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# Creating Understandings for Peace, Justice and Human Rights

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## Abstract

Peaceful co-existence is a universal but elusive aspiration. Despite the search for tools to create a peaceful world, conflict remains between nations and within nations. The fostering of peace is a question to which scholars, religious leaders and politicians put their minds, but despite this attention the paradox remains that there is little evidence that local and global conflict have subsided. Ideally the key to providing solutions can be found in the tenets of the world's major religions and cultural traditions and in the musing of some of the great philosophy voices of past and modern times. Regrettably these tenets are often absent in education systems where there are limited endeavours to encourage young people to think locally and globally about social justice, peace and human rights. Many of the current ways of imparting knowledge of human rights and peace are limited, with the emphasis on the legal aspect alone and on international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Although the UDHR is an inspiring document given that its creation stemmed from a commitment to all humanity, its uncritical acceptance negates the critiques about western dominance. Arguably, unless humankind can find a way to grapple with the tension between universal and relativist approaches to human rights by acknowledging diversity, the search for peace and social justice will be limited. This paper contemplates the creation of human rights understandings beyond legal constructs to explore how human rights concepts can be invoked through education to reduce ignorance, prejudice, religious intolerance and fear that detracts from the goal of peaceful co-existence. It explores the question of responsibility to 'the other', a form of responsibility that is not apparent in the clash of cultures and the conflict between nations. The paper suggests a schema for human rights understandings based on philosophical, political, historical,

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anthropological, legal and practical approaches to human rights. This includes forging the connection between theory and practice; engaging in critical pedagogy through a process of collaborative dialogue and inquiry; being familiar with the historical origins of human rights and their application; and understanding that concepts of human rights are found in every cultural and religious tradition. In advocating such a schema it draws on examples that present barriers and prospects and in so doing outlines the endeavours that take place in the inter-disciplinary Master of Human Rights program at Curtin University in Australia as a model that may be adaptable to other contexts. The paper concludes by suggesting practical ways in which the schema could be enacted including through a lifetime educational commitment to human rights through historical and philosophical understandings, inter-faith dialogue and cultural exchanges.

**Keywords:** Peace; Justice; Human Rights; Religion.

## Introduction

Peaceful co-existence is a universal but elusive aspiration. Despite the search for the means to create a peaceful world, conflict pervades between nations and within nations. This is a question to which scholars, religious leaders and politicians put their minds but there is little evidence that local and global conflict has subsided.

Ideally, the key to providing solutions can be found in the tenets of the world's major religions and cultural traditions and in the musing of some of the great philosophy voices of past and modern times. This is somewhat of a paradox given that some of the barriers to peace are ostensibly driven through religious divisions. In this paper I argue that such divisiveness is frequently based on fear and ignorance and we need to open people's hearts and minds to the prospects of drawing on diverse human rights perspectives if humankind is to leave in peaceful co-existence. Regrettably, human rights tenets are often absent in education systems and there are limited endeavours for young people to engage in thinking about social justice, peace and human rights.

Many of the current ways of imparting knowledge of human rights and peace are limited, with the emphasis sometimes on legal aspects alone and on international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948. Although the UDHR is an inspiring document, given that its creation stemmed from a commitment to all humanity, its uncritical acceptance may negate the concerns about western dominance. Arguably, unless humankind can find a way to grapple with the tension between universal and relative approaches to human rights by acknowledging a diversity of views and ways of being, the search for peace and social justice will be limited.

This paper contemplates the creation of human rights understandings beyond the UDHR and other international instruments to explore how human rights concepts can be invoked to reduce ignorance, prejudice, religious intolerance and fear that detracts from the universality of peaceful co-existence. It explores the question of responsibility to 'the other', a form of responsibility that is not apparent in the 'clash of cultures' and the conflict between nations

The paper suggests a schema for human rights understandings based on the philosophical, political, historical, anthropological, legal and practical approaches to human rights.[1] It draws on endeavours within the

1. See: Briskman and Fiske, 2008.

interdisciplinary Master of Human Rights program at Curtin University in Australia as a model that may be adaptable in different contexts. It presents some specific examples of how education can encourage students and others to become peace advocates through adopting wider understandings.

## A Common Humanity

In preparing this paper I am cognizant of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (adopted in 1981), which proclaims that freedom of religion or belief should contribute to the attainment of goals of world peace, social justice and friendship among peoples and to the elimination or practices of colonization and racial discrimination (check and add reference).

As pointed out by Lauren the visions of prophets, philosophers, religious and political leaders seen centuries ago are still capable of capturing our imagination, inspiring our thoughts and influencing our behavior. These visions of human rights did not result from a single society, political system, culture or religion. Some emerged from religious belief and duty; others grew from philosophical discourse and others emerged from a passionate sense of injustice.[1]

A word needs to be said on critiques of contemporary understandings of human rights and the view that they have been shaped by western Enlightenment thinking and are hence simply another manifestation of western colonialist domination. Rather than discarding human rights on this basis the task should be to loosen them from the shackles of western modernism and to reconstruct them in a more dynamic, inclusive and cross-cultural way ((Ife 2001). Furthermore, it is important to proclaim that notions of human rights are embedded in all major religious traditions and can be found in many different cultural forms although the term human rights may not be used. In this way, human rights is a powerful discourse that has the potential to overcome divisiveness and to be a unifying force for people of different cultural and religious traditions. From this standpoint human rights is a construct that can be adopted by those striving for a just and peaceful world? For Ishay (1997), the historical foundation of human rights lies in the humanist strand running through the world's greatest religions.

Taking this further, Heiner Bielefeldt (1995) refers to the universalistic claim of human rights that they refer to all human beings. However, the cosmopolitan

1. See: Lauren, 1998: 1.

claim has resulted in a charge that such universalism conceals global dominance and cultural imperialism of western states. Although confirming that it is not possible to deny that the concept of human rights is of western origin, he argues that it does not follow that the idea of human rights is exclusively connected to western culture and philosophy and hence only applicable to western societies. In this sense human rights does not mean the global imposition of a particular set of western values but aims at the universal recognition of pluralism and difference including different religions, cultures, political convictions and ways of life.[1]

All of the major world religions seek to speak to the issue of human responsibility to others despite their vast differences, complex contradictions, internal paradoxes, cultural variations and conflicting interpretations. All share a universal interest in addressing the integrity, worth and dignity of all persons and duty towards others without distinction.[2] This is consistent with the concept of 'alterity' an ethics of responsibility advocated by Levinas, which calls for a way of locating ourselves in relation to others, including strangers.[3]

Human rights is a powerful framework for engaging with the world as it articulates a utopian vision and attempts to find ways to implement this vision. Although the world at large often falls short of our ideals they need to be kept to the forefront with optimism.

John Sharruck (2002) argues that: It has become almost axiomatic that we must look at everything today through the lens of September 11with that certainly true for religion and human rights. He states, perhaps provocatively, that a multiplicity of religions in the past always meant conflict and that religious conflict often leads to war and devastation. In the spirit of the Declaration, he sees the development of the UDHR as a way of ensuring tolerance of religious difference. He notes that belief cannot be suppressed without destroying the very essence of what it is to be human. Furthermore, in his view, tolerance of differing beliefs is a strategic necessity for, without tolerance, conflict will occur.

A paradox is raised by Heiner Bielefeldt (1995) who reflects on the fact that the twentieth century was not only the century in which international organizations and universal human rights standards came into being but it was

1. See: Bielefeldt, 1995.
2. See: Lauren, 1998.
3. See: Stratton and McCann, 2002.

also a century marked by global wars and experiences of injustice that affected all of humankind. Drawing on Bielefeldt's concerns, the urgency of the quest for peace is apparent in a range of 21st century conflicts with potential for devastating consequences.

## A Schema

The following schema devised by Briskman and Fiske (2008) can be applied to different levels of education – elementary, secondary or tertiary – with adaptation. It covers six core aspects:

- Philosophical
- Political
- Historical
- Anthropological
- Legal
- Practical

Each of these is briefly discussed in turn.

Philosophical foundations are pivotal to human rights pedagogy and content. Ideas about human rights have developed over several centuries and provoke us to think deeply about existential and practical issues. Exploring philosophical roots presents human rights as dynamic, requiring active engagement and critical thinking. Incorporating philosophy and ethics equips students with deeper knowledge and skills in their human rights engagements.

The political aspect of human rights thinking acknowledges that causes and solutions of most human rights issues involve the political realm. Although the causes of conflict are complex, the growing inequalities between and within nation point to the need to understand how second generation rights such as those proclaimed in the Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights can enhance peaceful co-existence, minimize resentment and build hope. These rights include the right to housing, a reasonable standard of living and the right to a fair wage. They are usually best addressed though political rather than legal measures.[1] Moreover, though a critical analysis of the political domain and understanding of different ideological beliefs as classical liberalism, socialism or green political thought,[2] students are able to locate human rights understandings in relation to place and time.

1. See: Ishay, 2004; Gready and Ensor, 2005.
2. See: Briskman and Fiske, 2008.

Historically, it is important for students to have some understanding of how the United Nations was formed and how the UDHR and other international conventions came into existence. It is important to also understand the role of the Cold War and other human conflicts in determining how human rights understandings are shaped and understood. The relevant point here is that human rights instruments do not occur in a vacuum but there are complex historical and contemporary underpinnings.

An anthropological perspective challenges the notion that human rights are a western construct. Moving beyond the language of rights and the UN system it is important to create awareness that human rights roots span every cultural and religious tradition. This enables us to understand human rights as moral and customary codes guiding how we live together, how we care for one another and how we resolve disputes. Holding up a cosmopolitan or anthropological view provokes us to consciously seek out the contributions of non-western traditions and hence enriches human rights inquiry and scholarship.[1]

How much emphasis to place on legal aspects of human rights depends largely on the context? A law course would have a different approach to Curtin University's interdisciplinary and discursive view of human rights. Although not espousing adherence to a legal framework, students need to have some understanding of international and national human rights laws and their implementation.

At a practice level, students need to understand how they can position themselves as actors in contributing to peace. The work of some human rights educators is informed by the work of Paolo Freire (1996) whose critical pedagogy occurs through a process of collaborative dialogue and inquiry in which the method of education is as important as the curriculum content. Methods of teaching human rights needs to cohere with human rights principles including the dignity and worth of every human being and dialogical education can contribute to knowledge-building in this regard.

## Barriers and Prospects

In examining the question of advancement of the quest for tolerance, respect and peaceful co-existence, I draw on an example which although not threatening world peace is a microcosm of the barriers that religious and cultural beliefs can play in denying the realization of human rights and hence

1. See: Briskman and Fiske, 2008.

harmony between groups. The example I use is that of Indigenous peoples, and particularly the Aboriginal peoples of Australia.

At this stage, it needs to be noted that prior to British colonization of just over 200 years ago, Aboriginal cultures were rich in their family mores, their relationship with the land and nature, their spiritual beliefs and their regulated societies based on their own lores. After colonization many aspects of Aboriginal culture, including their sacred sites, were smashed, and there was a concerted effort to convert people to Christianity, especially children who were frequently removed from their families and communities in what is now referred to as the 'stolen generations'. Right up to the present time the legacy of colonialism remains, with Aboriginal people in Australia at the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder in terms of such facets as health, education, housing, employment and income.

As a non-Aboriginal person I cannot make claims to be able to adequately convey the spiritual beliefs of Australia's Indigenous peoples. But suffice it to say that there needs to be a distinction made here between formalized religion and spirituality. Spirituality can perhaps best be defined as a set of beliefs that construct the way people see the world and act out their place in it, individually and collectively.[1] Broadly, there is a gulf between the worlds of Indigenous peoples, based on spirituality, collectivity and connection to the natural world, to those of settlers that is based largely on individualism, individual gain and secularism.[2]

In many ways the fear that drives global conflicts also applies to Indigenous peoples. In Australia some of the resistance to Aboriginal self-determination was based on an irrational fear of the granting of land rights that would be contrary to the capitalist paradigm.

Notwithstanding some core differences in cultures, Aboriginal people in Australia and elsewhere have asserted their rights through the mainstream, particularly in United Nations forum. One key gain was the passing through the UN of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 although a number of western countries, including Australia, declined to be signatories.

What can human rights education provide for peaceful co-existence using this example? It goes beyond tolerance Learning from Australia's first peoples

1. See: Healy, 2005.
2. See: Briskman, 2007.

about their spiritual connections to nature, their relationships to each other is something that the dominant society rarely does. In the dominant frameworks of knowledge, Aboriginal concepts of being are ignored and even denigrated. Dialogue and mutuality are at the core of healing and reconciliation.

## Curtin University Program

The Curtin human rights master's program is committed to dialogue across communities, cultures, nations and religions about human rights. We believe that dialogue across different traditions enriches our understanding of the human experience and of what is needed if we are to live in harmony and peace in the world.

In our program we encourage students in critical thinking and dialogical approaches in asking them to consider issues of concern to society – local, national and international. In this a multi-disciplinary approach that draws on the schema is foundational. We posit that human rights teaching must be inspirational and aspirational and we do not position ourselves as experts but see the student participants from diverse backgrounds, cultures and nations as human rights actors, each of whom have something to contribute to the realization of human rights. What we endeavour to do is built upon the emancipatory potential of education in the belief that the creation of a just and peaceful world rests in part with educators and those they serve.

Although content is important, process is pivotal. Moreover, critical human rights issues change over time and place and are dependent on context, including the contexts of the students' lives. We hope that we encourage students to develop their own version of a rights culture that transcends disciplines and differences but is context specific. In this human rights are not understood as a panacea for all that is wrong in the world but as a discursive and analytical tool for change. In our approach to pedagogy there is an emphasis on grounded knowledge and participation. The educator is a guide and facilitator.

In addition we encourage students to undertake research, internships or special projects that take them out of their comfort zone and to confront conflictual situations at various levels. For example we have had students involved in working with an international child rights organization in Bangladesh, in a community centre in Timor Leste, studying trafficking in Thailand and exploring tensions in the Solomons. To some extent staff mirror what they teach including engagement with universities in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Thailand, Canada and Korea.

Preparing this paper makes me increasingly aware that we need to continually stress to students the need to link peace and human rights and to work more resolutely for peace. Without a peaceful world the future of those for whom we advocate cannot be realized such as Indigenous peoples, refugees, and people with disabilities and women experience violence.

## Concluding

Drawing on own profession of social work, codes of ethics, national and international, value diversity and challenge monocultural dictates. They also encourage striving for social justice and adherence to human rights. The core of peace advocacy and human rights across religions and cultures has some essential ingredients including trust, mutual understandings and dialogue, garnering the ability to walk in the shoes in others and listening to all perspectives even those with which we may not concur.

It is to be hoped that a paradigm and method of education such as the one proposed by us, moves beyond binary approaches to human rights, peace and religion. Instead of seeing the world in terms of right and wrong, them and us, or good and evil, a nuanced understanding through linking human rights and peace education is a key.

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