INTE 2014

Possible employment of religious ideas and practices in ethics

Jozef Bugar*

Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica, Ruzova 13, 974 11 Banska Bystrica

Abstract

In this article, the author is dealing with those religious ideas and practices, which could be employed in the teaching of ethics. The author identifies these main applicable religious ideas and practices: tolerance, religious figures as moral examples, a development of consciousness of freedom and responsibility, the question of the meaning of life, and relaxation. In ethics classes we should emphasize what human beings and individual religions have in common, without denying world-view differences.

Keywords: religion; tolerance; responsibility; moral example; religious fanaticism; freedom; meaning of life; relaxation

1. Introduction

S. Huntington determined adherence to a particular religion as one of the crucial criteria determining division in civilizational circles. This testifies to the fundamental significance of religion for civilization and culture. Though religion influences various spheres of social life, its greatest influence is on the formation of man’s moral ideas. This is the reason why information about the religion should be a part of ethics or value-based education. In my paper I focus on those religious ideas that should be part of ethics classes and the reasons for this. I will focus primarily on the opportunities for developing tolerance, awareness of responsibility, religious examples and ideals, the struggle against fanaticism, the search for the meaning of life and possibility of utilizing meditative techniques in relaxation.

Secular schools should not promote a particular religion nor impose it on pupils but they should provide pupils with objective information about religions in order to promote freedom of choice, in particular with reference to important moral ideas, which could influence the formation of their moral consciousness. Knowledge is a

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +0-000-000-0000 ; fax: +0-000-000-0000 .
E-mail address: author@institute.xxx

1877-0428 © 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd.
Peer-review under responsibility of the Sakarya University.
prerequisite for freedom of choice. If I do not know what does it mean to be a spiritual person or an atheist, I can hardly make a competent decision.

2. Religious tolerance

The first requirement for harmonious coexistence is probably a tolerance towards those of a different religion. Tolerance is sometimes confused with indifference. If I feel indifferently toward someone, it may seem that I am tolerant of him. However, real tolerance requires an understanding of another person. I need to understand why he is as he is, why he believes in what he believes. Tolerance is an important part of the relationship between members of different confessions, as well as in the relationship between atheists and those of faith.

Atheists often have an unobjectively critical attitude towards religion, as if it did not also bring positive impulses for cultural development and individuals’ moral development. They are only pointing out the negatives of religion. If an atheist perceives religion so one-sidedly, it is difficult for him to respect it. Therefore, pupils with such opinions should also obtain information about the positives of religion. As an example of the positive influence of religion on Western civilization we could mention charity, support of education, teaching about the equal standing of all people before God, and works of art inspired by religion such as the medieval cathedrals among other things. Last but not least we have ethical concepts emphasizing love for God and one’s neighbour. Many of the ancient world’s achievements, such as Greek philosophy and Roman law were accepted by medieval Europe and adapted by Christian scholars. In the 7th century, Islam brought a crucial impulse leading to the formation of an established Islamic civilization.

Pupils who have a one-sided negative attitude towards religion should obtain information also about the positives brought by religion. It is also important for them to recognize the roots of our civilization because religion has shaped every civilization. Many achievements of our civilization whether in the field of ethics, values or human rights (e.g. the idea that everybody is equal), though we may not realize it, have their roots in religion. Without the influence of Christianity, Judaism and Islam our civilization would be different.

On the other hand, those of faith should realize that an atheist might have many positive qualities although he does not believe in God. To be an atheist and, at the same time, a good person is not mutually exclusive. Austrian psychiatrist V. Frankl introduces the unconscious God (Frankl, 2005, p. 17). An atheist does not have to believe in God directly, but he can believe in certain values representing God in his consciousness. On the other hand, if somebody has faith, it is not an automatic guarantee of good character. This is mentioned also in the Bible: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Mt. 7: 21) (Mt. 25:31-46).

How could we develop tolerance between the members of various religions? In this context the Dalai Lama's thought that he is not only a Tibetan and Buddhist but first and foremost a human being (Dalai Lama, 2010, pp. 17-26) seems to be useful. If he met with members of another religion or nation and exaggeratedly stressed his religion or nationality, it would create a barrier between him and those people. On the other hand, if the Dalai Lama emphasizes that he is first of all human, consequently we can all as people communicate and form relationships with one another. If I realize others want to be happy and avoid suffering just as I want, that we are in essence the same, I am able to more deeply understand him and identify with him. Nowadays, personal and cultural differences are excessively highlighted. But it is one-sided. We are different in some ways as well as similar in others. Everybody has one head, two arms and two legs. Everybody needs to create relationships with others. Everybody wants to be respected, tolerated. We can say that we Christians, Muslims, Jews are the same or at least very similar. If I realize that the other person is a human being just like me, I should be able to understand and tolerate him.

Developing an awareness of what these religions do have in common may aid tolerance among those of faith. Therefore, we will emphasize similarities without denying differences. As Pope John Paul II said, both Christians and Muslims believed in the same God. It was a big misunderstanding when, in the Middle Ages, Christians and Muslims called each other unbelievers. Even more liberal was a statement of a Hindi Ramakrishna who said that all the great monotheistic religions led to the same God. Only the particular ways differ. Ramakrishna compared God to a mountain and religions to the individual paths leading to the top (Skarnitzl, 2000, p. 64). Religions differ only as individual paths leading to the same goal.
World religions accept the existence of a Supreme Being or reality with a spiritual nature, which is favourably inclined towards man. They believe that man also has a spiritual nature, which goes on existing even after physical death. They believe in justice, meaning that all good or bad deeds will be appropriately rewarded or requited whether in this world or the next. All religions stress the necessity of good deeds and the importance of prayer, meditation and rituals.

How can we explain the justification of the existence of many religions to pupils without veering towards relativism? By explaining to them, for instance, that religious diversity corresponds to different mentalities, different historical periods and cultures. The religious message is always adapted to the understanding of the people in any given culture. If we wanted everybody to believe in the same religion, it would be like wanting everybody to wear shoes of the same size. For one man the shoes will be too big and for another too small. As long as people have different foot sizes, it will not be appropriate to manufacture shoes of only one size. As long as people have different temperaments and needs, it will not be good to have only one religion for all.

3. Fanaticism

One of the greatest problems related to religion is fanaticism. The fanatic rejects critical thinking and is often intolerant of people of another faith. He promotes his faith even with force. Is it possible to regulate fanaticism? Yes, it is, but only if we understand what fanaticism really is. The fanatic clings to his faith because this resolved attitude gives a stability and firmness to his ego. His identity is based on membership in a group with a common faith. His attitude towards religion or ideology is blind. In order to avoid decision-making and responsibility for his decisions, he lets his church, sect or political group think for him. He becomes only their compliant instrument without his own opinion.

If I know something experientially, I have certainty about it. If I do not have any experience of something and only believe in it, some doubt may remain. But a fanatic is unable to consciously deal with any doubts and therefore rejects them and projects them onto others. This is the reason why people who believe in something different seem like enemies to him – because through their faith they indirectly call his into question. It is as though by so doing they upset his personal integrity. Teacher of ethics could fight against fanaticism by making pupils consciously deal with their doubts and also emphasize the fact that one who is absolutely certain of his faith does not need to fight against people of a different one. Man may believe in God in the modern world too but his faith should be more conscious, and more rational than in the Middle Ages.

For example, M. de Montaigne was a man who successfully connected faith with a reasonable degree of scepticism. "The paradox is that pyrrhonian scepticism is introduced as a preparation for religious belief and its precursor. Man's knowledge is limited; therefore we have to accept faith. We ought to doubt everything, except faith. God does exist and we cannot get to him by our reason, but only by our ignorance. It would be "dumb impudence to consider ourselves to be the supreme things in this universe: therefore something better than us exists and it is God." From this point of view, scepticism would have an instrumental function. Montaigne was a sceptic, as well as a Catholic; therefore he needed to place boundaries around the territory of faith concerning his scepticism" (Kaliský, 2013, p. 75).

4. Religious examples and ideals

In puberty children and teenagers experience the need to identify with some personalities. World religions could provide teenagers with appropriate moral examples to follow. Many religious personalities reached a high level of moral development. Personalities such as Francis of Assisi, F. Neri, M. Kolbe, Padre Pio, Mother Teresa could morally inspire pupils. Children like stories. Ideally, these stories contain some moral and are funny too. We could introduce these personalities mainly through their stories. We may also use biographical films. Stories about Hasidic Jews or Zen Masters are also appropriate.

Religions contain the thousand-year-old moral experience of mankind. They know man’s imperfection but also have a vision of what man can attain in the moral sphere. They offer virtuous ideals such as love, modesty, restraint, wisdom, etc. Their ethical criteria are high, but realistic. It is important to know ideal virtues, even if we do not do
them in our lives completely, in order to be able to distinguish between good and evil, and if we or somebody else does wrong, to be able to name it, rectify it and avoid it in the future.

Young people have ideals and want to change the world into a better place. We can support them by introducing inspiring ideals and personalities to them. While their personalities are being shaped, it is important to demonstrate to them that a moral heroic life is possible. We should show them examples of true love and self-sacrifice opposed to shallow love and enjoying life offered by the mass media. Many young people are not satisfied with a materialistic way of life and therefore are searching for a deeper sense of life, which would fit better with their moral aspirations. They are looking for a spiritual experience and because modern materialistic society does not offer them such an experience, they often resort to alcohol, drugs or promiscuous sexuality. In alcohol, drugs or sex they are unconsciously looking for transcendence, for God. Archaic societies satisfied those spiritual needs by means of various religious rituals or initiation practices. Ethical education cannot mediate spiritual experiences to young people, but it can provide them with an explanation of their possibly unconscious spiritual aspirations in order to help them consciously deal with the question of transcendence.

5. Development of responsibility

Religious concepts in ethics classes may play an important role in motivating pupils towards moral deeds. This is confirmed by the experience of the Buddhist S. Rinpoche: "My attention was often caught by how some Buddhist teachers I know, would ask only one simple question of the people coming to them for advice, "Do you believe in life after life?" ... Teachers know that if a man believes in life after death, his whole life perspective will be different and he will have a clear sense of personal responsibility and morality. Teachers must sense the existence of danger, that people who do not firmly believe in life after death will create a society focused on short-term results without ever thinking about the consequences of their actions" (Sogjal, 1998, p. 329). The question of the afterlife interests the majority of children at a certain age. Teachers provide them with information about various views on the afterlife, in order to enable them to come to their own opinion.

In the context of the afterlife, a teacher can familiarise children with the different concepts of particular religions, but he can also use knowledge about the experience of clinical death, for example from R. Moody’s book, or books about returning to past lives. Faith in the afterlife can have a significant impact on our moral behaviour. The concept of an afterlife is not neutral from an ethical point of view. It shows that our behaviour has consequences after our physical death also. It increases our sense of responsibility. On the other hand, people who do not believe in afterlife tend to live more hedonistically, according to the ancient Roman motto “Carpe diem!”

Materialistic concepts of the world do not have any influence on man’s moral motivation. Physical laws have no influence on the sphere of ethics. The law of gravity has the same effect on all people. From a materialistic point of view justice is relative and incidental. Innocent people are sometimes punished and criminals escape justice. If this is the case, the course of world events is often unfair and this has a de-motivating impact on us. When we see that the good is not always rewarded, and even a good man can be wronged in some way, and that evil is not always punished, why make the effort to act morally? Such understanding has an impact on adults, let alone children and young people who are even more sensitive to moral concepts. A young person full of ideals wants to see justice, wants to see the victory of good over evil and if we offer him a perception of the world where justice is random and sometimes non-existent, it hurts him.

One of the key religious ideas that can be used by a teacher of ethics is the ancient wisdom "As you sow so shall you reap." It means that every act has some consequences corresponding to its quality. If I sow a thistle, I cannot expect to reap wheat. The Bible says: "Sow the wind and reap the whirlwind." Buddhists believe that every action has a reaction. Of course, the reaction may not occur immediately, it may delay for many years, even until the afterlife, or, if we believe in reincarnation, until the next life. Hence we have the expression that the mills of God grind slowly but exceedingly small.

6. Free choice

Most religions understand the existence of evil in the world as a consequence of man’s free will. Man can choose between good and evil and sometimes he chooses evil. If he were not free, he would not be responsible for his
actions. Freedom is always connected with responsibility, and therefore some people reject it. English psychiatrist T. Dalrymple, who has devoted his practice to people living on the fringe of the society, noticed a dangerous tendency to disclaim their free choice and consequently also responsibility for their actions. "An alcoholic explaining his misbehaviour while he is drunk says: "That beer just went crazy." The heroine addict explains why he reached for the syringe: "Heroine is everywhere" (Dalrymple, 2011, pp. 9-10). Man who perceives himself in that way becomes the plaything of circumstances. Drugs are everywhere and therefore he takes them. He does not realize that it is primarily his choice to take a drug and that he could have refused it, if he had used the opportunity of free choice. Just how dangerous it is to reject freedom is also revealed by how the majority of Nazi war criminals tried at the Nuremberg Tribunal defended their actions by claiming that they only acted according to their superior’s orders. Religion stresses conscience, free choice and acceptance of responsibility.

Meaning of life. We may employ religion also in solving questions on the meaning of life. People of faith deal with this question more easily. They feel the absurdity of life to a lesser extent. According to V. Frankl, modern man’s biggest problem is not the neuroses, which originate in the suppression of sexuality but noogenic neuroses, which consist in us seeing no meaning to our life. (Frankl, 2011, p. 87). Religion tells us where we come from, why we are here and what our life is heading towards. It also helps us to understand why we suffer and what attitude we should adopt to it. It offers us a distinction between good and evil and a vision of a good life.

Religious forms of psycho-hygiene. The modern lifestyle makes great demands of man. As a result man is often stressed or has burnout. It is important to know how to relax properly. We need to get away from our everyday routine to get distance and to bring more peace and tolerance. Various meditation techniques and rituals, with which religions have rich experience, can help us. These techniques give the human psyche more strength and more resilience. Slovak dissident S. Krcmery who was brutally tortured in a communist jail in the early 1950s gained mental strength by imagining the individual parts of a Catholic service and regular prayers. He created a regular ritual that enabled him to resist the pressure of the secret police. Prayer is also a form of relaxation. An atheist can use it also – he may create his own formula and repeat it regularly. It may be a formula containing some positive message.

7. Conclusion

Nowadays it is unacceptable to impose religious belief on someone. The individual’s freedom has to be respected. On the other hand, we should not try to exclude religion from the culture. Many religious ideas or practices have a positive impact on man’s moral development. Information about them should therefore be part of ethics education or other forms of value-based education. When presenting world’s religions, we should emphasize what they have in common, rather than what divides them. Without religious knowledge we cannot understand our own culture. European civilization is a Christian civilization and our understanding of morality comes mainly from biblical tradition. Many legal ideas, such as human rights, the idea of equality, solidarity and brotherhood with all men without exception, have Christian roots. We may not realize it until we are confronted with Islam.

This paper was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. SRDA-0690-10.

References