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## Foundational Issues in Educating Young People for Understanding and Appreciation of the Religions in Their Communities

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*This is a conceptual paper considering some of the foundational issues that a teacher needs to have at least considered (if not resolved) when he or she sets out to encourage students to understand and appreciate the variety of religions in their communities. The first issue is that of what to call the enterprise; the second relates to assumed hierarchies of religions and the barriers these can impose on genuine education about religions; the third issue is that of the fundamentalist student; the fourth issue is the pervasive presence of religious history especially when religion has been the oppressor; the fifth, the position of the believing student in the conversation; and the sixth, the development of critical thinking about religions. All of these foundational issues provide rich content for educators' reflections, reading, and discussions with colleagues and dialogue with students.*

In the interest of developing social cohesion (Mintz & McDonough, 2011) as well as informed spirituality (Engebretson, 2009a) among their students, leaders and teachers in Catholic schools and universities are increasingly becoming aware of the need for their students to develop an informed and empathetic knowledge of religions other than their own. Elsewhere (Engebretson, 2009), I have provided a theoretical curriculum model for educating primary, secondary, and tertiary students in understanding and appreciation of the religions in their communities. This model draws on Husserl's (1954) concept of the lifeworld to characterize interreligious education as a constructively empathetic conversation between lifeworlds, a conversation that is evaluative, reflective, reciprocal, critical, and transformative. In the same book, *In Your Shoes: Inter-faith Education for Australian Schools and Universities*, I presented a range of pedagogical strategies, and suggestions for cognitive, affective, and experiential education for understanding and appreciation of religions. It is not my intention in this paper to replicate this work. Instead, I want to figuratively take "a step back" to consider some of the foundational issues that a teacher needs to have at least considered (if not resolved) when he or she sets

out to encourage students to understand and appreciate the variety of religions in their communities. I do not provide an exhaustive list of such issues, rather I focus on those that frequently reoccur and that risk impeding progress, or even becoming unsurmountable problems, if the teacher has not considered them and arrived at some position from which they can be dealt with effectively in the classroom or lecture group. The analysis that follows focuses on such key issues, these being terminology, religious superiority, fundamentalism, religions and history, students' beliefs, and critical reasoning.

### Terminology

Among the first issues facing the educator who wants to help young people to grow in their understanding and appreciation of the religions in their community is that of terminology. The term *religious studies* is usually understood as the study of religions in their cultural settings, a secular process that involves cross-cultural and comparative study. In religious studies (most often in senior secondary accredited religious studies courses), the religious adherent's experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them are examined. However, there is no attempt to evaluate these experiences and meanings as truth claims, or to allow them to challenge the student's own lifeworld. An important term used in this paper, the term *lifeworld* (Husserl, 1954) refers to "individual consciousness operating in a network of meaning and values all of which have constructed and transmitted historically and culturally by the socialized individual" (Engebretson, 2009, p. 66). The lifeworld is the "bedrock constellation" (Engebretson, 2009, p. 66) of the abilities, knowledge, assumptions, practices, and attitudes that make up the person's cognitive, social, psychological, and cultural landscape.

What is usually overlooked in the rather sterile approach most often taken in religious studies is that a purely objective study is not true to its underpinning methodology of phenomenology, which was pioneered by Ninian Smart (1976) and adapted in Australia by Habel and Moore (1982). Phenomenology proposes a cognitive study of religious phenomena (beliefs, stories, rituals, symbols, social structure, and religious experience in their many manifestations) that does not in any way require the student to adopt the belief system being studied. However, the method does require "imaginative participation" (Smart, 1974, p. 3) in the world of the believer. The student must "step into the shoes" of a religious adherent in order to see the phenomenon through their eyes, and thus come to at least an understanding if not appreciation of

religious experiences. This is the intuitive side of religious studies, the side that deals with meaning for the adherent and potentially for the student. The student distills such meaning from a phenomenon in his or her own context, and crunches it down into the framework of existing knowledge (Habel & Moore, 1982) in order to gain some personal insight. This intuitive, reflective aspect of the method is absolutely central to its use, and yet it is ignored in the critiques that posit phenomenology as a dry, descriptive method (Barnes, 2001; Jackson, 2006).

When the intuitive, reflective side of religious studies is ignored—as it so often is in textbooks, religious studies courses, and scholarly contributions—religious studies may become unsatisfying for many students and teachers who are interested in more than description. Religious questions such as those about the existence and nature of the sacred, about the origin and function of the human religious impulse, and about the meaning of religious phenomena for the adherent and the student arise naturally from the study of religion. If we limit religious studies to its cognitive dimensions represented above, these irreducibly “religious” aspects of religions are overlooked. Because of the limited way in which it is so often used, the term religious studies is no longer appropriate to describe the rich educative process of empowering young people for understanding and appreciation of the religions in their communities.

Similarly the terms *interfaith education* and *interreligious education* are problematic in the average classroom, for students of all ages. *Interfaith* education implies that the students are religious believers, and this cannot be assumed, even in Catholic schools and universities. *Inter-religious education* also seems to imply involvement by the student in a conversation in which they are expected to demonstrate their knowledge of their own religion. However, many Catholic students are disassociated from their religion and would not be able to contribute to this conversation. Therefore I propose the rather cumbersome *education for understanding and appreciation of the religions in the community* as preferable term to *religious studies*, *interfaith* or *interreligious education*. *Education* is a critical inquiry process which involves the student in reflection and evaluation. *Understanding* involves cognitive learning about an aspect of human experience (not unlike the methods employed in religious studies). *Appreciation* brings the affective and experiential into the process, thus broadening it from just a cognitive study. The goal is not just knowledge but appreciation of religions through seeing them in all their differences and similarities. More than this, it presents the student with the possibility of personal development through growth in awareness of his or her own spirituality, beliefs, and values

(Lovat, 2003).

### Is One Religion Superior?

A second foundational issue that educators of religion must face is that of the relationship of the home tradition (that is the tradition with which the school or university and most of the students are affiliated) to other religions. When the followers of another religion are considered to be infidels, or even simply unenlightened, promoting tolerance and listening is very difficult. An exclusivist approach that holds that only one religion, or one interpretation of it, leads to salvation is a significant barrier to education for understanding and appreciation of religions (Franzmann & Tidswell, 2006). Some forms of pseudo-inclusivism are also inadequate, a point I will attempt to illustrate by tracing developments in Catholic theology with regard to other religions. Catholic theology up to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)—with some nuances by various theologians (Engebretson, 2008)—taught the Council of Florence (1438–1447) claim that outside the Church there was no salvation (Denzinger, 1954). This rendered other religions and other Christian denominations meaningless for Catholics and any study of them pointless. Knitter (1986) characterized this position as *Christ against the religions*. The teaching of the Second Vatican Council, drawing on Rahner's (1961) theory of anonymous Christianity, allowed that God's saving grace was available to all, but that this grace was always Christ's grace, and Christ was the ultimate fulfillment of every person's gift of grace. In other words, in Rahner's theology, other religions are not valid in themselves, but partially and provisionally valid until the arrival of Christianity. They are a preparation for the Gospel and have no value in themselves. This view of *Christ within the religions* is mainstream Catholic theology expressed most positively in the words of John Paul II (1986). He insisted on respect for the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in non-Christians and in their religions—seen in their practice of virtue, their spirituality, and their prayer. However, ultimately John Paul II's thought mirrored the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, in that while it granted that other religions could be vehicles of salvation for their adherents, this was always in a mysterious way, in and through Christ (Knitter, 1986).

Many Catholics find this *Christ within the religions* theology patronizing and dismissive of the great religions of the world and their rich histories. They see these religions as means of salvation in their own right, and not just as a preparation for Christianity. They argue that while the task of the Church is

to promote the Kingdom of God, it is always in the understanding that the Kingdom of God is not limited to the Church and that God has acted in the world in many ways, not just in Christ. However, they assert that Christ is the norm by which religions are judged and in which they find their fulfillment (Knitter, 1986). This *Christ above the religions* (Knitter, 1986), which I call pseudo-inclusivism, is a common opinion today among Catholic theologians. Knitter critiques it in this way: “When one of the partners in the dialogue insists that s/he has the normative and final word, such a dialogue can finish only as one between the cat and the mouse” (Knitter, 1986, p.101). He proposes a revolutionary model for Catholics that he calls *Christ together with the religions and other religious figures*. In this model other traditions are valued in themselves as mediators of the sacred and as the means of salvation for their adherents: “Buddhism and Hinduism may be as important for the history of salvation as is Christianity—or other saviors may be as important as Jesus of Nazareth” (Knitter, 1986, p. 103).

While I have used Knitter’s analysis to illustrate the point, it can be applied to every religious community. We cannot enter into education for understanding and appreciation of the religions in our communities if we begin from the position that our religion is superior, or from the position that all other religions are mysteriously related to our religion and are valid only because of this relationship. This potentially works against the principles of listening and reflection that are the hallmarks of effective education and also potentially denies the expansion of religious consciousness that is possible when other religions are studied as equals. This crucial foundational issue needs to be clearly thought out by teachers and explored with students before and during education for understanding and appreciation of religions.

### **Fundamentalism among Students**

The third foundational issue that educators must consider is that of fundamentalism, both doctrinal and textual. There is fundamentalism in every religion, however, in this section, I discuss the particular challenge posed to education for understanding and appreciation of the religions in their community by Christian and/or Catholic fundamentalist students. The main reason for this is that there is evidence to show that adherence to fundamentalist Christian groups is growing in Australia (the homeland of the author) especially among young people (Bellamy & Castle, 2004). Additionally, in the United States 26% of adolescents claim to have been “born again” (Smith, Faris, Denton, &

Regnerus, 2003), a marker, I argue below, of the broad phenomenon of Christian fundamentalism. This means that teachers will encounter fundamentalist Christian students in their classes and lecture groups, and will need to find thoughtful and creative ways of bringing them into the conversation.

Barr (1976) makes the claim that Christian fundamentalism is a “pathological” version of Christianity and Gritsch (2009) describes it as a “toxic” form of spirituality. While I don’t necessarily endorse either of these terms, they do indicate the very negative view of religious fundamentalism held in some quarters. It is essential here to insist that while Christian fundamentalism is the focus in this section of the paper, the same things can be correctly claimed about fundamentalism in any religion. Christian fundamentalism commonly appears within, and is often identified with, conservative evangelical Christian groups, but it is also increasingly being found among younger Catholics. In this section of the paper I draw on Barr’s (1976) tentative description of the Christian fundamentalist as having: a) a very strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible; b) a strong hostility to modern theology and to the methods, results, and implications of a modern critical study of the Bible; and c) an assurance that those who do not share their religious viewpoint are not really *true Christians*. I add three further characteristics to Barr’s list. The first is the experience of a close, personal relationship with Christ, and acceptance of Christ as a personal savior, an experience that is often described as being “born again.” The second is the conviction that only those who are “born again” are “true Christians,” and the third is the certainty that there is only one way to salvation, a certainty accompanied by a commitment to convert others to this way of thinking (Brown, 1992).

The fundamentalist student in any religion has usually had a dramatic and emotional conversion experience, often at a time when they were experiencing unhappiness, loneliness, a sense of alienation, depression, or family trauma (Brown, 1992). The euphoria of conversion at first means that the fundamentalist strongly resists any challenge to their conviction that their path is the exclusive path to salvation. The initial euphoric conversion is supported by community and institutional networks of fellow believers, who provide social and emotional frameworks that either exclude other points of view or hold them up to criticism (Brown, 1992; Hill, 1997; Streib, 2007).

It is clear that Christian fundamentalism (indeed, fundamentalism of all religious varieties) is a significant barrier to education for understanding and appreciation of the religions in our communities. In a fundamentalist religious view, nonfundamentalist Christians and believers in other religions are viewed

as opponents of true doctrine and of the Gospel. The argument that goodness and holiness are to be found outside fundamentalist Christianity is not accepted as proof that there is more than one path to salvation (Barr, 1976). Therefore, according to the fundamentalist position, the ecumenical movement within Christianity is suspect, as is any attempt to understand and appreciate non-Christian religions. Both ecumenism and interfaith dialogue must begin by accepting the religious validity of the partners in the dialogue, and fundamentalist Christians in their conviction that they alone have the truth are usually unable to do this.

What course can be taken by educators who want to empower students to understand and appreciate religions, when confronted with fundamentalist Christian students or fundamentalist adherents of any tradition? These students can be argumentative and hostile to critical, reflective education about other religions. In an earlier publication (Engebretson, 2009) I argued that sometimes teachers need to accept that some students of a fundamentalist attitude are not suitable candidates for education about religions. I argued this because the hermeneutic of education for understanding and appreciation of religions requires openness on the part of students. The process is *intentional* in that the excursion into the religious lifeworld of the other is undertaken in order to learn. It is *empathetic* in that it uses the skill of imaginative participation to attempt to see the world through the eyes of a practitioner of the religion. It is *reciprocal, reflective, and evaluative*, in that it demands respectful evaluation of the goodness or otherwise, rightness or wrongness of the position of the other (Lipner, 2007), and here the ability to identify and evaluate one's own values, and to revise them if necessary is essential. The process of learning about another's religion is summarized in the following diagram (Figure 1), which illustrates the learning model that formed the basis of my 2009 book, *In Your Shoes: Inter-faith Education for Australian Schools and Universities*.

The model as shown in Figure 1 illustrates the process of education for understanding and appreciation of the religions in the community as a conversation between lifeworlds, those of the student and the religious other. The conversation is based on constructive empathy, which is an intentional, empathetic, and imaginative stepping into the shoes of another in order to try to see the world from their point of view. The constructive empathy is reciprocal, but if it is to be truly educative it is also reflective, evaluative, and critical. It has a strong cognitive (intellectual) dimension that implies and provides for affective learning. In addition, it is most effective when it involves firsthand experience of the religious other (the experiential dimension).



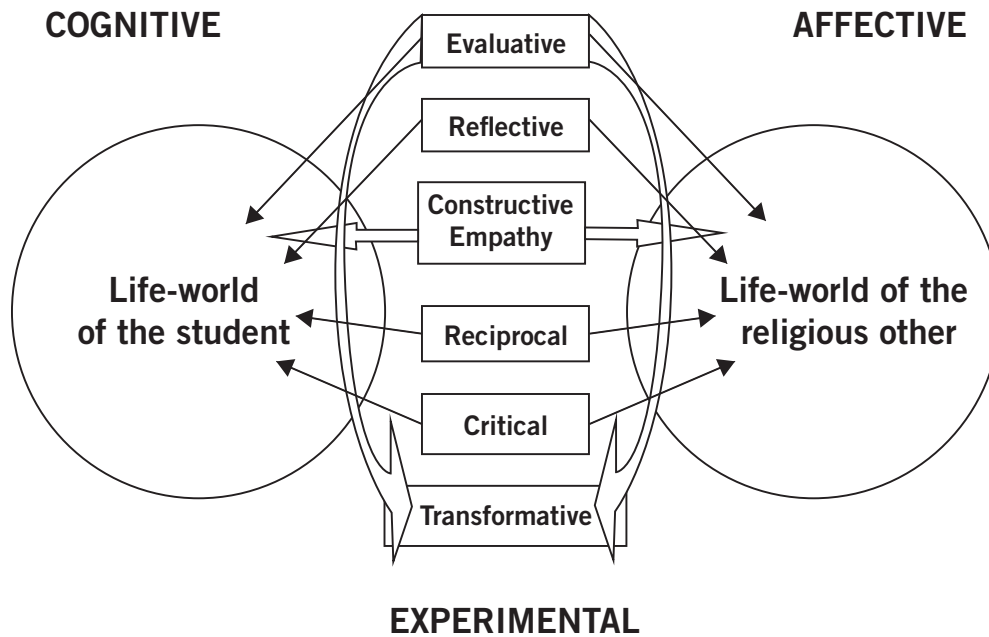


Figure 1: A model for constructivist interfaith education

All of this requires respect for others who are partners in the hermeneutical process, and respect must be required and demanded by educators. This is not always easy, for respect may not be the natural position of all students. Disrespect and intolerance is manifested in the fundamentalist student of any religious persuasion, who refuses to take part in the discussion because he or she is right and “they” are wrong, or who tries to use the classroom to proselytize. Rather than giving up on fundamentalists, however, Kung (1992) advises perseverance, arguing that fundamentalism can only be overcome with understanding and empathy. His guidance about communicating with fundamentalists has something to offer educators. First, educators should try to make fundamentalists of any religious persuasion aware of the parts of their Scriptures that promote openness, freedom, pluralism, and respect for others. Second, students who are *laissez faire*, in ready acceptance of anything and everything, need to be challenged to be rigorous and self-critical in their assessments of religious phenomena. Third, a basic respect for the spirituality and goodwill of the other must be expected and modeled by the educator, and fourth, the educator and fellow students should persevere in trying to establish respectful dialogue with fundamentalist students and to collaborate with them

on social issues.

### Facing the Facts of History

The history of religions, especially the partnering of religions with political power, is the fourth foundational issue for educators to consider. Rouner (1986) points out that to a large extent interreligious dialogue and education about religions have been dominated by Western Christianity. He claims that there is a moral repentance agenda here, because Christians have been responsible for colonizing and subjugating people of the third world. While the missions undoubtedly often improved the lives of the people to whom they ministered, in the West the missionary spirit was criticized for its theological triumphalism and social and political collusion with colonialism.

Two historical movements within Christianity challenged the exclusivist truth claims that were used to justify colonialism. The first was the Reformation and Luther's challenge to the Western Church, an event which ultimately had far-reaching repercussions in the proliferation of Christian Churches. The second historical movement was the missionary outreach of the Catholic and Protestant Churches. The discoveries of new islands and continents in the late 15th century associated the teaching of Christianity with colonial conquest. As imperial powers colonized the lands of the new world, Christian missionaries served as agents of the crown (Schreiter, 1995). Inevitably, this expansion of Christianity into new continents confronted its missionaries with the fact that there were morally good and highly spiritual people outside Christianity. Indeed, Christianity made little impact in the countries where there was already a highly developed and ancient religion. Kung (1974) argues that even when there was some success in this missionary outreach, for example, for a time in Asia, it was short-lived and resulted in large part from the alliance of the clergy with colonial powers. Inevitably, in encountering the ancient religions of Asia, and even in the encounters between Christian missionaries and the animism that characterized many of the local religions, questions about salvation by paths other than Christianity arose. A realization began to dawn that Christianity too is part of the historical process, an episode in the vast history of humanity. The new perspectives that came with the evolution of an historical and geographical consciousness meant that religious exclusivism came to be questioned. This questioning was particularly apparent in the religious accommodations and inculturation that characterized the missionary work of the two Jesuits, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) in China and Roberto de Nobili

(1577–1656) in southern India (Chung, 2010; Mitchell, 1980; Rule, 1968).

There are two issues in this discussion for educators concerned with understanding and appreciation of the religions in our communities. The first is acknowledgment of the partnership between Christianity and colonization in history. A second issue is that of Western guilt which educators must be careful to ensure is kept in perspective. As Rouner declares:

The world does not care whether or not Protestant theologians have recovered from their guilt over their exploitative colonial past, or even whether they can solve the problems presented by their pluralistic cultural horizon. *It cares whether or not they have a saving word about the future.* (Rouner, 1986, p. 115; author's emphasis).

The key point for the educator is that while history must be faced, one of the key reasons students have for studying religions is the hope that religions offer for a meaningful present and future, and the clues they provide to how this may be attained. This is always the focus of the study.

### **The Place of the Student Believer in Education for Understanding and Appreciation of the Religions in Our Communities**

This fifth foundational issue is a crucial one for the educator to unravel and to discuss with students. Although many educators find it attractive, the issue of the believing student is not necessarily served by Hick's (1989) philosophy of religious pluralism. This is a philosophy that argues that all people are inherently religious, and that each of the religions is a different human response, arising from this inherent religiousness, to one real divinity whatever name it is given. According to Hick, each religion has arisen in its own time and culture as a response to the divine, and while each religion names the divine differently, it is one and the same across religions, and is fundamental in human experience. In other words, all religious paths have the same purpose and lead to the same destination: "The great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it" (Hick, 1989, p. 235).

Hick (1989) explains the differences between religions as the result of humankind's indirect access to the divine. Access is mediated through religious traditions that are human constructs, each putting its own interpretation and layers of concepts on the divine. The religion itself, acting on the imagination

of the community and the individual, shapes perceptions of the object of worship. Therefore, perceptions differ among religions and often conflict arises as a result. These differences need not be a barrier to the study of religions, however they are accepted as inevitable when the limited human mind attempts to comprehend and explain the ineffable. The study of religions then is a study of the various ways in which people approach the divine.

Many educators find Hick's pluralistic view of religions useful and authentic. It accepts religions as authentic ways to the divine, but acknowledges these as lenses through which the divine is dimly apprehended. Therefore, the various ways in which religions express their beliefs, the ways in which they celebrate and the stories they tell can be studied in an ongoing quest to come closer to understanding the object of worship. I do not believe, however, that a pluralist approach to the study of religions is always the correct approach to take, for often the situation is more complex than acknowledging that all religions are equally valid paths to truth. In classes and lecture groups there are students who are committed to their own religions. While they are ready to engage with and learn about other religions they will continue to hold their belief in the unique nature and superior revelation of their own religion. For example, the committed Muslim respects Judaism and Christianity that preceded Islam, yet sees Islam as the true fulfillment of these religions, and as the fullness of God's Revelation. The Christian student wants to assert the unique place of Jesus Christ in salvation, and the Jewish student, while respecting the later developments of Christianity and Islam, sees them as departures from the original covenant (Engelbreton, 2009). The question arises, then, whether for students to study religions authentically they need to forsake their convictions about the uniqueness or fullness of truth of their own religion, for ultimately this is what is required in a pluralistic approach to the study of religion. It is important, then, that the teacher has some knowledge of the students' religious adherences before embarking on education for understanding and appreciation of the religions in the community, and that he or she is prepared to foster discussion of the implications of religious pluralism in the educative process.

It is certainly possible for students and educators who have their own religious convictions to engage in education about other religions, for the religious believer is at least positive about religions and their potential to achieve good. In arguing that personal faith is no barrier to education about other religions, I do not intend to contradict the claim made earlier in this paper that to view one's own religion as superior potentially works against the openness that is required for understanding and appreciating other traditions. However,

it works against this only if the view that one's own tradition is superior allows the student to adopt a closed or patronizing approach to other religions. It is certainly possible to be a believer and to hold to one's own religious convictions, while openly learning about, and developing understanding and appreciation of those of others. The key is in the attitude of the student. If the believing student is prepared to listen to, communicate with, and learn about the religions of others, the result will surely be enrichment for all parties (Moran, 1983).

Kung (1988, p. 235) has argued for a position that he describes as "generous, tolerant inclusivism" on the part of the religious believer in education for understanding and appreciation of religions. From the platform of their own religions, religious believers may take a number of positions in relation to other religions. They may take an exclusivist, fundamentalist approach, one that has been discussed and analyzed earlier in this paper. They may act from the belief that while the fullness of truth resides in their religion, all religions share in the truth in their various ways. They may also hold the view of Knitter (1986), analyzed in an earlier section of this paper, that while God has acted in their own religion, this is not definitive, and God has also acted in other religions and other religious leaders. Both of these latter positions allow the religious believer to participate fully in education for understanding and appreciation of religions. Nonexclusivist, committed religious belief is not only compatible with education for understanding and appreciation of other religions, it is arguably more desirable than *laissez faire* relativism or indifference, two attitudes that do afflict Western young people in their approach to religions. The committed believer who is open to religious growth has the potential to find in education about and from religions a clearer awareness of the contexts of his or her beliefs, the ability to question and scrutinize them, to embrace alternate perspectives, and thus to grow in spirituality and religious consciousness. Faith is stretched (Phan, 2004) as it is opened up to different religious worlds. As knowledge of the faith of the other grows, each participant's own faith is expanded and informed through the encounter, so that the experience is enriching for all concerned.

### **Making Critical Judgments about Religions**

The sixth foundational issue for educators is the place of critical reasoning in the quest for understanding and appreciation of religions. This study is not well served by religious relativism and the superficial equating of all values and standards. There are real differences in beliefs and values between, and impor-

tantly *within*, religions. Education about religions must engage with questions of truth in a critical way. It must involve the student in rational thinking about and evaluation of religious phenomena rather than mere description. Some examples are as follows: the violence against enemies found in some sacred texts must be evaluated against the golden rule of care for others as taught by almost all religions; the child sacrifice of some ancient religions must be critiqued against the sanctity of life as held in the great religions of the world; religious extremism, especially when it violates human freedom, human rights, and peace, must be judged against agreed-to values held in civilized societies. An essential task of education for understanding and appreciation of religions is the development of criteria by which the truth and goodness, rightness or wrongness, of religions and religious phenomena may be debated. Kung (1988) proposes certain criteria that may well be the starting point for this:

1. How does the religion (or this manifestation of it) portray the divine reality (God) and how satisfying is this portrayal?
2. Is the religion (or this manifestation of it) transformative; that is, does it advance, protect, and dignify humanity, and call human beings to ongoing transformation?
3. Does the religion (or this manifestation of it) entail fellowship and human solidarity, espouse forgiveness and mercy, see institutions as at the service of people, and strive for a voice and a transformative role in culture?

Kung's criteria may be useful in helping educators and students to dialogue in a rational, constructive, and critical way about religions. Agreed-upon criteria will build a platform from which critique may proceed, and a commitment to informed evaluation is necessary for the work of learning about and from religions. The process of discriminating and building arguments instead of simple narration and description must be the goal. This is the real task of education and ultimately the only way of studying religions that will have lasting consequences for the education of the student, for his or her own religious self-understanding, and for the advancement of informed religious conversation in our communities.

### Conclusion

I have composed this paper with the conviction that the educator needs to

engage in some careful, even complex reflection as he or she undertakes education for understanding and appreciation of the religions in our communities. The first issue is that of what to call the enterprise; the second relates to assumed hierarchies of religions and the barriers these can impose on genuine education about religions; the third issue is that of the fundamentalist student; the fourth issue is the pervasive presence of religious history especially when religion has been the oppressor; the fifth, the position of the believing student in the conversation; and the sixth, the development of critical thinking about religions. All of these foundational issues provide rich content for educators' reflections, reading, discussions with colleagues, and dialogue with students, so that the essential work of educating young people for understanding and appreciation of the religions in our communities may be undertaken with skill and wisdom.

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