RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION:
AN INVITATION TO CONVERSATION

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I. I propose that we begin our conversation on Globalization as a world-wide phenomenon and how Religious Education responds to it by having a brief look together at what the term itself signifies. I believe the term, as generally used in the media, covers at least three areas: technological, economic-political, and socio-religio-cultural.

1. a) **Technologically**: the famous "global village" image of Marshall McLuhan is now both a facultual and a virtual reality by means of the revolution that has happened in information and communication technology and in transportation technology. Such instant communication not only has repercussions on the way finance and media exchanges are conducted, but is beginning to affect the way learning and teaching is being done.

b) **Economic-politically:** Under the umbrella of a free market approach (free access to the world market both for exports, production and labor by coporations that are unrestricted by national borders), national states - and not only those in the developing world - find themselves less and less able to defend their political sovereignty and their social goals and programs (full employment, health, education, welfare) owing to the pressure of structural adjustment requirements from international bodies controlling national debts and, in the case of the industrial nations, the pressure to uphold "the bottom line" as the only value investors recognize. This approach as been dubbed "globalization-from-above." Some of its consequences on people's lives will be referred to below.

c) **Socio-religio-culturally:** Homogenization of culture vs attempts at cultural reclamation and preservation, inter-religious encountering vs recovery and valorization of indigenous religious roots and rituals (which end of these sets engages one depending on one's national identity and social location), and the voluntary or involuntary migration of peoples (either as the ability to transcend geographical residence boundaries - Tomlinson's 'deterritorization - or as forced migration in the form of refugee or migrant laborer) appear to be the most obvious manifestations of this area. All three definitely occasion pastoral concerns.

2. **Consequences** to wrestle with:

a) One of the most serious consequences from the activities of non-border economics resulting in increased exploitation of the natural world for resources, the increased pollution (greenhouse emissions, toxic wastes, caused by globalized industries via technological advances, is the damage,

some of it irreversible, done to the world's environment - depletion of rainforests and damage to the ozone layer, climate change, threat of species extinction and of a viable biodiversity, etc. - which may threaten the continued existence of the human species itself.

b) Other consequences of globalization-from-above include the increased inequality between industrial and developing countries, increasing impoverishment of the latter (and the poor sectors of the former), and the erosion of individual and state control of their destinies owing to the overarching rule of globalized trade agreements (see especially Brecher, Costello and Smith, 2000, and Ellwood, 2001).

II. To track how the field of Religious Education responds to the above phenomenon, the conversation will need to refer to the efforts toward the **globalization of theological education** made by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, the accrediting body of which many of the institutions we teach in are a member. Beginning in the 1980's at the committee level, the publication of two issues of the journal *Theological Education* devoted to the topic in 1986, and two comparative survey of institutions to track progress (1983 and 1989), it gathered momentum in the 1990's through a varied program consisting of institutional and faculty grants to encourage curricular innovation, summer institutes for faculty and administrators, faculty consultations on the teaching of the theological disciplines from a global perpsective, the publication of the "cranberry series" of five further issues or supplements of *Theological Education* between 1990 and 1994, culminating in the incoporation of specific guidelines for evaluating globalization in ATS schools in its current *Handbook of Accreditation.* Many among us have either actively participated in some of these programs, served on the ATS Globalization Task Force and its related committees, or taken part in scrutinizing the globalization efforts of the schools we visited on accreditation teams.

The rich offerings in Research Interest Groups and Colloquia at this 2001 Annual Meeting of APRRE is evidence of the commitment of Religious Education teachers and researchers to the topic, examining as it were a slice of the theological education pie. I believe these offerings reflect many of the elements in Thomas Tangaraj's understanding of the globalization of theological education as "the process of coming to awareness and appreciation of the global inter-connectedness and inter-dependence through curricular content and structure, community ethos and programs, and pedagogical tools and style", an understanding he formulated in 1995 as a member of the ATS Task Force on the Globalizatioin of Theological Education.

Examinining how this inter-connectedness relates to the "complex connectivity" of modalities (social institutional relationships, increasing flow of goods, information via cyber-technology, people and practices across national borders, see Tomlinson 1999, 2), and to what extent theological and religious educators can influence the direction of this flow rather than merely react/respond to it, is one of the challenges facing us. One question I ask myself is: "To what extent has Globalization itself [as defined in Part I above] been included in the theological curriculum in my institution?" Just to have it addressed in a Social Ethics course or two by a colleague does not absolve my responsibility. I need to be intentional in setting in the current globalized context all the teaching and learning for which I have any responsibility in designing and implementing. I need to bring before students some of those

issues and consequences caused by this phenomenon in whichever course I teach, so that as they move into their ministry and religious education leadership roles they can be at least minimally equipped to raise relevant questions or help members of their faith community deal with these challenges from a faith perspective. Sometimes it is to name the context and intention explicitly even in the title as well as the content of a course, such as "Spirituality and Education in a Globalized, Ecological Age"; at other times it may be to remind students of the view from the other side (for example, the side of the vagabond rather than the tourist, see Bauman 1998) when looking at a common happening; at another time it may be to remind them that better understanding of the role of transnational companies in allowing sweatshops could assist them in their efforts to resist the pressures of a consumer culture for the sake of their spiritual health. In other words, it is to remind myself and my colleagues that without addressing the consequences of Globalization in contemporary (and future) human life, we would be teaching a powerful null curriculum we may never have intended, but would still have to bear resonsibility for.

RESOURCES CONSULTED

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