

## Imposing tolerance, fostering conscience?

By Oddbjørn Leirvik\*

### Globalized concepts and religion in the classroom

The diversity of approaches in the programme “Religion in a globalised age” reflects the fact that globalization has got many arenas and takes manifold expressions. One of those arenas is school education, the ideals of which have increasingly become part of a globalized discourse.

Another important aspect of globalization is that of globalised concepts. In current discussions about religion and politics, we can see how a set of loaded concepts now flow more or less freely between the cultures. I deliberately say “more or less freely”, since the use of concepts is often entangled in power plays. Notions such as tolerance, freedom and democracy do not fall from heaven. Behind globalized concepts, there are human agents with an agenda of change. In this sense, concepts can be powerful. But concepts tend to live their own life, more or less independently of their origin. This implies that the meaning of globalized concepts is flexible and liable to constant renegotiation.

In current debates on the contentious issue of religion in school, we also find that certain concepts play an important role. Concepts and ideals such as “teaching for tolerance” serve as common points of reference for people with converging but not identical agendas for change as regards religion in school.

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In my presentation, I shall look upon the relevance of three particular concepts for the question of religion in the classroom: tolerance, conscience and solidarity. Tolerance is already a globalized concept in this respect. My suggestion is that two other globalized concepts – conscience and solidarity – should also be brought to bear upon the question of religion and ethics in school.

Although my scope of my discussion will be global, I will pay special attention to the Egyptian context.

## Tolerance

Beginning with the notion of tolerance, tolerance is one of those values that everyone with an ambition of being politically correct in the new world order would be expected to profess – along with “freedom”, “human rights” and “democracy”. But the exact implication of tolerance is always contested and easily becomes absorbed in political rhetoric. In post 9/11 speeches, George W. Bush has often referred to tolerance as one of the deepest commitments of *America*, to be defended (along with “pluralism” and “progress”) by the war on terrorism. But he is not alone in invoking tolerance. In a recent fatwa on “Spirit of Tolerance in Islam”, an American Muslim leader claims: “*Muslims* have been generally very tolerant people”.

Historically, tolerance is a distinctively *modern* notion. It gained momentum at a particular point in European history. In critical response to religious wars in Europe, tolerance for Enlightenment philosophers meant religious freedom. In political thought, tolerance has sometimes been conceived of merely as *toleration* of other creeds. But in standard usage, *tolerance* means something more. As the expression “a tolerant person” indicates, tolerance is more than politics. It is a personal virtue which implies the capacity of being patient with the opinions or practices of others.

If we look into the UN documents on tolerance, we will find that both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (from 1948) and UNESCO's Declaration of Principles on Tolerance (1995) refer to tolerance as an attitude that should be fostered *by education*. Tolerance is not only seen as a political and legal requirement but also as a moral duty related to friendship. It even means "appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures".

Since the 1990s, and particularly after 9/11, the notion of tolerance has become entangled in discussions about Islam and the West. As regards tolerance education, the US government has put considerable pressure upon Muslim majority states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to revise their curricula for teaching Islam in school. More independent observers have also noted the need to revise the way in which the Jewish, Christian or Western Other is depicted in prevailing Islamic textbooks. Muslim educators feel often squeezed between the pressure from outside and resistance from local religious leaders to their efforts at merging classical Islamic notions of tolerance with modern standards of human rights.

If one looks at Egypt's revised curricula for ethical and religious education, one will find that the modern Arabic word for tolerance, *tasamuh*, figures prominently in both syllabi and textbooks. In classical Arabic, the word *tasamuh* carries rich connotations of personal virtues such as patience and generosity. The coining of *tasamuh* as a word for political tolerance, however, is modern. As for its political implications, it is not always clear whether *tasamuh* transcends the traditional limits set by Muslim cultures for religious and moral pluralism.

In both East and West, his question is often blurred when tolerance is praised: exactly where are the implicit limits to tolerance drawn?

## Conscience

As we have noted, however, tolerance is not only about politics. It has also to do with personal attitudes. When discussing tolerance education, both the personal and political dimensions of the concept should be brought to bear.

In order to avoid a superficial understanding of tolerance as a more or less unwilling “toleration” of others, in what follows I will suggest that *teaching for tolerance* should be linked with educational efforts at strengthening the bond of *conscience* across cultural and religious divides.

It seems in fact that young people intuitively link the notion of tolerance with personal qualities – and the voice of conscience. When the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief (which has got a project named “Teaching for Tolerance”) called for a worldwide writing contest for youth and students, nearly all of the “Stories of Tolerance” that were submitted associated tolerance with personal relationships – like a bond of conscience across all barriers . The winning story portrays a Christian and a Muslim student in Nigeria who were able to reconcile with each other and deepen their friendship – after having been divided for some time over religious differences that were hard to tackle.

This understanding of tolerance is in line with UNESCO’s Declaration, which (as we have seen) relates tolerance to friendship and (freedom of) conscience.

In the Christian history of ideas, the notion of conscience goes back to the New Testament which associates conscience with a moral knowledge that can be shared by Jews, Christians, Greeks and Romans. In Thomas Aquinas’ later understanding, human conscience reflects the natural law that is written in the heart of every human being. This was also the conviction of the ancient Greeks: the abode of conscience is the human heart.

In Western European languages, words for conscience consist of a word for “knowing” and the prefix “with”. Thus the English word *con-science* corresponds to Latin *con-scientia* and Greek *syn-eidesis*. The prefixes *syn-* and *con-* indicate that etymologically, conscience means knowing “with” someone.

The critical question, then, is “with whom” we know something that is intimate and deep enough to be labeled conscientious knowledge. In my previous research on the notion of conscience, I have suggested that the inherent dialectic between “knowing by oneself” and “knowing with the other” is in fact constitutive of the notion of conscience. Conscience does only reflect private convictions. It also reflects interpersonal obligations. In pluralist societies, the question arises of whether the interpersonal bond of conscience will mainly be restricted to solidarity within one’s own community, or whether conscience can create a solid bond between people of different faiths and convictions.

During the 20th century the concept of conscience has become thoroughly globalized, not least by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Here, conscience is seen as a moral faculty that unites people in “brotherhood” across cultural and religious barriers. Article 1 says: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”.

Against the possible suspicion that the reference to conscience was included only because of Western influence, it should be noted that it was in fact a Chinese member of the drafting committee who proposed a reference to conscience. In his view, the Christian or Western notion of conscience paralleled the Confucian notion of *jen*. In Chinese script, *jen* is composed of the signs for “human being” and “two”. It can thus be translated as “two-man-mindedness” or “consciousness of one’s fellow men”.

The Declaration thus associates conscience with universal brotherhood. But it also reflects the modern understanding of conscience as a *personal* (almost private) property. Whereas Article 1 emphasises the social dimension of conscience, Article 18 states “freedom of conscience” as an inviolable right that rests with the individual: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion ...”

Modern Arabic words for conscience are *damir* and *wijdan*. In classical Arabic, the word *damir* refers to innermost knowledge that is not divulged. From the middle of the 19th century onwards, *damir* is given the additional meaning of moral consciousness, i.e. conscience. By their reference to innermost feelings and thoughts, words like *damir* and *wijdan* emphasize conscience’s nature of being an individual property (which political tolerance is supposed to protect). But in some modern Muslim discourses on conscience, one can also find that *damir* is referred to as the basis of a faith-transcending moral community that potentially unites Muslims, Christians and other people of good will.

In the 1950s and 60s (which I have previously been researching), outstanding Muslim intellectuals in Egypt spoke of “the *shari’a* (law) of love and conscience” as the uniting bond between Christ and Muhammad and even referred to Gandhi as “the voice of conscience in our time”. The scope of their discourses was “humanity”. The most daring of these authors, Kamil Husayn, wrote a book in 1954 about the drama of Good Friday, translated into English as “City of Wrong”. Putting aside classical Muslim-Christian controversies as to whether Christ was actually crucified or not, he sees the *intention* to crucify as an expression of the universal drama of moral integrity versus religious loyalty and political rationality. “They considered that reason and religion alike laid upon them obligations that transcended the dictates of conscience.”

However, this universalist approach to human conscience by Egyptian intellectuals is now history. Whereas in the 1950s and 60s, both Muslims and

Christians were generally keen to emphasize their shared Egyptian identity, the 1970s saw the emergence of huge revival movements in both Egyptian Islam and Coptic Christianity. In contrast with the previous emphasis on the fellow nationality and common humanity of Muslims and Christians, public discourses in Egypt in the last decades of the 20th century have given increasing weight to Coptic and Muslim authenticity respectively.

Similar processes have taken place internationally, reflecting the global growth of a type of identity politics that suggests that a person is first and foremost Christian, Muslim, Hindu etc. and only in the second place human.

This may also affect the way we conceive of the Golden Rule, which can be seen as an empathetic expression of conscience's other-directed aspect. Almost universal in its dissemination, the Golden Rule is found in most religious traditions and expressed either in the negative or positive: "always treat (not) others as you would (not) like them to treat you."

But how should the Golden Rule be interpreted? Is it universal in its range or does it only call for solidarity between adherents of the same faith? The Muslim version of the Golden Rule figures prominently in a hadith at the beginning of al-Bukhari's Book of Faith: "No one of you will become faithful till he wishes for his brother (*li-'akhihi*) what he likes for himself." The problem is that in the most widely used English translations of al-Bukhari, a narrowing parenthesis is added: "till he wishes for his (Muslim) brother what he likes for himself". The English translations thus contradict a more universalistic interpretation of Muhammad's saying. The narrowing translations are well in tune with prevailing identity politics in both East and West that threaten to make religion only a marker of communal borders.

## **Solidarity, face to face**

Coming now to my third concept, solidarity, it originates from the 1840s and is thus more recent than both tolerance and conscience. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the concept of solidarity has to do with “being perfectly united or at one ... in interests, sympathies or aspirations”.

In a recent article, the theologian and philosopher Enrique Dussel suggests that tolerance is not enough to counter intolerant attitudes. Intolerance, says Dussel, can only be countered by faith-transcending solidarity. In Dussel’s understanding, solidarity is not a question of group interest. In late modern usage, it has rather to do with group-transcending sympathy. It means responsibility for your neighbour and a readiness to respond to the vulnerability of others, even of enemies. In this sense, the notion of solidarity only corroborates the essential meaning of conscience as a group-transcending bond of responsibility.

## **Learning interfaith solidarity, in egypt**

How can education, then, foster conscience and create solidarity across cultural and religious divides? The most critical question is probably whether pupils of different faiths and cultures are in fact allowed to *face one another* when learning about religion and ethics. In most countries of the world, ethical and religious education in school is still confessional – which means that the pupils are separated when religion is taught. In the case of Egypt Islamic and Christian Religious Education has been offered as parallel options in public school since 1907. In order to balance the narrowing consequences of confessional instruction, revised curricula from the 1990s emphasize tolerance of the other, human rights and co-citizenship. In 2001, Egypt introduced also a new subject called “Values and Ethics” with tolerance (*tasamuh*) as a pivotal attitude to be promoted. Local critics have suggested that the



new subject has only been introduced because of external pressure. The architects behind the subject point to inspiration coming from UNESCO but emphasize also Egypt's own legacy of community-transcending ethical thinking. Indicative of this aim, textbooks picture Muslims and Christians in solidarity, in common defense of their homeland.

The problem is that textbooks for Islamic Education (and to some extent, Christian Education textbooks) still reproduce anti-Jewish stereotypes. In a fourth grade textbook for Islamic Education, the pupils read: "The Jews are certainly deceitful. They didn't respect the pacts between them and the Muslims, or the rights of the neighbour. The Muslims, however, keep the pacts and have always good relations with their neighbours." In general, textbooks demonstrate the strong interrelation between national and religious issues in Egyptian curricula. In a section about the benefits of the month of Ramadan, a direct line is drawn from the first Muslims' historic victory over the idolaters at Badr to Egypt's successful October War against the Jewish state of Israel in 1973.

It is not difficult to understand the political context of such statements: it is hard to tolerate a political enemy (Israel) that is widely seen to have infringed upon the fundamental rights of Arabs and Muslims. But calling for Muslim-Christian friendship at the cost not only of Israelis but of "Jews" clearly contradicts a type of solidarity that protects vulnerable individuals irrespective of their political and religious affiliation. For the same reason, conservative alliances in the West between Jews and Christians against radical Muslims should not be called solidarity.

Solidarity in Dussel's necessitates that the excluding nature of current identity politics is unmasked, also when it comes in the form of Muslim-Christian or Christian-Jewish alliances. As the example shows, those who are not present in the classroom are more vulnerable to exclusion than the others.

To mend these unfortunate aspects of Egyptian textbooks, one needs not to call upon Uncle Sam. Bringing alive the legacy of Egyptian Muslim intellectuals who two generations ago wrote inclusively on the concept of conscience and its implied bond of solidarity, would probably have a better effect.

## Conclusion

Summing up the educational vision underlying my presentation, I would suggest that teaching for *tolerance* implies calling on the pupils' *consciences*, helping them to learn faith-transcending *solidarity*. This understanding implies that individual consciences – when called upon in a multireligious context – may form a new kind of moral community that challenges traditional limits to tolerance set by the religions. If pupils of different faiths and backgrounds become united by the bond of conscience across religious divides, will they still accept traditional inequalities in rights and opportunities between different religious groups, between believers and unbelievers, between men and women?

If successful, conscience-based tolerance education may gradually lay the ground for *interfaith* solidarity. But that can probably only happen if pupils are allowed to *face one another* when learning religion and ethics and discussing religious tolerance in school. In that perspective, countries that do not even allow teaching religion in school (such as US and France), must be willing to revise their policies, just as much as those countries who do teach religion in the classroom must be willing to revise their curricula – in conformity with globalized ideals.