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Education for a Sustainable Future

Education plays an important role in building the national character and persona individuals, societies and nations. In the Arab world, the educational system, as in any other part of the world, was and is still greatly influenced by political and social challenges and realities.

While the Arab world is predominantly Muslim, the central part of it, the areas now represented by Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and Sudan, is uniquely different because of the presence of indigenous Christianity that has played and still plays an important and significant role in shaping its history, culture and traditions. While they have this in common, according to the study on “Christianity in text books of countries with an Islamic Tradition” there is no unified image of Christianity and other groups in the educational systems of these countries, though there are shared tendencies towards biases and discriminations in varying degrees. This is of course the natural outcome of many reasons, including the fact that the methodology and approach of the study does not fully take the following factors into consideration:

1. The differences in the developmental processes of the educational systems in these countries
2. International, regional and local political realities and circumstances
3. Social and economic structures of these communities
4. The standing and contribution of Christians in the respective societies

While there are many similarities that permit us to look into these countries as a homogenous group and study therefore the issue from a unified perspective, the fact is that this issues needs to be addressed at a sub cultural level within these societies. Although they all face similar challenges and circumstances, the reality is that these countries are a group in geographical terms only when it comes to this particular issue, making it very difficult to make general comparisons under these circumstances.

In Jordan, the Christian community is an important, active and integral part of the society and the contribution and influence of Christians in Jordan has surpassed their numerical presence. This is also reflected in the different studies related to the image and standing of Christians in Jordan. While this does not mean there are no problems and biases at all, it can be surmised that in comparison to other countries, the situation in Jordan is more favourable.

While the study of images of different communities in educational systems, be it Christians in Islamic countries for this study, or Muslims in the west for other studies, is very important for the long-term health of relationships within societies, and in the on-going process of dialogue and interaction of cultures and civilizations, what is a more important issue is the quality and methodology of the education system in general.

Taken from that perspective, it is not surprising that there is under or misrepresentation of Christianity in the textbooks of Arab countries, since there is a general lack of emphasis in these educational systems on diversity of thought and expression of individualised opinion. According to the Summary Report of the Council of 100 Leaders on West-Islamic World Dialogue and in particular on the issue of Education and the Other, children need to understand how to think critically, creatively and challengingly and to be open to new ideas. The report also points to the fact that there needs to be a balance brought forth by the arts and drama to nurture habits of mind and thinking along with self-awareness and self-criticism. These changes, coupled with an emphasis on values as a core element and on embracing differences and plurality and the appreciation of diversity, will bring about a deeper and more transformative change in the attitudes and thought processes of societies.
