

The Challenges of Globalization to Religious Education

Some Experiences and Reflections from Asia

by Hope S. Antone¹

Introduction

Just as the good news affects people differently depending on their socio-economic-political situation, so the phenomenon of globalization also affects different groups of people according to their social locations. In Asia, different groups of people have tried to understand, analyze and critique globalization. These analyses point to the fact that globalization is not really a new phenomenon but that it has evolved through time. Some Asian thinkers trace the beginnings of globalization to the period of conquest and colonization. Thus, globalization is known in Asia as a form of re-colonization or neo-colonialism.

Asian analysts have also pointed to the fact that globalization has both positive and negative effects on people. Among the positive effects are the breakthroughs in science and technology, advanced health facilities, better networking and sharing of information, and higher standard of living for some sections of society. The negative effects include the consumerist-materialist lifestyle, inequitable accumulation of wealth, monopoly, waste of scarce resources, ecological degradation, unfair trade relations, widening gap between the rich and poor of society, and increasing indebtedness of the poor countries.

Moreover, Asian analysts have pointed to the fact that while globalization is easily seen as an economic issue, it is also a socio-political, religious-cultural and spiritual issue. For as some theologians have said, globalization has brought to the fore a new religion: the Market. Or, as others say, it is not so much a new religion but the old worship of Mammon in another form.²

Having returned to Asia and now working with the ecumenical movement, I have had the opportunities to learn what many Asians are thinking about globalization from their respective social locations – as youth and students, urban-rural workers, development workers, women, church workers, academics, and social activists. I have also learned of what some leaders from the other faith traditions are thinking and doing about globalization.

My current research interest involves listening to these different Asian voices and trying to glean from them some challenges for my work in Religious Education through the two ecumenical organizations I belong to. I believe that since religion itself (and this is so true of Christianity especially where Asia is concerned) is both a tool or agent and content of globalization, religious educators need to be equipped with countering the negative effects of globalization and sharing

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² Leonora M. Briones, "Life in the Age of Globalization: Economic Threats and Possibilities," in *CTC Bulletin* 16.1 (November 1999), p.42.

the positive effects of the same. Religious Education also needs to be truly *Religious Education* – i.e., nurturing people’s commitment within their respective faith traditions as well as enabling an openness to share and learn with those of other traditions. In such a plural region as Asia, it is becoming increasingly clear that the different religions must work together in order to deal with the impact of globalization.

Manifestations of Globalization in Asia

If we think of globalization according to some word-based definitions, it seems a very normal, even desirable thing in the world. For what is wrong with the process of turning the world into a “global village”? In many parts of Asia, a village means a closely-knit community characterized by neighborliness, sharing, and togetherness through thick and thin. That was what many people in Asia were made to believe about globalization: that it is the process of “uniting the world for the common good of all.”³ While this sounds very desirable and beneficial, this is really just one view of globalization, in fact, a romantic view of it. There are many other views of globalization and these are based on what people are thinking or how people are experiencing globalization.

For Governments --

“Globalization is good because it facilitates the flow of much needed capital from the developed countries”⁴ into the poor Third World countries. If there is more capital and investments, there would be more businesses, and hence, more employment opportunities for the people. Capital, especially foreign capital, would surely pump up the ailing economy of many Asian countries.

For the rich Capitalist --

Globalization is like “a magic wand which can eliminate poverty from Asia,” where developing countries are “badly in need of capital, science and technology, in order to realize economic growth... shake off the shackles of poverty and provide quality of life to all people.”⁵ Aside from the influx of capital, advances in communication and transportation technology help make international links faster and more efficient.⁶

As social analysts however have seen, the removal or reduction of trade restrictions across national boundaries have only served the rich, powerful, developed countries who still hold massive purchasing power which they use to their greatest commercial advantage. Relaxing of controls has only benefited these powerful countries and inevitably led to the loss of control for national governments in the developing countries.

³ “Globalization” in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, eds. Virginia Fabella and R. S. Sugirtharajah (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 91.

⁴ Jetti A. Oliver, “Recolonization, Globalization and the Role of the Church” in *Globalization: A Challenge to the Church*, eds. P. Jegadish Gandhi and George Cheriyan (ACISCA: India, 1998), 4.

⁵ Oliver, 4.

⁶ “What is Globalisation?” in *Indepth* (London: Council for World Mission, July 2001), p. 2.

For Activists and Workers with People (peasant farmers, fisherfolk, Indigenous people, laborers, women) --

Basing on the effects of globalization on the majority common people, activists and workers with people have come to the following conclusion:

Economically, globalization creates wants but does not satisfy the needs of the majority of poor people. It thrives on uncontrollable speculative financial capital by nation-states and even international agencies. It widens the unemployment problem. It stimulates dispersal of the production process under the centralized control of corporate owners and technocrat-managers. Socially, globalization divides the people, explodes the ethnic and cultural values and breeds corruptive practices. Environmentally, it is exhausting non-replicable natural resources and warming the earth... Included in the fall-out of globalization are the dominance of private capitalists, concentration of capital and power, tax evasion by TNCs and the fragmentation of the oppressed and the working class.⁷

This is why for many church people in Asia who are committed to serve the poorest of the poor, there is a need to regard the romantic definitions by Asian governments and foreign and local capitalists with the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” This hermeneutics of suspicion is based on the analyses of the coalition of environmentalists, anti-poverty campaigners, trade unionists and anti-capitalist groups who have concluded that globalization really means a new colonialism that manifests itself through *economic domination*, *cultural aggression*, and *political imperialism*.⁸ In addition to this unholy trinity is the effect of globalization on the environment – *a real ecological threat*.

Globalization is *economic domination* because it aims at the integration of the economies of the world to the so-called liberal capitalist market economy which is controlled by the rich countries of the world. Dictated by these powerful countries, the economy of many developing countries is made *borderless* as they are forced to open themselves to the free play of the market, but always at the expense of their own consumer and labor sectors. A clear example of this relationship is the presence of transnational corporations in many Asian countries that have come to take advantage of our cheap materials and cheap labor. They easily get purchasing rights to many Asian countries' resources, build their factories, offer our hungry people jobs, and then make so much money which is of course channeled back to their home countries. Ironically, most of the poor Asian countries who host these transnational corporations and offer cheap resources and labor end up being increasingly indebted to these rich countries' money-lending institutions, especially the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. How ironic that while these TNCs come to our countries with the promise of a better life for our people, they really end up

⁷ Tissa Balasuriya, “Recolonization and Debt Crisis” in *Globalization: A Challenge to the Church*, eds. P. Jegadish Gandhi and George Cheriyan (ACISCA: India, 1998), 9.

⁸ J. B. Banawiratma, “Responding to Globalization and Debt from a Religious Perspective,” a paper presented at the seminar on Freedom from Debt Campaign Training, organized by the Christian Conference of Asia in Chiang Mai, Thailand, Dec. 1999. Quoted in “Some Asian Women’s Responses to Globalisation,” by Hope S. Antone, *In God’s Image* 20.1 (March 2001), pp. 20-26.

enriching themselves while the masses of people from the host countries become poorer and our governments more and more indebted to them!

Globalization is *cultural aggression* because in its attempt to propagate a monoculture, it has no respect for the uniqueness of peoples' cultures, especially the indigenous people's cultures⁹ and their natural habitat. The growing homogenization of culture, customs and values has reduced diversity. The traditional cultures of Asian peoples are being confronted with outside values and ways of working. As Asian peoples open themselves to the world and become part of the global village, their own cultures are being turned into a mere cultural showcase for the "entertainment" of their visitors. Likewise, their habitat is also turned into a miniature "developed country," a replica of the visitors' home countries, complete with foreign looking resorts, sports complexes, hotels, as well as foreign food chains to meet their comfort "needs". Yet, this is all at the expense of the local people's values, lifestyles and natural environment. This is cultural aggression because it spreads a notion that the foreign culture is superior to the local cultures.

Globalization is *political imperialism* because it boils down to the unjust power relations between the have and the have-nots among the countries of the world and among the rich and poor sectors within individual nations of the world. With the rules of the market being biased against the poor, globalization has not really improved the life of the poor but has in fact excluded them from the system. It has also spawned cutthroat competition that reduces human beings to economic animals who are "under constant threat of losing their livelihoods, unless they become more and more efficient in production."¹⁰ And so the cycle continues wherein those who have power or access to those in power take advantage of and exploit or totally disregard those who have none at all. Under globalization, the giant global corporations and the global financial system from the developing countries rule the world. Meanwhile, the governments of the developing countries end up having no control over their internal economic policies and the movements of international capital, and having less capacity to ensure and protect their people's jobs and salaries.¹¹ Under globalization, decisions are made at centers of power away from where the costs are paid and where the consequences are felt and have to be dealt with.¹²

Globalization also poses a serious *ecological threat*, resulting from over-exploitation of natural resources and nature. Under the banner of progress, development, and modernization, nature has been plundered; forests are continuously disappearing; land, water, and air are being poisoned by chemicals and wastes. All these result from an economic system and development model which

⁹ Mary John Mananzan, "Jubilee in the Wake of Globalisation - from an Asian Woman's Perspective," *In God's Image*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2000, p. 2.

¹⁰ Lourdes J. Custodio, "Towards the Formation of Christian Values Today," in *FABC Papers*, No. 92n (January 2000), pp. 12-13. FABC is the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences of the Roman Catholic Church.

¹¹ George Cheriyan, "Globalization – A Conspiracy of the Rich Against the Poor," in *Globalization: A Challenge to the Church*, eds. P. Jegadish Gandhi and George Cheriyan (ACISCA: India, 1998), pp. 67-68.

¹² Cheriyan, 69.

regard nature as a non-living thing rather than a living system, and humans as superior to nature rather than part of nature.¹³

Impact of Globalization on the Religious/Spiritual Life of the People

Globalization is real in our individual and corporate lives. Whether we like it or not, whether we are conscious of it or not, whether we are benefiting from it or not, we are actual participants of this process of globalization that has gone on for a long time now.

Although globalization has very much to do with the dominant economic system, it is not just an economic issue. It also impacts the religious or spiritual life of the people; hence, it is very much a spiritual issue.¹⁴ For like any religion, globalization has put up its own god, named Profit. It has its own priests and pastors – the transnational corporations and the conniving governments and local capitalists. It has its own places of worship – the shopping malls, fast-food chains, tourist resorts, etc. It has its own evangelists – the mass media, information superhighway, and advertising agencies. And it has its own icons – the trademarks and brand names of goods and food.

However, many of our Asian peoples, including some churches, do not see globalization as a problem. Hence, for them, the *response is one of bliss and contentment* in being a part of the "borderless world" or the "global village" that has been made possible through internet links, ecumenical travel, and ecumenical networking. They even recognize globalization as having made it possible for Christianity to return to and take root in Asia. As such, they also believe that globalization can be a means to *globalize Christianity* further in order to fulfill Christ's Great Commission in such a plural region as Asia. And so there are talks that if people do not come to church, why not let the church go to the people through the media, the internet, and the cell phones?

Another response is at the opposite pole of globalization. If globalization is seen as "a process which brings rapid and unsettling change into traditional societies," then one response takes the form of *fundamentalism* or the "return to the old stable way of life."¹⁵ Fundamentalism is a common response by those who feel threatened by the invasion of foreign values and lifestyles, the disintegration of native culture, and the seeming chaos and meaninglessness resulting from all this. It is basically a "reactionary emotional movement" among those who are experiencing rapid disintegration of their cultures, their traditions, their beliefs and ways of life.¹⁶

¹³ Cheriyan, 67.

¹⁴ Hope S. Antone, "Some Asian Women's Responses to Globalisation," *In God's Image* 20.1 (March 2001), pp. 20-26.

¹⁵ John Locke, S.J., "The Call to a Renewed Church in Asia and the Challenge of Religious Fundamentalism" in *FABC Papers* No. 92m (January 2000), p. 1. FABC is the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences of the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁶ Locke, p. 7.

Consequently, fundamentalism is expressed in different ways: intentional re-education or indoctrination of the members of the group, a strong intolerance of or enmity towards others outside the group or those deemed to be disloyal to the group, or even violence against those who are seen as threat to the group. This is true of religious fundamentalism, which does not only occur in non-Christian religions but also within some Christian groups.

So the impact of globalization upon the religious or spiritual life of the people is very real. Instead of dismissing the so-called fundamentalists, some ecumenical Asian Christians are now trying to understand what their concerns really are. One very clear concern, for example, is the need to challenge the values of the present culture, which are threatening the social fabric of society. In fact, these values are the very ones embodied in and promoted by the ways of transnational corporations and the global lending institutions -- consumerism, individualism, materialism, competitiveness, indebtedness, and profit-oriented mentality.

Challenges of Globalization for Religious Education

Undoubtedly, globalization poses many challenges for people in all sectors of society. Even those in power and privileged positions cannot deny the heavy negative impact of globalization that have been exposed by the victims and critics of globalization. But there is so much at stake that the UNDP Report has to straddle between admitting something is wrong and upholding what globalization stands for. According to its report,¹⁷ the challenge of globalization in the new century is not to stop the expansion of global markets. It is to find the rules and institutions for stronger governance in local, national, regional and global levels. This is not only to preserve the advantages of global markets and competition, but also to provide enough space for human, community and environmental resources to ensure that globalization works for people – not just for profits. Hence, the UNDP's hope is for globalization with:

- Ethics – less violation of human rights, not more.
- Equity – less disparity within and between nations, not more.
- Inclusion – less marginalization of people and countries, not more.
- Human security – less instability of societies and less vulnerability of people, not more.
- Sustainability – less environmental destruction, not more.
- Development – less poverty and deprivation, not more.

Yet, many nagging questions remain unanswered. How do we ensure that globalization will become humanized and begin to have a built-in "conscience" for ethics, equity, inclusion, human security, sustainability and genuine development? How do we begin to repair the damage that has been done to many peoples, nations, and also to nature? And in more theological terms: can serving God and serving mammon (read market or profit) really go together?

John Locke, a Catholic priest who is based in Asia, has put these questions a little differently:

Are such values as consumerism and unrestricted individualism Gospel values? Does the so-called free trade of the present global market, which seems to further widen the gap

¹⁷ Quoted by Ahn Jae Woong in an unpublished report to the Christian Conference of Asia Executive Committee at its June 30-July1, 2001 meeting in Hong Kong.

between the rich and poor, build up the Reign of God in our world? In the present age of rapid change and uncertainty, how does the Gospel provide us with the security necessary to exercise the freedom of the Children of God, and to join hands with people of other faiths and traditions to provide a better world?¹⁸

It is very clear that the task of countering the negative impact of globalization calls for the participation of everyone -- the governments and the people of all the developed and developing countries; the civil society movement; the people's movement; and the different faith communities. In Asia we are realizing that the challenges of globalization are making us more open to each other, regardless of faith commitment, ideological persuasion, religious background, and what have you. We realize that globalization has made us all victims and therefore we share the same fate. How then could we continue to hold enmity towards each other because of our doctrinal or creedal differences?

We are also realizing that despite the seemingly irreconcilable differences that Asian religions have, there are in fact some basic affirmations that we really share. Asian Christians long for the reign of God, which is characterized by justice, compassion, healing, reconciliation, abundant life, and peace for all. Asian Buddhists speak of true happiness that is based not on the *tanha* or craving, which is at the root of globalization, but on a sense of contentment and simplicity, and of being interconnected with one's surroundings.¹⁹ Asian Muslims speak of their worldview of egalitarianism (*musawah*), social justice (*al adalah al ijtimaiyah*) and peace (*salam*).²⁰ Asian Hindus also speak of the interconnectedness of all beings in one cosmic reality, whose common search will wind up in "the same divine cosmotheandric mystery."²¹ Why then can't we join hands to do something about the negative impact of globalization? Why can't we use the wisdom nurtured in our respective faiths or religions to enrich our spiritual journeys toward our common vision?

Of course this is not to discount the fact that in many cases we do fall short of our visions or that we simply hold on to them as ideals even when our lives and practices often, if not always, reflect the opposite reality. We therefore need to remind each other of our blind spots, not to mock or destroy but to help awaken or enlighten each other. And then, moving a step further, we need to actively find ways of working and living together towards our common vision.

¹⁸ Locke, p. 15.

¹⁹ Pracha Hutunuwatr and Jane Rasbash, "Globalization from a Buddhist Perspective" in Review, Reflect, Renew: Building Sustainable Communities (ASYG, January 2000), pp. 24-30.

²⁰ "Globalization, Development and Liberation in the Third Millennium: An Islamic Perspective" by M. Habib Chirzin, unpublished paper presented at a meeting of the Urban Rural Mission strategic planning meeting of the Christian Conference of Asia in Chiangmai, Thailand, 2000.

²¹ Francis X. D'Sa, "Discovering a Common Horizon with the Hindu Traditions," in *Visioning New Life Together among Asian Religions*, proceedings of the Third Congress of Asian Theologians, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, August 5-11, 2001, pp. 61.

What do all these mean for Religious Educators? I think it means that Religious Educators have to be more than nurturers of the faith and transmitters of faith traditions. Religious Educators must also be *keen analysts* of social realities, even those that do not seem to be religious or spiritual in nature. We must put an end to our dichotomized outlook and affirm that life is whole; hence, whatever affects one aspect affects the whole.

It also means that Religious Educators must be *critical interpreters* of the truth and wisdom that are nurtured in our faiths/religions. We cannot simply pass on the teachings and practices of our elders without assessing whether any of these are in fact oppressive or discriminating to some people, or whether they are in keeping or not with the common vision. We also cannot just dwell on the idealism of our heritage without paying attention to the reality of our practiced faith.

Finally, it also means that Religious Educators have to be *firm advocates* of change, of liberation, and of transformation both within and without their respective faith communities. Conscious of the realities facing the people, and critical of what goes against the common vision, Religious Educators must advocate and agitate for social change and total transformation -- a much needed thing in this era of globalization. As a Hindu thinker has well put it, "...for a long time, religions kept fighting each other, allowing materialism to sneak in and colonize the hearts and minds of our peoples. The marriage between religion and materialism has bred religious fundamentalism, obscurantism and communal politics."²² The need of the hour then is to retrieve "religion as life" from "religion as establishment".²³ When isolated from the life of the people, religion becomes mere establishment with its abstract notions of what comprises religion and how its interests must be upheld. This type of religion is often very fixated, very comfortable with the way things are, and therefore rejects change. As way of life, religion is rooted in the concrete realities of the people and is concerned about the quality, dignity, and fulfillment of life, and the sanctity of the web of life. Consequently, Religious Education would function to nurture this way of life and living.

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²² Swami Agnivesh, "Visioning New Life Together Among Asian Religions: A Hindu Perspective," in *Visioning New Life Together among Asian Religions*, proceedings of the Third Congress of Asian Theologians, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, August 5-11, 2001, pp. 73.

²³ Agnivesh, p. 75.

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