

## **Globalization as Local Paradigm: The World in Our Backyard**

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by Peter Gilmour

Old paradigms die hard.

Chicago is a city of paradigm shifts. For a long time, machine gun toting Al Capone style gangsters prevailed as the most universal Chicago paradigm. Lesser paradigms also abounded. Carl Sandburg, in his poem, "Chicago," captures other paradigms:

Hog Butcher for the World,  
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;  
Stormy, husky, brawling,  
City of the Big Shoulders. (3)

But it took the Zen-Christian coach, Phil Jackson, his major player, Michael Jordan, and the other members of a Chicago Bulls Basketball team to give the world yet another paradigm of Chicago. The Chicago Bulls, Michael Jordan in particular, is a new paradigm of this city.

For those of us who have eyes to see and ears to hear, there is yet another paradigm of Chicagoland emerging, more real than a previous generation's gangsterland image and the basketball iconography of this generation. Chicagoland now holds one of the most religiously and spiritually diverse

populations in the world. This interfaith reality, emerging into the public consciousness slowly but progressively, is yet another paradigm of Chicago.

There are at least 131,000 Buddhists in Chicago. At least 5,000 Sikhs live in the Chicago area. There are 60 Mosques and Islamic Centers, at least 10 Hindu temples, 32 Buddhist temples/centers, four Sikh Gurdwaras, one Jain Temple, one Zoroastrian Center, and one Baha'i Center.

Members of these faiths comprise part of the work force that wait on Chicagoans at local post offices, staff the hospitals, scan groceries in check out lines, teach at universities. Their children go to local neighborhood schools. They fill the parks and beaches on hot summer days and attend movies, theater, and concerts.

This city mirrors national religious and spiritual trends. The United States is becoming the most spiritually diverse nation in the world. No longer perceived as, Catholic, Protestant, and Jew, this new United States, as a result of the Immigration Act of 1965, and subsequent acts in 1986 and 1990 (Eck, 85) now includes people from Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, and yet other traditions (Eck, 84) "More religions are practiced in the United States today than anyplace else" notes Paul Griffiths of the University of Chicago.

The United States is home to nearly four million Muslims, five times as

many than just 30 years ago, and close to half of all Muslims in the United States are of African descent. Two million Americans today identify themselves as Buddhists, a tenfold growth since 1970. In this same span of time, Hindus have grown from 100,000 to close to a million, and Sikhs have grown from 1,000 to 220,000. In the last 25 years, three of the fastest growing religious communities have been Pentecostal, Mormon, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Nonetheless, this paradigm shift in religious/spiritual consciousness is harder for some people to see than the blood spattered corpses of gangland Chicago or the public pandemonium following the Chicago Bulls many championships.

The Parliament of the World's Religions, originally part of the Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, sponsored an ambitious program, "The World in our Backyard." this past year. Over the course of ten months, from September, 2000 through June, 2001, participants traveled to ten different religious/spiritual centers to hear about diverse religions and spiritual traditions, ask questions, and participate in their worship. On the program's schedule: a Sikh Gurdwara, a Native American ceremony in a public park, a Buddhist temple, the Baha'i House of Worship, an Islamic Cultural Center, the Zoroastrian Center, the Chinmaya Mission (Hindu), St. Pius V Roman Catholic Church, the Jain Temple, and a

Jewish Synagogue.

The visit usually took the form of welcome and introductory comments by a member of the place visited, participation in the religious service, a follow up period of more questions, and hospitality where informal discussion continued. The registration that was asked for three days in advance of each visit was merely procedural. There was no fee to participate.

Much was learned by many participants in this year long exploration of religions and spiritual traditions centering on Chicagoland's incredible interfaith diversity. Participants were put in contact with factual information about each of these spiritual traditions at each of the sites. One of the leaders at each site spoke about his/her spiritual tradition. There was time for questions and answers. Pamphlets and other written information explaining the specific spiritual tradition often were available to participants.

Participants in "The World in Our Backyard" program, in addition to receiving information about these various world religions, also joined in the ritual worship of each spiritual tradition. They entered the ritual space of other religions. Shoes were removed in some of these sanctuaries; in others heads were covered. Participation in ritual eating was extended to participants. The experience of participants extended beyond the informational into the formational dimensions of

these spiritual traditions.

This program, “The World in our Backyard” continues this year. The Parliament of the World Religions has arranged for visits to yet other spiritual centers.

This program, as well as others, reflects the 21st century reality of people from radically different religious and spiritual traditions (in comparison to Judaism and denominational Christianity) coming together to live and work in one geographical area. I like to term this, local globalization. It is a unique moment in the history of the United States, foreshadowed in our past only barely in port towns of the whaling industry, and captured in art by Herman Melville’s epic novel, Moby Dick. Ismael, that wild ass of a character, befriends a fellow sailor by the name of Queequeg. “I’ll try a pagan friend, thought I, since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy.” (Melville, 51) What was only possible in a 19th century port town inhabited by sailors from round the world now is probable on almost every street corner of most major American cities: the encounter with people from radically different religious and spiritual traditions.

This local globalization of religious and spiritual traditions, a new paradigm for the United States, is the context in which religious education now happens. The dominant religious culture (churches, synagogues, and theological schools),

according to Diana Eck, “have barely begun to take cognizance of this new theological reality.” (73) Regretfully, I need to agree with her. Just last Spring, while attending the conference, “Interreligious Pilgrimages: Where Are They Taking Us?” I met a seminarian from one of the major Protestant seminaries in the Chicagoland area. I asked him why he was attending the conference. He responded by saying, “we get nothing like this in our seminary, and I know this is becoming very important in the day-to-day lives of more and more people.” A course in world religions that has been offered at my own home institution, a university-based school of ministry, has been among the hardest to build an enrollment. It is not required in any of our four degree programs.

There are other difficulties in vigorously pursuing this new context for religious education, among them the increased attention given to identity building in many denominations today. In my own tradition, the concern about “Catholic Identity” (or the lack of it) in recent years has contributed to, perhaps unintentionally, a narrow parochialism which has little, if any, concern for serious and substantial exploration of other faith traditions.

“The World in our Backyard” therefore, represents an alternative approach to religious education that is not found in most all denominational programs. This approach, as I have previously indicated, contains two important foci: the

informational and the formational. The informational approach, of course, is hardly boundary breaking even though it is lacking in many religious education curricula. The formational approach, participation in another spiritual tradition's worship life, is definitely boundary breaking, and, like pluralism, "poses the opportunity for engagement, involvement, and participation" using "the language of traffic, exchange, dialogue, and debate." (Eck, 96).

Resources for the informational approach abound. Huston Smith's classic work, The Religions of Man, first published in 1958 is a benchmark work; however, this book only treats Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. More recent print resources treat an ever wider range of religions and spiritual traditions, e.g., the Multifaith Information Manual published by the Ontario (Canada) Multifaith Council on Spiritual and Religious Care, All in Good Faith: A resource book for multi-faith prayer, published by The World Congress of Faiths (England), and Testing the Global Ethic: voices from the religions on moral values published by CoNexus Press in the United States and the World Congress of Faiths in England.

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University was developed "to study and document the growing religious diversity of the United States, with a special view to its new immigrant religious communities." (<http://www.pluralism.org>) Their

CD-ROM publication, On Common Ground: World Religions in America is comprised of three sections: (1) Exploring the Religious Landscape; (2) Discovering America's Traditions; and (3) Encountering Religious Diversity. A Guide for Teachers and Students is also available for On Common Ground: World Religions in America.

Journalists are becoming more adept at reporting on religious and spiritual traditions. Some are receiving special training in this field. This past summer, thanks to a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois partnered with Garrett Evangelical Seminary, also on the Northwestern University campus, to host a quarter long program for ten journalists from around the country to deepen their knowledge of the many religious and spiritual traditions now present in this country. The "Religion, Spirituality and Values" specialization is one of three focus areas in Medill's "Specialized Reporting Program." These aforementioned resources, and others, are indicative of the importance of the informational dimension of religious and spiritual traditions which can well serve a religious education program.

Yet it is in what I am referring to as the formational dimension of interfaith religious education that much more extraordinary challenges abound. When a person claims allegiance to one specific tradition and then finds him/herself



worshiping, albeit infrequently, in another religious tradition, traditional boundaries are crossed. Some traditions' teachings that uphold an exclusivist construct of religious practice are no longer effective or followed by adherents.

The admission of outsiders to ritual practice within a religious/spiritual tradition not only reflects changing notions of ritual, but also raises interesting questions. In a classical paradigm, ritual defined boundaries both for believers and nonbelievers, and also established a particular religious world view over against other world views. At times secrecy surrounded ritual, especially when a particular religion was not the official or dominant religion, and persecution of members was a reality. Secrecy also preserved access to religious knowing. Nonbelievers were not given access to certain ritual knowledge.

In an age of postmodern globalization, many religious/spiritual traditions and their accompanying rituals no longer define clear cut boundaries, no longer impose secrecy, and no longer represent privileged, limited access to religious knowledge. Although ritual does define boundaries, those boundaries are much larger and much more porous than in more traditional eras. Rather than ritual being a confirming act solely for believers, many religious rituals today are constructed as invitations to explore the spiritual life. In some traditions, ritual has become very evangelistically oriented. In these cases, ritual is aimed directly at the nonmember rather than the

member.

When nonmembers are invited to participate in the rituals of a religion, as was the case with the “World in Our Backyard” program, some of the more classically oriented boundaries were set aside in favor of a wider ritual practice. Nor were evangelization and conversion the goals or intent of these various religious traditions who hosted the “World in Our Backyard.” Rather, the hospitable invitation to explore and participate in worship reconfigured the traditional boundaries among religions.

I find something very intense and personal goes on when people participate in a religious tradition’s ritual that is not their own. It is an honor and privilege to be so treated. And it is very humbling. Participation in various manifestations of the encounter with the divine becomes a formative experience. Ritual action, whether it be the fire ritual of the Zoroastrians, the ritual prayers before the manifold idols of the Hindu tradition, or chanting with Buddhists becomes a transrational educational experience for the nonmember participant. These intimate moments in the worship life of various religious communities, and the participation of nonmembers in ritual life contributes another dimension which transcends the informational dimension.

To be formed not only by the singularity of one religious tradition, but also

by other religious and spiritual traditions is a new paradigm for many religious educators. Such formation calls forth a new paradigm of understanding religion, religions, and religious education. This new paradigm transcends individual faith traditions and embraces the interfaith reality of life in North America.

After all, religions are not like stones passed from hand to hand through the ages, but are dynamic movements, more like rivers - flowing, dynamic, raging, creative, splitting, converging. The history of religions is not over, but still unfolding before our eyes. Perhaps nowhere in the world will it be more interesting to study the ongoing process of dynamic religious change than in late twentieth-century America. (Eck 73)

In this age of globalization, like in the city of Chicago old paradigms die hard. Yet the interfaith reality of North America presents a significant moment of opportunity to develop a new paradigm for religious education. Let us begin.

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