

**Human Nature, Visual Culture, and the Age of Globalization:
Challenges to the Life of Faith
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1. Introductory Issues

Postmodern theology and philosophy have expanded the discussion of human nature and have challenged the concept of human nature as enduring and unchanging. Instead, postmodernism has suggested that the social arena, understood in its widest context, is the stage upon which human nature is molded and developed. Postmodern thought understands human nature in terms of subjectivity, and the development and realization of subjectivity has given rise to different schools of thought and produced a prolific literature. This literature, mainly in the areas of sociology and cultural studies, has introduced a diversity of scholarship devoted to many aspects of the everyday and the ordinary which only a generation ago would be considered to be lowbrow and unworthy of the accolade of scholarship. Postmodernism and postmodernity often get blamed for many of the shifts of contemporary society and culture, but one can say, and without attributing any blame, that the diversity of sociological and cultural analysis has given new meaning to what is considered worthy of scholarship and learning.

One of the benefits of the analysis of the everyday and the ordinary is that that intentionality and purpose of life, ordinary and everyday life, is given fresh prominence and engages a wider audience at a level of reflection that is close to their experience. One of the more important areas of research and interest is in culture. The debate over the distinctions between high and low culture, particularly who it is who makes these distinctions and against what criteria, has led to a more fluid notion of culture; culture now has porous borders. Today, culture can range from Mozart, Shakespeare, and Renaissance Paintings to tattoos, music videos, and new age spirituality. This has widened the discussion but it has also made it difficult to identify the humanizing aspects or categories of culture. There are many reasons for this, one among them being contemporary culture's understanding of human nature—even though it may not use that precise term—has undergone a significant change. No doubt diversity makes for interesting dialogue, but it can also make it difficult to identify the first-principles of community and culture.

The title of this paper brings together three distinct areas of interest, each which can claim its own significant corpus of scholarship. Human nature, visual culture, and globalization are, however, three domains that influence and challenge one another. The critics of globalization make their defense precisely because they see it as an encroachment upon the dignity of persons and indigenous cultures. For their part, advocates of an enduring and unchanging human nature see the emphasis on developing of one's subjectivity as an assault on the given of human nature, as it is borne out in classical philosophy and theology. Finally, visual culture suggests that today the choices and options of life are the very stuff of constructing one's subjectivity, thus making the conviction of the unchanging character of human nature to be meaningless. All this has an impact upon the life of faith, and for no other

reason than faith is lived in the concrete dimensions of space and time and within the boundaries of a particular culture.

This paper is divided into the following sections. The first will make some brief reflections about globalization. The second section will deal briefly with the notion of culture and visual culture. The third section will offer some general comments on human nature. And the fourth and final section will reflect upon the challenges to faith in the context of globalization, culture, and human nature.

2. Some Reflections on Globalization

Globalization has received a great deal of attention, particularly in the last five years. This attention has come in the form of scholarship and research as well as protests and violence against international economic and trade summits. By and large, both the scholarship and the protests take a decidedly economic and material approach. The definitions of globalization, however, also point to the complexity of this economic dimension as it influences the other aspects of life. Some say that globalization is comprised of six dimensions, mostly economical: national economy, trader and investment; velocity of international capital markets; the complexity of technology; blurring of distinctions of information sources because of electronic integration; the digitalization of the economy; and space-time compression of globe events and trends. (See Kobrin 1999, 135-136) Others see “globalization less as a term describing objective reality about the creation of a new social order or civilizational possibility than as an ideology of predatory capitalism, ...[experienced] as a kind of siege.” (Stackhouse 2000, 4-5) One author in particular has written about globalization in a popular journalistic style: Thomas L. Friedman. His book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, presents a good overview of globalization. Friedman makes it clear early on in his work that globalization is not just economic nor is it a passing phase. In fact, he says that it has come to replace the Cold War as the universal umbrella. (Friedman 2000, 7) Second, globalization is characterized by a single word: the web. (Friedman 2000, 8) Its success is dependent upon the web. Third, the driving idea behind globalization is the free market economy. And fourth, globalization has its own dominant culture: “Americanization—from Big Macs to iMacs to Mickey Mouse.” (Friedman, 2000, 9)

There is little doubt that the economic dimension of globalization dominates the discussion, and some maintain that this dominance has come at the price of ignoring the cultural and social aspects of globalization. (Robertson, 2000, 55) The realization that globalization is housed more in “historical contingency” rather than in a “teleology” (Stackhouse, 2000, 9) raises questions that are central to the cultural and social dimensions of human life. I have chosen one definition of globalization that captures some dimensions of this term:

[Globalization is] a set of processes by which the world is rapidly being integrated into one economic space via increased international trade, the internationalization of production and financial markets, the internationalization of a commodity culture promoted by an increasingly networked global telecommunications system. (Stromquist & Monkman, 2000, 4)

The influence of globalization upon the social and cultural dimensions of life may be attributed to a number of factors; for now, two are of particular importance: the influence of instant communication and the dominant Western influence, particularly through the English language. Globalization and the expanding network of instant worldwide communication seem to have evolved together, and each appears to be dependent upon the other. For its part, the English language dominates global communications. "...not only is English becoming the global language, but there has developed a tendency, particularly among elites and middle classes all over the world, to adopt what might be termed an 'American way of life'." (Stromquist & Monkman, 2000, 7) While attention has been paid to cultural differences, it does seem like the structures and approaches to cultural distinctiveness are largely Western. Immigration in Western Europe and North America has also given birth to multiculturalism, which, by and large, is not embraced in most countries of the world, this despite their cultural and ethnic diversity. So while David Tracy is right when he says that today there are "many centers" of culture, and no longer a "Western cultural center with margins," (Tracy, 2000, 248-249) nonetheless the West dominates culture, a culture of the masses, a popular culture, and one that is heavily dependent upon the images of mass media and instant worldwide communications.

Instant communications has enriched life, brought the world closer together, and enables swift global attention when needed. The porous boundaries of global popular culture, however, communicated through television, the Internet, fashions, and other visual mediums, have provided myriad possibilities of creating and developing one's identity, personality, and subjectivity. While most of the citizens of the world spend their waking hours struggling to find means to live through that day, there is a not-so-small elite, mainly the young, who are the objects of this popular global culture. The rapid flow of mass media images have brought with it infinite possibilities of living one's life, but it has also contributed to a cultural "instability in the production of subjectivities." (Coleman, 2000, 58) The construction of modern subjectivity, therefore, is largely influenced by this global culture which is dependent more upon historical and economic contingency rather than upon teleology, and is often devoid of the principles of charity, social justice, and the love of one's neighbor. The struggles surrounding globalization, as recently witnessed in the streets of Seattle, Quebec City, and Genoa appear to concentrate upon narrow economic policies. In some ways, however, it also shows the breakdown of national identities, and this breakdown, as one author maintains, has led to the development of "new identities of hybridity." (Yon, 2000, 15)

A global popular visual culture is aimed at the young, and in many ways this culture slips out of the control of parents, teachers, and religious leaders, and this happens for one main reason: popular culture is almost entirely visual. This visual dominance is not limited to television and the Internet—over which some control may be exerted—but is experienced in all the dimensions of popular culture. The world of education is equally influenced by the power of the image. Education has increasingly been connected to the economy, and globalization challenges the traditional concept of education through its exclusive dominance of the power of sight. Secondly, while the sciences and other technical disciplines demand precision and exact data, doubt and revision are part of the methodology of the human sciences, which may lead to a further confusion of the tentativeness of all of life.

In conclusion, globalization should be understood not as a singular but as a plural: globalizations. While it is dominated by a global economy, there are cultural, educational, sociological, and communication dimensions to globalization. These dimensions are intricately bound to one another, but they also jostle for dominance. In all this, popular culture emerges as another aspect of globalization, and this culture depends upon the power of the image. I now turn to that discussion.

3. Culture and Visual Culture

The distinctions between high and low culture was/is secured upon an education of the liberal arts and the humanities. The questioning of these distinctions, however, has contributed to a widened understanding of culture. Describing culture, therefore, as that body of signs, symbols, literature, music, art, religion, etc., that houses the many facets of the human spirit is now seen to exclude the many more individual and particular expressions of culture, for example a culture of music videos or a culture of fashions. Cultural theory views the classical understanding of culture as static and elitist; the more expanded understanding is seen to be accommodating and inclusive. Once again, contemporary sociology and cultural studies have taken the lead in broadening the discussion of culture, and the titles of books and articles in these areas reveal the widened and almost borderless quality of the understanding of culture.

Amidst the various discussions about culture, about high and low culture, and who it is that can make such distinctions, emerges another phenomena of culture: mass culture. Mass culture is what it claims: a culture of the masses, where consumption becomes the governing principle. My interest lies in popular culture, whose governing principle is vision. Almost all of popular culture is visual and Music Television, in this 20th Year of its arrival, has led this revolution. In the world of popular culture, one which is aimed at the young and one that seeks to keep the young young for as long as possible, the sense of sight dominates the other four senses; the sense of sound gets the second prize.

In his book *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, Dominic Strinati outlines the various movements that have contributed to the present day understanding of popular culture. This cultural point has been achieved on the backs of a number of theories, such as feminism, semiology, structuralism, and postmodernism. (Strinati, 1995) While Strinati pays close attention to the various components of popular culture and its various manifestations, one cannot help but notice that popular culture is unhinged from any tradition and it floats freely on the waves of consumption, fashion, trend, and desire. Unlike the cultural artifacts and the manifestations of previous generations which were linked to tradition understood in the context of successive historical epochs, visual popular culture simply shops around for images and then pastes them together in a collage whose efficacy and efficiency are judged by consumption, fashion, trend, and desire. Some call this power of the visual the “hegemony of vision,” (See Levin 1993) and certainly much of the literature in the field of popular culture attests to this fact.

There is a tendency to talk about a new world culture, with both positive and negative interpretations. The positive side is that in the ‘global village,’ where one can see events within minutes on the television screen, a consensus can emerge that is more aware of injustices. The negative side is that precisely this image world of

television can be a source of manipulation, trivialization, and , and ultimately an anti-culture of commercial superficiality. (Gallagher, 1998, 3)

The sense of sight is one among five senses, and it operates in relationship to the other four. There is no doubt that in human beings sight dominates as the principle sense, but its integration with the others senses enables human unity. Classical philosophy and theology spoke about the powers of the soul, and one of the powers of the soul that is closely linked to the five senses is the imagination. The life of the imagination is sophisticated, and it depends upon memory, the five senses, and many other aspects that contribute towards the unity of the human person. However, a single image is more powerful than a thousand words, and a single image can enter into the mind and the soul and influence the imagination in lasting manner. The success of the arts and literature depends upon the versatility of the imagination to convert the objects of the five senses into images and ideas. Indeed, so powerful is the faculty of imagination that sentences and words themselves can trigger the power of the imagination. Popular culture is keenly aware of the power of the imagination and the influence of images upon the imagination. It exercises this influence not through sophisticated analysis of images, or dwelling upon images, or developing a critical stance about images, quite the contrary. The success of popular culture is largely dependent upon the fleeting quality of images, their here-today-gone-tomorrow quality as well as their patchwork characteristic.

In this context, I wish to make three points with regard to the influence of sight in popular culture. The first is that popular visual culture is global in nature and instantaneous in its outreach. Through television and the Internet, popular culture can reach across the globe selling a new fashion, marketing a new song, or promoting a new lifestyle. It is driven by consumption and desire and is based upon the raw economic principles of buying and selling goods. While parents have some control over some aspects of their children's lives, the ubiquitous quality of popular visual culture prevents parents from exercising a more pervasive control. Outside the West, this popular visual culture is undoubtedly available to a small percentage of the world's young, particularly in economically poor countries. Today, for the youth and the young who can enjoy and access popular culture, there is more in common with the people their age in New Delhi, Istanbul, and Beijing than there is among young people in their own countries. The second point is that popular visual culture is proceeding to construct identities and subjectivities in a manner previously unimagined. Choices and lifestyles are flashed across the globe in an instant, and there is no corresponding critical analysis of such images. Furthermore, while the young are open to critical discussion, the complexity of these images is so disproportionate to the mental and moral stages of the young that it makes critical discussion difficult, if not impossible. An image taken out of context carries its own power and weight and its ability to influence; placing this image back within its proper context and analyzing it from that locus is a much more difficult task. Growing into one's personhood, into one's identity, is no doubt a lifelong process, but it is particularly delicate in the lives of the young who are impressionable and can be easily manipulated. The third point is that popular culture is aimed at prolonging youth and adolescence for as long as possible. Indeed, some would maintain that adolescence now stretches into to mid to late twenties. Again this prolonging of the stage of youth appears

to be motivated by one principle alone: economic, but it raises enormous questions about the stages of mental and moral growth and the consequences of interrupting this movement. In all of this, the power and the place of memory and memorization has been eclipsed by a twenty-four culture that never sleeps—what one author calls the “Disney-round the-clock homogenization (Friedman, 2000, 23)—and a culture that stores all the images one needs within the serpentine labyrinth of the Internet.

Popular visual culture is both ubiquitous and presents culture only as entertainment, and instant entertainment at that. In such a context, the power of words, the power of memory, the collected wisdom of the past, the experience of one’s elders, religious tradition, etc., all come to be suspect and, more specially, are seen to interfere with the purpose of entertainment. Indeed, the power of the visual has changed the notion of entertainment itself. Today entertainment is primarily understood as that which can be seen, and the seeing need not be encumbered with stability or permanence. Thus, for example, the stability and permanence of Beethoven’s symphonies contradict all the principles of entertainment of popular culture: repetition, order and harmony, and, above all else, they are almost exclusively dependent upon the sense of sound. This limited understanding of entertainment comes at the expense of how cultures and societies have understood the depth and breadth of culture, and particularly how cultural entertainment is understood. Popular culture then is almost entirely visual.

4. Human Nature

The topic of human nature is philosophically and theologically complex. For their part, anthropology and the other social science have also contributed to the discussion and have enriched our understanding of human nature. My reflections, therefore, will be understandably brief and sketchy.

Human nature may be generally described as that foundation that provides human unity. Human nature is manifested in a myriad ways, but it is always grounded in the unity of the human person. Some say that this human unity is based upon the primacy of the spiritual and incorruptible nature of the soul, without losing sight of the need for human community and fellowship that assist the actualization and the manifestation of the powers of the soul. (Wallace, 1977, 82 & 234) Others recognize the essential foundation of human nature, but they also recognize the role of the historical and the contingent upon the universal, and they define this relationship as “human nature and historicity.” (See Lonergan, 1974, 3-6) Still others would say that human nature is grounded in a *suppositum* or a subject in possession of an essence. (Maritain, 1948, 15) It seems to me, that a traditional Christian philosophical and theological approach would see no conflict between a universal theory of human nature on the one hand and the context of one’s time and history in influencing this human nature on the other. Human persons are a unity of spirit and flesh, a unity that is grounded in the materiality and the immateriality of the created order. In general terms, therefore, this traditional approach would see cultures and civilizations as the manifested fruit of the relationship between the universal nature that human beings share and the particularity of the manifestations of this nature as evidenced in local cultures and civilizations.

This traditional philosophical and theological approach sees human nature as an essence, as seeds sown deep in the human person that are germinated and flourish as a result of the powers of the soul, for example, the imagination, the intellect, and the will,

as well as moral, social, ethical, religious, and intellectual influences. Within such a school of thought, human nature is understood neither as a predestined stamp which simply forces itself to be realized in the human person nor is it the result only of societal and cultural influences over which, again, the person has no choice or freedom. Rather, in the Christian tradition, human nature is understood as the manifestation of that delicate interplay between the freedom of being created in the image and likeness of God and the influencing role of society and culture; the relationship between grace and nature. Such an understanding of human nature places prominent importance upon a number of interrelated factors. First, since human persons are created in the image and likeness of God, there is a primacy placed upon the spiritual dimension of the human person. Second, because human cultural and societal agencies are seen to be primarily for the enhancement of human persons, then human nature is dependent upon and molded by these other agencies as well. Third, human nature is never understood apart from the nature of sin and redemption. These two poles situate the human person and human nature is realized or diminished depending on the person's proximity to these poles. Fourth, the growth and actualization of human nature is encapsulated in the natural law: choose good and avoid evil. The natural law is seen as a "fixed standard" encompassing the plan of God as revealed in Revelation in relationship with all that is achieved through human reason. (Rice, 1993, 15)

The other side of the debate on human nature is carried out by the disciplines of cultural studies, sociology, feminism, and postmodernism. Some in these schools of thought would see the traditional understanding of human nature as static and confining, and often leading to hierarchical structures and categories. One of the implications of postmodernism is the "collapse of the credibility of the 'unitary subject' and one who knows [his or her] aims and desires and works towards their attainment through [an] instrumental rationality." (Kitwood, 1990, 3) Not only is there a crisis of identity of the individual subject, but some say that today there is a crisis of who constitutes the "we" in society. (Caughie, 1992, 298)

For its part, contemporary feminist thought views discussions of a universal human nature with suspicion. Some say that the celebration of diversity and cultural pluralism of today has been won through the suffering inflicted by the "homogenization of 'human nature,' which excluded...distinctions, [thus] feminists now insist that no one voice, no one anthropology should dominate." (Crysdale, 1994, 345) Some say that even within the field of feminist thought itself that it is impossible to universalize the experiences of women given their diversity of cultural and personal experiences. (Carr, 1998, 118) In general it may be said that feminist thought has expanded the understanding of knowing, particularly the different kinds of knowing. All of this has played a decisive role in shaping the understanding and perhaps even the manifestation of human nature.

In conclusion, these schools of thought have challenged the traditional understanding of human nature, particularly attempts to categorize human nature in precise terms and through focused definitions. The diversity of this discussion has pervaded the world of mass and popular culture. The construction of the self and the realization of many different, and often contradictory subjectivities, is made possible by the diversity of the discussion on human nature, particularly what constitutes human nature, and how it is realized.

5. Challenges to the Life of Faith

Faith has two dimensions: visible and invisible, and some Christian heresies have arisen by stressing one of these dimensions at the expense of the other. The Christian commandment of love of God and neighbor situate the internal and the external, or the visible and the invisible, dimensions of faith. The interaction between human nature, visual culture, and globalization have resulted in an epistemological shift where the very structures of knowledge and knowing have undergone a change. In such a situation, the knowledge gained through faith, indeed the possibility of knowledge gained through faith, faces a significant challenge.

The first challenge that I see is the change that has occurred in the relationship between human nature, culture, and education. Education presupposes a human nature of some kind, recognizing, of course, one's adherence to a particular philosophy of education. Education occurs in the context of a particular culture and tradition. For their part, culture and tradition are the pillars of education, but they also have the potential of imprisoning those they are meant to liberate. So education is broader than culture and tradition. Education can neither be only a vehicle for change (and even revolution) nor can it be a means to protect the status quo. Education lives in relationship and in tension with culture and tradition. It cannot do this, however, unless it is clear about the integral makeup of the student as a person. Among other factors, personhood grows and develops in the context of a particular culture and tradition, but it cannot be defined exclusively in the context of a particular culture and tradition. For its part, however, globalization, through mass media and instant communication, offers the young a single popular culture, one based upon consumption and desire. It is a culture that is not anxious to engage its audience in the deeper questions of life, except, for example, in flashing images of death, religion, poverty, etc., but without any accompanying discussion or analysis. Faith, in the context of institutional education, depends upon some understanding of human nature and the interaction of human persons with the created order. Given the ubiquitous nature of a popular culture, how do educators, particularly in confessional schools, deal with the reduction of human nature to the contingent and the present? There is no doubt that educators in confessional schools will need to keep in touch with the thinking and scholarship around the issue of human nature in an age of globalization. However, they will need to be clear in their minds as to how they evaluate trends and movements in relationship to their religious tradition. They will also need to have a clear understanding of the student as a human person, one created in the image and likeness of God and called to live in community and at a particular time in history.

The second challenge lies with the young being offered a unified popular culture, one based upon consumption and desire and unified by the sense of sight. In general, it might be agreed that the sense of sight plays a governing role that is quite different from an over-powering control that this sense seems to exert in popular culture. As said previously, the senses have a special relationship with the imagination, and for its part the life of faith also has a special relationship with the imagination. It may seem, therefore, given the general governing role of the sense of sight, that the life of faith would be enhanced in a culture that is so dependent upon vision. Faith, however, involves a kind of knowing, but it is a knowledge of things seen and practiced in the life of the believing community, but it is also a knowledge of things unseen and yet believed by the individual

and the believing community. I would like to suggest that the most powerful slogan of popular culture is 'seeing is believing;' if so, then there are challenges to the life of faith that were hitherto unknown. Previous definitions of culture were developed in relation to the whole person. Culture was understood as the manifestation of the human spirit at many levels, interacting with different kinds of knowledge, and asking and responding to a variety of questions. The dominance of vision in popular culture appears to upset the balance of the human person in interaction with all of reality, and an interaction at different levels. The religious believer is invited to live the life of faith at all levels of life, but there seems to be a significant challenge to faith when all these different levels of life are increasingly interpreted through vision. Institutional education whether confessional or secular depends upon more than just the power of vision. Indeed, the abstractive nature of the intellect is a case in point. Integrating theoretical knowledge depends upon this abstractive quality of the intellect. For its part, the life of faith also involves this power of abstraction, as is evidenced in learning the principles and creeds of one's particular faith. Educators cannot but be aware of the changes that are occurring in this global popular culture with regard to the dominance of vision. This dominance is changing the very concepts of understanding and knowledge, two key aspects of the life of faith.

The third challenge concerns the centrality of consumption and desire in popular culture. Now neither consumption nor desire are new to the human condition. Indeed civilizations, as distinct from cultures, have prospered by the growth of material consumption and the desire for power. What is new is that consumption and desire along with fashion and trend have become the determining factors of a popular global culture. Defining and expressing the complexity and variety of the human spirit through these four features is obviously problematic; chief among them is the reduction of the human spirit to material manifestations and expressions alone. The relationship between spirit and matter occupies a prominent place in the history of the religions of the world. While recognizing the materiality of the human condition—in the Christian tradition the person is a unity of matter and spirit—most religions call for a discernment in distinguishing how the material world is the locus of faith and justice. Religious traditions also teach about how the material world throws its cloak of allurements around culture and tradition. Defining culture therefore through consumption limits the possibilities of human engagement in the world and cripples the notion of culture as the manifestation of the diversity of the human spirit. The other aspect of this particular challenge concerns desire. Desire as religions show is a multi-faceted word, and like culture, it exists and relates to the human person at many levels. Ranging from the desire for God to the desire for pleasure, this word carries a moral, social, religious, intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic complexity. In the case of popular culture, the word desire seems to be prominent on two fronts in particular: all that is instantaneous and can be achieved immediately and everything that comes under the category of sexual passion and sexual drives. Consequently, popular culture is instantaneous and sexually charged. Being offered to the young and tempting the young to stay young for as long as possible, popular culture knows the powers of the sexual instincts and commercializes this power through the prominence of sexual images and sexual identities. For its part, faith and religious traditions too recognize the importance of desire, but they distinguish between good desires and evil ones, between desires that liberate the human spirit from those that

imprison it. Indeed, in some traditions Christian spirituality—like the Ignatian tradition—one is called to pray for the desire to love God and the desire to do and follow God's will. In religion, desire is richly charged as that power which gives one energy and passion for all of life, for choosing the good and the noble, for seeking what is true and good. Desire is, therefore, a word that expresses the human condition in all its depth and complexity. Reducing the dimensions of desire to the material and the physical, particularly the sexual, destabilizes the complexity of human unity. In traditional Christian philosophy of education, the educational institution educates the intellect or the mind and by implication the will and the heart as well. The education of the will, however, even though it is carried out indirectly, is of special importance. The place of desire in the education of the will, through religious, ethical, and moral education, is of paramount importance. Accordingly, what is the response of confessional education to the shift and uni-dimensional quality of desire in popular culture? Its students face this conception of desire in all the dimensions of popular culture. Students cannot simply suspend this notion of desire during their school hours only to find it reinstated by the media at the end of the school day. This is one dimension of the increasing tension between faith and culture.

And the fourth and final challenge that I see is the absence of teleology in popular culture, particularly in the context of a globalization. All monotheistic religions are governed by an inherent teleology. There are, undoubtedly, differences in how these religious traditions understand teleology, but it is present nonetheless. By being secured almost entirely upon historical and economic contingency, global popular culture does more than shift the focus of teleology; it appears, rather to reject the very notion. A culture without an accompanying and governing teleology raises questions about the very efficacy of that culture and the liberation of the human person from the contingencies of life. Teleology governs the question of purposive activity as well as functional activity. It could be said, of course, that popular culture does have a purpose and a function and it is entertainment. Furthermore, entertainment is offered and achieved through four means: consumption, fashion, trend, and desire. Consequently, the nature and scope of culture has been fundamentally transformed, and, in turn, this change has transformed how the human person is viewed and understood. Culture has generally been understood as all those manifestations that arise from the freedom of the human spirit, in interaction with the various levels of reality. Popular culture has narrowed the understanding of reality as well as the understanding of the human spirit. It must be said in defense of popular culture that entertainment has always been an important hallmark of culture, specially the celebratory aspect of culture. However, entertainment is surely only one aspect of culture.

Faith and belief depend upon teleology, both for the order and purpose of terrestrial existence as well as preparation for eternal life. A culture that is devoid of teleology and not interested in the questions of order, purpose, and goals, imprisons rather than liberates its adherents. The human person is a complex being, one who exists and interacts at many different levels. Accordingly, reducing the expression of the human spirit to entertainment alone reduces and limits the notion of culture. In the context of globalization, a teleology-less popular culture seems to run roughshod over indigenous cultures and seeks rather to cement over the distinguishing and unique features of local cultures. Its purpose is not necessarily sinister. Global popular culture is guided by the

basic economic goals of buying and selling and it achieves these goals by consumption, which in turn depends upon fashion, trend, and desire. Its limited focus, therefore, limits the human spirit. These limitations make a significant impression upon the life of faith.

6. Conclusion

Human nature, visual culture, and globalization are three distinct areas of research and interest. Contemporary sociology and cultural studies have provided a platform upon which these three fields of study can be brought into relationship. This relationship also has an impact upon the issues of faith and belief. Furthermore, they have enormous implications for education, both in and of themselves but also when they are brought together. Traditional education and educational theory have been challenged by the scholarship in the fields of sociology and cultural theory, particularly because these two fields have widened the educational arena. These challenges, however, are made in the context of popular culture and mass-culture and they are often devoid of some of the first principles that governed the more classical and modernist conceptions of culture. Educators and religious educators are becoming increasingly aware of the absence of these first principles.

Placing human nature, visual culture and globalization in conversation with one another leads to the realization that the scope and field of religious education has been widened; it must now attend to a whole host of interrelated issues. Christian religious educators have been widening their scope and interest and have been moving beyond curricular or catechetical interests alone. I believe that some of the relationships between globalization, human nature, and visual culture provide new and challenging areas that call for urgent Christian pedagogical attention.

The speed of the web and the infinite possibilities it provides is itself an enormous area deserving of urgent pedagogical attention. The web can be likened to a giant and hitherto unimagined encyclopedia that can provide information and images on just about anything that one can imagine. Indeed, in a very powerful way the web has moved beyond the categories of postmodernism and postmodernity and returned instead to the regulated categories of modernity and governed by the principles of order, and system, and direction. This change itself comes on the coattails of globalization and all that that movement entails. However, the apparent unity of the web is merely a technological reality rather than an epistemological, social, moral, or a religious unity. The ability to know about anything one desires and in no necessary relationship to anything else or any prior governing first principles of knowledge and learning is an enormous challenge to all educators, religious or secular.

For its part, religious education must now face and deal with a whole host of challenges in the life of faith and belief in the context of institutional knowledge and learning. The power of the image and of vision coupled with the place and influence of desire, consumption, and trend sets a new course for the very shape and interaction of human community. These categories have a deceptive either or quality about them, particularly in relationship to religious faith and belief. Either one opts for consumption, desire and trends or one chooses the more sedate and seemingly out of step and boring options and offerings of traditional religions. This in itself is a trap and I think the quickest way to lose the young at their most impressionable age. The offerings of popular culture are usually presented in this either or frame: either one opts for what is

the latest trend or fashion or one opts for religious choices seen to be obsolete and out of step with the world. In this regard, engaging the young to develop critical faculties through which they may measure and evaluate their culture is not going to be easy, but it is something that educators cannot shy away from.

The approach that the young and the not-so young are taking towards their faith should not be reduced to an alarmist cry of despair nor should it be dismissed as a trend that they will eventually grow out of. We know that is not the case. One thing, however, is sure. The young are intrigued and captivated when their elders—parents, educators, and specially their religious leaders—can engage with them about their culture and their choices and the challenges of their age. In this context, therefore, what, for example, does it mean to tell a young person today that God is the only one who can save them from sin and from death? What do sin and death mean in a popular culture where morality is relative and private and where death is kept as far away as possible, particularly when an ever extended adolescence appears to be the major and perhaps only paradigm for life?

If globalization has replaced the Cold War as the dominant frame of reference, than one can see why there are more and more people who correctly refuse to reduce this frame to economic policies and issues alone. Globalization has a leveling power, irrespective of local culture and practice. While it is true that it is grounded upon the simple economic principles of buying and selling, globalization has given rise to a way and manner of molding all of life well above and beyond economics. It achieves this leveling effect through the all pervasive power of the web, and this all pervasive power has enormous implications for education in general and religious education in particular. Simple principles that were taken for granted a generation ago are now open season. If everything is relative, and if human nature is constantly being constructed, and if vision is the only dominant sense, and if desire has a purely material and sexual quality to it then religious education faces challenges of a monumental proportion. In all this, the sanctity and holiness of the human person is what is important and must continue to be the focus of religious educators.

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