

GLOBALDISPATCH

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Divine Connections: Religious Literacy, Global Education and Social Transformation

By Dean Vereene Parnell

Countless mission statements from countless progressive liberal arts colleges are peppered with commitments to value-driven education, global citizenship and civic responsibility. Centers for global education are often charged with checking off these promises when accreditation reviews roll around, but rarely have access to the resources they need to train students in one of the central and most overlooked prerequisites for global citizenship—religious literacy.

Understanding the relationship between spirituality, global education and social transformation requires that we step outside stereotypes that equate global education with academic tourism, religion and spirituality with fundamentalist dogma, and move to the cutting edge of progressive pedagogy—an edge Wheaton College often defines. The creation of the new Office of Service, Spirituality and Social Responsibility and its partnership with Wheaton's Center for Global Education marks such an edge.

Religious literacy, including an enhanced understanding of individual and collective spiritual practice, furthers the goals of global education in three primary ways. First, and most concretely, the overarching goal of global education is to enhance students' understanding of their world and their place in it; therefore, religious/spiritual literacy is certainly a key prerequisite. A significant proportion of the individuals and cultures our students encounter on their travels define themselves and their values, to some degree, in relation to religious traditions and/or personal spiritual practices. Western media and political leadership increasingly represent religion in simplistic, polarized and contentious ways. If we do not educate our students about particular religious traditions and train them to engage religious differences as intelligently and sensitively as we train them to engage other cultural differences, who will?

Second, if global education has a specifically ethical aim—to prepare students not only to live in an increasingly complex and diverse world, but to change that world for the better—religious literacy can provide a framework for exploring and articulating our responsibility to our neighbors, near and far. Most obviously, religion plays a critical role in many pressing social and political issues—from the HIV/AIDS pandemic to the conflicts in the Middle East. Even the most basic understanding of such multifaceted and dynamic situations requires more than a casual understanding of the religious traditions and concepts involved. While higher education in the West often focuses on the negative influences of religion on social justice, we frequently neglect the key role religion and spirituality have played in liberation movements around the world—in India, the United States, South Africa and Poland—to name just a few. More abstractly, “moral philosophy” has historically advanced through religious intellectuals from all faith traditions. Familiarity with these intellectual traditions provides multiple languages for exploring ethical issues. For example, Jewish philosopher and theologian Emmanuel Levinas wrote that the apparently simple, physical act of looking into the face of a stranger somehow creates an ethical bond, holding us accountable for the welfare of the other. Many of our students returning from educational experiences around the globe describe with photographic detail a single face that drew them into a new understanding and sense of personal responsibility for the fate of others. It is not necessary to describe this transformative human instant in religious terms, but it has been eloquently done by spiritually grounded intellectuals across time and cultures.

Finally, true religious literacy rewrites our stereotypes about religion and, especially, about spirituality. There is in liberal higher education and in popular media an unfortunate tendency to equate spirituality with religious dogmatism and a closing of minds, rather than an enhancement of intellectual maturity. A more proper understanding of spirituality is reflected in decades of work by educator and Quaker theologian Parker Palmer. In his tiny book, *To Know as We Are Known*, which might easily be used as deep background for any global education project, Palmer debunks our narrow assumptions about the relationship between spirituality and moral and intellectual endeavors. “Authentic spirituality wants to open us to truth—whatever truth may be, wherever truth may take us,” Palmer says. Like global education, he writes, “spirituality does not dictate where we must go, but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge. Such a spirituality encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity and embrace paradox.”

Diversity, conflict, ambiguity, paradox—the stuff of life in the 21st century. Global education is one of the most effective pedagogical tools we have for preparing our students to inherit this life. Religious literacy is one of the key competencies they will—we hope—carry with them as they head off on this grand adventure.

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