Global Citizenship: Issues in Ministry and Education

(A Plenary Presentation)

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Globalisation is not, of itself, a new phenomenon. Nor is the notion of global citizenship. As a child born in Britain in the 1930s I myself grew up with a clear awareness that one third of the countries of the globe were coloured red on all our maps – the Empire on which the sun never set and of which we were all citizens, although some clearly were more citizens than others. And the notion of internationalism, which the former colonial powers like to think of as their creation following the days of empire is not that recent either. That goes back at least to the 1920s with the more or less simultaneous foundations of the League of Nations and the corresponding Union of Soviet of Socialist Republics.

These secular world-wide movements were paralleled, if not preceded, by the creation of global religious institutions such as the Christian International Missionary Council, founded in1910, developing into the World Council of Churches in 1948 just as the League of Nations was being transformed into the United Nations. Nor should we overlook the emergence of international Zionism which, as Janick and Toulman (1973: 61) commented, "was yet another response to the problems of alienation in modern mass society which spread after World War One."

Many of these movements claimed to be based on high idealism and were seen by many to be highly beneficial to peace and prosperity. While in the various Soviet movements emanating from Russia religion became a victim of the greater internationalism in the West it remained at the core – a continuation of the largely Protestant missionary movements which had their origins back in the late eighteenth century and of the Roman Catholic movements which preceded them.

Not, of course, that globalisation should reallybe confused with internationalism The difference, simply put, is that whereas internationalism delights in differences globalisation seeks to impose sameness. Nevertheless, in practice, the two can become very confused insofar as the powerful tend to assume that they are bestowing improvement and, therefore, beneficence on the weak.

That confusion, perhaps, can be seen most clearly in the way that the word "development" has changed over the last century or so. Until three or four generations back it was a value-neutral word simply meaning the opposite of "enveloped", of "exposing what is there" as we still use it in photography. Nowadays, however, the meaning imposed on it by the new science of economics with its strong connotation of improvement has become applied across the board. The result is that we frequently talk of developing a community when what we mean is only that it has more money even if that is at the cost of destroying its art, its music, its code of values, its sense of community and even its language.

Maybe within this one etymological example we can discern the trend which gives rise to anxiety today and causes us to ask questions about ministry and education in particular?

There are, I would suggest, two basic concerns. First, there has been both a proliferation and an acceleration of the process largely as the result of new and speedier forms of communication. Secondly, and of particular concern for us as religious educators, the initiative and the motivation of the new globalising movements are almost entirely secular. Whilst rarely explicitly anti-religious, in contrast with the earlier movements of global Communism, the present rationale, given throughout the Western world is almost entirely presented in terms of material wellbeing while other considerations such as the spiritual are largely ignored.

There is one outstanding exception, however. Ironically it is greeted in the West, with some disquiet. I refer, of course to the growth of international Islam. Just why this should be so is in itself an interesting and perhaps delicate question but which cannot be investigated at all thoroughly in a paper such as this. Suffice to say that Islam, growing out of the same roots as both Judaism and Christianity, has played a significant role in European history both north and south of the Mediterranean Sea but, by moving eastwards rather than westwards did not participate in the development of what we once termed the New World on anything like the scale of the other two. And, of course, it is that New World, the Americas, which has come to dominate current globalising movements and to receive the inevitable reactions from those who both welcome and resent the domination simultaneously.

What this point alone raises in terms of ministry and education is our position in regard to other faiths and belief systems. In Britain our whole approach to religious education within the public school system has, on the surface at least, changed dramatically over the past thirty years. Our syllabuses are multi faith with a confessed aim of developing understanding and promoting harmony rather than of deepening personal faith. The results are, I think, real if often unrecognised.

To give just one example. The city of Birmingham, England contains about one million people. Within that city there are now some thirty mosques: there were none forty years ago. One of those mosques bears the name of Saddam Hussein as does the nearby school. At the outbreak of the Gulf War there was a real fear that there would be violent disruptions in the city. They never occurred. At the time I found that surprising but perhaps I should rejoice that perhaps, just perhaps, we are more educated about one another than we were a generation ago although the cost has been that the indigenous population is more woefully ignorant about Christianity than at any time in the last millennium. A ministerial emphasis on “Love thy neighbour” can serve to undervalue the question “Who or what am I?”

This then is my first question for the future of education and ministry. How far are they concerned with nurture and how far with understanding others?

The second concerns, to my mind, the fundamental issue of our current globalisation process and that is language, through which nearly all ministry and education are conducted.

In one sense we are perhaps more honest than in the past. When we turn to look at the avowed intentions, motivation and aims of our current globalising movements they are overtly stated to be economic. We no longer pretend that it is Christian missions which head up the movement or even serve to accompany it. We are explicitly up front about a World Trade Organisation. Commerce rules supposedly bringing benefit to all. But, of course, the reality is very different and the basic philosophy underpinning the movement is rarely brought to the fore.

For the fact is that information itself has become a commodity to be bought and sold on the world markets as never before. Those who control it have a powerful weapon at their disposal, matched occasionally, but all too rarely, by their opponents such as Orson Welles or our British television writer Dennis Potter who publicly and repeatedly named his terminal cancer "Rupert" to draw attention to the adverse influence of the Murdoch empire on both our public service and commercial channels.

A recent issue of the monthly journal *New Internationalist* (April 2001) was devoted to this theme of , "MegaloMedia – The Voice of Globalisation". Within it in an article entitled "Empires of the Senseless" Katharine Ainger wrote,

> "in every country media corporations help to break our relationships to our communities, educators, collective cultures, experiences. They turn us into isolated consumers – then sell our stories back to us."

A little later she adds,

> "We are creating a world in which a small and shrinking commercial monopoly gets to tell all the stories while the rest of us get to watch and listen." (p.11)

We would seem to be caught in a vicious cycle of development. In many parts of the world the public media is strictly under tyrannical state control. But efforts to break that control, which we like to refer to as a free press, result only in domination by vested commercial interests.

Nor is it the case that the explosion in media outlets makes us better informed. The truth is just the opposite. For as Ainger concludes,

> "The deepest irony is that as the economy globalises we actually find out less and less about one another from the media. Increasing commercial pressure and cost cutting means that the coverage of international news in the West has dropped by an average of 50% in the last ten years. On a single British channel, ITV (Independent Television), it has dropped by 80% since the onset of satellite competition."

Or, as Clive James, an Australian media critic commented on the great proliferation of channels now becoming available in a digital age, there is, "more to ignore than ever before". Is it a part of our ministry and educational task actively to encourage the ignoring of media intrusion into students' lives?

What surely is of direct concern is that our own stories are not immune from the commercial and political world of global capitalism which often actively seeks to distort the key stories of our religious traditions. It was our own Margaret Thatcher, for example, who told the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland that the only reason the Good Samaritan was able to help was because he had money in his pocket with which to pay the inn keeper. Without capitalism there could be no charity!

The third question I want to raise then in relation to ministry and education follows on from this consideration. It is simply to ask if there are even more powerful forms of expression than language and whether they have a proper place in our programmes and our preparation.

I well remember a visit I made to a Jesuit community in Edmonton in the formative months during which I was trying to construct an outline for a doctoral thesis which was to be on the spiritual dimension of education. The idea was greeted with a quiet smile from one member of the community who simply said, "All you can do on that subject is to bind 400 pages of blank paper within hard covers; the language of a thesis is incompatible with spiritual modes of expression."

It was, I decided, an extreme view and the thesis was eventually written but not without great difficulty in reconciling the form with the substance. For it involved arguing, among other things that story must remain superior to the interpretations put upon them and that the prime responsibility of ministry is to ensure the telling of the stories rather than the theologies which become attached to them. Theology departments do not always receive such arguments with positive enthusiasm. But it is exactly one hundred years ago this session that William James was promoting just that message in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Perhaps it is time we listened to it.

For listening is the other aspect of silence that we ministers and teachers are not very good at. Two classic examples spring immediately to mind, both arising from the three and a half years that I spent many years ago in a missionary teaching post in Zambia. It concerned the question of the status of women in a society which not only accommodated but actively encouraged the practice of polygamy. How could one reconcile this with the Christian story. Clearly we were right and they were wrong and Christian ministry required that we say so. So we had done just that from the end of the nineteenth century. What we could not or did not hear was the message that there was absolutely no place in that society for the single woman: we merely went ahead with what we saw as the most visible aspect. The result by the time we arrived in the 1960s was widespread misery and an enormous problem of rootless women and a high incidence of prostitution which had never existed before the Christians came. The current Aids crisis in Africa is in large part a continuation of that process of alienation from a tribal family community in which all members had a secure place.

The second area where we could not listen was on the question of land ownership. Zimbabwe's current crisis has its origins on our Western Christian assumptions that individuals can own land. African traditional society had no such concept any more than Australia's aboriginal or Native American society had. The African chiefs who were beguiled into signing treaties for the extraction of minerals discovered too late, when the fences went up that they had lost everything. President Mugabe, for all his

nastiness and tyrannical behaviour retains within himself a notion of the earth as sacred and in trust only to its present inhabitants.

One sees I think in these two examples a contrast with, say, the example of Thomas Merton who after some twenty five years of silence in a Kentucky monastery found himself in total rapport with Buddhist outlooks in south-east Asia.

Our ministry more than ever today has to be communicated in what we are and what we do as much as in anything we say. We need to recognise the aggressiveness of our current societies as they are seen by others in the world and not be too surprised if the reaction too is aggressive and violent.

It is only in being and doing, rather than merely telling, that our stories can be kept alive in a world context which has not only become dominated by other stories but which has long since begun to distort religious stories so that they might be seen to conform to what constitute success and failure.

Perhaps today as much as at any time in the past those of us who are Christians need to recall the words of the lowly unmarried Jewish mother-to-be whose words introduce Luke's gospel, namely to scatter the proud in their imaginings, to help pull down the mighty from their elevated status, to exalt the lowly and to turn away the rich.

These are all incredibly difficult things to do and for all of us like the rich young ruler of Matthew's gospel most of us will shake our head in silence and find it all a step too far. We prefer to teach and preach the content of faith without too much application of that content to our modes of ministry and teaching.

References

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