Globalization, Neo-Humanism and Religious Diversity

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This paper proposes that the challenge of religious diversity must be seen in terms of globalization and the emergence of the postmetaphysical challenge within the crisis of humanist culture of the West. After outlining the dynamics of globalization and their implications for understanding cultural and religious diversity, the paper outlines the weaknesses of the dominant approach to religious diversity and sketches a new postmetaphysical perspective. This approach has two components: (1) a deconstructive stream, which emphasizes difference and deferral as disruptive forces in the ongoing discourse on diversity and the construction of religious identities; and, (2) the paradigm of desire, which emphasizes the dimensions of corporeality, desire and transgression in religious commitment. Overall, the postmetaphysical perspective suggests that religious diversity may best be comprehended via the encounter of religions in the here-and-now of concrete life-world situations. This reorientation can be conceptualized in terms of a shift from an ontotheological perspective to an ethical one.

Charlesworth (1997:50) has recently suggested that the challenge of religious diversity represents "a task even more radical and momentous than that which confronted the early Christian communities when they realized that the second coming of Jesus was not imminent". In this paper, the discussion of religious diversity will be located in a sociological and philosophical context that facilitates some promising insights into this vital area of research. After noting the significance of globalization for understanding the contemporary dynamics of diversity, it argues that the present paradigm is exhausted and leads nowhere. It sketches a new postmetaphysical point of departure, with two streams: (1) the deconstructive, which emphasizes difference and deferral as disruptive forces in the ongoing discourse on diversity and the construction of religious identities; and, (2) the paradigm of desire, which emphasizes the dimensions of corporeality, desire and transgression in religious commitment. The postmetaphysical perspective suggests that religious diversity may best be comprehended via the encounter of religions in the here-and-now of concrete life-world situations. This reorientation can be conceptualized in terms of a shift from an ontotheological perspective to an ethical one (Bendle 1998).

As Castells (1997:1) points out; "our world and our lives are being shaped by

the conflicting trends of globalization and identity", particularly religious identity. Leading scholars (Moynihan 1993; Bauman 1991; Ahmed 1992,1995; Ahmed and Shore 1995; Featherstone 1995; Rojek 1995; Mestrovic 1994, 1996; Castells 1997) concur that globalization involves at least two powerful processes that operate in tension with each other. (1) The **centripetal** tendency is towards increased centralization, integration and order, especially within global capitalism and those economic and political institutions (IMF, World Bank, G-7, GATT, etc.) that are responsive to it. (2) The **centrifugal** tendency, which is towards increased disintegration and disorder, especially amongst those (often-marginalised) groups and institutions that define themselves culturally in religious, ethnic and nationalist terms.

At the same time as economic and political power is being centralized in accordance with various universalist principles there is a world-wide countervailing re-assertion of cultural localism and religious, ethnic and nationalist particularism. These contra-dynamics reflect the inability of a distantly managed global economic system to provide a sense of meaning and identity. Quite the contrary: as the lives and destinies of individuals and their families are effected and even destroyed by decisions and processes far removed from their everyday life-world (Elias 1998), a sense of alienation and powerlessness causes people to turn to available traditional, community and familial bonds within which they seek identity, direction and a sense of self-worth. Where these bonds are no longer viable or available the response will be anomie, alienation and often violent rage. In terms of Habermas's (1987) analysis of advanced capitalism, the challenge of religious diversity may be understood in terms of the reaction of the (socio-cultural) Life-World to its colonization by the (economic-political-technological) system. In such circumstances, there is a clear moral imperative to recognize and sustain such anti-systemic life-worlds. The alternative is to deliver humanity up to a global system of power premised ultimately upon nothing more than the profit motive and technocratic ideologies of economic rationalism.

Globalization is generating a sense of social and cultural fragmentation, anomie, alienation and conflict, not least within the world's religious traditions (Robbins and Palmer 1997). Within such a crisis, religious diversity looms as an important challenge, but it is precisely one that should **not** be approached from the currently pervasive managerialist perspective, with the implication that religious diversity is a 'problem' that must be managed **within** the structures of a globalized capitalist society. In fact, religions historically have judged and contested their societies - not merely sought accommodation within them. This responsibility is at no time more urgent than at present when globalization is collapsing the once great diversity of the world's cultures into one vastly unjust capitalist world system, characterized above all by technocracy and a consumerist monoculture. Therefore, it seems that the proper task is not at all the 'management' of religious diversity but rather its promotion and accentuation - even to the point of disruption and conflict.

Some recognition of this imperative is found in scholars of religion like Ernest

Gellner (1992), Kenneth Surin (1990) and Akbar S. Ahmed (1992) who emphasize "the isolation and construction of local, non-apologetic identities, of faiths radically opposed to Western globalization". (Ward 1997a:592). The difficulty facing Christian theology - if it is to play a proactive and constructive part in addressing this crisis - is that it is aligned with some of the most powerful universalizing forces of the modern era. Aside from its traditionally very close association with the centres of economic, political and military power, these include the missionary and proselytizing activities of the institutional churches which have abetted colonialism and imperialism; and the ideological power of Western theology, philosophy, and humanism, which promote a universalizing vision of human nature, needs and destiny.

At a philosophical and theological level, this resistance involves recognition of the vital importance of **Difference** and **Otherness** - recognition that these are irreducible values that cannot be subordinated to the pervasive logocentric longing for unity that seeks to incorporate and comprehend all difference and diversity in the One, invariably conceived in terms of some idea of 'Truth'. As James Buchanan (1996:311) noted in his report on a recent East-West Philosophers Conference: "Postmodern[ism] is about giving up the metaphysical security that guarantees sameness, and allowing the radicality of diversity and difference - possibly even irreconcilable difference - to play itself out. Postmodern[ism] is willing to risk presuppositions, foundations, criteria in the name of difference".

Despite a postmodern drift, the logocentric longing for unity and the incorporation of difference still characterizes Western theology and metaphysics generally, even within recent progressive discussions of religious diversity (Charlesworth 1997, Chap.1). This is not surprising as it is in the very nature of knowledge *per se* to seek to comprehend, incorporate and place under authority that which is initially alien and opaque to the cognitive gaze. This suggests that a fruitful encounter with religious diversity requires a critique of the nature and role of knowledge within theological discourse, especially how the latter are implicated in systems of power. As Ward (1997a:587) remarks with respect to the postmodern challenge in theology, "the postmodern moment...is composed of that which is excluded from or excess to the discourses of knowledge or the orders governing various sciences, and the authorities which police them".

Within the theology of religion it is quite difficult to evade logocentric authority, so rigorously asserted, e.g., by John Hick (1989:294) who declares that "each religious tradition refers to some thing...that stands transcendingly above or undergirdingly beneath and giving meaning or value to our existence". Even amongst those who eschew Hick's essentialism, there is still a dominant tendency to assess, evaluate, and incorporate the world's religions into an all-encompassing intellectual schema, on the assumption that difference must ultimately yield to the power of reason. In general the dominant tendency may be summarized as follows (Bendle 1998): the world's religions, while apparently plural, are nevertheless 'grounded' in the one omni-present 'divine reality', conceived in some way; the presence and salvific nature

of this one divine ground is revealed and mediated to all people through their religious traditions; the apparent religious plurality of the world reflects merely the different ways this revelation and mediation takes place; this plurality will, in time, be overcome as religions 'resolve their differences' and evolve and converge around a common understanding of the divine articulated as 'one true religion' or 'global theology' or 'global ethic' within which all people will achieve salvation or enlightenment. For example, Charlesworth (1997:50) proposes as 'Item 1' of his 'operational credo' for dealing with religious diversity that all believers should feel able to declare that, "I believe that 'God' wills that all should be saved or achieve enlightenment and that all human beings have access to the means of salvation or enlightenment through some mode of revelation". In a footnote we learn that 'God' here is taken to mean any source of revelation or disclosure of 'the divine'. In such a fashion, through processes of mis-recognition, transference and fantasy, the Other is incorporated into the One, particularity into universalism, plurality into unity, and diversity into sameness. The homology between this vision and the monocultural dynamics of globalization is obvious (Surin 1990).

Theologians (Knitter 1995) are now recognizing that this logocentrism brings them into direct conflict not only with the incommensurable truth claims of other religions but also with postmodernity with its valorization of diversity, particularism and alterity, expressed through such tendencies as the politics of identity, postcolonial thought, poststructuralism, and the cultural politics of difference generally (Bhabha 1994; Young 1990; Gates 1986). Their (implicit?) commitment to logocentrism means however that they have not resolved the problem or 'mystery' of religious diversity. They have reacted instead with pragmatic maneuvers, as does Charlesworth (1997:50), for example, with his "operational credo for the religious believer". While there is widespread recognition of the problems thrown up by religious diversity, its theological comprehension remains elusive.

The reason for this impasse appears clear: the paradigm within which most theological and philosophical thinking about religious diversity and related issues takes place is exhausted - the knowledge it provides does not adequately illuminate the situation. In this failure however, it is not alone, but rather reflects the general crisis of humanism and the humanities in the West, represented in the controversies over postmodernism and the so-called 'culture wars'. (Nussbaum 1997; Denby 1996; Lehman 1991). This crisis - which is rooted ultimately in the disjunction of life-world and system in the West - has been a long time coming. It was heralded by Nietzsche's insight that 'God is dead' and the West no longer has recourse to a central source of meaning and truth. Indeed the latter is merely "...a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms - in short, a sum of human relations...". (Nietzsche 1968:46-7). More immediately it found expression in the multi-faceted crises of the inter-war years, variously represented, e.g., by Barth's 'theology of crisis' and the 'linguistic turn' of philosophy. It has since come to entail not only crises of liberalism and representation but also the denunciation of the

Enlightenment project and specifically of metaphysics, history, humanism, identity and the self conceived in their traditional forms (Ferry and Renaut 1990:xxvi). In the latter decades of this century an emergent anti-humanism is giving voice to cultural despair in the West and provides much of the critical vocabulary for the contemporary intellectual and cultural opposition to the traditional humanities including theology and philosophy (Ward 1997a, 1997b; Blond 1998).

The scale of this retreat cannot be over-estimated. In general terms, the essence of humanism may be defined as the pursuit of human empowerment with respect to the ground of being. That is, the key characteristic of humanism is the Promethean belief that humanity itself can fully comprehend and even reach into the very grounds of its own existence - into the logos, logic or structure of the world, whether these be comprehended in biological, scientific, metaphysical or socio-historical terms - and manipulate and even change the fundamental determinants of its own condition.

The possibility of such Promethean intervention arose from the re-conceptualization of reason and logos that marked the start of the Modern era. The Western tradition has long grappled with a foundational pre-apprehension that civilization is embroiled in a confrontation between Chaos and Cosmos - between the underlying disorder of the world and the structured and ordered civilization that humanity is able to impose upon it. The demoralizing threat of chaos has been pushed back since the Greeks with the rise of the notion that there is a logos underlying all things. Through the Middle Ages and into the Modern era, the West was sustained by a sense that the world was a Cosmos, an integrated whole wherein every person and thing had its ordained place. As Michel de Certeau (1988:148) explains: before the full impact of modernity, it was "accepted that morality and religion have the same source; reference to a single God organizes at once a historical revelation and an order of the cosmos; it supposes Christian institutions to constitute the legible form of a law of the world. Society is built in terms of an integrative belief". For centuries the world was held together by a scriptural 'voice' - a re-assuring knowledge that was read directly out of scripture and tradition and into the world.

In a philosophical context, 'logos' came to refer to the structure or order that ultimately pervades reality and renders it intelligible; it refers also to the source of that order, to accounts of it, and to the human capacity to recognize and comprehend it. The logos ensures that there is a continuity - a relationship of necessity - between the world, knowledge of the world, and the means - including revelation, language and reason - through which that knowledge is acquired. As Tillich (1968:326) put the idea: "The universe has been created by an intelligent power, the divine ground, and since the world has been intelligently built, intelligence can grasp it".

In assuming - albeit transforming - this logos-structure, humanism is inherently universalist not only with its premise of a shared human nature, but with its premise of a shared underlying ground of all existence. Together, these premises establish continuity between humanism and the universalizing tendency in the theology of religions. Indeed the universalist idea of 'religion' itself arose contemporaneously

with humanism, Marsilio Ficino giving currency to the term in his book, *De Christiana Religione* (1474). For Ficino religious awareness is universal, "indeed, the fundamental distinguishing human characteristic, innate, natural, and primary. It is the divinely provided instinct that makes man man, by which he perceives and worships God". (Smith, 1964:34). After the Renaissance, the idea that all people possess an innate religious impulse - a shared orientation to the logos - evolved and culminated in the Enlightenment universalism of Kant, Hegel Schleiermacher and later Tillich among many others. As part of the Enlightenment project it subsequently became a dominating master-concept within the universalist discourse of modernity, mandating, for example, religious studies as a specialist academic field and framing the current discourse within which religious diversity is made to manifest itself as a problem.

The ascendancy of this master-concept was also directly linked to European imperialism - an epochal force that is now manifest as globalization. Certeau has analyzed the West's exposure to the Other in the early Modern period, pointing "to disruptions, ambiguities, and the excesses of otherness as they infest the early evolution of modern thinking and rationalism. These were all eventually to be suppressed by a developing scientism and the politicization of the religious in the name of an economic, technological, and political progress" that became the modern nation-state and later assumed the aura of authority that had once belonged to the Church (Ward 1997a:595). As the scriptural 'voice' declined, the voice of the State was heard - both made claims of universal authority and in both cases the disruptiveness of the Other was suppressed.

However, the rise of the nation-state and a universalizing humanism did not compensate for the steady decline of Christianity. The early modern period initiated processes that continue to express themselves throughout contemporary Western culture. Arendt (1955:82) notes that when Europe "began to prescribe its laws to all other continents, it so happened that she herself had already lost her belief". And as Clarke (1997:30-1) argues in his history of the West's ever-growing fascination with the East: "at the very beginning of the modern period, at all levels from the intellectual and cultural to the political and economic, Europe underwent a profound transformation amounting to a radical discontinuity with its past". The eruption of modernity served "first, to create a painful void in the spiritual and intellectual heart of Europe; and second, to beget geopolitical conditions which facilitated the passage of alternative world-views from the east" (Clarke 1997:34). For Needham (1969:22), the Renaissance, Reformation and the Scientific Revolution produced widespread cultural instability that amounted to a "schizophrenia of the soul". Kiernan (1972:12) concurs: in the early modern era the West was "plunged for rejuvenation into a cauldron of Medea. It was...a more radical transformation than any of the other big regions [of the world] experienced". Overall, this 'profound rupture', and 'trauma' combined with global expansionism to produce the Orientalist appropriation of 'the East', understood as a rich cultural resource for the use of the West. It is from this

long-term tendency of cultural appropriation that the theology of religions must dissociate itself.

The cultural crisis of the West is ongoing. Although humanism derived its essential principle of universalism from the philosophical tradition it shared with Christianity, the linkage of religion and humanism proved quite problematic, not the least because humanism itself came to assume characteristics of a religious movement, operating in tension with central streams of Christianity, for which humanism came to exemplify the Promethean arrogance of modernity. This suspicion has come to seem well founded in the 20th Century, which has seen several hundred million people die at human hands in wars and state-initiated violence. We have already noted the consequent cultural despair, anti-humanism and postmodernism within philosophy, cognate fields and culture generally. Thus, Carroll (1993) declares that we live amidst the ruins of the 600-year old humanist project: "around us is that colossal wreck. Our culture is a flat expanse of rubble. It hardly offers shelter from a mild cosmic breeze, never mind one of those icy gales that regularly return to rip people out of the cozy intimacy of their daily lives and confront them with oblivion" (Carroll 1993:1).

The genealogy of theoretical anti-humanism is well known, involving Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, etc. (Dews 1987; Kearney 1994; Bendle 1996). In proposing the deconstruction of the Western philosophical tradition, anti-humanism developed the primordial insight of Nietzsche, whom Heidegger identified as the "last metaphysician": God is dead and there is no logos. Consequently, the world is ultimately undetermined and chaotic - Chaos threatens to engulf Cosmos and over everything looms the unpredictable threat of the Other. Humanity and civilization hover above the Abyss that they confront as the ultimate (non)meaning and destiny of life. Western civilization and all its institutions, values, laws, moralities, religions, metaphysics and ideals of truth are revealed as facades and illusions constructed to evade the existential terror of confrontation with the Void. As Conrad shows in *The Heart of Darkness,* Kurtz's 'horror' lies at the heart of the West's 'civilizing mission' to the realms of the Other - realms it may penetrate but never comprehend or possess and which promise ultimate engulfment and dissolution. The inevitable outcome of this cultural despair is "the abyss of annihilation". (Lehman, 1991:41). As Himmelfarb (1994:6) puts it: "....the abyss has grown deeper and more perilous, with new and more dreadful terrors lurking at the bottom. The beasts of modernism have mutated into the beasts of postmodernism - relativism into nihilism, amorality into immorality, irrationality into insanity..."

Theologically, the implications of this are profound. The totality and unity of the world are fractured and there is no ladder via reason to God. Repelled at the prospect, Tillich (1968:326-7) claimed that "there is a necessary logos element in all theology. Any theology which does not have an understanding of the universal character of the logos structure of the world, and that means reason in the sense of

logos, becomes barbaric and ceases to be theology." More recently, Ward (1997a:589) notes that "the death of God is the death of identity, *telos*, and therefore meaning in anything but a local and pragmatic sense. That death has led to a new emphasis upon the immanent flux, the material, the body and its desires - all of which deny there is anything 'higher' or 'out there'". Humanity is driven to engage with the world if it is to encounter the divine.

In the humanities, these tendencies - which are ultimately metaphysical - have found axiological expression as culturalism. In general terms, the culturalist paradigm proceeds from the following principles (Bendle 1996). (1) The world is without foundation, and entities (including human beings) have no essential natures. (2) Instead, the world is text, a vast constellation of symbolic orders. (3) Ultimate reality is unknowable or opaque to reason; thought and knowledge are merely the intermediation of symbols, concepts and texts. (4) Human capacity for knowledge is preformed by cultural and somatic life. (5) The self, identities and the subjective are cultural and historical constructions that are increasing untenable and liable to fragmentation and dissociation. (6) It is no longer possible to separate knowledge and human interests. In the contemporary world, knowledge and power are increasingly collapsing into each other (e.g., as Foucault's power/knowledge) - with profound implications for all forms of study and dialogue.

It seems highly unlikely that the traditional ontotheological platform of Western metaphysics can (or should) be reconstituted. Consequently, it is from this contemporary cultural location that Western thought now confronts the world and must seek to address the challenge of religious diversity. Given the sensitivity and importance of the issues at stake here, it should be noted in passing that we are seeing the emergence of a neo-humanism that attempts to work with this new paradigm while retaining essential traditional humanist values. Martha Nussbaum (1997), for example, persuasively argues for the "cultivation of humanity" based on the principles of critical self-examination, the ideal of the world citizen and the development of the narrative imagination.

It is possible now to identify two main tendencies of this emerging postmetaphysical paradigm that are of particular relevance to the question of religious diversity. One, which takes a lead from Heidegger and Derrida, is deconstructive and emphasizes difference and deferral as disruptive forces within the cognitive, axiological, and metaphysical discourses of Unity and Totality that characterize Western thought. Derrida follows Heidegger in developing a postmetaphysical critique of logocentrism, denying the ontotheological presuppositions of thought, that there exists any ground of being, or that there is a fundamental, universally determinant order to existence. Consequently, there cannot exist any inherent and determinant congruity or continuity between ultimate reality and the human capacity for knowledge of it. Instead, knowledge is contingent - a construction of language games and like language games merely conventional and subject to the play of power.

In the humanities, this post-metaphysical critique has generated great

controversy. Nevertheless, it now frames the discourse within which the challenge of religious diversity must be confronted. In particular, this perspective denies that there is any logos, any underlying logical and rational structure to the world that can serve as the foundations for a comprehensive, integrated account of religious diversity. Any such accounts can only be provisional and are never free of the play of power/knowledge. Not only are such foundational assessments of the religions of the world not available, it is also not tenable to comprehend religious diversity in any way which reduces or denies Difference or Otherness: in particular, ontotheologies or salvational schemes cannot be generalized. Even the liberal and pragmatic universalism of Prof. Charlesworth may not be generalizable, as some religious communities - Christian and non-Christian - may not recognize or allow the exercise of the reciprocal tolerance and pluralism that his "operational credo" presupposes.

The second main postmodern tendency of interest to the question of religious diversity is constructivist and develops a form of Nietzschean vitalism into what might be termed the *paradigm of desire*. Instead of universalism, it emphasizes boundaries and constraints. It places human embodiment at the centre of analysis and posits desire as a form of pervasive and relentless Will that manifests itself in libidinal, emotional, and instinctual forms that seek always to transgress these limits. In theology, Cupitt, for example, draws from Foucault and Deleuze and describes his own thought as a *Lebensphilosophie* - as an outlook that is monistic and naturalistic and appeals to the flux of life (Ward 1997a:588).

In this fashion, there is a retreat from Cosmos to Chaos, but the latter is a space not just of anxiety, destruction and death but also of exuberance, creativity and Eros. It becomes perhaps what Derrida calls the *Khora,* a nonfoundational and heterogeneous source that cannot be reached or grasped, and which becomes in the feminist work of Irigaray and Kristeva, "an unstable, mysterious, ungrounding origin...a febrile, irreducible, divine spacing...a dark, ineffable place from which the semiotic rhythms issue which demand and destabilize the symbolic". (Ward 1997b:xxxiii-xxxiv). Religious diversity then becomes an event to celebrate as the fecund *Khora* of humanity's spiritual creativity. Such a vision is not dissimilar to that of Corbin who argued that it is of the very nature of the divine that it manifests itself - i.e., enters into the realm of being - as the fecund plurality of the world (Charlesworth 1997:44-5). Corbin was in fact radicalizing the potential of the phenomenological approach to the study of religions (Nasr 1996:26). A similar radicalization was accomplished by Levinas who did not focus upon phenomena as distinct from essences, but rather solely upon phenomena *per se* as the only available mode of manifestation of being within the world. The emphasis therefore is on the study of the world in all its multiplicity as the primary concern and not as a mere phenomenal manifestation of an underlying unifying essence.

The key to this authentically pluralist approach is the shift advocated by Levinas from the ontotheological to the ethical as the 'first philosophy' through which religious diversity is comprehended (Bendle 1998). This shift proceeds from the

principle - also derived from Levinas - that the Other is not a secondary or provisional presence whose destiny is incorporation in the unity and totality of the Self. Quite the contrary - the Other has a primary - indeed primordial - presence as **that towards which desire projects itself.** The Self engages with the Other, not in a struggle for domination and incorporation, but rather in a dance or play of possibilities - of engagement, care, surrender, ecstasy, even *jouissance.* It seeks not to absorb the other but to complete itself with the Other and, in so doing, to complete the Other with its Self. The relationship of the Self with the Other is not even primarily cognitive but affectional, desiring. Within this paradigm of desire, the aim would be to encounter religions not within the abstractions of theological speculation, but via the everyday life-worlds of religious communities and their members, especially through the various stages of growth and change, and all the moments of exaltation and crisis - birth, love, grief, death, etc. - through which all people must pass. Such an approach would also seek to embrace the embeddedness of human groups within nature as a pivotal source of spiritual awareness, focussing not only on the major world religions but also on the existing and resurgent chthonic traditions associated with shamanism and other primal religions in the West and elsewhere.

In conclusion, it might also be suggested that the world of religious diversity could be approached in the spirit of Bakhtin's (1965) image of the carnivalesque - an anarchic festival during which freedom is unleashed, traditional hierarchies are inverted and authorities transgressed. Similar note could be taken of Maffesoli's (1993) critique of the 'productivist ethic' of modern capitalism and his argument that the effervescence of the collective consciousness is throwing up new spiritual phenomena that stand in stark tension to globalized capitalism. Overall, the posture towards religious diversity suggested here is one of celebration of its potential, and contestation of those globalizing forces that would normalize and routinize one of humanity's greatest forces for creative interaction, change and growth.

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