Understanding the Religions and Worldviews of Others: the Alliance of Civilization's Goals and the Interpretive Approach

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Introduction

It is a privilege to speak at the second Forum of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, in the beautiful and highly symbolic city of Istanbul.

I work as Director of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU) [http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/wreru], based in the Institute of Education at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom. WRERU has 15 staff working on research projects and contributing to Masters and Doctoral teaching programmes. The research sponsors include the European Commission (currently through its Framework Six programme); the Arts and Humanities Research Council; the Economic and Social Research Council; the Department for Children, Schools and Families (a British Government department); and various charities in the UK and in Europe.

I also contribute to policy discussions, development projects and writing programmes, relating to religious diversity and education, for bodies such as the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Projects have included a Council of Europe study on the role of the study of religions in intercultural education (Jackson 2004a; Keast 2007), and the drafting of the OSCE Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (OSCE 2007). I will be contributing to the work of the newly established European Wergeland Centre, based in Oslo, with a European brief to foster intercultural, citizenship and human rights education, including the dimension of religion (www.theewe.org).

Our WRERU projects and teaching programmes support the Alliance of Civilization's aim to 'promote understanding and reconciliation among cultures globally' and to be involved with 'bridge-building, facilitating, and advocating trust and understanding between cultures'. We share the Alliance of Civilization's vision to promote education about different religions and beliefs in order to enable people 'to deal sensitively and tolerantly with the reality of globalization and multiculturalism in modern societies where one will encounter people who believe in many different religions, or people who may not believe in any religion at all'.[1] WRERU is a partner organization in the AoC's Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) Clearinghouse and will work alongside other partners from different regions to make relevant materials easily available on the internet, including material about the interpretive approach.

Understanding the worldviews of others

In what follows, I will concentrate on education about religious diversity. If we set out to educate people about religions, then there are some basic principles which need to be followed in devising appropriate methods for learning and teaching. One

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[1] Information about the AoC's Education about Religions and Beliefs Clearinghouse can be found at http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/252/224/lang,english/ (accessed 30 March 2009).

methodology which uses such principles is the interpretive approach (Jackson 1997; 2004b; 2005; 2006; 2008a & b). This can be used on its own or combined with other approaches, using textual and historical methods, for example. The approach adapts methods used in the social sciences and humanities in Western academia, including ideas from ethnography, literary criticism, psychology and religious studies.

The first principle is concerned with *how religions are represented to others*. One of the major causes of tension and misunderstanding is the misrepresentation and stereotyping of religions. For example, media representations of religions all too often present them as totally homogeneous systems of belief, whose adherents share exactly the same beliefs, values and attitudes. Sometimes, generalisations are made from individual cases to the whole religious tradition. Also, negative stereotypes, some of which have a long history, tend to be repeated. We need ways of representing religions that are more nuanced than simple descriptions of religions as belief systems. Portrayals of religions as systems of belief tend to filter out the stories of the faith and practice of individual people, perpetuate negative stereotypes or generalise from individual (often negatively perceived) cases. The interpretive approach focuses on the *relationship* between individual believers and practitioners, the groups they belong to or relate to, and the wider religious tradition, with its various sources of authority, in order to find ways of representing religions as dynamic 'ways of life'.

The second principle is concerned with finding reliable *ways of interpreting the religious meanings of others*. The interpretive approach sees this as fundamentally a linguistic issue, and makes use of the learner's current terms, concepts and understandings in comparing and contrasting these with terminology and explanations used by people within a particular religious group or tradition. This method helps learners to appreciate the similarities and differences between their own current understandings, and those who belong to different religious traditions.

The third principle is concerned with *reflexivity*, and relates to the self awareness and sensitivity of the learner. Learners need to be sensitive to the language and experience of others and to avoid imposing their own understandings on to the material being studied. Learners also need to be able to reflect upon the impact of the material studied on their understanding. Without adopting the religious position of another (the interpretive approach is concerned with understanding others, not about inducting people into a faith), the learner might nevertheless gain some insight at a personal or social level from learning about another's beliefs, values and way of life. Learners needs to be aware of the methods being used to try to understand others, and need to be able to assess -- either individually or with others -- how well the methods have succeeded in developing an understanding of another's worldview. Finally, learners need to be able to make evaluations and judgements in an informed way, with a high degree of sensitivity.

These principles need to be translated into classroom strategies in relation to particular topics of study, and teachers and teacher trainers need practice in how to do this. Some examples of the application of the approach can be found in a book reporting action research on teaching about religious diversity in schools, teacher training and the continuing professional development of teachers (Ipgrave, Jackson & O'Grady 2009). The use of key concepts from the interpretive approach in an EC

research programme involving universities from eight countries is reported in Jackson 2008b.[2]

The interpretive approach sets out to help learners to *understand* the religious worldviews of others. In doing this, it does not reduce religion to culture, nor does it filter out the transcendent in the experience of others. It does encourage sensitivity in dealing with the beliefs and values of others, and expects learners to relate what they have learned to their own experiences. The approach does not make judgements about the truth or falsity of religions, nor does it claim that religions are equally true, but it does encourage critical distance as well as empathy; learners are not discouraged from making judgements on the basis of their learning.

Tolerance respect and recognition

The interpretive approach is consistent with the human rights principle of freedom of religion or belief. At the very least, within the law, citizens should tolerate the religious positions of others. The concept of *'tolerance'* is often used in the literal sense of the word, as 'enduring' (Latin: tolerare) something, even that with which we do not agree or appreciate. In this sense tolerance suggests the need for people of all faiths to develop the ability at least to endure the fact that others believe and live differently within a particular society, or in the wider world, although they might share some core values. In addition to being an individual attitude, tolerance can be a guiding principle for state relations regarding religion or belief, referring to the need for the state to accept the existence of a variety of religious traditions and convictions. Tolerance can thus – in both senses – be seen as a *minimum* standard or precondition for peaceful co-existence in multi-cultural and multi-religious societies.

The concept *'respect'* refers to a more positive attitude, where one does not simply tolerate difference, but regards it as having a positive value. Before one can respect a way of life, or a person, one needs to have some fairly close acquaintance with or understanding of it, her or him. Thus, in English, we speak of a person or way of life as 'commanding' our respect. Respect, as defined here, can be combined with tolerance, since it does not require agreement with that which is respected, but can be seen as a way of appreciating 'the other' and his or her differences, thus reducing the need for toleration (in the above sense). Approaching 'other' ways of life, and those who practise them, with respect can be seen as a step in the direction of recognition.

The concept *'recognition'* refers, in this context, to an even deeper appreciation of equal human dignity and equal human rights. Recognition builds upon a genuinely positive attitude towards diversity, seeing the meeting between people with different beliefs and cultural practices as enriching for all, and seeing individual identity as being developed through meeting 'otherness'. Recognition in this sense would lead to a more positive approach to multiculturalism within societies, both at the individual level and from the perspective of the state, leading, for instance, to an active accommodation of differences, whilst upholding and strengthening common human values and other common features of identity.

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[2] Further information about the EC REDCo Project can be found in Jackson, Miedema, Weisse & Willaime 2007. See also http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/3481/index.html

Tolerance, respect and recognition are thus concepts that do not require one to see all religions, practices and convictions as equally true or valuable. Rather, they are based on the fact that one approaches other people and their beliefs and practices with a certain identity and worldview of one's own, although these might change and develop in the meeting with 'the other'. Tolerance, respect and recognition in relation to religion or belief therefore do not imply indifference, relativism or syncretism. An education which requires knowledge and understanding of different religions, and of people who adhere to those traditions, requires pedagogical approaches that represent religious traditions fairly and accurately – including their diversity – and enable students to engage with what they have studied at a personal level. If these conditions are fulfilled, then students will not only have some understanding; they will also be in a position to formulate viewpoints relating tolerance, respect and recognition.

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