

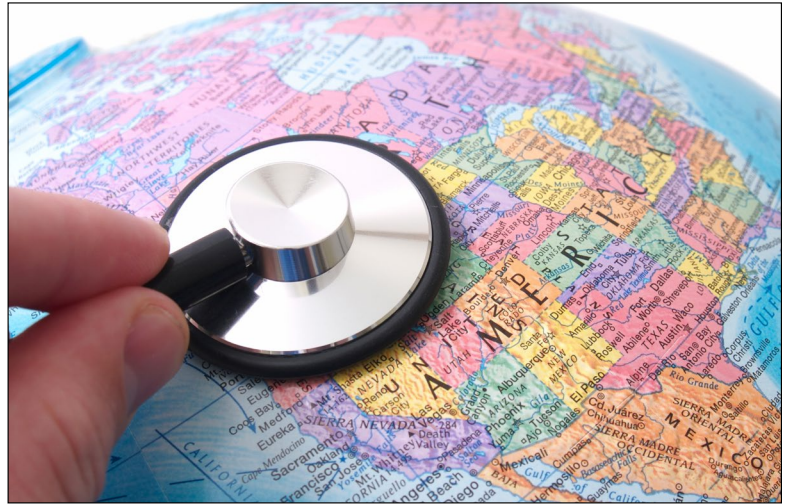
# Revisiting global awareness and engagement amid multiple pandemics

By LESTER EDWIN J. RUIZ

*After more than seven months of quarantining and physical distancing demanded by COVID-19, the pandemic continues to command attention in the public square. It has rendered more prominent the historic infirmities of the world not just in the economy, environment, governance, health, and culture, but also in politics, public discourse, technology, and, in what Robert Bellah called, “habits of the heart.” 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. These historic infirmities—racism/white supremacy, sexism/patriarchy, poverty—have been rightly associated with the “old normal” by some because they have plagued our world, unevenly to be sure, for at least the past 500 years.*

## Contexts

The pandemic seems to be posing a serious challenge to our fundamental assumptions more generally about and practices of *human community and identity* and more specifically in accredited graduate theological education. It 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, and dangers this pandemic has wrought, one thing seems to remain constant. Our world sorely needs a personal quiet resolve to be good and kind



as well as 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 within and without each of us—with God’s help.

## Questions

Those of us engaged in accredited graduate theological education—some of which are intentionally global in reach or aspiration at the same time as 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” that seems to be the metaphor of choice lately. In what ways are 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?

What does global awareness and engagement look like strategically and programmatically during a pandemic? In particular, what does it look like when ATS schools and global partners are focused mainly on addressing the *immediate* challenges facing their respective communities about and to which they feel primary responsibility and accountability, and where the *global* challenge of the crisis looms so large that the only seemingly apparent credible response is *local* engagement? How do we continue to appreciate and embody the spirit of global awareness and engagement especially when we are constantly reminded not only of our embeddedness in a global ecology, our global interconnectedness, the global permeability of boundaries, the 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?

At the same time, we are called to respond to the immediacy of these global invasions, permutations, and evasions in our neighborhoods and homes, where the demands of the so-called “new normal”—major pivots in institutional practices, educational delivery modalities, and dispositional sensibilities—could eclipse the spiritual, emotional, formational, ecological, health, and safety needs of ATS schools and their constituencies.

### ***Infrastructures/architectures***

In June 2020, 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 the Commission’s descriptive/aspirational, normative, and mandatory *infrastructure*, and also their commitments to global awareness and engagement in theological education. These included that theological education “demonstrates diversity,” “is contextually appropriate,” and “depends upon integrity, trust, and mutual accountability.”

It is not surprising, then, that the architecture of the redeveloped *Standards of Accreditation* understand institutional integrity to include how member schools attend to “global awareness and engagement within the context of its mission, theological commitments, and resources,”

and defines acts of integrity to include “valuing, defining, and demonstrating diversity within the context of its mission, history, constituency, and theological commitments.” Equally important, where student learning and formation are now at the heart of the educational enterprise, the *Standards* expect 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; (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;” and (3) “an understanding of learning and formation as lifetime pursuits by helping students develop motivations, skills, and practices for lifelong learning.”

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.

### ***Practices***

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 the Association’s own programmatic and institutional infrastructure in the area of global awareness and engagement by cultivating strategic relationships with existing as well as potential “global partners” and institutions within and without North American accredited graduate theological education around shared concerns related to global theological education and accreditation. The Initiative has continued to implement aspects of this strategic goal despite effects of the “lockdown” due to the pandemic.

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. GFTE has gathered 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. GFTE III is scheduled to be in person, June 2021, in Seoul, Korea, but needs to be reviewed due to COVID-19. At its Kolymvari, Crete meeting in May 2019, at least one-third of more than 65 participants came from ATS member schools. Even more so now, 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’”<sup>1</sup> in the life of our world by their very nature, require, almost counter-intuitively, not just a global perspective, but *globally-oriented solutions*.

Before the “pivot” to emergency online delivery, 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. In July, 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 pandemic.

ICETE started a weekly Zoom/Facebook-mediated synchronous conversation with theological educators from different parts of the world to provide an immediate, safe, and reliable conversation space for maintaining communication, for sharing how partner theological institutions in different parts of the world are dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, and for praying for one another. Supported by the ATS Initiative, these ICETE conversations have included theological educators from the Rome-based European Council for Theological Education, 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.

Similarly, ongoing conversations with the leadership of the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA), have continued with the collaboration or support of ATESEA-sponsored virtual workshops in somewhat “full swing.” In the summer alone, the Initiative was involved both in directly participating in and/or lending support for three well-attended ATESEA-sponsored webinars—“Designing Degree Programs for Theological Studies,” “Distance Education and Flexible Learning,” and “Standards and Sustainability of Theological Libraries.” 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,” with several ATS staff participating.

In the brief but intense period since March, the Initiative learned at least five major, though not always appreciated, challenges in its ongoing conversations with its global partners:

1 Andy Crouch, Kurt, Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard, “Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization Is Now a Startup,” *The Praxis Journal* (2020), <https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>

1. The need to acknowledge the profound differences and historical asymmetries in the infrastructures, architectures, and cultures of theological education worldwide that COVID-19 didn't create but has rendered more visible.
2. The continuing need and shared obligation for maintaining agreed upon standards of quality in accredited graduate theological education.
3. The need to ensure and reassure continuity of accreditation statuses while committing to principled, maximum flexibility in achieving such continuity.
4. The need to provide ongoing institutional, educational, moral, and spiritual support through broadly defined resource sharing (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.
5. The need to respond more fully and intentionally to challenges posed by multiple pandemics, assisting schools not only in developing the skills and competencies to address the educational and institutional challenges due to COVID-19 (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 regarding the school's mission and integrity, and student learning and formation (specifically around diversity, contextuality, intercultural competencies, global awareness and engagement, and accountability to one another to communities of faith, and to the broader public).

## Orienting conversations

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

- The importance of deliberation [or dialogue] that's truthful; especially in the current cultures of untruth that have normalized lying, hypocrisy, and predatory

self-interest in public, state-centric discourses and action.

- The necessity of creating, nurturing, and defending the *res publica*—"the common"—that 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.
- The need to redefine educational institutions as (local, regional, and global) ecological systems that are a combination of private and public spaces—virtual, face-to-face, hybrid—as a heterogeneous assemblage of physical, human, financial, environmental resources (including buildings, livelihoods, technologies, ideologies, knowledge structures, administrative mechanisms, behaviors and dispositions, religious and scientific inspiration) not to mention economic, political, cultural interests, and commitments.
- The desirability of multilateral, multilayered, and multi-perspectival partnerships and voices that (1) seriously attend to the intersectionalities of the issues related to globally-oriented theological education and ministry<sup>2</sup>; (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 lines of diversity, difference, and plurality.

These 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."

<sup>2</sup> Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix, "Ain't I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5, no. 3 (2004), 76.

Effective partnerships include the formation of a spirituality 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 cannot be underestimated because our generation is heir to an insidious, subterranean spirit of indifference, not only to others but to the excluded Others that, 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 and find its future within a “new” ATS—especially while cultivating a much wider network of working partners around the globe while 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 that not only is illustrating the truly global character of our world, but also 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 during the COVID-19 health crisis, the multiple pandemics it has unearthed, and the interregnum between the crisis and whatever shape a post-COVID-19 world might look like politically, culturally, economically, and educationally—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 “global world” that continue to call accredited graduate theological education into its future?



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Please note: A slightly extended version of this writing can be found on the ATS website.