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## PRESIDENTIAL REFLECTION: TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES<sup>1</sup>

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This past weekend the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education (APRRE) has celebrated *with* The Religious Education Association (REA) one-hundred years of modern religious education. It has been a conversation among practitioners and researchers: between students and the professorate; between those who work in local congregations and parishes, and those who work in academe; between young and old; between women and men. Conversation has taken place across national boundaries, cultures, faith traditions, gender, and race. In this time of transition, at the beginning of the third millennium, we have revisited the founding vision of the REA described by then President William Rainey Harper at the REA's inaugural meeting in February 1903 as "The Scope and Purpose of the New Organization" (REACH 2003, 3).

The hymn for this 100th Anniversary Celebration of the REA—written by Brian Wren, with music by Susan Heafield—speaks of "Each Seeking Faith." As people of faith, committed to the field of religious education, we are learning to appreciate the religious search and journeys of those who belong to religious traditions and cultures with which we are not familiar. Experiences such as the tragic events of September 11, 2001 in the United States and the witness of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu have made us aware of how the forces of globalization affect religion and its practice. Beyond the pluralism, diversity, and multiculturalism that we each encounter in our lives and work, a new and different global religious conversation has been born around the world. Each of us knows that we have been called to move closer to those of other faiths—to move beyond mere tolerance to acceptance and trust. We suspect, if we do not *know* already, that those we sometimes think of as "other" have much to teach us. We are called to become better-informed both intellectually and relationally.

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<sup>1</sup>Delivered to the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education, Sunday, November 8, 2003.

A couple of years ago I was part of an informal conversation in a group of APRRE and REA members at our common biennial meeting. We shared our faith stories. I was struck by the manner in which each person's search for personal and religious integrity had led them to make significant changes in their religious affiliation or commitment. In that group, each person's involvement in the academic field of religious education was somehow linked to their own ongoing desire to live their faith with integrity. This was not a unique group of our members. One of the striking features of whom we are as a Guild is that our faith lives and academic commitments are interrelated. In Brian Wren's words, "Each Seeking Faith" is true both at the personal and professional level in our lives. In a very real sense, as a profession, we can say that "We've come this far by faith, faith seeking understanding."

In preparation for this meeting four questions were asked: What does it mean to be religiously literate today? How have the assumptions about the distinctiveness of religions changed since the beginning of the 20th century? What values or truths do our faith traditions have to offer for the good of all humanity? How do we as religious educators situate ourselves as we move into the third millennium? These questions were framed by those preparing the program for this joint meeting of the REA and APRRE. Propelled by the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001 and the consequent impact on the global community, we knew that we were invited to a new religious literacy. Ensuing events in Afghanistan and Iraq served to emphasize this. Each of us had new questions, particularly about the role of religious education in our present world. We hoped that the wisdom of this assembly would bring light to bear on the role of our field for the future. Our conversation this weekend has born such fruit.

For the past two years I have served as the academic dean of Canada's only university college for women. Brescia University College is a small Liberal Arts college of some 950 students and 60-plus faculty members. It is a foundation of the Ursuline Religious of the Chatham Union, and therefore a Catholic college. As is the tradition of Catholic colleges around the world, the student body is diverse. For Canada this means that the student body reflects the multicultural and multi-religious mosaic of our country.

On September 11 two years ago, the first students to seek out Brescia's chaplain were Muslim. Many of these young women wear *hijab*—their head scarves and long dresses serve as a reminder to us of the stresses they face in their daily lives. The source of this distress is not their religious identity or clothing but rather their worry about

immediate family members in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and other parts of the Middle East. Interestingly, these young women are very open about their desire to have a better understanding of Christianity, which they perceive to be the dominant faith in Canada. Some are pursuing degrees in Religious Studies. Mariam, a member of the student council, has introduced an annual Ramadan dinner for the Brescia community. She and her mother prepare food for some two-hundred people. For some of us, the irony of a women's college having to wait while the men present go off to another room to pray alone before the meal is not lost on us. But the Ramadan dinner is above all an educational event. In 2002, the Ramadan dinner program included a Muslim professor and a Catholic professor each explaining the role of fasting in the respective traditions.

As a religious educator, I am very much aware of the impact of the hospitality of the Muslim community on our total college community. Two years ago this would not have happened. What is most significant for me is *who it is that is doing the religious education*? This student initiative is fostering new understanding and new relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. A second Ramadan dinner is planned for later this fall. Mariam has included the Jewish community and is calling it a "Cross Faith Dinner." The student descriptor for the event is itself quite revealing. Who are the new agents of transformation in your milieu?

## THE NEW GLOBAL REALITY

While preparing for this meeting, I was invited to facilitate a workshop on *Faith and Culture* in Kampala, Uganda. The workshop was held this past summer. Some 30 women from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda participated. The preparation and the process of the workshop, itself, were an experience of our new global reality. In this time of transition, I found it to be an occasion of renewal—personally, religiously, and professionally—and an experience of *faith seeking understanding*. Unexpected boundaries emerged.

## THE CONTEXT

The East African women who invited me to Uganda are members of the International Grail—a women's movement, rooted in the

Catholic Church, and found in some 20 countries around the world. As one might suspect from its name, central to the impetus of Grail is what one might call the spiritual quest or search. Today the “mission” that results from this quest takes shape according to the region of the world in which Grail women live. Three concerns are generally found: response to the needs of women and children, care of the Earth, and a commitment to the principles of social justice.

The idea of a workshop on theology and spirituality first emerged during a conversation at an international meeting in the Netherlands in 2001. The meeting occurred a little over a year after the Ugandan massacres that made headlines around the world. People purportedly on retreat had simply disappeared while away from their villages. Some of the Ugandan Grail members spoke of the influences of neo-Pentecostalism and other charismatic phenomena in their country and their desire to study “faith and culture.”

Among the conversationalists in the Netherlands was another person of European ancestry whose doctoral studies had focused on religion, culture, and the media. When she learned of my invitation to Uganda to conduct the workshop on faith and culture, she offered to travel there earlier in the year to assist the African team with the planning. Communication with Uganda was carried out internationally by shared e-mail. A long silence following her offer ensued. Eventually the Ugandan planning team responded. They cited every official document the International Grail has to indicate why it was not necessary for her to come to assist them. It was within our documents, they said, for each country or region of the International Grail to take responsibility for the planning of their own events.

About a week later the Ugandan team e-mailed me to ask what we should do in the workshop. My response was immediate. I indicated that I was coming *to be with* and *to learn with* the workshop participants. I also stated that they knew that I was a good facilitator and that we would work out the program together at the time.

## REFLECTION

In some ways I was stunned. I had not yet left Canada for East Africa and already issues of economic power, educational background, as well as latent racism and ethnocentrism were at play. None of this was intentional. Yet there was no one in East Africa who could fly half

way around the world to assist with the planning of a workshop in the Americas, Europe, or Australia. Among the Ugandan Grail members some have tertiary education or training. None hold a doctoral degree. One Grail woman in the East Africa region holds two master's degrees but such higher education is rare.

The more pressing concern for me was the unintentional ethnocentrism reflected in the offer and the failure to see the necessity of those whose concerns had given rise to the request for the workshop being the ones to set the agenda. The topic was *faith and culture*. In sub-Saharan Africa, as in many regions of the world, it is more appropriate to speak of *religio-culture*—for Africa's peoples do not distinguish between culture and religion. Religious practice is integral to and expressed through culture. Thus, the workshop's theme of *faith and culture* was not to be an abstract intellectual exercise. It was *their* lives as individuals and as a community that the women wished to address.

## HOSPITALITY

The initial reason for my being in Uganda was to attend the 21st General Assembly of the International Federation of Catholic Universities. IFCU met at Entebbe. Very early into that conference I received word that the organizer for the Ugandan workshop wished to meet with me at my hotel to go over the program prepared by the Ugandan team. Travel to see me involved some three hours one way. Teopista brought to our meeting two things—*The African Bible* (Zinkuratire and Colacrai 2003) and a timetable for the workshop. Following the official liturgical opening on a Sunday the schedule outlined activities for five days—beginning each morning at 6:30 a.m. and ending at 10:00 p.m.

Through her gift Teopista set the context for me: The African perspective was to be the point of departure and reference for the Faith and Culture Workshop.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the commitment of the Grail group was most evident. Our days would be full. I also knew that I was a privileged guest. The Bible was a gift of *welcome*. The journey to Entebbe had been made by Teopista in great part to welcome me to

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<sup>2</sup>The *African Bible* is an amazing resource with exegetical notes and illustrations reflective of pan-African cultures and customs. Its translation is that of *The New American Bible*.

Uganda. Culturally, it was important for us to meet in person (Healey and Sybertz 1996, 168–202.)

### THE WORKSHOP

We began the workshop by developing a working understanding of what we mean when we speak of theology, spirituality, and inculturation. This was followed by a group process that allowed areas of concern and questions for the week to emerge. Two East African Grail women assisted with the workshop facilitation. A priest from the Rubaga Cathedral, the former Rector of the Gaba Seminary, attended some sessions acting as a resource person. His theological perspective and pastoral understanding of the implications of inculturation were liberating and profoundly respectful of the lived experience of the female participants.

Each day included time for personal prayer, morning and evening communal prayer, as well as daily Mass. The Grail women worked in self-selected teams to prepare these events. On occasion, at the time of the liturgy, the priest was informed that the readings had been changed for the day to better reflect what we had been doing in the workshop.

An early development in the workshop was the group's affirmation of their Catholic identity. Having been drawn to the Grail through the Catholic Church, the Church is an integral part of their lives centered around daily participation in the Eucharist. One realized that in their affirmation of their Catholic identity *the question of faith and culture* for these women also had to do with their seeking how best to deal with Western culture. Being part of an international movement that has become ecumenical and interfaith—and in the United States and parts of Europe even post-Christian, in part—is a particular challenge for these women who consider themselves to be part of a young Church. One must also be cognizant of the importance of one's ancestors in this part of the world.

This affirmation of Catholic identity was not a naive or uninformed stance. Participants spoke of having siblings and relatives who were Muslim; others had family members who had been drawn to neo-Pentecostal groups. As women rooted in Christian faith, they sought a fuller understanding of how best to address the poverty, violence, evil, and the HIV/Aids crises in their countries *through the lens of an informed Catholic faith and conscience*. For me, it was an experience of an earlier time when people looked to life within their community

of religious affiliation for how best to situate themselves in the world. (My own “ancestors in faith” were Anabaptist and left Switzerland in 1542, arriving in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1699.)

No topic was out of bounds. Open and honest conversation about sexuality, including homosexual and lesbian life styles, took place. The national newspapers carried stories of both the Province of Ontario’s recognition of same-sex marriages and the Vatican’s condemnation of such unions. The *culture of silence* about women’s plight in sub-Saharan Africa, where extra-martial relationships have led to the rampant spread of HIV/Aids among women and children, was broken. I learned some of the coded language when I asked what “frustrations from men” meant. It has to do with single women being harassed by men for sexual favors. At times a woman’s livelihood for her family is at stake.

The language of the workshop was English. I was the only unilingual person present. All spoke the language “of their area” as well as Swahili and English. As the week progressed, different participants took me aside and explained what was not being openly expressed—an explanation for some of the conversations in the vernacular.

A recommendation arising from the workshop was that the participants would come together for a week next year to study Church history. The need to understand the history of the Church occurred repeatedly. The earliest missionaries to Uganda, both Anglican and Roman Catholic, were martyred. I was reminded, however, by one of the teachers in the group that the first Ugandan martyrs were Egyptian Muslims who had tried to convert and colonize the Buganda region of modern day Uganda prior to the arrival of Christianity. For these women, Church history includes Christianity’s engagement with traditional African beliefs as well as other religious traditions. One’s baptismal name, whether it is from scripture or that of one of the Saints, is revered as that of one’s ancestor in faith.

## REFLECTION

Why was this experience a source of challenge and renewal? I have to say that *it was the witness of the communal search for religious literacy* by a lay group of women who had used their limited financial resources and scarce free time to come together to better understand their faith and how best to apply it to the exigencies of life. These

women make their homes in three different African nations but in reality belong to many different ethnic groups within those countries. Amid the ethnic tensions in their own countries, these East African women, whose countries are former colonies, have identified boundaries that those they know from around the world unwittingly raise in their relationships with them. Wherever we reside in the world today, we, too, are more than likely living some aspect of our lives cross-culturally.

This weekend we have spoken of the need for multicultural and multireligious education as well as of the need for sensitivity to ethnic diversity. What of the cross-cultural experiences in *our* everyday lives—be it where we live, shop or work? How can we become more intentional about transcending the boundaries that divide us? Issues of economic power, educational background, linguistic difference, sexuality, food and dietary differences are just the tip of the iceberg. They are, however, the realities of all our lives in the new global community.

How do we address such issues in our practice and research as religious educators and pastoral theologians? Each of these boundaries has a fundamental impact on relationship. And if faith seeking understanding is not for the benefit of better loving our sisters and brothers, then we have missed the message of *Shalom*.

In the West, the 20th century brought one kind of new religious literacy enabling ecumenism and interfaith dialogue to become a reality, particularly among Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews. This dialogue is reflected in the history of the REA over the past one-hundred years. The rule of thumb for participating in such activity is that one must be both informed about one's own religious tradition and open to change. That is, willing to learn from the other and to correct one's distorted understandings. In our respective denominations we have seen how religious education has become focused within. For what purpose? Does such teaching welcome the stranger (Matlins and Magida 2003)? How do we engage the dilemma of denominationally centric religious instruction, which so limits the wider work of religious education, as practitioners and researchers?

The East African women with whom I spent a week in Kampala sought understanding with a view to having a value system that would enable them to address the societal problems around them. They look to their faith system for daily nurture and sustenance. Through the practice of an informed faith they seek a lens through which to discern an appropriate response to the needs of their societies and the wider world.



As leaders in their communities, they have broken the culture of silence that has so often existed around issues of sexuality. They spoke of the need to attend to the physical and sexual abuse of children that sometimes results when families move from the villages in search of employment and end up living in poverty and cramped quarters in the sprawling city slums. Members of our Guild (English and D'Souza, 2003, 33–34) have begun to address issues such as bullying, violence, and abuse in their research and writing.

One of the most courageous theological educators in North America today is Rebecca Ann Parker, president of Star King School for Ministry at the Graduate Theological Union. In her book with Rita Nakashima Brock (2001), *Proverbs of Ashes*, she reflects theologically on what occurred with her United Methodist congregation when she, as minister, broke the culture of silence on questions of abuse. Through a series of sermons she raised the congregation's awareness of the theological distortions that had led many to bury the pain of their experiences.

As professors and practitioners, as people of faith, committed to the work of religious education we, too, need to identify and speak to the issues of pain and suffering where we work and live. The boundaries we are invited to transcend to make this possible are both within and without—latent ethnocentrism and racism, sexism and homophobia, educational and economic power, Eurocentricism—both theological and linguistic.

In the joint reorganization of the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education and the Religious Education Association, let us discern how best to use our shared wisdom as a community to bring light to the world around us.

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