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PERSPECTIVES ON TOLERANCE IN EDUCATION FLOWING FROM A COMPARISON OF RELIGION EDUCATION IN MEXICO AND THAILAND

Abstract

This paper investigates religion education (RE) in Mexico and Thailand – two countries from different parts of the world with vastly different populations and cultures. We wanted to learn whether they had tackled similar problems regarding the provision of RE in their schools, particularly with respect to the matter of tolerance in diverse societies, and in which ways the solutions they came up with agree with or differ from each other. We assumed that people are the same the world over, and that their problems regarding the provision of RE in schools and the quest for (inter)religious tolerance might, depending on the prevailing local and historical circumstances, be roughly the same. The paper presents and discusses some of the parallels, resemblances and differences with respect to RE and the issue of (inter)religious tolerance. It ends by tentatively advancing the following four stages of state-church relations that could help us understand (inter)religious tolerance in education: state-church tension and disagreement, state-church mistrust, state-church truce, and recognising the need for religious tolerance.

Historical Background

Contemporary Mexico is rooted in Roman Catholicism which arrived in the territory with the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th Century. Many struggles between state (supported mainly by anti-clerical Liberals; secularists) and the Church (driven mainly by politically active clergy and pro-clerical Conservatives) ensued (APEC, 2012).

Liberals and Conservatives alternated in power during the period from the War of Independence (1810-21) to the Mexican-American War (1846-48). A liberal constitution (1857) guaranteed basic freedoms. It deprived ecclesiastical orders of the right to own land, and secularized education. In response, conservative forces launched a coup that devolved into a civil war and finally to a clergy-supported occupation by French forces under Maximilian I (1864-67). The final decades of the 19th century were marked by the autocratic rule of Porfirio Díaz who allowed the Church and clergy to expand their temporal powers despite the restrictions imposed by the 1857 constitution (Berkeley Centre, 2012).

In 1917, a new Constitution reaffirmed the liberal principles of the 1857 document, but went further in restricting the authority and influence of the Church (Berkley Centre, 2012). After the uprising of 1929, the state (represented by the Institutional Revolutionary Party) and the Church reached a tacit agreement by which the former reduced its control over Church activities and the latter refrained from criticizing the Government. This situation remained in place until the 1980s, although the National Action Party and its socially conservative positions received tacit support from the Church from the 1930s on (Berkley Centre, 2012).

In 2011, Mexico's Senate approved constitutional reform that paved the way for religious education in the country's public schools. The reform (following Pope

Benedicts XVI's visit to the country) is widely seen as a victory for the Catholic Church in Mexico (Univision News, 2012). Article 24 of the Constitution used to grant everyone in the country the right to pick and exercise the religion of their choice. It now also grants people the right to "uphold their ethical convictions, freedom of conscience and religion".

Senators also changed Article 40 of the Constitution so that it described Mexico as a "secular nation", proof, according to certain politicians, that their parties respected the separation of Church and State in Mexico (Univision News, 2012).

Beginning with the colonial period, education has always been the duty of the Catholic Church. After 1810, a public education system was begun out of concern that the Church was imposing its values and beliefs on education and schools. Religious influences of any sort were banned in the public primary schools (grades one through six). The federal government controlled the curriculum and provided the textbooks for primary schools (APEC, 2012). However, the Salinas administration's 1991 proposal to remove all constitutional restrictions on the Roman Catholic Church, approved by the legislature the following year, allowed for a more realistic church-state relationship (Countrystudies.us, 2012).

In Thailand, Buddhism first appeared during the 3rd century B.C. It soon gained wide acceptance because its emphasis on tolerance and individual initiative complemented the Thai's sense of inner freedom. King Ramkhamhaeng (1275-1317 A.D.) established Theravada Buddhism as Thailand's dominant religion. In 1360, Ramathibodi (r.1351-69) declared Theravada Buddhism as the official religion and compiled a legal code based on Hindu legal texts and Thai custom that remained in effect until the late nineteenth century (Religion: Thailand, 2012). Although Buddhism became the primary and state religion, Thais have always subscribed to the ideal of religious freedom. From 1972-1992, the new Government, led by Prime Minister Thanin Kraivichien (an anticommunist), introduced Military Rule that was more repressive in many ways than the earlier military regimes. Censorship continued, and the regime tightly controlled labour unions and purged suspected communists from the civil service and educational institutions (Library of Congress, 2012).

Muslims comprise Thailand's largest religious minority. Islam is said to have been introduced to the Malay Peninsula by Arab traders and adventures during the 13th century. Thailand's Muslims enjoy state support and are free to teach and practice their religion according to their own tenets. Christianity was introduced to Thailand by European missionaries in the 16th and 17th centuries (U.S. Dept. of State, 2005). From the mid-sixteenth century Thailand opened up to French Catholic influence until the mid-seventeenth century when it was curtailed, and the country returned to a strengthening of its own cultural ideology (Religion: Thailand, 2012).

Tolerance issues

In Mexico, the 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a notable shift in religious affiliation and in church-state relations in Mexico. Although Mexico remains predominantly Roman Catholic, evangelical churches have dramatically expanded their membership. Dozens of evangelical denominations have engaged in strong recruitment efforts since 1970. Protestants of "evangelical" affiliation -- the terminology used by Mexican census officials -- surged from 1.8 percent in 1970 to

3.3 percent in 1980 and to 4.9 percent in 1990. The Mormons also reported that membership surged from 248,000 in 1980 to 688,000 by 1993 (Countrystudies.us, 2012).

Motivated in part by the evangelical challenge, the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church has sought greater visibility, speaking out on sensitive public issues and ignoring constitutional bans on clerical involvement in politics. These actions ultimately led in 1992 to dramatic constitutional changes and a resumption of diplomatic relations with the Vatican (Countrystudies.us, 2012). These negotiations resulted in amendments to the Constitution that granted greater freedom to churches (Berkley Centre, 2012). The 1992 Constitution provided that education should avoid privileges of religion, and that one religion or its members might not be given preference in education over another. Religious instruction was prohibited in public schools; however, religious associations were free to maintain private schools, which received no public funds.

The 2001 Constitution explicitly banned discrimination based on religious affiliation. Under the seven decades of PRI rule in Mexico, priests and other religious officials were not allowed to vote until after 1992. However, broadly speaking, the Constitution provided for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contribute to the generally free practice of religion. The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, there were some restrictions at the local level. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government in the period 2009-2010 (UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency, 2010).

Incidents of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice usually occurred in small rural communities in the south. Government officials, non-governmental organizations, and evangelical and Roman Catholic representatives agreed that these conflicts were often attributable to political, ethnic, or land disputes related to the traditional practices and customs of indigenous communities (UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency, 2010).

The emphasis on homogeneously implementing national schooling and curriculum standards without consideration of local context has created a situation where the tension between national standards and local needs could affect the quality of students' education. The educational possibilities for children of indigenous ancestry are particularly at risk. National versus local is a significant topic in Mexico, as is the issue of diverse ethnic groups and the extent to which students will be well served by national curriculum standards (Cisneros-Cohernour, Moreno & Merchant, 1999).

In broad terms, we may distinguish three main periods of multicultural education in twentieth and twenty first century Mexico: the post-revolutionary period of "classical" *indigenismo* (until the eighties), the period of ethnic mobilization and indigenous multiculturalism (during the eighties and nineties) and the current period of official inter-culturalism (since the turn of the century) (Dietz, 2012: 3).

Historically, the relationship between the Mexican state and the private education sector has comprised conflicts and disagreements, as well as tolerance and concurrence. Its complex history is permeated by the ideological alternatives of the Mexican state during the 20th century, the cyclical dilemma between centralism and

federalism, governmental definitions of a national educational project, and by the diversity of political, normative and practical actions (Rodriguez & Ordorika, 2011: 9).

In Thailand, the relationship between missionaries and the people was sometimes good, and sometimes bad. It depended, first of all, upon the missionaries themselves, in particular, on how much attention they paid to the customs of those to whom they preached the Gospel. We have inadequate evidence with regard to this matter, because much of the information on it was written by Christians, especially by missionaries themselves. Generally they praised themselves and blamed others. Secondly, the persecution of Roman Catholicism was due to political causes, for example, war between the Siamese and the Spaniards in the course of the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Diplomatic relations were not reopened with European nations until the nineteenth century. During the crisis that ensued, especially while the French soldiers were leaving, the French missionaries and their converts were imprisoned. Finally, persecution recurred in 1769 and 1782, when King Tak Sin went through a spell of insanity. A Thai church history says that one day the King stayed in the temple and told the people that he was a god who could ascend to the heaven. As the missionaries and the Christian converts did not believe in this, he did not permit their existence. A number of Christians were killed; some of them were burnt alive. However, persecutions only made them stronger in their faith. In comparison, persecution of Protestantism was only of brief duration. Persecution usually occurred due to two main factors, firstly, the people wanted to retain their customs and way of life; secondly, they wanted to preserve their religion. It was understood that anyone who did not care about the nation's social customs was a rebel against Thai society, and had to be punished accordingly (Saad, 1975: 22-27).

Daniel McGilvary (1828-1911), an American Presbyterian missionary who played an important role in the expansion of Protestantism in Northern Siam, realized that the Gospel could not be proclaimed unrestrictedly unless religious tolerance were promulgated (Saad, 1975: 22-27). The High Commissioner helped him prepare a petition to the King for a pronouncement on religious tolerance. Fortunately, a favourable reply came from King Chulalongkorn, granting all of his requests. A part of this edict of religious tolerance, promulgated on October 8th, 1878, says that religious and civil duties do not come in conflict. Whoever wishes to embrace any religion after seeing that it is true and proper to be embraced, is allowed to do so without any restriction, and that the responsibility for a right or wrong choice rests on the individual making the choice. All persons are permitted to follow the dictates of their own conscience in all matters of religious belief and practice. Christians, as well as missionaries of other religions, have been permitted to proclaim their respective faiths throughout the country ever since (Saad, 1975: 22-27).

Tolerance issues flowing from the comparison

The histories of both Mexico and Thailand demonstrate the tensions that often exist between the state (political authorities and powers) on the one hand, and religious entities such as churches, on the other. The history of Mexico is a record of ongoing conflict and tension between state (secularists, liberals) and the Roman Catholic Church (clergy, conservatives). While the relationship has always remained

tense and uneasy, at times it became more realistic in that the state entered into a form of truce characterised by a measure of tolerance of the church and religion. The basic stance of the Mexican state, however, is to restrict as far as possible church influence on schooling and education out of fear of church domination, and the imposition of the church values on the state, (public) education and the schools. The upshot of this has occasionally been the banning of RE from (public) schools and the creation of a secular society.

The actions of the Mexican state could be interpreted as a form of radical secularization, because it wished to eradicate all religious influences from society in general. The latter did not fully materialize, however, since the state has recently (2001) been persuaded to recognise freedom of religion, convictions and conscience. Since 1992, the official churches have also enjoyed greater freedom. It has paved the way for the introduction of RE in the public schools, which was hailed as a victory for the churches and religion.

Mexico is predominantly Christian, with the Roman Catholic Church as the most prominent denomination. Other denominations have also grown in numbers, particular the evangelicals. This diversity has prompted the state in 2001 to ban all discrimination based on religious affiliation and to insist, generally, on the free practice of religion. Despite this measure, religious intolerance occasionally still occurs at local level, albeit because of political, ethnical or economic reasons. Mexico currently finds itself officially in a period of multi-culturalism of which multi-religionism forms a major facet.

Thailand has similarly experienced extended periods of tension between state and organised religion, as demonstrated by the conflicts between the indigenous population and the Christian missionaries. The brief period of persecution of the Roman Catholic Church for political purposes in the 18th century is another instance of such conflict. The Christians sought a greater degree of state-sanctioned religious tolerance, and their wish was granted towards the end of the 18th century. Since then, freedom of religion, conscience and a culture of no restrictions on religious people have been the order of the day. Why the initial conflict between state and religion / churches did not continue up to this day, as has been the case in Mexico, remains uncertain. It could, perhaps, be ascribed to the inherent tolerance and phlegmatic attitude that typify the majority religion in Thailand, namely Buddhism.

Conclusion

Although Mexico and Thailand are geographically far apart, and as far as could be established, have had no relations, they seem to have struggled with much the same set of problems regarding the provision of RE in their schools. The comparison suggested that distinguishing between the following four stages of state-church relations with regard to RE could help us understand (inter)religious tolerance: state-church tension and disagreement, state-church mistrust, state-church truce, and recognising the need for religious tolerance.

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