

Globalization and Catholic Social Teaching: *A Reflective Synthesis*

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Twenty-six scholars, academics and social justice activists gathered outside Toronto, September 25-28, 2003, to assess the relevance and promise of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) for the globalizing dynamics of today. A general consensus emerged from this group that CST in its present form has much to contribute to the world community, but it clearly cannot claim to be a global ethic, marked as it is by both the strengths and the clear limitations of being culturally western and theologically Catholic-Christian.

The challenge is to develop a Catholic ethic for globalization that can be brought into constructive dialogue with the other faiths and cultures gracing the planet. That will put us on the only viable path toward a global ethic—an ethic that will then have to be expressed to the peoples of the world in the rich diversity of cultural forms that constitute the world's faiths.

Bill Ryan, SJ, founding director of the Center of Concern, and John Coleman, SJ, internationally renowned sociologist of religion, convened the seminar to explore this challenge under the sponsorship of the Jesuit Faculty of Theology at the University of Toronto and the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. It proved a valuable occasion for building stronger bridges between the very different worlds of academia and social action. Draft papers were discussed that covered the difficulties in conceptualizing globalization; CST as a living discernment tradition; the common good; the role of religion; conflict and security; culture; ecology; and economic justice. Commentaries came from different regional and inter-religious perspectives and will result in future papers to round out a volume on the topic of the seminar.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE

A successful response to the challenge of developing a global ethic must begin in local faith communities. Several seminar participants highlighted the evolutionary character of CST as a form of community-based discernment grounded in efforts to live faithfully and reflectively in the contemporary world. The teaching of the hierarchy plays a role in that process, but CST realistically is a summation and consolidation of the lived faith experience of local communities of church around the world. Today's challenge to develop CST as a Catholic ethic for global interfaith dialogue is, as Pope Paul VI noted, up to "Christian communities, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion

with the bishops, who hold responsibility and in dialogue with other Christian [people] and all [people] of good will, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed."
(*Octogesimo Adveniens*, #4)

The grounding in local community life is important. At the local level, strong relational bonds and cultural symbols are generated and embraced that give a sense of identity and provide ethical guidance. Religious symbols are the most deeply rooted and comprehensive, providing the foundational elements of identity and the strongest force motivating action.

Emphasizing local communities' religious identity can, of course, set the stage for conflict, as the history of religious wars and the rise of different varieties of religious fundamentalism willing to embrace conflict and even terrorism has shown. When the forces of globalization threaten local cultural identities, people's resistance often takes religious form. In one of the seminar papers, Gregory Baum pointed out perceptively that "Religion [in the threatened groups] acquires a new vitality by defending people's cultural identity against the alienating impact of western, secular forces and generating social activities aimed at reducing the plight of the poor."

But for that very reason, religious identity cannot be ignored when trying to develop an ethic for this globalizing world. It is too deep and pervasive. The only path toward a potentially effective universal ethic must be through the respectful dialogue of these religions as they search for mutually enriching ways to live together.

In her paper on the common good, Lisa Cahill of Boston College notes that inter-religious dialogue is both possible and promising. Although each religion is shaped by extensive cultural differences, all the major faiths share a drive toward coherence or universal integration, prophetic elements that resist exploitation of the powerless, and set human experience and projects against the horizon of transcendent meaning. Gregory Baum also identified the commitment to reconciliation and peace-making as an important base for dialogue common to all the world's religions.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

As the seminar discussions progressed, it became clearer that social movements resulting from the convergence of local communities worldwide represent a special locus for discerning the Signs of the Times, the movements of the Holy Spirit in our history responding to the current processes of the current forms and dynamics of globalization. The religious communities embedded in these movements are important dialogue partners in the search for a universal global ethic.

In broad terms, these social movements are in conflict with the dominant dynamics of contemporary globalization:

The ascendance of the “realist” school of international relations which sees world politics as an anarchic conflict zone in which each nation must battle to protect its own interests and security;

The promotion of the neo-liberal economic model which most serves the interests of the wealthy and powerful by the wealthy nations that control many of the international institutions; and

The underlying motivations of anxiety and fear in economic and security matters.

The social movements are seeking a different vision characterized by:

A more interdependent and collaborative world order;

Promotion of an economy designed to meet the needs and basic human rights of all peoples while protecting and enhancing the ecology of the planet; and

Grounded in the underlying motivations of love and solidarity.

The inter-religious dialogue needed to expand this latter vision and motivate the broad-based social movements essential to its realization presents a particular challenge. Those engaged in inter-religious dialogue around the world today are primarily focused upon doctrinal issues. Those active in social justice movements are rarely in serious dialogue with the communities of other faiths in their local areas. These too-separate worlds must be integrated if the search for both truth and justice are to progress.

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