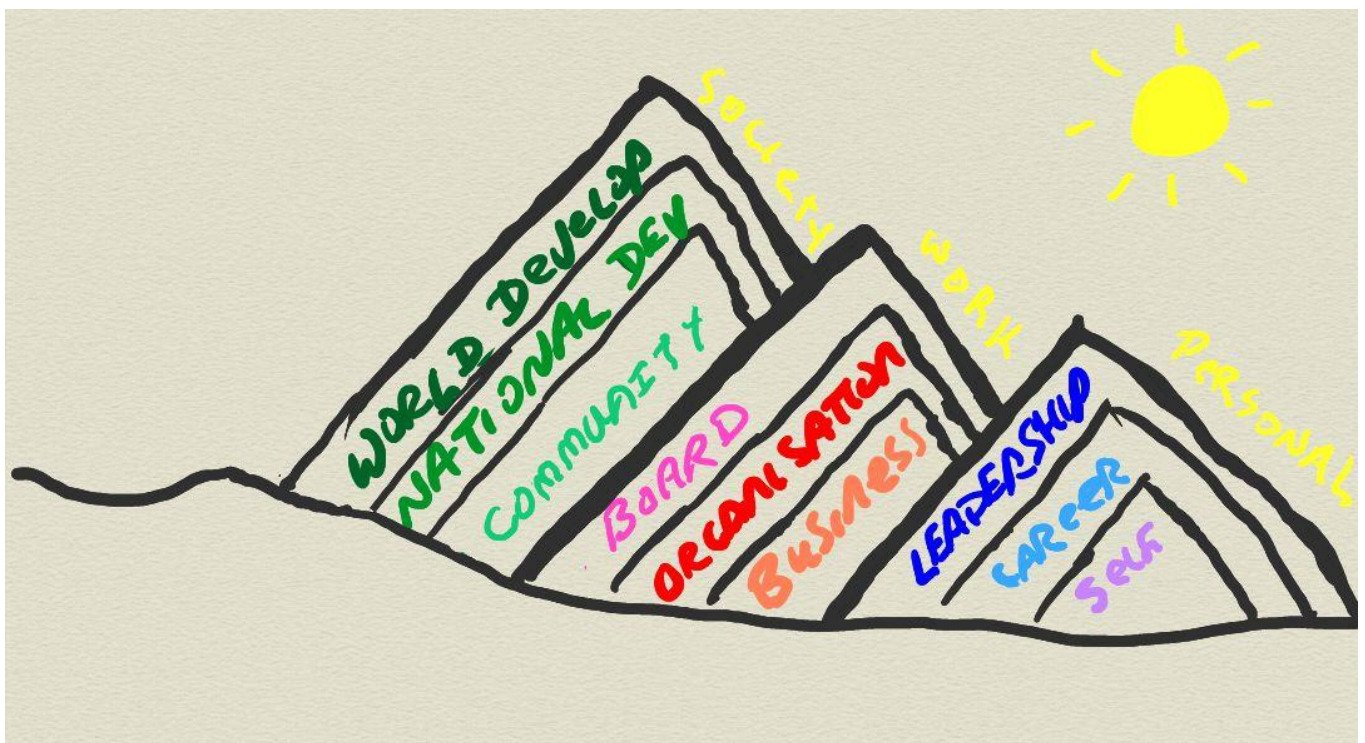


Cultural Hurdles, Religious & Spiritual Education, Countering Violent Extremism

February 2016, Hong Kong

By Peter Nixon, author of *Dialogue Gap*, "one of the best titles penned this century" - South China Morning Post.



We climb several mountains during our lifetime. As the drawing above indicates all of these "development mountains" start with self. Self-development begins with the ability to calm the mind to the point of presence from where you can observe, recognise and learn from what is happening within and around you.

Religious and spiritual education, whether formal or informal, always include some aspect of slowing down and reconnecting with oneself from which point your presence enables you to connect with God, the Spirit or emptiness, depending on your tradition. This stillness leads to feelings of calm serenity and happiness. Religions and spiritual traditions recommend their followers to slow and connect weekly, daily, even 4-5 times per day, often at the rising and setting of the sun, to enable followers to live in accordance with the laws or scriptures offered by tradition's founders or prophets as ways to overcome life's challenges and succeed on a regular basis from birth through death.

Religions typically suggest their laws or scriptures to be transmitted by God through man and to be absolute. In historic times when the world's population lived in separate spheres around the world, religious and spiritual traditions including food, dress, personal grooming and behaviour, enabled people to recognise followers and non-followers. To reinforce tradition, scriptures and morals espoused by religious or spiritual tradition non-believers or heretics are considered sinners or enemies of the faith and worthy of rejection or even death although some opportunity is open to compassion and eventual conversion of these people which believers might consider as lost souls.

The advent of the internet combined with global migration and the explosive growth in world population now means that religious and spiritual followers have neighbours of different traditions living on their doorsteps, close enough to prove or disprove some of the traditions, scriptures and morals of their particular faith. Nowadays it is easy to witness first-hand or via the internet people behaving contrary to your beliefs and traditions who are seemingly immensely more successful and happy than you causing people to question their own beliefs, behaviours, values and morals.

There are three inevitable outcomes of having the world's religious and spiritual traditions living on each other's doorsteps.

1. **The disaffected** are drifting away from their religious and spiritual traditions and reducing the amount of time spent focusing on prayer, church, temples, mosques etc. Organised religions in some parts of the world are seeing dramatic drops in the number of adherents leading to inevitable closing of churches etc. Some of the disaffected are rejecting their religious or spiritual traditions based on the perceived negative behaviours of their leaders and fellow parishioners now or in the past.
2. **The seekers** are becoming curious and interested in learning more about other religious and spiritual traditions hoping to find the contentment they feel lacking in the tradition of their birth. The significant adoption of Eastern traditions by people in the Western world is indication of this movement. Another indication of this change is the growing respect for indigenous traditions around the world but in particular in the Americas where they were almost brought to extinction through colonisation.
3. **The fundamentalists** are fighting to insist their way is the right way and other traditions should be rejected to prevent attrition, invigorate followers and attract new adherents. Conservative and fundamentalist behaviours are making headlines in all major religions notably in America's religious right, Islam's terror campaigns, India's Hindu fundamentalism, Israel's orthodox vs secular disputes and the plight of the Rohingya (Muslim people fleeing Buddhist countries).

So can religious and spiritual education help counter the violent extremism gripping the world today? Given the three trends outlined above, the fact that the number of people considering themselves religious adherents is now the majority of humanity and growing worldwide and the fact people of different religious and spiritual traditions live and work side by side, the only way we can reduce the violence gripping the world today is through education.

Educators around the world must help people better understand the underlying reasons for their own religious and spiritual traditions. Violence was never meant as a goal of any religious or spiritual tradition and fundamentalists espousing violence are misinterpreting their own traditions either through ignorance or corruption.

Where people of different faiths and traditions assemble, e.g. most schools, universities and places of work today, education and training should respectfully introduce these religions and spiritual traditions as well. Religious and spiritual education must position the behaviours, beliefs, values and morals which they espouse in the context of today's world taking into account the reality of change over the thousands of years since the founding of these religions and traditions.

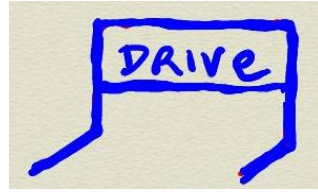
If religious and spiritual education is to be effective at reducing violent extremism it has to take into account the cultural differences amongst people today. Now that we all live and work together the religious and cultural differences that used to enable us to recognise who was with us and who was against us have less importance today. In their place I offer these cultural hurdles as 21st century markers differentiating people.



The pace and nature of life and work today causes us to lose the mindfulness from which all goodness, learning and insights arise. Religious and spiritual traditions that teach mindfulness and enable people to reconnect with their presence daily are more successful attracting adherents and enabling their connectedness and serenity in today's 24/7 always on world. Only on the basis of mindfulness can the traditions, values and beliefs espoused by religious and spiritual prophets be taught and understood.



Religious and spiritual traditions compete today with personal and corporate missions some of which have far more attraction and resources for the people involved. Religious and spiritual education must accommodate the power of these competing missions which can be equally and some might argue more effective than religious and spiritual traditions, at saving the world and the people in it. One need only look at the fast growing social enterprises, NGO's and educational institutions that are improving the living conditions, health and careers of millions of people worldwide.



Psychology, psychiatry and brain research provides a basis for understanding why people do things therefore religious and spiritual education must accommodate this knowledge and the recognition that a lot of violence today has less to do with religious differences and more to do with the actual and perceived inequality facing the world in terms of food, wealth, health and opportunity. Research suggests the rich – poor divide has never been bigger than today and this gap has appeared just when the internet allows people to see the divide like never before.



Another aspect of the world today is that we are communicating more than ever before. This mostly digital communication is often replacing face to face dialogue and thereby reducing our ability to dialogue and converse when needed, like when accommodating religious and spiritual differences. We are increasingly challenged to speak and listen to people with views different than our own. I call this gap between our diminishing dialogue skills and our need for dialogue to overcome problems like violent extremism as Dialogue Gap and I outline the extensive research into Dialogue Gap in my book of the same name.

If religious and spiritual education is to be at all successful in reducing violent extremism it will have to take into account our decreasing ability and willingness to dialogue with people having differing views to our own. As we lose the ability to dialogue, conflict is increasing and tolerance is going out the window. As a result education aimed at reducing violent extremism must include basic education in how to have a conversation, the behaviours of good dialogue and the variety of methods available to dialogue leaders wanting to engage conflict parties.



Another cultural hurdle differentiating people and groups today is their willingness to partner with individuals and groups with differing views and behaviours. Not partnering has become more of an option in our richer and safer world of today but partnering clearly helps teams, companies and governments to succeed. Examples today include public – private partnerships for infrastructure development in emerging markets and scientific breakthroughs arising from multi-disciplinary teams. If for example the Sunni and Shia traditions are to put an end to their

centuries of conflict they will first need to learn to work together but this culturally seems a lot harder than what we find for example in Silicon Valley where entrepreneurs are teaming up to change the world in ways far greater than religions and spiritual traditions.



Some individuals and groups seem more interested in accumulating all the wealth possible during their lifetimes while other cultures seem more focused on living sustainably with the smallest footprint possible. If we perceive our role as that of trustee instead of consumer then our actions are driven not by ownership and consumption but by that of a guardian, protecting and preserving that which is given to us to manage during our lifetime for future generations.

If we are to counter violent extremism we need to consider that people and groups don't value trusteeship equally. This difference is the source of conflict for example regarding the recent destruction of historic temples and artefacts by religious extremists. Similarly some people are exhausting the ocean's resources, not with a view of the future, but on the basis that the fish are ours for the taking. Similarly some believe correcting the proportion of believers to non-believers is more important than preserving the lives of the non-believers.



Another cultural hurdle differentiating the success of individuals and groups today is their willingness to engage, accommodate and build on diverse views and behaviours. People insisting on sameness, be it the same religion, dress, gender or behaviours are losing out to people and groups open to the potential and opportunities arising from diverse work groups, companies and governments. At the individual level you need only consider the success and happiness of people living in diverse communities today. Isolated individuals tend to be those closed to the diversity of the society in which they live.

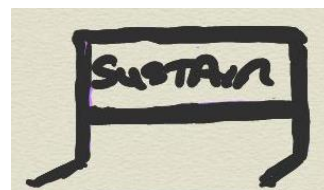
At the corporate or city level we simply need consider the talent flowing into or out of these places. Consider for example the mass migration towards Europe and away from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and parts of Africa. Societies open to diversity are winning and those closed to diversity are losing. An important part of diversity in religious and spiritual traditions is the changes previously described which result in the disaffected, seekers and fundamentalists. If we are to counter violent extremism we must promote the value of accommodating diversity.



Fear is an important cultural difference. At one end of the spectrum we have reckless people and groups willing to risk everything in favour of their goal. At the other end of the spectrum we have people with very low risk tolerance who prefer little if any change and seldom if ever stick their heads out to say what they think or act different from the norm.

Countering violent extremism must take into account the reality of people's differing levels of risk tolerance. Asking the fearsome to move away from the group will never succeed. Likewise getting violent extremists to take highly visible risks, often losing their lives while doing so, engages more risk takers to follow and convinces the risk averse to fall in line and not rock the boat. The same was seen with dissidents in Nazi Germany in the 1930's and 1940's and can be seen in communist countries today.

Educating people to counter violent extremism must take into account peoples' risk tolerance. Success arises from a balance between recklessness and total risk aversion. Responding to change effectively involves risk and change is a constant. Migrants fleeing Syria weighed their risk in staying in Syria with the risk of dying at sea enroute to Europe. Successful education in countering violent extremism needs to give confidence to the risk averse and stress the dangers to the reckless.



The final cultural hurdle I see differentiating people and groups today is their willingness to sustain development over time through rights, justice, performance management and succession planning. There are too many individuals and groups that put their own interests ahead of sustainability either through selfishness, corruption or some tainted view of the future.

Successfully countering violent extremism needs to take into account the reality that some leaders disregard rights and justice and take a short term view putting themselves and their group ahead of others. They are the same people who hijack the meaning of religious texts to justify their behaviour and ask others to do the same.

If we are to sustain human life on earth as our population swells and we increasingly share our table with people of different religious and spiritual traditions, we need to learn how to respect each other's rights and live in a just way. The original prophets understood rights and justice

and sustaining human life. Effective education in countering violent extremism must address differing views on sustainability because the protection of one life means the protection of all.

Peter Nixon is author of *Dialogue Gap* and *Negotiation-Mastering Business in Asia*. He is a graduate of the TBFF-McGill Programme on Religious Education & Countering Violent Extremism. Peter is Canadian and splits his time between Hong Kong and Montreal. He can be reached at Peter.Nixon@PotentialDialogue.com

