

Module 5

Identity and Religion

Religion is a form of association and solidarity that crosses boundaries and not just physical ones. The world's major religions unite people from different classes, ethnic groups, linguistic communities, and heritages. Perhaps the most well-known case of conscious transborder identification is the Muslim Ummah, or "community of believers." It is hard to say whether religion has been more of a force for peace or for conflict in human history. Concern about religious conflict and a sense of the importance of spirituality in global justice led the parliament of the world's religions, with the initiative of the important Swiss theologian Hans Kung, to promote a "global ethic," based on a set of values that can be affirmed by all religious traditions as well as by secular persons. Following the slogan "no rights without responsibilities" the universal declaration of human responsibilities consists mostly of the list of responsibilities and active attitudes that the declarers deem necessary for global justice and peace. Although its detractors claim that it avoids conflicts between religions rather than mediates them, the global ethic has attracted a lot of support from leaders around the world and has inspired people who believe that justice and human rights can't be fully embraced without some spiritual basis and commitment.

The trend throughout human history is that humans are moving from a state of ignorance into knowledge and from a creature of fear to a creature who wants to be a God. This trend has started to pose a danger to humanity and Earth. Our call is about alleviating the fear while maintaining a control on human endeavors through scientific research to harvest the principles that govern the universe for the happiness of mankind.

Throughout history individuals have been aware of the dangers of not achieving a balance. Models abound from Buddhism, Confucius, Christianity, and Islam. Within our nature we have an inherent good that strives to realize the best of mankind in terms of empathy, love, and forgiveness. Some of us are strong enough to give up everything and some are weaker. The example of St Francis is one of many other examples throughout history that serve as anchors for ships not to drift faraway. St Francis offers us a particular conceptualization for thinking about the implications of biotechnology such that the human is not distorted, altered, or altogether erased. In addition, we may look at several non-European contexts for conceptualizing balance. One such example that I have familiarity with is Islamic civilization. Born in 1058, a few hundred years before St. Francis, Al-Ghazali grappled with the same dilemma of how to achieve a balance. From Sufism to practicality and from metaphysics to science, his was a pilgrimage of seeking the truth. Al- Ghazali was a professor. But after only four

years, Al-Ghazali decided to quit being a professor, gave away all his money, left his family and lived the life of a poor Sufi religious man. As a Sufi beggar, he travelled to Damascus and Jerusalem, and then to Medina and Mecca, before coming home to Tus where he resumed teaching. Al-Ghazali's work encouraged many later Islamic astronomers to rely on their own observations instead of philosophy to describe the stars and planets.

Al-Ghazali preached that the human soul's temperament, for instance, becomes imbalanced through the influence of other people and needs to undergo constant disciplining and training in order to keep these character traits at equilibrium. As a result, Al-Ghazali rejected the notion that one should try to give up potentially harmful affections like anger or sexual desire. These character traits are part of human nature, so disciplining the soul means controlling these potentially harmful traits through one's rationality (*'aql*). The human soul has to undergo constant training and needs to be disciplined. "The first 7 years, play with your children ... the next 7 discipline your children ... the next 7 befriend your children" said Imam Ali. From here the concept of public good (*maslaha*) arose where one does not only think of personal benefit but also thinks of the public benefit. This code of balance is what we are looking for today.

Thus, 500 years earlier on the other side of the Mediterranean, a group of people arose from the darkness of ignorance and injustice to the light of knowledge and humane justice to take responsibility for their actions to make this world a better place for humans and all nature. They gave up worldly good to the limit of acknowledging human nature and needs achieving a balance that takes into account our needs and desires but using guidelines to control them rather than being controlled by them. Providing a balanced example of life that all can follow. This code of life is based on loving all creations including human beings while being fair.

The Prophet said, "Help your brothers whether they are oppressors or victims. You can help oppressors by making them stop their oppression (to others)... Do onto others as you would have done onto you."

Some remarkable people from the fortunate generation that immediately followed the companions went to the Caliph to learn what their punishment would be if they accidentally stepped on a grasshopper. When we look at the outer walls of our mosques and minarets that radiate light, we see tiny holes made for birds to nest in; this is an expression of the depth of the love of our ancestors. History is intertwined with such tremendously humane acts, acts that protected animals as well as people. Search for the truth with sincerity.

From this code of life sprung a whole civilization that flourished in all fields including the natural sciences. Many discoveries were made in the fields of medicine, astronomy, and engineering.

These examples are beacons of guidance and general reminders. Recently our ships have become more powerful. Thus, we need more powerful anchors than before.

As natural scientists representing science, it is essential to emphasize the importance of crossing borders and ideologies in science to achieve its role of serving mankind. Science should be for all and the benefit of all. How can we make sure that is the driving force behind science, and not a political or economic agenda?

Modern means of communication and transportation have transformed the world into a large global village. Nations and peoples are more in need of and dependent on each other, a situation that causes closeness in mutual relations. Moreover, owing to advances in technology, especially digital electronic technology, the acquisition and exchange of information is gradually growing. As a result, the individual comes to the fore, making it inevitable that democratic governments which respect personal rights will replace oppressive regimes, as we are witnessing today in the Arab Spring. As every human, unlike animals, represents the whole of humanity, individual rights cannot be sacrificed for society, and social rights should depend on individual rights. This is why the basic human rights and freedoms found in the revealed religions were taken on board by a war-weary West. These rights are given priority in all relations. The primary right is the right to life, which is granted by and can only be taken by God.

We must not forget that we are in a place of privilege, as we introduce, call for and begin the process of realizing the content of those two words: love and forgiveness. In other words, we must recognize that there is, on the one hand, the rhetoric of love and forgiveness, and, on the other hand, love and forgiveness as they are possible in our world. A quick glance at any newspaper reveals the way in which love and forgiveness has been denied to entire populations, especially in the Middle East and South Asia, often under the guise of “democratization” and all those terms we have become used to. So, clearly love and forgiveness are given to certain people and not to others. The question for us to answer and to think critically and ethically about is how we decide who receives and who doesn’t receive love and forgiveness. We must decide how to offer those two things to one person, group or collective and deny it for another person, group or collective.

Our call is how to achieve a balance that is practical. "We must not be so foolish as to arrogantly ignore the natural foundations that are the very frame of our freedom, nor the treasures of our spiritual traditions that make that freedom truly free." (Quote from Williams article). This is our call to you. If we believe, it can be achieved. Caliph al Mamun said that reason and faith could coexist and that by fully opening the mind and unleashing human creativity many wonders including peace were possible.

We believe that a new generation of people will appear. "They will rely equally on reason and experience, but give as much importance to conscience and inspiration as they do to the former. These new people will be individuals of integrity who, free from external influences, can manage independently of others. While making the fullest use of modern facilities, they will not neglect their traditional and spiritual values in building their own world. Equipped with the good morals and virtues that make them truly human, these new men and women will be altruists who embrace humanity with love and are ready to sacrifice themselves for the good of others when necessary. As they shape themselves in the mold of universal virtue, they will simultaneously strive to illuminate the way of others. They will defend and support what is good and recommend it to others, while seeking to challenge, combat, and eradicate all evils." (Quote)

The Middle East in the past was the cradle for discoveries during the Islamic civilization. However, in a couple of hundred years after the demise of the Othman empire followed by colonialism, the general population became illiterate. The colonizers introduced their own schools which catered to a few elite in a way of controlling the population (for example, in medieval Europe the church controlled people by keeping them illiterate and allowing a few to be literate). With the lack of education and illiteracy comes ignorance which is preyed upon by dominating governments such as the end of the Othman empire or by the colonizers who control or later by dictators.

It is easier to control uneducated people. Thus, for several decades in the Arab world dictators in charge fostered a lack of freedom in order to control. This lack of freedom filtered through from the highest authority down to the household where a parent would not allow a child to express his/her opinion.

Even now with the removal of some dictators in some countries the transition to a free society is not instantaneous nor is it easy. It takes time and a price must be paid. It will take a generation or more to produce a new generation of parents who have lived in freedom to be able to foster freedom of thinking in their children. Those who thought that with the Arab Spring all would be solved are short sighted and have not read history, for example, the French Revolution, the

US Civil War, etc.

It is about creating a whole new environment. This is where introducing global civics is very important.

Spirituality, reflection, and contemplation will be the core of the curricular platforms that we propose to develop to foster global civics in science students. Science students lack these activities in their curricula and we will use them to help students examine what it means to be interconnected.

Values in an Interdependent World

As the review of various global governance options would reveal, we need to talk about the values underlying our institutions before we can decide which institutional constellation is desirable. *One World* by Peter Singer and *Power Rules* by Leslie Gelb provide diametrically opposed views on values in the context of global interdependence; Singer advocates a radical cosmopolitanism, whereas Gelb sees no use for such a philosophy.ⁱ Gelb does not pose the only opposition to Singer's perspective. *Cosmopolitanism* by Kwame Appiah makes an eloquent and nuanced case in favor of a differentiated ethics for an interdependent world and is a must-read in this context.ⁱⁱ A complementary and worthwhile exercise might be to research and debate *ubuntu*, *vasudheva kutumbakam*, and the golden rule.

Finally, we need some way to engage and address the cynicism that permeates popular culture and everyday life. From popular self-help books to the TV show *Seinfeld*, we are repeatedly told that life is not fair and it is silly to lament the obvious. And yet manifestations of kindness and generosity with no expectation of reciprocity seem to have a resilient presence. There are two movies, *The Lives of Others* (2006) and *Pay It Forward* (2000) that may help us ponder these issues. Both have a thoughtful and endearing story line and redefine what is possible in terms of choices facing all of us. As such they merit a prominent place in this curriculum.

ⁱ. Peter Singer, *One World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002)

ⁱⁱ. Kwame Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (London: W.W. Norton, 2006)