges.

The Fe y Alegria system, mentioned above, 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. It is one part of the large, complex, and very varied system of Catholic-church education, and exemplifies the ancient Christian traditions of education and its 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 is further distinct (even within the Jesuit system) in its strong ethos of serving the poorest communities. Fe y Alegria's approach emphasises excellence, commitment to strong values, and community involvement, and the system, with its 53-year record of experience, shows impressive results. Apart from basic education at primary and secondary level, Fe y Alegria does pioneering work in vocational education and in radio distance learning. Often Fe y Alegria runs the only schools available to the disabled. With support from an innovative foundation, AVINA, Fe y Alegria has taken impressive steps to strengthen its systems of management and monitoring. And with this support it is, in a departure from the past, taking more active roles in dialogue about national and regional education. This is a welcome development, as Fe y Alegria has extensive relevant experience in engaging and serving poor communities.¹⁹

A very different example is the rapidly growing network of private schools run by the Gulen Movement. Originating in Turkey, and inspired by Fetullah Gulen, a Muslim Sufi leader, the system now operates schools in some 100 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).²⁰ The schools stress excellence and achieve outstanding results, and they place a strong emphasis on science. Schools address education needs in Central Asia but numbers are increasing in Africa and as far afield as Cambodia. The schools are essentially high quality private schools, with some commitment to equity (some scholarships are offered)

but above all they reflect a general commitment to quality education as a general principle, in service to the society.

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) does not consider 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 the AKDN institutions.²¹ Some of their work on education is exemplary, 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.²²

Understanding religion, understanding 'the Other'

Many public education systems around the world, 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 (see Prothero 2008). Other countries may have religion as part of the official public curriculum but dominated by a single perspective. The results are a 'religious illiteracy' that is the subject of mounting concern. The concern stems largely from the reality that plural societies are the norm today and will surely increase in significance, yet relations among communities are impaired by lack of 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, so that they are unable to appreciate literary references and other elements of culture and identity.

Teaching about different religious traditions is a sensitive topic, easier said than done. Sensitivity in approach, across different topics and disciplines, is essential and there can be no single formula or curriculum. Even so, there is an emerging consensus that more purposeful efforts to develop sound curricula, particularly at the secondary level, are needed. One example of interesting ground work to develop appropriate curricula in this area is the United World College (UWC) system, which is introducing a world religions curriculum. The UWC²³ system includes 13 schools, most offering a two-year programme leading to the International Baccalaureate, draws students from some 120 countries, and is inspired by a philosophy to achieve international peace and understanding by educating future leaders together. Thus their curriculum development effort has special interest. The UWC is one among many examples of pilot efforts to find effective and appropriate ways to develop curricula that ensure a level of religious literacy that modern plural societies need. Similar efforts are needed, with some exemplary efforts showing the way, in higher education (witness the Henry R. Luce Foundation's initiative on religion and international affairs²⁴) and in professional organisations such as diplomatic services and United Nations institutions.

The summary conclusion is that ignorance about religion can represent a serious obstacle in many fields, ranging from education to business to public affairs, and redressing the situation plainly should engage religious leaders and institutions.

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 is far less the norm today, and many religious leaders emerge from their advanced training programmes 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. Thus an area for action in education is theological training institutions of many kinds. Promoting exchange programmes among institutions and faiths is another area with significant potential.

There are important initiatives underway. One practical example is the World Council of Churches institute at Bossey, interfaith programmes at the Hartford Divinity School, and multifaith 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. But to a large extent this is uncharted terrain, with large numbers of people and a multitude of institutions involved in a somewhat hectic and disparate fashion. It is heartening, nonetheless, that in many quarters there is considerable interest in reaching out beyond the boundaries of a single faith and in finding ways to strengthen networks and collaboration.²⁵

The gaps in understanding among communities and between religious and secular leadership extend beyond theology: religious leaders pride themselves in their engagement in virtually every aspect of community life, from sex education and trade policy through housing, water and agriculture. The differences often matter: for example, priests who preach against genetically modified crops (GMOs) can exacerbate tensions around this technical and ethical issue, at the same time that religious leadership on conservation of natural resources can make an enormous difference for good. Thus broadening theological education to address a range of issues for development can both enhance the effectiveness of dialogue and, in some instances, provide a foundation for interfaith cooperation that can have important spill-over effects. Programmes in Africa that provide a grounding in health matters, including understanding causes and treatment of HIV/AIDS and malaria, in theological training institutions are good examples of extending educational approaches to meet contemporary needs and demands. More broadly, preparing faith leaders to address some contemporary issues such as sex education and use of social media might well offer wide benefits.

Thorny values questions and social cohesion

A vignette: a priest engaged in interfaith dialogue, a World Bank education specialist, and myself, meet to discuss a forthcoming report on education in an important region, the Middle East. The priest speaks, in a somewhat discursive fashion, about a small theological exchange programme that is a gleam in his eye. It is to involve advanced students from a Christian and a Muslim institution, and, despite agreement in principle, implementation has encountered significant roadblocks. The eyes of the World Bank specialist glaze over: 'What on earth does this have to do with the subject at hand?' Is his unspoken question: 'I turn the subject, asking how the forthcoming report has addressed the question of values in curriculum reform, a subject of keen interest to the priest. Brightly, the specialist says: 'Oh, 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 should be value neutral and impartial; they should teach students 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 that include rich ethical frameworks. It is this, he believed, that allows an individual to contribute to the society.

This exchange offers a glimpse of underlying debates that explain why the role of faith 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, today the situation is far more mixed. To complicate matters, questions about faith as part of education today are enfolded in several broader debates, notably about the respective roles and responsibilities of public and private actors in education and about how public education systems address the pluralism that is a central characteristic of modern societies. Returning to the 'values' question described in the exchange between the priest and the technical specialist, the questions are: 'whose values?', and 'how can values best be taught?'

The debates about values reflect an important set of policy questions that can and should engage a wide range of educators and which extend to the welfare of societies. These are of course fundamental and 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, with schooling geared essentially to preparing students for the labour market. That is plainly a vital function but undue focus on 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. And, in a negative sense, school systems, public or private, can teach in ways that either ease or exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions. It is on these questions that religious leaders and communities have a major stake, and can play positive or negative roles.

The example of the Balkan countries and the former Soviet Union countries after 1989 are full of instances of how issues are framed around the social functions of education; education specialist Stephen Heyneman (2008b) is especially insightful on this topic. Social cohesion is strongly influenced by education and takes on special importance in diverse, plural societies. Heyneman 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 by convincing students and parents that the educational opportunities offered are truly fair. Among the ways in which these questions work out in practice are in teaching about nationalism and ideology, and how much confidence is instilled around freedom of choice. '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 2008b, 95).

Interestingly, these debates echo in the history of framing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Reflecting on debates 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. And, more recently, Heyneman emphasises that fear of religious and ethnic extremism can be so great that it can influence policy on school choice.

Heyneman concludes with an important admonition:

In the end, whether in Turkey or in Britain, schools should all teach the same thing – 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 should also teach that the obligations on minorities are exactly the same as the obligations on majorities, that is, to conform to social norms. In this way schools can effectively add to every nation's social cohesion. (Heyneman 2008b)

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. But ignoring the tensions surrounding differences in values, pretending that differences are unimportant, cannot serve these ends. So addressing the questions that remain strong beacons of concern is as important as it ever has been.

Towards conclusions

In the final analysis, the great problem of humankind in a global age will be to balance and reconcile two impulses...: the quest for distinctive identity and the search for global coherence. What this challenge will ultimately require of us, is a deep sense of personal and intellectual humility, 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 even more intellectual than that. 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 do that, then we will discover that the universal and the particular can indeed be reconciled. As the Quran 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)²⁶

This statement by the Aga Khan is an inspired framing of the central challenges facing contemporary education, in this age marked by the forces of interconnectedness that flow from globalisation and the increasing pluralism of today's societies. It is a challenge that is 'quantitative', as exemplified in the MDGs and EFA, but even more it is qualitative in nature, complex and nuanced in its multiple dimensions. It highlights many of the reasons that faith leaders belong at the policy tables where global and national educational issues are discussed.

To start with the less positive, faith leaders and institutions are, in some situations and parts of the world, on occasion 'part of the problem'. They can both represent doubters, stalling the push for universal education, the most notable example being the case for girls. And there can be and quite often are significant tensions around

approaches to education and curriculum. Yet faith leaders can and should, in many instances, be 'part of the solution'. This would involve first, more active efforts to engage them and seek their views, to share research and information, and to take their contributions into account. An area where (my faith makes me confident here) sharing research and information could change mindsets and mobilise energies is precisely education of girls. Research here provides such compelling evidence of the enormous benefits of educating girls that, surely, the reticence of many faith leaders could well be removed if they saw it clearly.

Far 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?), how to teach on 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 should be key allies in the global effort to bring education for all.

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. The complexity of the challenges underscores two important priorities: first, addressing the issue of information gaps, through exploration of data gathering and definitions, and second engaging in structured dialogue. Both 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.

Notes

1. See (Heyneman 2008a) for a thoughtful critique of background of Education for All and its flaws. Also see (Lewin 1993), a paper prepared for DFID that outlines the 'state of the art' on relevant issues.
2. 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).
3. See Sen (1999).
4. See EFA Global Monitoring Report, <http://www.unesco.org/en/efareport> and http://www.unesco.org/education/gmr2009/press/efagrnr2009_Highlights.pdf for highlights and for main messages.
5. For general progress on MDGs, see <http://www.mdgmonitor.org/>. On education, see the EFA monitoring reports cited above.
6. See <http://www.wcp.org/resources/lookis/faith-in-action> for a WCRP 'Toolkit' on advancing the MDGs, and the Micah Challenge mission and work is summarised on their website at <http://www.micahchallenge.org/>. The Micah Challenge originated as an Evangelical Christian effort to highlight global social justice issues.
7. For the text, see: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_carta8-in-veritate_en.html.
8. 'Spiritual Counsel to the G8', describes the 2009 such meeting in Italy: http://news-week.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/georgetown2009/06/spiritual_counsel_to_the_g8.html.
9. See <http://www.theafricanmonitor.com/>.
10. See <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/wrld>.
11. 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/>.
12. See Tooley (2009) and <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/egwest/>.

13. An example of efforts to fill this gap is a recent World Bank publication (Barrera-Osorio, Patrinos and Wodon 2009).
14. For background and relevant texts see <http://www.aidharmonization.org/>.
15. For example, see Grace and O'Keefe (2007).
16. Magis Americas (a non-profit US organisation supporting Jesuit social endeavours) describes the Federation of Fe y Alegria, which serves 1.3 million students, 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/feyalagria/abstracte/veenezuela.pdf>. The Harvard Business School has an interesting case study on the system, see: <http://harvardbusiness.org/product/fe-y-alegria-one-or-many/SKE101-PDF-ENG>.
17. Research on madrasa systems is limited. Interesting new material is being produced by three institutions. The Religions and Development Program undertaken with DFID support by a consortium of universities led by the University of Birmingham has 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/resources/module/@random454R060b3f4/1211530945_working_paper_13_for_web.pdf). Also The World Bank Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics has a forthcoming volume on madrasas inter alia at: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUD-TS/PARTNERS/EXTDEVDIALOGUE/0,content-MD%2D19553884~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 madrasas, see: http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=10&Itemid=149.
18. The latter refers to the paradigm shifting work of Paul Collier (2007).
19. Chapters in the author's two books about development and faith describe the Fe y Alegria system: *Development and Faith, Where Mind, Heart, and Soul Work Together* (with Marisa Van Saanen), and *Mind Heart and Soul in their Fight Against Poverty* (with Lucy Kough), published by the World Bank, 2004 and 2007.
20. For general overview, see M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (2003).
21. Aga Khan Education Services (AKES), a network of educational institutions, combines operation of over 300 schools and management of 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>.
22. For a short summary, see http://www.partnershipsnaction.org/downloads/briefs/Brief_MADRASA.pdf.
23. See <http://www.uwc.org/>.
24. See <http://www.uwc.org/nlucereinatf.asp>.
25. The World Council of Churches has taken leadership in one area, HIV/AIDS training. For one example, see http://www.oikoumene.org/uploads/ox_wcdiscussion/HIV-AIDS_1-Teaching_and_Talking_about_Our_Sexuality.pdf.
26. See "The Peterson Lecture," by his Highness the Aga Khan to the Annual Meeting of the International Baccalaureate marking its 40th Anniversary: <http://www.ibo.org/council/peterson/agakhan/index.cfm>

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