ROLE OF ETHICS EDUCATION IN STRENGTHENING FAMILIES AND NURTURING SPIRITUALITY IN CHILDREN

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PANELISTS:

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INTRODUCTION

The panel discussion took place in Panama City on 11 May 2017, during the third day of the Fifth Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC). The panel discussion aimed to reflect on the role of ethics education to nurture spirituality in early childhood through family engagement. By engaging caregivers in building safe, healthy, affectionate and respectful environments, and by tapping resources from religious traditions, children can be equipped to develop their spirituality, strengthen their identities, and thrive with others in plural societies.

The family remains the natural environment for children to grow, thrive and develop. Positive and respectful family engagement and child-upbringing skills are vital to ensure that children and parents/caregivers develop positive emotional attachment; children enhance their self-concept and self-esteem, form inclusive identities, and develop socio-emotional qualities and healthy relations with others.

The 2013 Report on Ending Corporal Punishment of Children confirmed through numerous studies that children who have experienced corporal punishment are more likely to be aggressive towards their peers and parents, to bully and to experience violence from their peers, and to use violent methods to resolve conflict. By supporting parents and caregivers to create safe environments where values and spirituality are nurtured in early ages, the foundations for children’s sound and healthy development are created.

Mrs. Maria Lucia Uribe, Director of Arigatou International Geneva, introduced the objectives of the panel and the panelists, emphasizing on the multidimensional approach of their interventions.

The specific objectives of the workshop are threefold:

1. Identify the environmental and societal factors that hinder or foster the ability and possibilities to nurture spirituality and ethical values in early childhood;
2. Discuss the role of and ways religious communities can help nurture spirituality in early childhood as well as support families and caregivers in this task;
3. Reflect on how ethics education and spirituality in early childhood help to foster inclusive identities that can prevent extremism and violence.

The dialogue was organized through questions proposed to each panelist, revolving around the importance of nurturing spirituality in children in early ages to contribute to their inclusive identity formation and the prevention of violence.

**OPENING REMARKS**

Dr. Kezevino Aram – Director Shanti Ashram, India - Chair of Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children, Arigatou International opened the dialogue by highlighting that family, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State. The preamble of the Convention on the Rights of the Child refers to the family as “the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well being of all its members and particularly children”.

Dr. Aram emphasized that family remains the natural environment for children to grow, thrive and develop. Positive family engagement and child-upbringing skills are vital to ensure that children and parents/caregivers develop emotional attachment; children enhance their self-concept and self-esteem, and develop socio-emotional qualities and healthy relations with others.

Dr. Aram continued by saying that children need to grow in an atmosphere of happiness and affection allowing them to safely and fully develop emotionally, physically, cognitively and spiritually.

According to Dr. Aram, there is not an international commonly agreed definition of family; the understanding of the family has been changing due to several factors such as increased longevity, growing number of blended families, cohabitation, unmarried couples, single heads of households, childless couples and changing views on same sex marriages. Higher divorce rates, children outside marital unions, unintended pregnancy and early childbearing also shape the understanding of family today. Changing demographics and socio-economic cleavages, as well as increasing conflict dynamics that force families to disintegrate. Higher unemployment rates among the young population in places like Europe and the United States lead to economic dependency on the parents.

With parents of older age new families consequently become smaller. Still in some places in Africa, Latin America and South and Southeast Asia, where unemployment is also high among youth, there is a relatively high birth rate and early pregnancy. Children become parents and are forced to grow up prematurely to be able to take care of their children, and are therefore prevented from enjoying their childhood.

In this context, Dr. Aram stressed that we have a responsibility not only in shaping the children’s ecosystem but also being able to do it in the way children wants to harmoniously grow.
DISCUSSION

Dr. Melanie Swan – Global Advisor on Early Childhood Development, Plan International started the discussion by addressing the question: why is early childhood such an important period for children’s learning of ethical values and key skills? Children are learning from the moment they are born, and they learn through interaction with adults, other children, and the world around them; through play and exploration; and through observing what others do and say and how they behave. Therefore, early childhood is the most important developmental phase in life since it is the period of most rapid learning, development and “brain-building”. By the time the child reaches three years of age, 90% of the structures and the pathways of the brain are built. The building of the child brain is dependent on the interactions with the adults and others around; it is dependent on them having by their side, a warm, sensitive caregiver, male or female, who stand for them, and are willing to understand them and to respond to their needs and ways of communicating. It is also dependent on the child being protected from sources of prolonged and significant stress that directly affect the development of his or her brain.

Why are parents and other family members such important actors in this regard? Dr. Swan explained that in early childhood, children learn not only physical and cognitive skills, but also key social and emotional skills, such as sharing, helping each other, communicating, and resolving conflicts without violence. The foundations of these skills are built well before the child reaches primary school, and are fundamental to help forming and maintaining respectful relationships with others. It is also the period where the child begins to understand differences between themselves, their families and others. According to Dr. Swan, there is a genetic component to some traits (empathy), but moral values (beliefs about what is right or wrong), ethical values (e.g. respect, compassion) and pro-social behaviors are mostly learnt. While there is mixed evidence about how children learn about prejudice, we know that it can also be learnt early. We know that the youngest children are very sensitive to prejudice and discrimination and they learn this early and quickly. Dr. Swan mentioned studies with children as young as four years old that show that they quite clearly understand that some groups are “worth more” or have “higher status than others”. They also show children from multi-ethnic populations, who clearly have a positive bias towards their own groups and negative prejudices towards other groups. These learning and development is key for later in life. If the child falls behind in the early ages, they are likely to remain behind later in life.

Dr. Swan stressed that children are learning from birth, through interaction, observation and playing, and these elements are much more important than formally being taught something. Thus the role of parents and caregivers is fundamental since they are the first people the child will encounter in his or her life. Dr. Swan pointed out three elements to parents’ role as educators:

- What parents actively teach to the child: cultural and religious values and beliefs play a strong role.
- How they provide the child with a secured emotional relationship: to have a sense of trust and willing to get out there to explore the world and learn.
- How parents modeled behaviors: what they do and how they relate to each other is a critical factor, since children pick up prejudices and discriminatory norms from what adults say. Also, they learn from early age how to behave as boys and girls and how important they are in the society from the way their parents and relatives behave.

Consequently what are the key external and internal factors in the family that foster or hinder their ability to ensure the positive upbringing of children? According to Dr. Swan in each family there may be multiple factors at play that influence parents
abilities to be warm, sensitive and responsive caregivers, capable of providing a positive upbringing and nurturing ethical values and pro-social behaviors.

Some of these factors are, for example, social norms in the community about what “good parenting” means, as well as cultural and religious values and beliefs that influence parents’ expectations about how they think they should raise their children and how their children should behave.

Dr. Swan mentioned that the psychological wellbeing of the parents and the quality of the couple’s relationship also influence the upbringing of the child. Maternal depression (which affects around 25% of women in low and middle income countries) high rates of alcohol abuse, high rates of stress within families (particularly among young or first time parents, parents living in poverty and parents with disabilities) are factors that affect the ability of parents to provide a sensitive care to their child.

Time is also an issue across many countries. Mothers are increasingly going out into workforce and they are spending more time at work. However, there are still gender norms dictating that the role of childcare belongs exclusively to women, without a shift of roles or shared responsibilities between both parents.

Underpinning many of these more immediate factors, are structural and society issues such us: poverty, societal violence, conflict, emergencies, displacements that are risk factors for increased levels of family stress, domestic violence, time poverty and depression among caregivers.

Dr. Swan explained that we all want to belong and be accepted, thus the opinions of other people around us about what good parenthood means are key drivers for the way we behave as parents. This means for example that in certain communities, parents continue hitting their children, although they don’t want to do it, only to fulfill the expectations of their communities.

Dr. Swan concluded by stressing that in order to support parents to strengthen their abilities to provide a positive upbringing to their children it is important to look beyond “parenting education programs” that aim to change their knowledge, attitudes and beliefs, and consider also how to address these other factors that are at play and that influence how parents behave and what they teach.

Dr. Rashied Omar – Research Scholar of Islamic Studies and Peacebuilding - Member of the Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children, Arigatou International began his intervention by addressing the question: what is the impact of Islamophobia on the positive upbringing of Muslim children, and how does it influence the identity formation of children in early ages?

Dr. Omar stressed that these are the most challenging times for Muslims. Since the beginning of 2017 more than 2000 Islamic centers across the United States have been vandalized. This is the case of the Islamic Center of Victoria, Texas, which was burned to the ground by unknown attackers in January; only one day after this attack, a gunman killed six worshipers and injured eight others at the Grand Mosque in Quebec, Canada.

According with Dr. Omar, children live at the cutting edge of this reality and they are not unaffected by the toxic islamophobic environment that we are currently experiencing. A growing number of scholars, including the French Social Scientist Olivier Roy, agreed that young immigrant Muslims living in North America and Europe experience acute identity crises which arises from the two cultural worlds in which they live - their homes and broader society.

One in two American-Muslim children, ages 5-9 feel conflicted about being both Muslim and American. As an example of this, Dr. Omar shared the comments of a six-year-old girl and a five-year-old learner who said:
This toxic environment makes young Muslims susceptible to extremist viewpoints of Islam. In this context, how religious leaders can foster values that help children deal with negative prejudices and respond in non-violent ways? According with Dr. Omar, fostering a strong sense of identity is the most important aspect of preparing young children to deal with negative responses to their faith.

Religious leaders need to nurture young people with an inclusive spirituality. Muslim religious leaders should inculcate and nurture a vision and understanding of Islam as a balanced and life-affirming religion.

There is a great need for religious traditions to learn from studies on Child Development and Child Psychology in order to be able to distinguish practices that foster children and families from those that dehumanize and violate the wellbeing of the child. It is not possible for religious leaders to contribute to prevent violence in the family if they are not well informed about child’s development.

To answer the question about how does religion influence the choices made in the family in the upbringing of children? Dr. Rambachan mentioned the example of corporal punishment, a practice that is still supported by many religious communities.

Despite the existence of legislation in many countries that forbids corporal punishment of children, some religious communities contest these laws and support this practice. According to Dr. Rambachan, this happens because in some cases the use of corporal punishment is based on certain interpretations and theological views about human nature.

The belief in these cases is that the child is inherently predisposed to wrong behavior because human nature itself is flawed and intrinsically broken. Consequently, the only way to rectify this behavior is by pain, fear and physical punishment, and there are still families that think these are important instruments to nurture and raise children.

To the question about how can religious teachings that justify violence in the upbringing of children be challenged? Dr. Rambachan emphasized on the importance of a deep self-examination in the religious traditions to avoid these types of so-called “disciplines” based on theological understanding of the “fundamental problem” of humans.

A more optimistic view of human nature, a view that emphasizes the inherit goodness of human beings will lead to different child upbringing practices in the family, practices that will not depend on fear or pain to nurture and to raise children. In conclusion, without a deep self-searching from the part of the religious traditions it will not be possible to have positive nonviolent teachings.
Prof. Enrique Palmeyro – Global Director, Scholas Occurrentes was asked about the factors in the community, and particularly in schools, that affect the acquisition of values and the possibility for children to nurture their spirituality. In order to address this, Prof. Palmeyro referred to the Pope’s Francis First Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii Gaudium” (The Joy of the Gospel) that reflects on the joy of receiving the Christian faith and the joy of missionary activity.

According with Prof. Palmeyro this joy comes with a responsibility to see the reality, and in the present times exclusion is part of our reality. Dr. Palmeyro continued by quoting Pope Francis:

“This society of consumption also affects the way children are raised in our modern society and consequently this is one of the multiple factors that affect the acquisition of values and the possibility for children to nurture their spirituality.

Following the discussion and focusing more on what can be done and recommendations. Dr. Omar was then asked how can religious communities nurture a spirituality that promotes inclusiveness, respect and reconciliation? According to Dr. Omar, it is important to understand that spirituality is not only measured by how much you pray, how often you fast, your dress code or your diet, but most importantly, by how these acts of worship empower you to interact with and live alongside fellow humans beings.

From the religious communities it is important to create spaces to foster anti-racism and anti-bigotry among young Muslims. It is also important to make these young people aware that Islam is a culture-friendly religion and sound and healthy cultural values and practices should be embraced, stated Dr. Omar.

Quoting Dr. Umar Faruq Abdullah, Dr. Omar mentioned that advocating for a so-called “culture-free Islam” loses sight of the fact that culture is integral to the development of a healthy sense of self and community.

As for the role of families, we cannot insulate them; we need to equip them to navigate through these difficult times of Islamophobia. The religious community and the family should provide refuge from the harsh psychological and emotional trauma our children and youth endure as a result of Islamophobia, stressed Dr. Omar.

The growing phenomenon of Islamophobia is engendering a fertile ground in which radical extremism can thrive, expressed Dr. Omar and quoted the writer John L Esposito, from his book “Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam”:

“If foreign policy issues are not addressed effectively, they will continue to be breeding ground for hatred and radicalism, the rise of extremist movements, and recruits for the bin Laden’s of the world.”
The challenge of mitigating the destructive effects of Islamophobia on Muslim children is the responsibility of all peace and justice loving people, concluded Dr. Omar.

**Dr. Rambachan** followed the discussions by responding to what is the role of religious communities in nurturing values that foster pluralism in children from early ages? How can religious leaders and communities support families, particularly parents and other caregivers in this task? In order to answer these questions Dr. Rambachan stressed the difference between religion as a marker of identity and religion as a maker of identity. At the heart of this distinction is the view that when religious traditions serve only as marker of identity, they become a sort of “national flag” that distinguishes the person from others holding different identities. However, religion as a maker of identity is not intrinsically a virtue, explained Dr. Rambachan.

Religion as a maker of identity, on the other hand, pushes us to consider what this identity means instead of just holding it up. Asking ourselves what does it mean implies questioning what it means in our relationship with others.

In the context of a world that is becoming more and more diverse, we need to emphasize the significance of religion as a maker of identity, but also as a resource that underlines our connectedness to others.

Dr. Rambachan explained that in their sacred text, all religious traditions have a sort of “despised other” or unequal regarded other, in relation with the way we profess our identity.

According to Dr. Rambachan, nowadays we live in a society where respect for the other is based upon what he calls “unequally distributed attainments” which means we value those who are wealthy because wealth is not equally shared and we value those who are powerful because not everyone enjoys power. So in order to foster pluralism, a first step should be to ask ourselves who is the despised other in relation to whom my identity has been formed and how do I overcome the relationship with this despised other, explained Dr. Rambachan.

Answering the question about how organizations working with and for children can support families in fostering positive values and skills from early ages? Dr. Swan emphasized that organizations need to come to the table with humility, recognizing the challenges that parents and families face in different context, and admitting that they are not coming in
with all the answers about the best ways to parent.

Organizations have to come in with a clear objective to ensure that their programs are relevant and sensitive to the context and the culture in which they are being implemented, and they have to build on shared positive practices and beliefs. As an example of this, Dr. Swan mentioned Plan International’s work with indigenous communities in Bolivia where their programs are built on positive ancestral practices and after a process of understanding how parents want to raise their children. Over time they began to sensitively open up spaces to reflect and challenge practices that are in children’s best interest, said Dr. Swan.

Traditional parenting programs (such as health promotion, nutrition, etc.) are absolutely important, however organizations have to expand the spectrum of their work with parents and talk together about how children learn and develop, also talk together about the critically important relationship between the child and the parent, and simple ways on how this relationship can be strengthen, and reflect on how parents can build their children’s social and emotional skills from everyday activities.

To answer the question on how schools can help families to foster spirituality in children? And how nurturing values from early childhood can help children live free from violence? Prof. Palmeyro shared the experience of the foundation Scholas Occurrentes as an example of good practices in nurturing spirituality, values and sense of respect in young people.

The objective of Scholas Occurrentes is to integrate students, from public and private schools and from all religions to guide them in the commitment for the common good. As Prof. Palmeyro explained, their vision is to transform the world into a classroom without walls where all children are integrated and coexist in peace.

Through programs and actions based on sports, art and technology, this initiative aims to follow the “culture of encountering” proposed by Pope Francis in order to generate a paradigm shift in education through the integration of educational communities.

Dr. Aram concluded the panel summarizing the main points highlighted by the panelists, and reminding us about the multi-factorial causes of violence against children and the need to work at different levels to support the ecosystem of the child. She pointed that families are part of the larger society and therefore, schools, religious communities, and civil society organizations all have a role to play to end violence against children, and ensure that families become safe places for children to grow, develop and thrive free of violence in an environment that fosters their spirituality and wellbeing.