THE GLOBAL DIMENSION

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THERE IS LITTLE IN THE WAY OF contemporary spirituality that is untouched by the rhetoric of globalization. Yet, despite the frequent usage of the term 'global' or any one of its many derivatives, there does not appear to be any clear consensus as to its precise meaning or actual significance. Though it is fair to say that there are as many ways as there are desires to incorporate a so-called global dimension into our spiritual lives, it is equally important to note the difficulties involved in holding ourselves accountable for the living out of this dimension. It seems that the greater the possibilities for action, the greater the chances for distraction, hesitation and inertia.

It is my thesis that contemporary Christianity, replete as it is with a diversity of spiritual charisms, is not in critical need of a new global spirituality. Working from the premise that all spiritualities are local, I would like to argue that the more urgent need is to incorporate into already existing spiritualities a global dimension that is both compelling and efficacious. Is it not more realistic to take spiritualities as they are and inject into them or find within them a global dimension? In an effort to demonstrate my position, I begin with introducing the concept of the 'global paradox' and its relevance for our immediate purposes. Next I pose a number of reflective questions on the relationship between spiritual values and human agency in a world of increasing global complexity. Then I consider examples of six possible ways of approaching the global dimension of spirituality. Finally, I use these approaches to illustrate how bringing a global dimension to our respective spiritualities can inspire and sustain active involvement in one of the most critical public life concerns of the 1990s: the children of our world.

Coming to terms with the global paradox

In his recent book, *Global paradox*, John Naisbitt observes the world in which we live and concludes that the more universal we become, the more tribally we act.[1] According to his definition, tribalism is 'the belief in fidelity to one's own kin, defined by ethnicity, language, culture, religion, or, in this late 20th century, profession'.[2] Though Naisbitt's work focuses primarily on the implications of this paradox for economics and politics, is it not possible that those of us involved in ongoing reflection on spirituality might have something to glean from his

analysis? If the opinion of this internationally renowned trend analyst is accurate, then coming to terms with this paradox could be key to our understanding of the new era we are entering.

In light of the challenges and questions that Naisbitt's analysis raises, I would like to explore two religious trends in the world that illustrate how the global paradox also applies to spirituality. The first trend is illustrated by the growing consensus that has emerged in recent years with regard to the relevance of spirituality for a world fragmented by competing claims and conflicting needs, many of which are driven or aggravated by religion. This trend was most recently articulated in the concluding statement on a global ethic issued at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions.[3] The second trend underscores what we have known for some time: adherents of particular spiritualities tend to act in ways that are characteristically tribal. Like their counterparts in other religions of the world and various confessional traditions within Christianity, the spiritualities associated with religious orders, pious unions, secular institutes, and reform or renewal movements have been internationally recognized as proven tribe-makers.

Thus, the aspect of the global paradox that we must reckon with is basically this: *as consensus regarding the importance of spirituality emerges and becomes more global, adherents of particular spiritualities become more tribal.* Becoming aware of the paradox, however, is only the first step in coming to terms with its implications. Though we may not be fully attuned to the fact that the more the phenomenon of spirituality is given universal attention, the more the particularity of specific spiritualities is intensified, the consequences of the paradox are being played out around the world. If, as some would suggest, the phenomenon of spirituality is critical to the process of counteracting the forces of dehumanization and destruction at work throughout the world, we must prepare ourselves to face the fundamental questions that the global paradox raises. Not only do we need to deepen our understanding of how particular spiritualities are related to the universal phenomenon of spirituality, but we must also consider whether or not the global dimension of our tribe-making spiritualities is of any real value or consequence for the world in which we live. To what extent do our respective spiritualities inspire and sustain active involvement in public life? And, in what ways are these spiritualities themselves open to the processes of change, adaptation, conversion and transformation?

Spirituality, global consciousness and human agency

Admittedly, these questions are somewhat rhetorical in nature. Nevertheless, they do provide a starting point for exploring how our

particular spiritualities inform and influence the lives of individuals or communities, not only in terms of global consciousness, but also in terms of its correlates of human service, political action and solidarity. These questions raise up for our consideration the means by which our respective spiritualities are informed and influenced by the signs of the times. Above all, they compel us to assess the real correspondence between our commitments and our spiritualities, our politics and our mysticism, our humanity and our holiness. Do our experiences of global realities lead us to a deeper understanding of the mystery of God? Do transformative experiences of God's grace and mercy give us new eyes with which to see the lived realities of those who are marginalized and oppressed, or new ears with which to hear their cries for compassion and justice? Are we moved by the wonder and fragility of creation in a way that draws us closer to our Creator, while deepening in us a sense of stewardship for the earth and all her creatures?

If we are convinced of the importance and urgency of incorporating into our respective spiritualities a global dimension, we must learn to live with these questions and to trust them. Learning to do this, however, cannot be accomplished in isolation. It is not something that we can do on our own. The very nature of the task is dialogical and participative. Without an unwavering commitment to reciprocity and interdependence, the global dimension of any spirituality is nothing more than a delusion. If the global dimension is to become a vital part of our respective spiritualities, as opposed to a postmodern appendage, the commitment to reciprocity and interdependence must engage the religious and moral imagination of every spiritual tradition. In this process, the adequacy and integrity of our fundamental stance toward the world must be re-examined in light of the world in which we live and the values that distinguish our particular traditions.

The fact that we live in a world that is made up of many worlds is a constant reminder of the challenges inherent in the global paradox. Active involvement in these 'worlds within the world' is predicated on a number of factors, not the least of which is our location on the continuum of power and knowledge. Whether we find ourselves overwhelmed by a sense of responsibility or burdened by a sense of powerlessness, our commitment to reciprocity and interdependence requires us to face the realities that confront us from day to day. We are subject to human limitations and we are also subject to errors in human judgement. What we may not fully understand, however, is the extent to which we are more constrained by false limitations than real ones. The global dimension of any spirituality should enable us to sort out the difference between the two.

Inclined as we are to presumption or despair, we need to conserve a bias for hope by better assessing the multiple forms of power and knowledge that we actually hold and are potentially able to share with others. Hope, it seems to me, remains foundational to the global dimension of any spirituality. To the extent that classic characterizations of sins against the Spirit hold true in our own day, we must wrestle with the temptations to live in the world with no sense of hope, or with a false sense of hope. By the fact that hope is frequently associated with the apocalyptic or the utopian, it holds out to us the possibility of an unexpected advent, rather than the inevitability of a predictable future. If nothing else, the global dimension of our spiritualities requires the courage and creativity to envision scenarios that give expression to the reason for our hope.

Since many of us learn by imitation, I invite you to consider six different ways of approaching the global dimension of spirituality. I will describe each approach and highlight a few individuals who, through their lives and writings, give courageous and creative expression to the global dimension of particular spiritualities and confessional traditions.

Six approaches to the global dimension of spirituality

The approaches considered here possess certain distinguishing characteristics; they also have a great deal in common. Although these approaches to the global dimension of spirituality can be expressed in any number of ways, they are readily exemplified in the written works of many spiritual guides, religious leaders and theologians.

The first approach is most appropriately described as *intercultural.* Though this approach tends to be contextual in substance and orientation, the reflections of those who represent this approach are accessible and challenging to individuals living in other contexts. In many instances, this approach gives special attention to the social, political and economic dynamics at work within a given cultural situation. This often serves as a means for demonstrating how these same dynamics are at work within the world and the Church. In so doing, this approach emphasizes the interrelatedness of people from many cultures and examines the implications of their interdependence for Christian life and practice. The selected writings of individuals identified with this approach frequently reflect the particularity of their respective spiritualities or confessional traditions. Examples of such individuals include Marcello Azevedo, Jon Sobrino, Juan Luis Segundo, Leonardo Boff and Dorothee Sölle.[4]

The second approach is *intracultural.* This explores the great spiritual traditions of Christianity for resources that can be used as compelling

historical foundations for addressing particular concerns, many of which are of universal consequence. In general, such reflection is done on behalf of a particular audience and with a particular objective in mind. In this approach, the given culture is often understood as a microcosm of the world. This approach finds expression in the work of individuals such as Jean Vanier, Joan Chittister, John Kavanaugh, Matthew Fox and Edwina Gateley.[5]

The third approach is *interreligious*. Essentially, this approach calls upon Christians to extend the historical and cultural horizons of their own spiritual traditions by recognizing the sacred dimensions and spiritual practices of other religions. Without relativizing religious beliefs, this approach lends itself to appreciation, reverence and respect for the efforts of people from all religions to respond to the transcendent in their lives. This approach finds expression in the works of individuals such as Thomas Merton, Kosuke Koyama, C. S. Song, Chung Hyun Kyung, Aloysius Pieris, John Mbiti and Sister Vandana.[6]

The fourth approach is *intrareligious*. This approach leads Christians to recognize the plurality of spiritualities and forms of religious experience that, while all claiming to be Christian, present themselves in dramatically different ways. Differences in history or culture are not necessarily the issue here, though this may well be the case, but, rather, diverse theologies that all root themselves in the Christian tradition. This approach is best characterized by renewal and reform movements. Examples of individuals representing this approach include Brother Roger of Taizé and Chiara Lubich.[7]

The fifth approach is broadly conceived of as *interpersonal*. This approach gives expression to reflections on experiences of conversion or spiritual transformation that have occurred as a result of personal encounters with individuals, regarded for their charismatic simplicity, spiritual insight or personal holiness. In some cases, the persons encountered are from different regions of the world. In other cases, *where* they live is of lesser significance than *how* they live. Sometimes, encounters occur during pilgrimages to holy places or at assemblies where thousands of people are gathered together. Sometimes they occur in hospitals, shelters, alleyways and private conversations. This approach finds expression in the reflections of individuals whose lives have been changed by encounters with well known people like Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, Rigoberta Menchu, Dom Helder Camara, Desmond Tutu, Elie Wiesel, Thich Nhat Hanh and Dorothy Day, not to mention countless others who are lesser known, but significant nonetheless.

The sixth and final approach is *intrapersonal*. This approach is exemplified in any number of reflections on self-awareness that focus on

different aspects of human experience. The intrapersonal approach encourages individuals to examine their lives in ways that allow them to give voice to their memories, dreams, anxieties, addictions and personal struggles. A distinctive feature of this approach is found in the emphasis it places on the inner dynamics of the human mind and heart, and the stress it places on self-knowledge as foundational for understanding one's relationship with others and with the world. Examples of this approach are found in the writings of individuals such as Richard Rohr, Mary Wolff-Salin, John Welch, Thomas Moore and Gerald May.[8]

As with any typology, the boundaries that distinguish one approach from another may be in fact less differentiated than my categories would suggest. Nonetheless, in reviewing these six approaches comparatively, numerous observations can be made. One observation that I believe to be particularly noteworthy is the range of perspectives and concerns that each of the approaches brings to the global dimension of spirituality. The second observation is most appropriately expressed in the form of a simple but important question: so what? How exactly do these six approaches lend themselves to reflection and action on a specific issue of global and tribal significance?

In the course of writing this article, I received an urgent action appeal from Amnesty International about recent reports of death threats and assassinations of street children in São Paulo. As a returned missionary from Brazil, I could not help but reflect on the fact that as I write this article, death squads and vigilantes exterminate children with impunity.[9] Twenty-five years ago, their targets would have been union leaders, journalists, university students and social workers. Sobered by the realities of Brazil, I am made aware of children being gunned down on the streets of Boston as well. I cannot help but ask: of what real consequence is this reflection on the global dimension of spirituality for the children of our world, many of whom must struggle simply to survive?[10]

Though some may find my expressed concern for children to be a compelling position, there are undoubtedly others committed to any number of global concerns ranging from persons with AIDS and victims of natural disaster to prostitutes, refugees and casualties of war throughout the world. It seems to me, however, that regardless of what global concern is proposed, the particular plight of children somehow figures in almost every concern. Given this conviction, I return to the question: so what? What exactly do these six approaches to a global dimension of spirituality contribute to engendering a commitment to interdependence and reciprocity with the children of our world? In an effort to

respond in a practical way to some of the challenges that this specific question of children raises, let us consider briefly how various approaches to the global dimension of spirituality might provide us with some direction for reflection and action.

It seems that present in every spirituality is the potential for challenging the delusions and distortions of a culture, a religion or a person. For most of us, the world or worlds in which we live are construed primarily by adults and for adults. It is we who benefit the most from this world, from these worlds, whether we thrive or merely survive. Yet the global dimension of our spiritualities may afford us opportunities and insights for *conversion* in order that we may learn how to *turn with* the children of our world as we endeavour to *turn with* our God. We know from the work of individuals like Robert Coles, the depth of the moral, political and spiritual lives of all children.[11] Consider the poetry and drawings of the children of Terezin.[12] The spiritual legacy of these children causes us to ponder the ways in which a new generation of children engage in the struggle to make meaning of their lives in an adult world that is often as brutal as it is indifferent.

In considering the various approaches to the global dimension of spirituality and their implications for real involvement in the lives of children, the following questions arise:

- How often have we reflected upon the preferential option for the poor without ever being fully conscious of the fact that the majority of the world's poor are children under the age of fifteen? How often have we recognized the plight of children in another region of the world without ever making a connection between their experiences and the experiences of children in our own cultures?
- How often have we sought out resources from our respective spiritual traditions in order to acquire insights into how we might address the specific concerns and interests of children within our own cultures and in ways that are distinctive to our particular charisms?
- How often have we considered the ways in which children and childhood are understood by other religious traditions? What might we learn about the value and significance of children by setting spiritual insights from other religious traditions in dialogue with those that are present within various Christian spiritualities? How might these insights lead us to reconsider the ways in which the voices and experiences of children remain marginal or unexamined within various religious traditions?
- How often have we explored the image of the child and the construction of childhood from the viewpoint of various spiritual and

confessional traditions within Christianity? How might insights derived from such study lead us to re-examine our attitudes and biases about various aspects of children's lives?

- How often have we been changed or renewed as a consequence of an interpersonal encounter with a special child? How far removed are we from understanding, much less participating in, the lives of other human persons who are infants, children or adolescents?
- How often have we pondered our own experiences as children in order to understand ourselves better as adults? What kind of energy and resources have we invested in caring for the 'inner child' that was neglected, abused or unloved? Have we ever considered how such reflection might lead us to care for the concerns of present-day children whose realities may be quite similar to those once experienced by present-day adults?

In raising these questions, we are given a glimpse into the possibilities for reflection and action that a global dimension can bring to our respective spiritualities. The responsibility for actually engaging in reflection and action, however, ultimately rests with committed individuals and groups. Though we may not share common spiritualities, as Christians, we do share a common gospel and a common commitment to look to the life of Jesus Christ for insights into the meaning of discipleship and service.

Taking this common ground as my concluding point, it is my expressed conviction that we can grow in an awareness of what we have overlooked in this gospel, beginning with our liturgical tradition, that acknowledges children as the first martyrs to give their lives for Christ (Mt 2:16–18). Though devotion to the Holy Innocents has waned in the wake of historical biblical criticism, the narrative still merits some serious contemporary reflection given the state of the world's children. Among the hard sayings of Jesus, the injunctions against those who scandalize children are unambiguous (Mt 18:5–6). Jesus' own admonitions to the apostles who attempted to relegate children to a place of insignificance are sobering (Mt 19:13–15; Mk 10:13–16; Lk 18:15–17). Finally, for those of us who request a practical application to reflections such as this, we only need to look to the example of Jesus (Mt 18:1–4; Mk 9:33–37; Lk 9:46–47). The fact that he repeatedly responds to the immediate needs of children, regardless of who their parents are (Lk 8:40–42, 49–56; Mt 9:10, 23–26; Mt 15:21–28; Mk 7:24–30), should be more than sufficient direction for taking action globally and tribally. Given the role and influence of religious values in forming the moral

imaginations of peoples and nations, there can be no public commitment to advancing the rights of children[13] unless precedents and reasons for protecting and defending their dignity can be substantiated in the religious traditions of the world, especially Christianity.

The bias for hope that stems from our commitment to interdependence and reciprocity will not be sustained by watching television campaigns or reading articles about saving the children, saving the whales or saving the planet. The bias for hope will only be sustained through relationships, whether global or tribal, that make it possible for the horizons of our respective spiritualities to be stretched and expanded in accord with the signs of the times and the gospel of Jesus Christ. In essence, this is the global dimension of spirituality; everything else is commentary.

NOTES

[1] John Naisbitt, *Global paradox: the bigger the world economy, the more powerful its smaller players* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1994).

[2] *Ibid.*, p 23.

[3] 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, *A global ethic* (Chicago: Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, 1993).

[4] Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, *Vocation for the mission: the challenge of religious life today*, translated by John W. Diercksmeier (New York, 1988); Jon Sobrino *Spirituality of liberation: toward political holiness*, translated by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, 1988); Juan Luis Segundo, *Christ of the Ignatian Exercises*, translated by John Drury (Maryknoll, 1987); Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis: a model for human liberation*, translated by John W. Diercksmeier (New York, 1982); and, Dorothee Sölle, *Window of vulnerability: a political spirituality*, translated by Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis, 1990).

[5] Jean Vanier, *From brokenness to community* (New York, 1992); Joan Chittister, *Womanstrength: modern church, modern women* (Kansas City, 1990); John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a consumer society: the spirituality of cultural residence* (Maryknoll, 1981); Matthew Fox, *Creation spirituality: liberating gifts for the people of the earth* (San Francisco, 1991); Edwina Gateley, *I hear a seed growing* (Trabuco Canyon CA, 1990).

[6] Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen masters* (New York, 1967); Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: a critique of idols* (Maryknoll, 1984); Choan-Seng Song, *Third-eye theology: theology in formation in Asian settings* (Maryknoll, 1990); *Jesus in the power of the spirit* (Minneapolis, 1994); Chung Hyun Kyung, *The struggle to be sun again* (Maryknoll, 1990); Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian theology of liberation* (Maryknoll, 1988); John Mbiti, *The prayers of African religion* (Maryknoll, 1975); and, Sister Vandana, *Find your roots and take wing: spiritual formation for the East and the West* (Bangalore, 1991).

[7] Brother Roger, *Awakened from within: meditations on the Christian life* (New York, 1987) and Chiara Lubich, *A call to love* (Brooklyn, 1989).

[8] Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *Discovering the enneagram: an ancient tool for a new spiritual journey*, translated by Peter Heinigg (New York, 1991); Mary Wolff-Salin, *No other light: points of convergence in psychology and spirituality* (New York, 1986); John Welch, *Spiritual pilgrims: Carl Jung and Teresa of Avila* (New York, 1982); Thomas Moore, *Care of the soul: a guide for cultivating depth and sacredness in everyday life* (New York, 1992); and Gerald May, *Simply sane: the spirituality of mental health* (New York, 1993).

[9] Gilberto Dinenstein, *Brazil, war on children*, translated by Chris Whitehouse (New York, 1991).

[10] Amnesty International USA, *Children, the youngest victims: compilation of Amnesty International documents and articles concerning human rights abuses of children* (New York, 1990), and UNICEF, *The state of the world's children* (Oxford, 1991).

[11] Robert Coles, *The political life of children* (Boston, 1986); *The spiritual life of children* (Boston, 1990); and Margaret Sartor (ed), *Their eyes meeting the world: the drawings and paintings of children* (Boston, 1992).
[12] Statni Zidovske Muzeum, *I never saw another butterfly: children's drawings and poems from Theresienstadt concentration camp, 1942–1944* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
[13] Judith Ennew and Brian Milne, *The next generation: Third World children and the future* (Philadelphia, 1988).