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Debra Erickson  
Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum

Diversity and complexity are facts of contemporary life. The large majority of Americans live in cities; even those who don’t are affected daily by a globalizing world. Society is an ongoing negotiation among relative strangers. The ethical project set forth here—"critical reflection on morality" in the context of diversity—could not be more urgent.

Some seek comfort in imagined uniformity—ethnic purity, fundamentalist certainty, nationalistic superiority—but Schweiker knows these won’t hold up much beyond enclaves small enough to be defined by face-to-face relationships. But he also knows we cannot move to the other extreme and say difference alone defines us, so total relativism is inevitable. We must seek morality as defined by our own cultural norms while doing ethical reflection and negotiation in a
pluralistic setting.

One key to this ethical project is constantly seeking overlapping values and interests capable of creating a society out of many different individuals, cultures, and communities. In Sacred Circles, Public Squares, our work on religion and the urban culture of Indianapolis, we found several kinds of broader values shared by different individuals, interest groups, and cultures across the metropolis.

Schweiker is right to point to sports; where else do tens of thousands gather while hundreds of thousands watch on tv, all wearing team colors? Perhaps more substantially, we found a widely-shared commitment to economic progress. Critics are not wrong to see risks in economic growth alone as our common bond, but most members of a society share a sense that a rising tide will lift their boat, too (and when they do not share that sense, their despair becomes a defining social fact).

Most striking, in Indianapolis at least, was a shared commitment to citizenship and patriotism Blind nationalism is frightening, but a common interest in living in a good city built on fair play, individual liberty, democracy, and hard work is pretty appealing, even if the reality falls well short of the ideal.

Where do such civilly-religious values leave traditional religion? Strong as ever, in one sense, but inevitably more localized. “Privatized” is not quite right. Religions have many public faces. But any culturally-specific religious tradition is less likely to provide the overlapping, shared values throughout a city or society, and any attempt to push religion into that role will probably cause more hostility and resentment than commonweal.

In our observation, religious organizations build smaller, more local, bridges. They develop the character of their adherents and provide a place for them to consider the broader context—do ethical reflection—through the lens of specific moral content. Adherents learn to live out their specific values and to look for ways to live in a world defined by other values too.

Some view this localization of religion in the city as a great loss. They remember Sunday Blue Laws, downtown Easter sunrise services, and sermons printed in the weekly newspaper as positive signs of social integration. They remember when religion provided moral content, and moral judgment, for the whole city.

What they don’t always remember is that this was never religion-in-general, but always a particular brand of religion that inevitably privileged some and excluded others. The contraction of this public religion paved the way for greater inclusion. In Indianapolis, a city in which Jews and Catholics experienced nativist prejudice in the early 20th century, post-World War II anti-communism in the 1950s provided
Perhaps these broader bonds—sports, prosperity, patriotic citizenship—merely delay the inevitable, creating larger tribes but failing to create a universal ethic. But it says here that the ethical project is a process, not a dealt hand. If Protestant liberals, Protestant Conservatives, Catholics and Jews learn to live in cities where each can nurture their culturally-specific morality but also do the critical ethical work of negotiating a society based on shared, but inevitably more generalized, values, that’s progress. If they seek values overlap with Muslims or non-theists or others, that’s progress too.

In cities with millions, on a planet with billions, one culturally-specific worldview is not going to emerge victorious. But ethics must nonetheless grow from such specific morality, even if grows from several at once. It will be painful at times, but we must learn to do the specific work and the more general, reflective work simultaneously. Professor Schweiker has called us to roll up our sleeves and get at it.

Arthur E. Farnsley II
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William Schweiker's paper examines the “interesting and complex connections between the image of the city and the origins of religious and non-religious ethics.” I live in the world of medicine and surgery, at a large urban academic medical center. Every day, the question arises: how can we better care for an individual who has suffered some calamity, but has no one who will take responsibility, spend time, and incur cost to care for him, because he has no insurance, no money, and perhaps is not even a citizen of our country?

By conversing with an ER doctor from some hospital in our metropolis who has requested our assistance, I become intimately involved with the fate of that person and the question, what has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Each June, I recite with a new crop of medical school graduates a modernized oath of Hippocrates, and each Sunday I read and reflect on Hebrew biblical texts and words of Jesus. For me, when that same question is posed, what does “Greek rationalism have to do with biblical revelation?” the answer is: they walk arm in arm through my life as if they belonged together.

But the tension between reason and revelation represented by the two cities continues to be the subject of debate. In some ways, the two concepts are naturally antagonistic and represent two separate realms of human experience. There are those for whom the very ideas of religious belief and faith are repugnant and naive in this age of
scientific and technological progress. These outspoken atheists elevate their concept of science to the status of yet another religion that denies the spiritual, the transcendent, or the possibility of the unknown. It's all there, waiting for the theory of everything.

But there are also those who believe that there may be, in fact, limits to the intellectual and scientific analysis of subjects such as cosmology or the neural basis for consciousness. A scientist's religion, or lack thereof, has no direct bearing on work in particle physics. A believer is free to accept and invite scientific discovery, not as a challenge to belief, but as evidence of God’s awesome and infinite creation. Then, there are those who bend and distort science to fit their preconceived religious ideas; essentially resorting to irrational analysis in an effort to support their specific revelation.

It can be very confusing out there in the “city.” But it remains a vibrant and energetic arena both for science and technology and religions in general. The rise of Islam, the explosive growth of Christian churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and the continued interest in and identification with religion and spirituality in North America make clear the ongoing vitality of religion and religious thought throughout the world.

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The Martin Marty Center celebrated its 10th Anniversary in February 2008, with a two-day conference on the theme “Religion in the City.” Coincidentally, the February 8 issue of the journal “Science” published a special section on the global phenomenon of cities. In twelve articles, scientists reported and reflected on the 21st century’s “mass embrace of city life,” with its attendant problems and solutions.

Here is where I want to connect with Schweiker's focus on that which makes the city “crucial to the origin of ethics.” That is, the idea of “political existence” or “the ability to debate and discuss in community... enabling the orientation of social life.” This can occur in many ways, including artistic expression, writing, reporting, political involvement, etc. The freedom to engage in that discourse is a privilege and blessing; it is worth noting that in ancient Athens (and Rome and elsewhere), the arts and letters flourished during times of peace.

So, what is being written about the city from a scientific perspective? First, cities are now responsible for 75% of global energy consumption, and 80% of greenhouse gas emissions. One sees a huge worldwide shift from rural to city life. In 1900, 10% of the world’s population lived in cities; in 2005, >50% of all people resided in cities, and that trend is accelerating. The general thought has been that the city offers a greater chance for economic growth, richer market structures, and proximity to needed services.

However, especially in populous countries like China and India, rapid
urban growth already strains the ability of humans and the ecosystem
to respond to the demand for services and the burden of debris and
waste and environmental degradation. According to the United
Nations, more than 1 billion people now live in slums. There is no
historical precedent for the new city that exists in the 21st century. The
mega-city, with populations of greater than 10 million people, spawns
environments that engender hopelessness, fear and social isolation for
its inhabitants. Despite this, well run cities “...will be one of the key
factors in the ongoing battle against poverty” (State of the World’s

Will countries that are fortunate to possess wealth and resources also
have the foresight and moral will to respond to the complexities
inherent in the evolution of the “re-imagined” city? Who will hear the
cry and give “political existence” to the child wandering the streets of
Lagos? Will there emerge political leaders who will respond to “the
other” with wisdom and restraint?

When we think of the task confronting our earth and its people, and
future generations, it is no wonder that “revelation” takes center
stage. Socrates, Moses, Jesus – each spoke words offering direction
and moral insight that have resonated with people for generation upon
generation. If technology and science function in a moral vacuum, we
are doomed. We need Jesus, Socrates, Moses – ethical frameworks,
careful analysis, good governance – to meet the challenges of the city
and its people.

Douglas Anderson
Loyola University

Anonymous

Posted: 09 Apr 2008 22:30    Post subject: Laura Sumner Truax's response to
William Schweiker

Christ came to redeem individuals. Christ came to redeem communities.

I write as a pastor of an inner city church with a long history of social
justice. For almost 50 years, we have been actively engaged in the
truth that individual and community salvation is always at work in the
gospel message. In the 1960’s this was a suspicious message for a
non-denominational evangelical church, in 2008, it has now found place
right in the very heart of evangelical faith as our world has shrunk
creating the awareness that we are all related by our choices and
actions.

I was most struck by Professor Schweiker’s observation that the city is
a place that helps shape who we are as persons and that who we are
as persons shapes the type of city we form. One key role of the church
is to rise to the challenge of contributing to the health and life of the
city with the same energy and verve we have for contributing to the
salvation of individuals. When we begin to practically live our challenge of being a community embedded in community, then we begin to view all of our lives as one seamless act of worship and service.

This has immediate implications for the way we as leaders “do church” as we realize that the message of the urban church is one that consistently addresses the needs of people inside and outside our doors, then we are not preaching and living the full message of Jesus.

First, “doing church” means that what the church engages with always have individual and society dimensions. The church doesn’t stand apart from the rich complexity of the urban issues we all face. The church becomes the place of ongoing transformation by being the place of discussion, engagement and practical incubator of forming community. The church is the place where the thorny issues of globalization are boiled down to size as neighbors from different economic groups, political persuasions, and religious identities come together around topics as sustainable wages, housing issues, and handgun control.

Secondly, the church doesn’t do church alone. Rather the church begins to see itself as a body that builds partnerships with other agencies and institutions to be advocates for what a rich diverse community of neighbors can offer each other and always paying particular attention to those who are often sidelined from the centers of power.

The shalom we seek is vast and requires the active engagement of partners. The city needs churches who imagine itself as part of an inner-connected web of urban life, instead of a one-stop shopping, free-standing, mega store.

In our own congregation we have formed partnerships with agencies all over the city – not just in the traditional manner of resourcing folks who need social services, but we partner with artists and writers as we considered the implications of labor (on the eve of a city council discussion on living wages); we have partnered with others to build housing for lower-income senior citizens; and we are continuing to create a community of people who are diverse in race, income, and education.

It’s challenging to do more than tolerate, it’s challenging to invest in community that is bigger than you and it’s incredibly challenging to be willing to let others form you as you form them as people. But it seems pretty clear that was the message of Jesus as he redeemed people and their communities.

It feels to me like there has never been a better time to be engaged in this kind of work.

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Rev. Laura Sumner Truax
LaSalle Street Church, Chicago

Anonymous


William Schweiker’s essay on the location and origins of ethics brings a host of issues to the fore. I was present for the oral presentation and discussion, and found both stimulating. In the days before I flew out to Chicago, I was putting into production one of the most stimulating books I have had the honor to work on in nineteen years at Orbis Books.

I refer to the work of Jehu J. Hanciles (Fuller Seminary), “Beyond Christendom: How Globalization Is Transforming World Christianity” (forthcoming, Orbis Books 2009). Hanciles, born in Sierra Leone (PhD, Edinburgh), is a historian by trade, has a take that I find interesting. I had also been reading Lamin Sanneh’s “Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity” (Oxford 2008). This work by these two African scholars formed the backdrop for what my thoughts about global cities and ethical reflection.

First, Professor Schweiker’s distinction between ethics and morality is exactly right, in my opinion. The nature of ethics is to question and weigh the rights and wrongs of inherited moral systems. And his quote from Nietzsche (“Morality is the best of all devices for leading mankind around by the nose”) is exactly right, too, for conventional morality easily becomes the dead, stultifying hand of unexamined tradition (to paraphrase Kant’s view on what “enlightenment” seeks to overcome). The opposite is also true, however. Tradition can be life giving and liberative. Discerning when it is one or the other is the task of ethics, and it is often a matter of weighing imponderables.

One problem that we face today in formulating an ethical analysis of our global situation is the whirlpool in which the many vectors of globalization hurl bearers of the world’s great civilizational and religious traditions into orbits that collide with one another. It is almost as if the world had become one large Fermilab or CERN particle accelerator.

Trying to make sense of the maelstrom, intellectuals such as we who read Marty Center posts, including ethicists, could be compared to the men and women in white coats at Fermilab or CERN. The problem, of course, is that we all know today that objectivity, whether in the humanities or the physical and social sciences, is impossible. And those who try to prescind from a particular religious or cultural point of view import assumptions of which they are hardly aware. Or they become part of that great ‘tertium quid’ (“third something” in scholastic terminology) — deracinated, detraditioned intellectuals who have formed their own hermeneutical circle. The most unfortunate of them think theirs really would be universal, if only they could give everyone a Chicago, Sorbonne, Tokyo University, or Oxford education.
I don’t say that to knock them. But as I read the letter pages of The New York Times, I am daily reminded that many of them really do believe they represent a universally valid point of view. In fact, their makeup is, psychologically, little different from that of a local imam, rabbi, priest, or teacher who reads the world from a monocultural Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, or Hindu perspective, wishing everyone would embrace his or her tradition’s vision.

Conversation after Professor Schweiker’s presentation moved into a discussion of globalization and its discontents. I cannot remember the train of thought exactly, but what was at play, in my opinion, is the way in which the global becomes real only in the local. Much globalization talk, of course, is carried on as if there were some already out there now, real, universal entity acting on the world. As Roland Robertson and others remind us, however, although factors such as the banking and finance system, the availability of cheap transportation, and electronic communications media are ubiquitous, they are not universal in their effects.

As these forces have an impact on, say, Yoruba relations with northern Muslims in Nigeria, masters of French cuisine in the face of McDonald’s, or the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party watching the tour of the Olympic torch, they set up reactions that differ enormously from one place to another. These reactions more often than not lead people become more we-group conscious and to accentuate their particular identities. Few embrace some supposedly ideal, self-transcending solution to their problem — except as a last resort.

‘Athens’ stands for Western cultural assumptions that reason can – if it works very hard – get to truth buried by myths or hidden from direct scrutiny. It is updated in the modern era to the assumption that we approach truth asymptotically though a self-correcting process of sifting evidence. ‘Jerusalem’ stands for an assumption that a concrete universal is capable of being revealed or discerned (and the difference between those verbs is important) at Sinai, beneath the Bodhi tree, or on Calvary and Easter morning. Such events are believed able to disclose transcendent wisdom that human beings should appropriate over a lifetime and understand, somehow, in a cloud of knowing unknowing. Scientific “truth” need not be denied, but it and religious “truth” live as different dimensions of one world. Ethics, on that view of things, tries to sort out issues of good, better, best, bad, worse, worst, nugatory, and obligatory, taking both dimensions seriously.

Jehu Hanciles’ analysis of globalization shows exactly how thin is the layer of scholars, scientists, engineers, bankers, traders, professors, and computer programmers who read English and talk with one another. They personify globalization, but their reach into the local is often superficial. Hanciles’ research points to migration bringing peoples with a Jerusalem view of truth to Schweiker’s “global cities.”
My ‘tertium quid’ – the sort of people who write to The New York Times, The Strait Times, and the Tokyo Shinbun – tends to find their worldview primitive and dangerous. (Gentle Reader: I peek at the letters to the editor of The Sun-Times and The Chicago Tribune from time to time. As a group, they are much less dogmatic and much more grounded, at least in this former Iowan’s perspective.) Hanciles’s migrants are capable of technological and scientific sophistication while retaining a Jerusalem orientation to how one knows what is ultimate.

Schweiker suggests that we need “new and creative forms of ethical reflection to meet the global challenges we face as a species.” I agree. There is a new sort of African, Asian, and Latin American coming along, I believe – epitomized by Hanciles and his Yale colleague, the Gambian Lamin Sanneh – whose voices we need to listen to. They are also skeptical about accepting Kantian or Nietzschean dicta as absolute. They are often much better grounded in a sense of how stubbornly plural our world is. Finally, they are less apt to take the standards of classic “liberal” modernity as the gold standard of intellectual life as we seek to imagine more humane futures for suffering humanity and distressed earth.

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Anonymous

Posted: 17 Apr 2008 20:57    Post subject: Terry Clark’s reply to William Schweiker

Urban Scenes as New Ethical Locales

I would like to pursue William Schweiker’s closing comments. He notes two types of ethics, labeled here “fundamentalist” and “cosmopolitan.” The tensions between these two ethics drive other ethical developments that deserve mapping and interpretation. I quote:

1. We see in the global whirl a rise of fundamentalism since these movements claim that one’s identity must be formed around one description, say Hindu or Christian or Muslim.
2. For others, this is the possibility for people to form complex identities that allow them to identify with others who have complex identities as well. While you might be a Hindu and I am Christian, we are nevertheless also Americans, social progressives, and fans of the Chicago Fire.

In the context of the modern city, the cosmopolitan style has often been stressed—by such social theorists as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim to contemporary observers and city residents. But even within such cities, the intensity and success of cosmopolitanism is one source of the new “whirl of fundamentalism” that Schweiker notes.
Major shifts in recent decades have transformed established social arrangements. It is helpful to identify some of these to specify arenas where ethical analysis could be distinctly useful.

*The decline of agriculture and of industry and their associated ethical/political arrangements. First is the ethic involving feudal personal ties, clientelist politics, and patronage characteristic of agricultural societies. Second is the class politics, union-management conflict, and the have/have not imagery they encourage. While these two ethics are still dominant in most of the world, they are under serious criticism. Why?
*The rise of post-industrial society, which encourages a more global and cosmopolitan perspective.
*The rise of mass education and sense of individual self-worth and independence, leading to more efforts to choose new ethical systems and more.
*The explosion of communications with old and new media: internet, fax, cell phones, cheap air fare, personal automobiles, etc. which provide more choice options, ethical and other.
*The decline of primordial attachments: race, class, gender, and religion as closed social systems. People have more options as old barriers weaken, and individual choice is seen a more broadly legitimate even for fundamental choices like choosing marriage partners and new regions communities.
*These weakening of psychological/cultural barriers that disturbed Socrates, Rousseau, and Nietzsche creates new issues: it is leading many persons to search to create new forms of ethics to give deeper meaning to their lives. How?

Especially in larger global cities, these background factors generate new options, but in this short comment, I want to stress one type of factor, the Scene. As used here, Scenes include five components: a small geographic territory like a neighborhood, physical structures like buildings and churches, distinct types of people, engaging in activities like going to the church, pursing values that give meaning to these activities and the locale. Scenes are further classified using 15 dimensions of legitimacy, theatricality, and authenticity. These are the analytical dimensions that variously combine to describe empirical locations. Each of these dimensions implies, if not full ethical systems, then at least a micro-ethic. Our "Grammar of Scenes" is outlined below.

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A Model of Scenes

Theatricality: Scenes generate a chance to see and be seen, shaping the bearing and manners of their members. Participants can enjoy the essentially social pleasure of beautifully performing a role or a part, or of watching others do so. This is the pleasure of appearances, the way we display ourselves to others and see their images in turn.
Subdimensions of Theatricality and examples:
Glamour: Standing on the red carpet at Cannes gazing at the stars going by
Formality: Going to the opera in a gown or white tie and tails
Transgression: Watching a performance artist pierce his skin
Neighborliness: Attending a performance by the community orchestra
Exhibitionism: Jumping onto a raised platform to dance in front of a crowd at a rave

Authenticity: The human possibility to be realized in a scene, even where it is highly theatrical, may also be defined by the extent to which a scene affirms a sense of rootedness, confirming or reshaping the primordial identity of their members. Participants may seek the pleasure of having a common sense of what makes for a real or genuine experience. This is the pleasure of identity, the affirmation of who we are at bottom and what it means to be genuine and real rather than fake and phony.

Subdimensions of Authenticity and examples:
Local: Listening to the blues in the Checkerboard Lounge, birthplace of the Chicago blues
Ethic: Recognizing the twang of Appalachia in the Stanley Bros.’ Voices
Corporate: Not attending a Britney Spears show because she is a corporate creation
State: Visiting the Gettysburg Battlefield
Rational: Reveling in the cosmic scope of human reason at a planetarium

Legitimacy: In addition to their theatricality and authenticity, scenes may be defined by a judgment about what is right and wrong, how one ought to live, structuring the legitimacy of social consumption, shaping the beliefs and intentions of their members. Participants can seek the pleasure of a common sense of being in the right or rejecting those in the wrong. This is the pleasure of a good will, intending to act on what one takes to be valid beliefs.

Subdimensions of Legitimacy and Examples:
Traditional: Sharing in the stability and assurance of hearing Mozart performed in the Vienna State Opera as you believe it was earlier
Utilitarian: Attending a benefit concert because it contributes to positive outcomes.
Egalitarian: Savoring the democratic implications of a crafts fair
Self-Expressive: Enjoying hearing a jazz musician play something that could only be improvised spontaneously at that particular moment
Charismatic: Watching a Chicago Bulls game because of the charismatic aura of Michael Jordan rather than because one is a Chicagoan

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Following Schweiker’s two types, some scenes are more closed, such
as those fostering tradition and localism. Others are more open, such
the transgressive and self-expressive types of scenes. More generally,
a large city permits the simultaneous creation of many scenes that
cosmopolitan individuals can move across to enjoy; in the process they
reinforce their distinctive individually, identities, and ethical systems.
They transform the scenes via interaction and participation. In the past
race, class, and gender seemed to dominate many discussions; we
suggest adding scenes to help open a new door on analysis. Ethics is
key.

With our students and my faculty colleagues Lawrence Rothfield and
Daniel Silver, we have papers and a book in progress on Scenes as
new components of life. These detail new options in our more open,
volutaristic, and value-driven societies. We join our theories with
indicators for Scene dimensions for all of the 40,000 odd zip codes in
the US and analogous data in several other countries. More detail is on
our site: http://www.tnc-newsletter.blogspot.com/

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