

Global uncertainties, the study of religions and religious education (Michael Pye)

Two lectures held at Otani University, February 22nd and March 8th 2005
Summary

In global perspective we perceive the plurality of religions and the existence of various religions side by side in different parts of the world. In the media, religion is regarded both as socially significant and as politically dangerous.

Accordingly, the study of religions has been developed as an international, global activity. An important role is played here by the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) and a number of national and regional associations such as the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR). In the near future the Japanese Association for the Study of Religions is organizing the 19th World Congress of the IAHR in Tokyo (the first having been held in 1900).

Historically, many universities began as religious foundations, Christian, Buddhist or Muslim. At the same time, the study of religions has been developed as a religiously neutral academic process which is *not* dependent on a religious foundation.

Nevertheless academic specialists in the study of religions bear the responsibility of explaining and commenting on questions which are socially and politically important, e.g. questions about the relations between religion and conflict, war, and so on. Five major concerns relating to religion may be identified as follows:

- 1.No simple secularization process
 - 2.Strong ideological function of religion
 - 3.Fear of irrationality and violence
 - 4.Separation of religion and state difficult
 - 5.Religious education problematical
- These are all *interrelated*, as explained more fully in the second lecture.

It is necessary to distinguish between different levels of terminology:

Believer terminology (**insider terminology**): e.g. fundamentalism as “relying on the word of God”

Media terminology (**outsider terminology**) e.g. fundamentalism as “fanaticism”

Academic terminology (**outsider terminology**) e.g. fundamentalism as “sincere literalism”.

For various reasons, believers or participants may not be happy with statements made by specialists in the study of religion. This leads to the “tension with believers factor (TWB Factor). At the same time, important guiding principles of the study of religions are: *empathy* and *detachment*. These should be combined. Moreover, the study of religions is not “a position”, but rather a process, analogous to other scientific procedures (c.f. diagram).

However, the study of religions is not necessarily in tension, or only in tension, with the participants in religious systems. There may also be very good relations. This may be of value, not only in the research process, but also in the mediation of dialogue. Examples are the recent dialogues between representatives of Shin Buddhism (Otani University) and Protestant Theology

(Marburg University), and the recent IAHR regional conference in Indonesia (2004) on the subject of “Religious Harmony: Problems, Practice and Education”. (c.f. publications).

On the subject of “War and Peace”, it is important to see that in any one religious tradition there is a spectrum of attitudes, ranging from the militant to the pacific. Indeed there is a debate among religious people about the implications of their faith or their tradition. This is a matter for the respective theologians. Yet, at the same time, the specialist in the study of religions should try to comment on the options available. Therefore, in the perspective of an *observer analysis*, the value of the following characterizations will be briefly explored:

- Christianity: militant option not religiously central
- Islam: firm defensive stance typical
- Buddhism: pacific attitude expected
- Sikhism: development from pacifism to firm defensive option
- Hinduism: indifference to military action
- Judaism: dialectic of conquest-suffering-conquest
- Shinto: nationalist, but not necessarily militarist

The question of “Religious Education” is important because of its implications for counteracting social conflicts, violence and international war.

However the question of the relation between private and public education must be thought about carefully. Private religious education may be one-sided. Public religious education might lead to ideological misuse, or negate the principle of the separation of religion and the state. This in turn may lead to a loss of religious freedom.

The solution to these problems lies in correlating religious education with the academic study of religions as a religiously neutral process. It must also be correlated pedagogically with the growth and development of the child. The following four stages provide a basic orientation for this combination.

- Awareness: learning about customs and festivals
- Understanding: learning about religious themes
- Knowledge: learning about religions in the wider world
- Analysis and reflection: learning about religious problems

Proposal

The following *proposal* is therefore made. A new program of religious education in Japan should combine the viewpoints of education, especially child development, with the world-wide study of religions, without insisting on one religious view. This development would provide an internationally acceptable and interesting model, respecting the separation of religion and the state.

Conclusion

Globally speaking, religious traditions and systems are perceived as presenting various dangers, leading to social conflicts and international wars. At the same time they are thought to provide various values and meanings which are important for human life and community. Social and academic responsibility require us to develop good programs of religious education, both in the

private and the public sectors, so that these various implications can be properly understood by young people. This is necessary for the benefit of peace and harmony in the future.

Michael Pye

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