Religious Education in a New Age of Globalization: The Case in Hong Kong

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Introduction

The tragedy of September 11, 2001 has shaken many of us in re-thinking about our fundamental beliefs and understandings of 'Globalization' and what Religious Educators can do in this critical time. It is indeed a significant topic of our conference to reflect on 'RE in this new age of Globalization' and I am here to address this topic from my Hong Kong experience.

The concept of Globalization has long been used in the past few centuries yet its meanings are changing in different times and as varied as its users. It has once been used by missionaries in the seventeenth century and later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as motto for the expansion of the Christian empire and for the evangelization of the whole world. It has also been used to signify the "compression of the world" and "the greater consciousness of the world as a whole, in terms of economy and social cultures".(Walters, 1995:1; Robertson, 1995:8).

In regard to the proper task of religious education for today, it depends very much on how the term 'globalization' is conceived. If globalization was understood to be preaching the gospel to the world, the task of religious educators would simply be to train preachers of the Bible and to equip them for the work of evangelization. Yet, if the concept of globalization is meant more than the nurturing of faith and commitment, or be understood as the consciousness of the one world with many cultures and religions, then the task of religious educators may turn out to be one which aims at helping pupils to cope with life among people of different cultures and religious faiths.

The Case of Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a secular, pluralistic and open society. Since 1842, Hong Kong has become a British colony, with the portion of Kowloon Peninsula added to it in 1860 and the lease of New Territories for 99 years in 1898. Hence, the New Territories which formed more than 90% of the colonial land had to be returned to China in 1997. It was settled by the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 that the colony of Hong Kong would be handed over to China and become a Special Administrative Region of China when the lease ended in 1997. The return of sovereignty took place on July 1, 1997.

Being a British colony, Hong Kong was open to Western cultures and religions including Christianity. Yet, with over 90% of the Chinese population, the government of Hong Kong has learnt to respect Chinese culture and Chinese religions in the territory. Hong Kong has a variety of religions. Besides Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism, there are Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism and other folk religions too.(*Hong Kong 1998*, pp.312-321.) On matters of religious beliefs and practices, Hong Kong is an open and free market. Some significant features are worth noting here. In Hong Kong, there are government-subsidized schools run by the various religious traditions. These schools are closely located to one another and citizens of Hong Kong are free to choose whatever schools they like despite of their religious adherence. Also, there are individuals who claim to be Confucian, yet they may appear occasionally on certain Buddhist or Taoist festivals. Such behaviors are never condemned as betraying one's religion. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to have several religions represented in the same family. For instance, we may have a family which consists of a father who is a Confucian, a mother who is a devout Buddhist, and the three children who may be a Roman Catholic, a Baptist and a Methodist or one who belongs to 'Falungong' cult. Moreover, all family members may have to attend a Taoist funeral service together when one of their grandparents or a close relative dies. In short, people of Hong Kong have been learning how to respect and live in harmony with people of different faiths, and most of religions in Hong

Kong have been blossoming amidst the pluralistic context in Hong Kong.

It should be noted that since Britain was a Christian country and the Church of England had a significant role to play in social and political affairs in the United Kingdom, the Anglican Church in Hong Kong did share similar, though lesser rights in the colony. Consequently, even though Christianity has never been enjoying full monopoly on the religious market of Hong Kong, Christian churches including Roman Catholics were given important privileges and much greater shares of social resources than other religions. Yet, since 1960s the government of Hong Kong has adopted a more lenient policy towards other non-Christian religions and invited organizations of various religious traditions to join partnerships as government's re-distributors in the provision of education and social services in Hong Kong.

Since the return of the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China, the 'One Country, Two Systems' policy was adopted and Hong Kong was ruled by the new government (known as the Hong Kong SAR government), according to the Basic Law which was a mini-constitution drafted between China and the United Kingdom. There was no change of religious policy in Hong Kong, as promised by the Basic Law (Articles 32 & 141). However, as the political situation has been changed from the rule of a British colonial government which favored Christianity to the rule of Hong Kong SAR government which does not have favoritism to any religions, Christianity who has once been enjoying the princely status is now being treated fairly and equally as other religious traditions. Moreover, alongside with its de-colonialization policy, the Hong Kong SAR government had made the Birthday of Buddha a public holiday, to be a counterbalance act as Christmas holiday and others had been given to the Christians. Hence, the religions in Hong Kong are sharing the spirit of 'let the blossoming of the hundred flowers be'.(Ng, 1989:394-395)

The Challenges to Religious Educators in Hong Kong

As David Ng has said, globalization brings great challenges to religious educators. In Hong Kong, the greatest challenge for religious educators is how to handle religion(s) in a fair and objective way. No matter what religion one is after or is teaching, it must not be presented as the one and only one religion, but rather as one among the many religions in the world. Globalization signifies not only the awareness of the world as one entity, but also the consciousness of one world with many cultures and many religions. The existence of religious pluralism confronts one with varied truth-claims in which none of them holds a privileged status.(Ng, 1989:395-396)

Regarding the teaching of religious education, there are two problems related here, namely the problems of indoctrination and of commitment. The first problem is the problem of indoctrination. It has been widely accepted that indoctrination should have no place in modern education, neither could a teacher impose any religious beliefs upon his/her pupils. How then can religious educators be saved from the charge of indoctrination? There are three elements underlying the accusation of indoctrination:

a. That, in the process of teaching, disputatious views (including religious beliefs) are imposed upon pupils as irrefutable facts;
b. That the pupils cannot exercise their reflective power to contemplate other possible views; and
c. That the pupils are not free to exercise their autonomy to accept or reject what is presented to them.(Cox, 1983:101-110; White, 1982:125-129)

In order to be kept safe from the charge of indoctrination, religious educators should always remind themselves:

i) not to impose upon their pupils religious beliefs as though they were irrefutable facts;
ii) to be self-critical, be prepared to accept challenges and criticism from different viewpoints; and

iii) to respect the pupils' right to think for themselves and make up their own minds.

More positively, religious educators should fully recognize education as their 'first order activities'.(Grimmitt, 1981:49) They should ensure themselves that the subject is taught in an educationally accepted way. There may still be some teachers who are convicted of their beliefs as 'absolute truth' and want to impose them upon the pupils. Yet, the more they are concerned about education, the more they would be convinced of the value of respecting the autonomy of their pupils and would keep themselves from the vices of indoctrination.

The second problem is the problem of commitment. If religious educators are not allowed to impose religious beliefs upon their pupils, how then should they handle their religious commitments. Many educators today still hold the view that personal religious commitment should not be acceptable in education for it may destroy the values of being 'objective', 'open' and 'neutral' in the process of education. There is probably a danger there when one's commitment is not handled properly. I would, however, argue that personal commitment if handled properly can rather serve as a helpful tool in religious education. Firstly, it should be noted that 'openness' does not exclude commitment. A committed person can still be an 'open-minded' person. Secondly, since religious education necessarily involves commitment, there is no point in withholding one's commitment and pretending to be 'neutral'. Edward Hulme was right when he argued against 'neutrality in education', saying:

> "If what is loosely called the uncommitted (i.e. open-minded) teacher is permitted a freedom to work that is denied to some of his colleagues then there is a real danger that he will be allowed to proselytize on behalf of his own scepticism, which would be no less repugnant because it is fashionable."(Hulme, 1979:21)

Indeed, it is only when one's personal commitment is declared then can one really be open for educational dialogue

with people of different commitments. Personal commitment, if kept open, can become a helpful tool in religious education. Hulme suggests that it can serve as 'a primary source material' which would provide greater chances for the pupils to exercise critical assessment. Personal commitment should then be seen as a dialectical way, i.e. as one 'which is firm but provisional or partial'.(ibid.:88) It is provisional or partial if it is subject to modification in the light of new experiences. Commitment of this kind is educationally acceptable as it is open to new challenges and criticisms from people of other commitments. For even if the religious educator has his/her own commitment and is holding certain religious truths, this would not stop him/her from allowing his/her pupils to contemplate the possibility of alternate views and to make their own personal choices.

One of the fundamental concerns of contemporary education is to help pupils to develop their rational thinking and to exercise autonomous choices. If religious education is to be educationally acceptable, it should definitely share the same concern. Especially when pupils are confronted with different truth-claims in the society, it is essential for proper religious education to enable them to make personal judgements critically and responsibly, as it is so demanded in the case of Hong Kong.

Concluding Remarks

In this new age of 'Globalization', the term signifies the consciousness of the world as one which embraces a variety of different cultures and religions. A few centuries ago, it was this awareness of one whole world that brought forth in the countries of Europe and America the motivation for missionary movements and the expansion of the West. It has been a legacy of the missionaries, notably described by the motto: 'To evangelize the whole world in this generation', Therefore, the early missionaries wanted to conquer China by the gospel of Christ and to wipe off pagan cultures by the Christian culture. There has been a notorious book published in 1922, entitled: 'The Christian Occupation of China' which meant to be a comprehensive survey and review of the work of missionaries in China.(Staffer M.T., 1922) Yet the title was so intriguing that

it has brought to the attention of many Chinese intellectuals and resulted in the Anti-foreign and Anti-Christian Movements in the 1920s in China. Now, the missionaries have learnt the lesson from their over-the-centuries' work in China that they could no longer uphold the supremacy of Christianity over other Asian religions which were as pagan or heathen and they have to pay due respect the Chinese culture as they have respected the Western cultures.

This is indeed a very good lesson, not only for the missionaries of early days but also for our religious educators of today. The experiences of China are shared by other Third World countries and that is why there often exists the anti-globalization movements, or specifically anti-western movements alongside with the process of globalization in Eastern or Asian countries even today. They are reminding us of the same message that 'Globalization' could by no means be a tool for cultural aggression nor political imperialism. 'Globalization' should signify not only the awareness of the world as one entity, but also the consciousness of one world with many cultures and many religions. Hence, religious educators today have a more urgent task, not only to lead pupils into mere understanding of their own religious faith and traditions, but also to equip them for life in a global context, learning to respect and appreciate faith of other religious traditions, in order that they may live harmoniously with peoples of various religious faith and ideologies.(Ng, 1998:183-185) Their task is, by all means, to lead pupils into a spiritual journey of life, in which the pupils are not guided to the same destination but 'to travel with a different view'.(Peters, 1964:47)