

## Revisiting global awareness and engagement in a time of multiple pandemics

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"The novel coronavirus is not just something for leaders to "get through" for a few days or weeks. Instead, we need to treat COVID-19 as an economic and cultural blizzard, winter, and beginning of a "little ice age" — a once-in-a-lifetime change that is likely to affect our lives and organizations for years."—Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard (March 2020)

"Every declared rupture is an undeclared repetition"—Gayatri C. Spivak (1999, 333).



### Contexts

On the North American continent , after more than seven months of "sheltering in place" and *physical* distancing as part of one's social responsibility demanded by the COVID-19 health emergency, the Coronavirus pandemic continues to command attention in the public square, and as it does, it has rendered more prominent the historic infirmities of the continent not just in the areas of economy, environment, governance, health, and culture, but also in politics, public discourse, technology, and in what Robert Bellah called "habits of the heart" (1985). People are afraid; people are angry, people are frustrated; people are defiant; people are distrustful; people are confused; people are impatient. Very little seems to have been accomplished to "flatten the curve" while societal infrastructures seem to remain ineffective in successfully addressing COVID-19, not to mention the re-emerging historic infirmities. Citizens live with a culture of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and scarcity.

These historic infirmities have been rightly called the "old normal" by some because they have plagued our world , unevenly to be sure, for at least the past five hundred years. Many peoples of this continent, not to mention our planet continue to be: 1) *dispersed, displaced, and dislocated*; 2) *their identities profoundly racialized and ethnicized*; 3) *as well as gendered and sexualized*; 4) *their lives callously commodified and pathologized*; 5) *their contexts militarized and securitized*; and 6) *their bodies and memories incarcerated, rendered invisible, erased or forgotten* (CWW, 2017; Derrida, 1995; Foucault, 1980; Spivak, 2010). Moreover, for many it feels as if the worlds of power, privilege, and legitimacy are simultaneously

experienced both as even more explicitly and unapologetically predatory and inherently violent—sometimes invisible—almost inescapably authoritarian, undeniably xenophobic, deeply apathetic to collective wisdom and truth-seeking/speaking, and definitely aporophobic. One even wonders what new operative forms of meaning are wrought by these multiple pandemics that serve as new forms of subjection: incitement, provocation, intensification, and seduction—captured in the wise observation of Gayatri C. Spivak that “Every declared rupture is an undeclared repetition” (1999, 333).

That said, these multiple pandemics have also been marked by equally historic human capacities for “acts of justice and acts of mercy”—worldwide—including demonstrations of hospitality, solidarity, and social responsibility (in what has come to be known as “global civil society”); as well as expressions of self-sacrifice, patriotic duty, and accountability (among, for example, first-responders, health care providers, and even law enforcement). New forms of collaboration, cooperation, and alliances between and among the private and public sectors in the service of the “common good” also have emerged, although their long time sustainability, not to mention whether these changes are substantive or merely self-serving still remains to be seen. Creativity, innovation, and flexibility, in education, for example, (with the pivot to emergency remote learning), have also marked the pandemic landscape worldwide although whether these pivots are temporary or are long-term civilizational responses to the crisis still needs to be demonstrated.

To put the matter simply, perhaps even counter-intuitively, these multiple pandemics seem to be posing a serious challenge to our fundamental assumptions about and practices of *human community and identity*, more generally, and in accredited graduate theological education, more specifically. They may be interpreted as inviting us to revisit the best in who we are as a species, particularly in terms of diversity, solidarity, and community; of hospitality, social responsibility, and friendship; of trust, joy, and love; and, of resistance and struggle, as well as accountability, humility, kindness, forgiveness, trust and decency. Whatever challenges, uncertainties, even dangers these multiple pandemics have wrought, one thing seems to remain constant. Our world sorely needs, on the one hand, a personal quiet resolve to be good and kind, and on the other hand, an institutional commitment to be just and humble—all of which are made possible by what many faith- and religious-based traditions understand as the capacity of human beings to be accountable to “the good, the true, and the beautiful” that are both within and without each of us—with God’s help.

### Questions

Those of us who are engaged in accredited graduate theological education—some of which are intentionally global in reach or aspiration at the same time that they are fiercely local in commitment and location—must continuously be attentive to the “old normal,” rather than focus on the so-called “new normal” which seems to be the metaphor of choice these days. We need to keep asking: In what ways are these multiple “old” and “new” pandemics interrelated? And *if they are* how can our normative/aspirational, and mandatory responses to them be more fully and effectively articulated? What forms of intersectional analyses are required? What learning, teaching, and research pedagogies and strategies are needed? What *theological* and

*ministerial*, not to mention, political engagements and interventions are demanded? What dispositional, behavioral and institutional changes are necessary? Or to put it in the insightful language of UNESCO, what should the “**Next Normal**” look like?

In this context, what does global awareness and engagement look like strategically and programmatically in these times of multiple pandemics, particularly when ATS member schools and global partners are focused mainly on addressing the pressing and *immediate* challenges that face their respective communities about and to which they feel primary responsibility and accountability—where the *global* challenge of the crisis looms so large that the only seemingly apparent credible response is *local* engagement? How does one continue to appreciate and embody the spirit of global awareness and engagement especially in a context where, on the one hand, we are constantly reminded not only of our embeddedness in an ecology that is global, not only of our global interconnectedness, of the global permeability of boundaries, of shared futures and destinies, and even more so now the increasing awareness of the uneven effects and responses to the crisis due to the “pre-existing” historic disparities in our world—but also on the other hand, and at the same time, are called to respond to the immediacy of these global invasions, permutations, and evasions in our neighborhoods, even our homes—and where the demands of the so-called “new normal”—including major pivots in institutional practices, educational delivery modalities, and dispositional sensibilities—could eclipse the spiritual, emotional, formational, ecological, and, health and safety needs of ATS member schools and their constituencies and self-selected publics. By “global” I mean that process of differentiation and formation that “maintains a crucial reference to the world’s horizon as a space of human relations . . . of meaning held in common . . . of signification or possible signification” (Nancy, 2007).

### **Infrastructures/architectures**

In June 2020, in the midst of these multiple pandemics, ATS member schools, in their shared and collective wisdom affirmed the importance for accredited graduate theological education of at least **ten educational principles** that would orient both the Association’s and Commission’s descriptive/aspirational, normative, and mandatory *infrastructure*, and, also their commitments to global awareness and engagement in theological education. These included:

- *Theological education demonstrates diversity.* Graduate theological education values and demonstrates diversity in its many manifestations, including attention to intercultural competencies, global awareness and engagement, and underrepresented and marginalized groups.
- *Theological education is contextually appropriate.* Graduate theological education attends carefully to the contexts, communities, and constituencies in which, and for which, it is offered, and responds to changing contexts with creativity and innovation.
- *Theological education depends upon integrity, trust, and mutual accountability.* Graduate theological education is offered by schools that act with integrity and trust, are committed to freedom of inquiry, and hold themselves accountable—to each other, to

communities of faith, and to the broader public—for their quality, transparency, and authenticity.

It is not surprising, then, that the architecture of the [2020 Standards](#) understands institutional integrity to include how member schools attend to “global awareness and engagement within the context of its mission, theological commitments, and resources” (Standard 1.4), and defines acts of integrity to include “valuing, defining, and demonstrating diversity within the context of its mission, history, constituency, and theological commitments” (Standard 1.5). Equally important, where student learning and formation which are now at the heart of the educational enterprise, the 2020 Standards expects schools to demonstrate 1) “intercultural competency in student learning and formation by helping students understand, respect, engage, and learn from diverse communities and multicultural perspectives, inside and outside the classroom (Standard 3.3), 2) global awareness and engagement in student learning and formation by helping students respect, engage, and learn from global perspectives and sources, understand the global connectedness and mutuality of theological education, and increase their capacities for service and learning in globally interconnected contexts” (Standard 3.4), and 3) “an understanding of learning and formation as lifetime pursuits by helping students develop motivations, skills, and practices for lifelong learning (Standard 3.5).

By linking diversity, intercultural competencies, and global awareness and engagement both to institutional integrity and student learning and formation, the Standards underscore their critical importance for accredited graduate theological education. Moreover, it is also just as important that global awareness and engagement more fully and clearly be understood programmatically, practically, and conceptually, to which we now turn.

### **Practices**

We will recall that one of the strategic goals of the Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative (the *Initiative*) during the 2018-2020 biennium—and before it was interrupted by COVID-19—was to strengthen ATS’ own programmatic and institutional infrastructure in the area of global awareness and engagement by cultivating strategic relationships with existing as well as still to be identified “global partners” and institutions within and without North American accredited graduate theological education around shared concerns related to global theological education and accreditation.

Since January 2020 the *Initiative* has continued to implement aspects of this strategic goal despite the slowed down effects of the “lockdown” as a result of the COVID-19 health crisis. Before the “pivot” to emergency online delivery around the middle of March 2020, the *Initiative* was in the midst of implementing the initial agreement between the International Council of Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) around the approved joint ICETE-ATS [“Playa Bonita Affirmations”](#) including the formation of a joint working group with ICETE to explore areas of collaboration around accreditation and quality assurance, new “trade routes,” common enhancement of both ICETE and ATS web presence, and concrete areas of engagement. On July 31, 2020, both institutions brought together in a [virtual global seminar](#) nearly 35 ICETE and ATS accreditation officers and peer-expert evaluators from Asia, Africa,

Europe, the Caribbean, and the US to explore the possibility of virtual accreditation site visits amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the intensification of the COVID-19 “lockdowns” globally, beginning around the middle of March 2020, ATS-initiated activities have similarly pivoted to a minimalist, internet-based emergency strategy, with the postponement to later in the year or next of both scheduled and planning in-person, on-site meetings. Part of this was due to the uncertainties engendered by COVID-19; but part of this was also due to the strategic need of ATS and its global partners to focus on the immediate demands of their respective constituencies and publics, with the commitment to stay in touch and inform each other later in the spring 2020 about where each of the organizations are headed in the medium and long term.

For its part, ICETE started a weekly Zoom/Face Book-mediated synchronous conversation with theological educators from different parts of the world in an effort to provide immediate, safe, and reliable conversation space for the purpose of maintaining communication, sharing how partner theological institutions in different parts of the world are dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, and praying for each other. The *ATS Initiative* has been supportive of this important ICETE conversation. So far there have been conversations with theological educators around the world, including from the Rome-based European Council for Theological Education, from the Ukraine-based Euro-Asian Accrediting Association, the Lebanon-based Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, the Nairobi-based Africa Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa, the *Seminario Teológico Centroamericano* (SETECA, Guatemala City), and ScholarLeaders International.

To be sure, the *Initiative* is learning from these conversations far more than it is contributing to them: for example, what is important to theological educators “outside” of North America particularly in this time of COVID-19 including the possibility of resource sharing (at a very basic level), the challenges of uneven IT infrastructures for education, the dangers of a “new dependency” in the light of this pivot to emergency online delivery modalities, the importance of enhancing local support—“home grown solutions,” if you will, and the developing of South-South “trade routes” in both credentialed and non-credentialed theological education.

Similarly, ongoing conversations with the leadership of the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA), have continued in this period with onsite, in-person meetings presently “on hold,” but with collaboration or support of ATESEA-sponsored workshops in virtual modality in somewhat “full swing.” In the summer alone, the Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative was involved both in directly participating in and/or lending support for three well-attended ATESEA-sponsored webinars on “Designing Degree Programs for Theological Studies” (July 21-24), “Distance Education and Flexible Learning” (August 25-27), and “Standards and Sustainability of Theological Libraries” (September 22-23). The *Initiative* also collaborated with St. Andrew’s Theological Seminary (an ATESEA member school) and the Seminary Formation Project of Biola University in bringing together representatives of nearly 15 theological schools in Asia to discuss “Spiritual Formation in

Seminaries: Research, Assessment, and Practice” (September 15), with several ATS staff participating.

What the Initiative is learning from these engagements with ATESEA, to use the summary provided by Mitzi Budde, Head Librarian of the Bishop Payne Library and the Arthur Carl Lichtenberger Chair for Theological Research at Virginia Theological Seminary, in her lecture during the August 25-27 webinar noted previously, are the need for the following:

- Connection-building
- Effective communications
- Change with intentionality
- Collegial collaboration—local, regional, global; and
- Creative flexibility

Moreover, planning for the next Global Forum of Theological Educators (GFTE), which ATS has supported since its founding meeting in Dorfweil, Germany, in May 2016, is moving forward. The reasons for this fulsome planning effort is partly because GFTE III is scheduled to meet in-person and on-site in June 2021 in Seoul, Korea; but largely because of COVID-19, needs to be reviewed. It is worth recalling that GFTE since 2016 has brought together theological educators from Evangelical, historical Protestant, independent (African and Chinese), Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Roman Catholic educational and ecclesial individuals around the world to discuss issues of shared concern. At its Kolymvari, Crete meeting last year (May 2019), at least one third of the 65+ participants came from ATS member schools. Even more so now than before, GFTE affirms the importance of keeping the global dimensions of theological education not only in view, but at the forefront of the present situation; not because it is the most important issue, but mainly because the pivots that need to be made given what has been metaphorically referred to as “an economic and cultural blizzard, winter, and beginning of a ‘little ice age’” in the life of our world (Crouch et al, 2020), by their very nature, require, almost counter-intuitively, not just a global perspective, but *globally-oriented solutions*.

In the brief but intense period of mid-March through October 2020, the *Initiative* learned at least five major, though not always appreciated challenges in its ongoing conversations with its global partners. First, the need to acknowledge the profound differences and historical asymmetries in the infrastructures, architectures, and cultures of theological education worldwide which COVID-19 did not create but has surely rendered more visible. Second, the continuing need and shared obligation for maintaining agreed upon standards of quality in accredited graduate theological education. Third, the need to ensure and reassure continuity of accreditation statuses while committing to principled, maximum flexibility in achieving such continuity. Fourth, the need to provide ongoing institutional, educational, moral, and spiritual support through resource sharing *broadly defined* (including education and training for whatever major emergency pivots need to be made) particularly for theological schools and their constituencies with the least resources, and/or who are the most deeply affected by the crisis. And fifth, the need to respond more fully and intentionally to the



challenges posed by the multiple pandemics, assisting schools not only in developing the skills and competencies to address the educational and institutional challenges posed by the COVID-19 health crisis (e.g., educational modalities and pedagogies, enrollment management, financial resource planning and allocation, etc.) but also in thinking through the challenges posed by the multiple pandemics noted above in terms of the school's mission and integrity, and student learning and formation—specifically, around the questions of diversity, contextuality, including , intercultural competencies, global awareness and engagement, and accountability to each other, to communities of faith, and to the broader public.

### **Orienting conversations**

To begin to address these challenges, we may need to pursue:

- First, the importance of deliberation [or dialogue] that is truthful; especially in the current cultures of untruth that have normalized lying, hypocrisy, and predatory self-interest in public, state-centric discourses and action.
- Second, the necessity of creating, nurturing, and defending the *res publica*—"the common," which acknowledges profound contextual differences based on racial/ethnic, gender, class, sexual orientation, ecclesial identities, and disciplinary characteristics or solidarities, and affirms mutual obligations and relationships while simultaneously accepting norms of tolerance, decency, hospitality, and principled inclusion.
- Third, the need to re-define educational institutions as (local, regional, and global) ecological systems that are a combination of private and public spaces—virtual, face-to-face, hybrid—a heterogeneous assemblage of physical, human, financial, environmental resources (including buildings, livelihoods, technologies, as well as ideologies, knowledge structures and administrative mechanisms, behaviors and dispositions, religious and scientific inspiration)—not to mention economic, political, cultural interests and commitments). In short, education as *biosphere* (Boff, 1997; Pope Francis, 2015).
- Fourth, the desirability of multilateral, multilayered, and multi-perspectival partnerships and voices that: 1) seriously attend to the intersectionalities (Brah and Phoenix, 2004) of the issues related to globally-oriented theological education and ministry; 2) intentionally deepen and broaden sensitivities to the nuances and specificities of asymmetrical space, time, and place; 3) recognize the multidirectional flows of interdependence and relative autonomy in global North-South relationships; 4) flatten power differentials arising out of the unevenness of human, financial, and physical resources, and of history and location; and 5) enhance solidarity and friendship across boundaries of diversity, difference, and plurality.

These orienting conversations are illustrative of the complexity of global awareness and engagement. Still, the *Initiative* is learning that theological education globally understood is fundamentally about practices of "effective partnerships": those institutional and educational

practices that are animated by and enhance at the broadest levels, mutuality and collegiality, shared responsibility, accountability, transparency, and decision-making between and among the partners at whatever level or kind, and that have clearly agreed upon purposes that empower and transform those in the partnerships, and which are contextualized, sustainable, useful, and attainable.

Effective partnerships also include the formation of a spirituality that is articulated in: 1) the enhancement and improvement of individual and institutional capacities and skillsets for cross-cultural, contextual, and inter- and multi-religious competencies for institutional and educational change; 2) the knowledge and sensitivity to and respect for economic, cultural, and religious differences that shape education and practice worldwide; 3) the development and nurture of shared ideals, values and principles among and between the partnering individuals and institutions; 4) the constitutive and regulative practice of active, empathic, principled, and humble listening, as well as translation and appropriation; and, 5) the sobering fact that partnerships take a long time to develop and require trust, planning, and organizing for their full flowering. The importance of such a spirituality, metaphorically summarized in the phrase “markers of grace, fragments of love,” cannot be underestimated because our generation is heir to an insidious, subterranean spirit of indifference, not only to others, but to the excluded Others, which if left unchecked, will compromise the possibility of any kind of partnership—if it has not done so already.

As the Global and Awareness and Engagement Initiative continues to implement its strategic goals into the 2020-2022 biennium, as well as find its future in the ecology of a new ATS, especially in terms of cultivating a much wider network of working partners around the globe, at the same time that it develops a more mutual intersectional approach to its work among member schools, it will continue to reflect on the following questions, especially given the still-to-be fully understood and articulated consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic, which not only is illustrating the truly global character of our world, but also of the globalizing contextuality of theological education:

- What is *global* about global awareness and engagement?
- What is *theological*—and therefore, normative—about “global awareness and engagement”?
- What is *missional*—and therefore, aspirational—about “global awareness and engagement”?
- What is *educational*—and therefore, formational—about “global awareness and engagement”?

Given the changing landscape, however permanent or impermanent of accredited graduate theological education, both in this period of the COVID-19 health crisis and the multiple pandemics it has exposed and the interregnum between the crisis and whatever



shape a post-COVID-19 world might look like—politically, culturally, economically, educationally, geophysically—what programmatic priorities might the Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative address (whether from its current strategic plan or from elsewhere) to meet the demands of the kind of *globalizing world* that continue to call accredited graduate theological education into its future?

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