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The Socio-Political Impact of Education on Understanding the Religion of the Other: A Global Historical and Intercultural Perspective
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In my presentation I would like to proceed in three steps. First, I am going to offer a schematic outline of the global historical process of transformation from the old system of discrimination between “true” and “false” religion to the contemporary system of increasing religious pluralism and interreligious mutual recognition. Then, I am going to analyze two different conditions of religious education and the two different types of impact which they imply, namely, I am going to distinguish between, on the one hand, the socio-political impact of teaching and understanding the religion of the other in public schools and state educational institutions, and on the other hand, the socio-cultural and inter-religious impact of teaching and understanding the religion of the other in private schools and religious educational institutions.

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The key principle of the new global secular trend is the recognition of religious freedom as an inalienable individual right based on the sacred dignity of the human person. Not creeds or doctrines, but persons have rights. In this respect, and this is what is radically new, neither truth nor error have rights per se. Persons have the right and the duty to search the truth without coercion and to follow their conscience in good faith even when in the process they may err.

The second key component is the principle of a newly redefined secular state. The modern state needs to be secular, but not in the laicist or secularist sense of adopting a critical negative attitude towards religion, preserving for itself the right to regulate religion and to keep it in its place, excluding it from the public sphere. The state needs to be secular precisely out of respect for the freedom of religion of each and all its citizens.

The third foundational principle is the recognition of a fundamental sociological fact of our global age, the recognition that global humanity is characterized by an irremediable religious and cultural plurality. This recognition in turn leads to the acknowledgment that religious pluralism, rather than being a negative fact that needs to be corrected and suppressed, is a positive principle that calls all religious communities to mutual respect and recognition, indeed to interreligious dialogue.

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Throughout much of the world of Islam, for instance, one still finds much resistance to all three principles. Many Muslim societies still function with the crucial distinction between “true” and “false” religion and use discriminatory distinctions between true orthodox Islam (Sunni) and *schismatic* (Shiite) and *heretic* (Ahmadiyya and Baha’i) Muslims, *infidels* (Christian and Jews) and idolatrous *pagans*.

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Naturally, this global transformation has important socio-political and socio-cultural implications for religious education in public schools as well as in religious schools. Recognizing the principle of religious freedom and freedom of conscience as an inalienable individual right implies that every individual has a right to a religious education, but at the same time it implies that religious education cannot be imposed or coerced and has to be organized so as to respect the freedom of conscience of each and every individual.