Guerrand-Hermès Foundation For Peace

United Nations Alliance of Civilizations
Many cultures. One humanity.

International Symposium on

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND EDUCATION FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING

A DISCUSSION SUMMARY

24-26 FEBRUARY 2012
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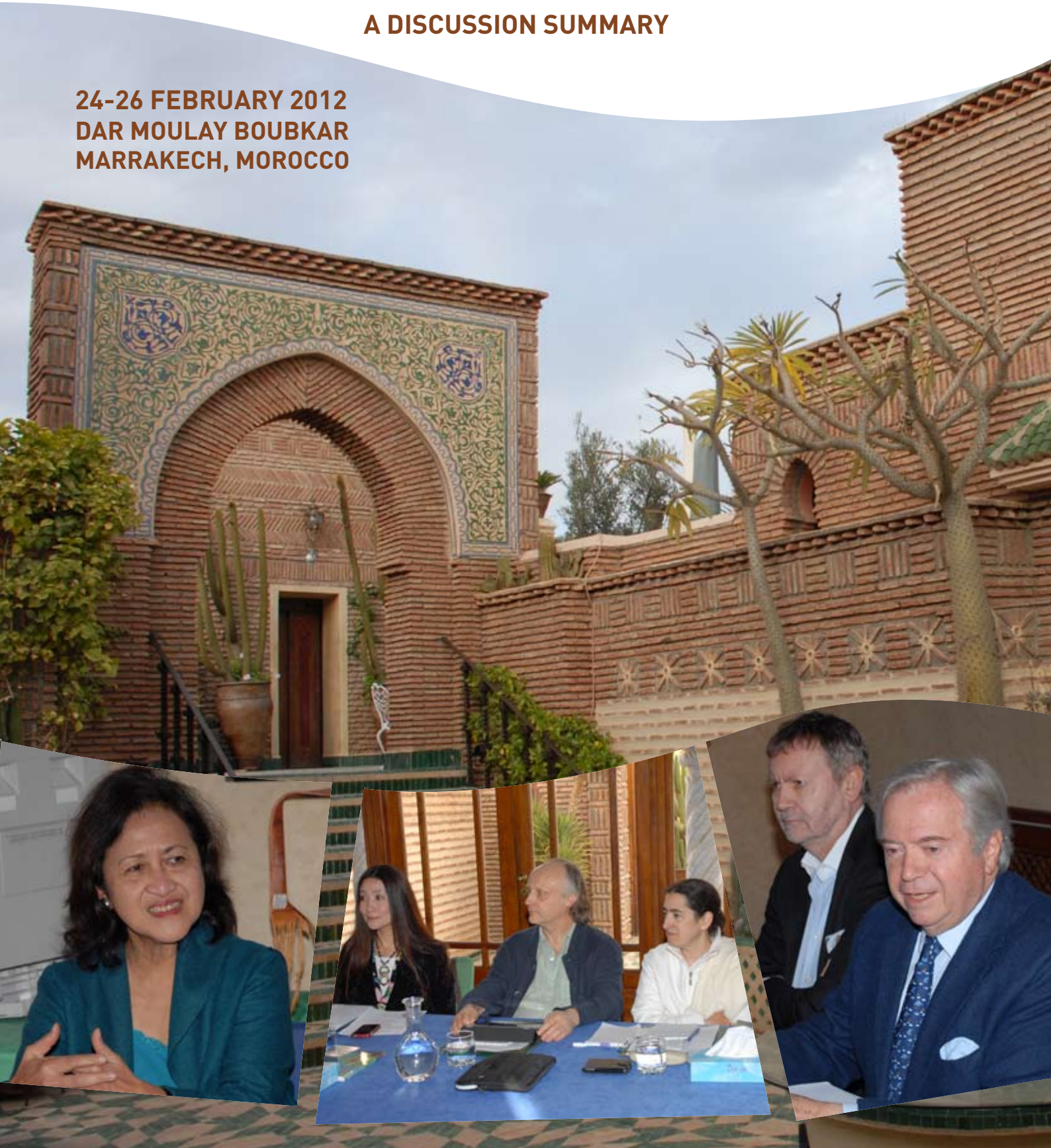
MARRAKECH, MOROCCO



RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND EDUCATION FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING

BACKGROUND

Today humanity faces unprecedented challenges. This is especially so because economic growth pushes us towards greater materialism. It threatens meaning, the harmony between people and the natural world and widens the gap between the rich and the poor. At the same time, there is now a tremendous opportunity for humans to live in unity and solidarity on a global scale. The connections between traditions, cultures and communities have the potential to bring about transformation. However, this requires a shift from the purely economic towards a more holistic understanding of human flourishing, on both an individual and a societal level. Such a vision must include spirituality.

A deeper understanding of the spiritual aspects of human flourishing has important implications for the education of children and young people of the 21st century. Cultivating spirituality will foster a deeper awareness of meaning and goodness. Furthermore, people of different religions can come together to search for their commonalities, including a shared understanding about spirituality in human life. For these reasons, it is crucial to explore the roles that religions and religious education already play, and might play better, in young people's spiritual development.

Under various names, such as 'education about religion', 'faith education', 'religious studies' and 'religious education', the teaching of religious beliefs and practices has already been integrated into the national curriculum of many countries. However, the main focus of such religious education is normally to impart knowledge about religions, rarely providing avenues for exploring inter-religious understanding. This approach to religious education tends to regard religion mainly as an academic subject, and because such education is at arm's length, its focus is not on a holistic cultivation of spirituality as part of human flourishing.

It was against such a backdrop that the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (GHFP) and the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) collaborated to co-convene an International Symposium on Religion, Spirituality and Education for Human Flourishing. Both organisations are committed to human development, justice and peace from complimentary perspectives. Whilst the GHFP is more interested in developing a common conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between spirituality and education for human flourishing, the UNAOC is more concerned with social harmony within multicultural societies, given the differences between cultures, religions and nations, as well as addressing social issues such as equality, inclusion and justice.



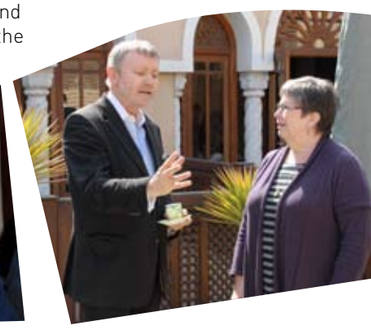
METHODOLOGY AND PROCESSES

The symposium intended to create a space in which participants from diverse backgrounds could have intense conversations over two and a half days about the following questions:

1. How should we conceive and understand human flourishing and spirituality? How is spirituality relevant for human flourishing?
2. How are religions relevant to spirituality?
3. In what way can religious education cultivate spirituality?
4. What have we learned and what are our conclusions?

Prior to the Symposium, each contributor wrote a scholarly paper to address some aspect of the main questions that the Symposium aimed to explore. These papers were circulated to all participants before the event so that they could serve as resources for more informed discussions and conversations during the Symposium. The actual two and half days' event featured plenary sessions, group discussions and two sessions of meditation.

At the opening plenary, Simon Xavier Guerrand-Hermès welcomed the participants to his home, where the Symposium took place. He underscored that the GHFP is committed to supporting the growth of humanity as the core of peace in the world through the foundation's work in human-centred education, inter-religious understanding and good governance and livelihood. This Symposium has brought together these three interconnected aspects of the GHFP's work.

Marc Scheuer also welcomed the participants and conveyed the UNAOC's commitment to this partnership in the Symposium. He highlighted the Alliance's mission to build bridges between cultures and to celebrate rich diversities within our common humanity.

After an extended personal introduction during which participants shared how their lives were linked to the themes of the Symposium, the first plenary drew attention to the challenges and problems of defining the concepts of flourishing, spirituality, religion and education within diverse social, economic and cultural contexts, faith traditions and educational systems. The same challenges permeated throughout the small group conversations where the participants were divided three times over the rest of the Symposium, into three groups of eight people led by one facilitator.

Problems of definition

Although the symposium acknowledged the need to define the key concepts, the limitations of such a task were also recognised. The meanings of a word are found in its uses within a language, culture and religious tradition, which may not only shift over time, but also differ at any given time, especially across languages. Therefore, it would be a narrow and incomplete approach to seek a consensus on a simple definition because any consensus would wipe out the complexities and richness in the diversity of our understanding. Any such definition also risks excluding other interpretations, especially when taking into consideration social concerns of equality and fairness. Hence, the key concepts are open to many interpretations, and the participants of the Symposium found it best to start from their own perceptions, traditions and experiences.

With these complexities and constraints in mind, the participants helped enrich each other's understanding on the key concepts and relevant issues. Below is a summary of three major conclusions from the Symposium:

- **A** A conceptual framework for understanding religion, spirituality and education for human flourishing
- **B** Promising practices in religious education
- **C** Recommendations for pedagogy and curriculum of religious education in schools.

A

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

HUMAN FLOURISHING

The term 'human flourishing' is a translation of Aristotle's 'eudaimonia' in the 'Nicomachaean Ethics'. This is sometimes translated as 'happiness' but eudaimonia incorporates a sense of fulfilment as one strives for ones proper ends, which includes ones relationships and interactions with others. The notion of human stresses dignity – a person is inherently valuable in his or her own right (Kant). A religious view might connect this idea to blessedness – a relationship to God (or the Divine or any other ultimate notion of the transcendent).

Human flourishing not only includes the development of typical human qualities (and virtues) such as self-reflection and the ability to connect with others, an inner peacefulness, self-awareness and sense of meaning. It also includes the values and dispositions associated with agency. For instance, flourishing includes the ability to pursue actively worthwhile ends such as the flourishing of others in just societies and the capacity to form meaningful stories about one's life. There is an inner conscious dimension of oneself that enables one to pursue moral and ethical objectives connected to flourishing. Similarly, there are also unconscious sides of oneself that facilitate these processes. Progress lies in the transformation of human experiences for the betterment of the self, as well as the common collective good.

We can also understand 'flourishing' in terms of what it isn't, such as a lack of self-esteem. Human flourishing is understood differently in various cultures. For example, self-flagellation can be regarded as a harmful self-deprecation in one culture and as a form of purification in another.

Furthermore, 'flourishing' might be seen as an accomplishment that is only available to the privileged few and which is beyond the grasp of the majority of humanity. For this reason, it is necessary to counter-balance such a concept with that of basic human rights, which help ensure a satisfactory level of wellbeing available to all. This counterbalance is necessary especially given recent attacks on the notion of basic human rights and the Millennium Development Goals. Furthermore, the idea of rights includes notions of justice, which 'flourishing' does not explicitly have. Therefore, we must remind ourselves to be more inclusive and more just so as to include the social conditions and causes of flourishing.

SPIRITUALITY

The Latin etymology of the word 'spirit' refers to breath, whereas the Chinese characters suggest 'essence' and 'beyondness' (as in aura, something beyond material existence, something connecting to the divine). Human nature and flourishing include several spiritual aspects However, perhaps, it is difficult to affirm that spirituality is a part of human nature because our comprehension of it is intertwined with the diverse cultures from which we derive our understanding.

We could understand spirituality as an inner path, a feeling of connection with something beyond oneself, an intuitive and mystical experience. Minimally, spirituality involves transcending one's ego, and this is necessary to live in peace with each other and in harmonious communities. The ability to connect with others is an important part of a flourishing life. In this way, spirituality requires a sense of inclusiveness and the willingness to embrace otherness regardless. This aspect of spirituality might be linked to an awareness of our common humanity.

Spirituality can also be described as an enchantment (or re-enchantment with the world). In this sense, it is a discovery of value and/or meaning in the world. Thus being spiritual is part of our everyday being that embodies our understanding of and aspiration for goodness.

It further involves integrity of the self, which requires self-knowledge. This integration or wholeness might be described as a unity of body, mind and soul. Some describe it as a heightened awareness of the non-material aspects of life. That is also to say that spirituality can simply be full presence of one's complete self in the here-and-now (suchness as it is). This aspect of spirituality enhances human dignity.

We understand spirituality as linked to experiences which may include the feeling of being called or uplifted, or an awakening (or a shivering) and a feeling or an experience of being moved. Often these experiences have an element of compulsion or submission. Such experiences can be described in religious terms as an awareness of something sacred or divine or greater than oneself.

However, spirituality does not need to be attached to any religion. It can be compatible with some versions of atheism, especially those that are humanistic and more open to something beyond human self and humanity as a whole. For these reasons, it is an idea that appeals to many young people, especially where there is an increasing secularism. Finally, it became clear during the Symposium that spirituality is something deeper than being virtuous and moral.

RELIGION

Religions are fundamentally different paths to human spirituality. To be religious can be understood as to be open to awe and gratitude and to that which deserves worship. It also includes attitudes about the universe such as care, tenderness, solemnness and the sublime. Religion or a spiritual tradition can embody a view of spiritual life and offer us a language to perceive and understand our spiritual experience.

Yet religions are more than this, because, as traditions of deep meanings, they include rituals, symbols of the sacred, and very often scriptures. Some people seem to need such rituals, symbols and holy books more than others. They can become part of our identities. For these reasons, religious institutions are guardians of traditions. Because these traditions are very valuable and important, as institutions, religions feel that they have something to defend. While protecting these interests, they sometimes assume an authority, inculcate fear, and require people to place their everyday understanding and practice of spirituality within a set of predefined terms. For example, they can require fixed interpretations of experiences and scriptures.

In this regard, especially for many young people, religions can be antipathetic to the more open and experimental approach to spiritual life. Furthermore, religious traditions typically leave little room for critical thinking. Doubt, scepticism and critical thinking are important values in secular societies with which young people often identify. Such critical approaches also conflict with the often more dogmatic aspects of religious traditions. These traditions tend to paint moral issues in black and white terms and in contrast young people tend to be more situational in their moral thinking. These comments are especially appropriate for Europe and parts of North America, Australia and New Zealand, but also may apply increasingly to young people in many other parts of the world.

On the other hand, spirituality that has come adrift of religious traditions may be missing something. For example, religious traditions teach us about the nature of the after-life and youth culture usually does not include awareness of our finitude and death. Religious traditions include incredibly rich and multi-faceted moral stories such as the story of the Prodigal Son, which bring dimensions to our understanding of spirituality that might be otherwise neglected, such as humility. They can also offer narratives about moral and spiritual transformations, such as the need to serve others. In addition, religious traditions involve strong portrayals of role models.

It is common in a postmodern society to find spiritual practices (such as yoga, mindfulness practices and meditation) separated from the tradition in which they originated, which can result in a loss of depth in meaning.

Bringing these two points together, we see that religions need spirituality and, in secular societies in particular, they need a spiritual revival. For example, in increasingly secular societies, religions tend to be excluded from public debates about the purposes of education. At the same time, we need to allow our approaches to the Divine/the Ultimate to be free, open and pluralistic, and be willing to grapple also with religions' 'shadow sides'.

B

PROMISING PRACTICES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The problem-space defined by the Symposium was how to make religious education more meaningful to young people not merely by imparting neutral information about various religions but also by exposing them to various religious and spiritual practices and experiences, without of course falling into inculcation of any one specific religious tradition. There ought to be a way to make religious education a route to meaningful spirituality for young people within multi-faith and secular societies, as well as more religious ones, though the educational challenges would then be relatively different. Within this problem-space, and on the basis of existing educational experiences shared by the participants, four models of promising practices emerged during the Symposium conversations, which might be applicable to different contexts:

1 SPIRITUALITY IN WISDOM

The Wisdom project doesn't aim to provide religious education but rather it provides a space for young people of 16-18 to find who they are and to discover wisdom. According to this idea, a safe space for young people to dialogue and explore personal problems, meanings and values doesn't necessarily need to be linked to religious education, and is better for cultivating their independence. It often involves taking young people out of the context of the classroom.

The Wisdom Project focuses explicitly on spiritual development, a different emphasis from the normal religious education concerned with learning 'about a religion' in an objective manner. We acknowledge that practices of religious education within a classroom could always be approached in a similar manner as the Wisdom Project so that students are moved at a spiritual depth.

2 SPIRITUALITY WITHIN TRADITIONS

In sharp contrast, the Sikhs (through the example of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha's work) build multi-faith schools in the vicinity of worshipping communities. This example stresses the importance of lived religion and what it can offer to children and young people (e.g. virtues such as humility and service). Nevertheless, this emphasis on the importance of religious traditions does not need to be accompanied by exclusivity. It is compatible with, and indeed requires, a multi-religious approach. This is because religions share common understandings of spirituality and spirituality requires inclusiveness. A similar example is found in Brahma Kumaris Retreats 'Choose, Change, Become' that help young people think about their purpose and values and what they want to contribute to life.




3 CO-CONSTRUCTED RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Birmingham, a city with diverse populations, has developed a new approach for Religious Education in its multi-faith state schools. All stake-holders – school leaders, parents, religious leaders, the city council and the community - have been involved in the discussions and negotiations concerning the curriculum. 24 dispositions, which are common amongst all traditions, have been selected as the entry point for the study of religions. These dispositions are grouped under six broad headings: creativity, commitment, choice, contemplation, compassion, community. Issues that are human concerns and are relevant to the students' own lives are introduced for discussion. This is followed by learning how the different religions respond to the issues. Thus human questions are given a religious twist. This approach emphasises the importance of the participation of religious communities in the process of shaping education.

4 USING INTERFAITH/INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS A ROUTE TO SPIRITUALITY

The idea is that teaching about the religions can be a path to help students develop understanding about different religious traditions, which lead to understanding of their spirituality. Open and critical exploration and comparative approach to faiths can further help cultivate intercultural and inter-religious understanding, such as the methodologies promoted by three projects shared at the Symposium: Learning to Live Together Project, Three Faiths Forum and Project Interfaith. Within such an interfaith route, young people from diverse traditions are mixed together in classrooms and outside of formal educational settings so that they can learn from one another and learn to embrace diversity and appreciate the presence of others.

Clearly these four models do not exhaust the possibilities. They seem to be especially relevant to multi-faith societies with an increasingly secular dimension. Yet, they do not apply so readily, on the one hand, to more strictly secular societies such as France and, on the other, to more religious societies or communities, for example, parts of India and the Amish.


C

PEDAGOGY AND CURRICULUM

We realise that religious education can try to do too much in limited schooling timetable and resources. For example, in the UK, religious education has 13 different functions, ranging from spiritual development, citizenship awareness, to sex education and relationship building. Indeed, such approach to religious education can alienate the students, making it impossible for them to engage with deeper questions that interest them. At the same time, religious education, when approached academically, inhibits students' spiritual awakening and development, and results in them remaining mere voyeurs of something distant from themselves.

Rethinking religious education in these ways requires re-conceiving education as a whole. Traditionally states pay little attention to the deeper aims of education. The old paradigm of imparting knowledge for academic attainment needs to be replaced by a new more holistic and human-centred model. Indeed we recognise the need for articulating a new philosophy of education, and linking the aims, processes and intentions of all educative endeavours.

The symposium saw three broad recommendations for the pedagogy and curriculum of religious education:

1. Value-based religious education curriculum
2. Developing nurturing environments in schools
3. Training teachers as spiritual mentors and facilitators

1 VALUE-BASED RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM

In terms of meaningful spiritual religious education, many curriculum ideas were shared, including an explicit focus on values and meaning. At the Symposium, some recognised the need to directly cultivate values that are part of a religion or cultural and societal ethics; others considered value-based curriculum akin to a Socratic dialogue approach where young people gradually learn and come to appreciate values and goodness for themselves and their community.

Inter-disciplinary approach to curriculum design, experiential learning and cross curricular activities with an aim to cultivate spiritual and moral development were underlined as part of the pedagogical strategies. Arts, music and other creative activities have been identified as important components to religious education curriculum, as well as silence, solitude and quiet contemplation. The use of internet and modern media is also highlighted as a key platform for building curriculum resources, engaging young people in more interactive and open dialogue, and allowing diverse perspectives to be shared and critically examined at the same time.

Participants shared, based on their own work, multiple examples of a value-based curriculum, including the 'Learning to Live Together' programme developed by the international faith-based NGO Arigatou International (headquarters in Tokyo, Japan), the work done by the Center for Spiritual and Ethical Education (USA), a new educational venture in learning about religions in New Zealand (see below), the performative or experiential approach to religious education (Germany) and faith inspired educational programmes from the traditions presented at the Symposium, including the Baha'i, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, Brahma Kumaris and so forth.

2 DEVELOPING NURTURING ENVIRONMENTS

In secular schools of those countries where teaching about religions in classrooms is possible, teachers can be encouraged to develop a classroom climate that fosters autonomy and is non-threatening, non-judgemental and communal, where students can feel safe to ask questions, to reflect and try out different ideas. This kind of classroom climate makes holistic learning possible when 'heart, mind and soul' can all be engaged and spiritual development can be fostered.

Indeed, a nurturing environment is important in the whole school not just in the religious education classroom. Within such an environment, individuals can feel valued as persons and as who they are, where the focus is on building trust and human relationships. This environment becomes a safe space where teachers are sensitive and students are open. Thus it is conducive to an appreciation of traditions other than one's own and understanding of such traditions in relation to one's own in general and to one's personal lives in particular.

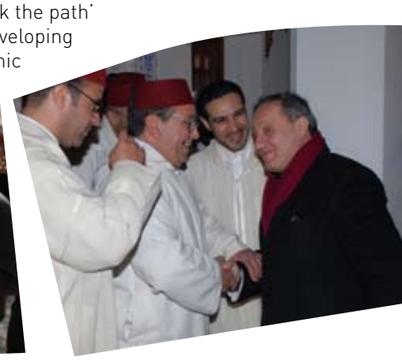
An illustration of (1) & (2) was found in the 'learning about religions' programme in New Zealand. The programme is integrated into a Social Studies curriculum and takes an inquiry-approach to encourage students to follow their curiosity, to reflect, and pursue questions without the pressure of a heavy curriculum-content. The key to this programme is an open classroom climate that is conducive for students to learn about, question and appreciate their own values and those of others as well as perceive something in the rich traditions of the religions that touches them at a spiritual depth.

3 TRAINING TEACHERS AS SPIRITUAL MENTORS AND FACILITATORS

There is no substitute for good teachers. However, good teachers are not those who merely deliver a curriculum effectively. This is a false understanding of teaching. A good curriculum cannot mitigate the negative impact of a teacher who does not understand religious traditions or appreciate the spiritual dimension of human life. Indeed, teachers' love and enthusiasm in their own religious traditions and spiritual development can be a gift to the students.

In our conception of religious education along the lines suggested above, there needs to be the inclusion of training for trainers/teachers and attitudinal mentoring. Religious education teachers ought to be mentors (i.e. wisdom coach) and facilitators in their approach to teaching. Ideally, they are also role models who exemplify spirituality by embodying certain values and who are aware of their own presence in the educational process.

Good religious education teachers are those who take a view that education is a lifelong journey where humanity grows from and who are willing to 'walk the path' with the students together. Thus the focus of teacher training will be developing pedagogical strategies that go beyond religious education as an academic subject. This ought to include a dimension of teachers' learning and spiritual development too. An example was given of the 'Living Values Education Programme' that takes teachers through a reflective process and helps facilitate the development of values from inside out and offers them the opportunity to reflect on love, honesty, compassion, etc.



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FURTHER TOPICS TO BE EXPLORED

The Symposium also identified a number of issues for further exploration.

We realised the need to bring together the language of human rights and that of human flourishing as this integration is crucial to both religious and human rights' narratives.

Religious literacy has been recognised as an important part of schooling, which is about one's knowledge of, and ability to understand religion. Whilst globalisation creates greater links between religions and cultures, we must reflect on how to help young people of today to become religiously and spiritually literate because it is a key to developing solidarity amongst the world's peoples.

Although this Symposium raised many pointers towards a conceptual framework for understanding religion, spirituality and human flourishing, it is still necessary to articulate it more explicitly and provide a sound theoretical basis on which we can continue to develop formal, informal and non-formal education for spiritual development and promote a flourishing life for all those involved in education and beyond.

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The International Symposium on Religion, Spirituality and Education for Human Flourishing was co-convened by Scherto Gill and Thomas Uthup (former Research and Education Manager of the UNAOC). It was facilitated by Scherto Gill, Garrett Thomson and Patrice Brodeur.

The Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (GHFP) was founded 15 years ago. It operates as an international think-tank and research organisation. The work of the GHFP is underpinned by the belief that peace is a human concept and can only be achieved when people are in touch with their own humanity. Inspired by this belief, the Foundation's core aim is for humanity to flourish within each individual and promote broader social transformation. The GHFP actively seeks to promote peace through our work in research and publication, project support and facilitation, as well as creating safe and open spaces for dialogue.

www.ghfp.org

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) was established in 2005, at the initiative of the Governments of Spain and Turkey, under the auspices of the United Nations. It aims to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions. It also helps to counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. Through its Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) project, UNAOC seeks to stimulate research in, disseminate best practices of, and provide a platform for, ways to educate people about differences to enable followers of diverse religions and beliefs to live together.

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