Globalization and inter-culturel dialogue

William Mac Bride

Abstract: Globalization, always a difficult word to define and one with many meanings, has acquired yet another significance of late. If one looks at a globe and focuses on the westernmost part of the American State of Alaska and the easternmost part of the newest partner in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, one sees that only a few kilometers of the Bering Strait prevent NATO from complete encirclement of the earth. Not only the North Atlantic Ocean, but the northern Pacific Ocean as well, are maria nostra, our seas. By contrast, the once-mighty Roman Empire confined the designation, "mare nostrum," to the Mediterranean Sea alone.

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"The basic challenge is that what is called globalization is really another name for the dominant role of the United States."

Henry Kissinger[2]

Globalization, always a difficult word to define and one with many meanings, has acquired yet another significance of late. If one looks at a globe and focuses on the westernmost part of the American State of Alaska and the easternmost part of the newest partner in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, one sees that only a few kilometers of the Bering Strait prevent NATO from complete encirclement of the earth. Not only the North Atlantic Ocean, but the northern Pacific Ocean as well, are maria nostra, our seas. By contrast, the once-mighty Roman Empire confined the designation, "mare nostrum," to the Mediterranean Sea alone. (Incidentally, an announcement that I received some time ago concerning a forthcoming conference on globalization to be held in Cuba showed a map of only the Caribbean Sea, labelled "mare nostrum", with the word "nostrum" referring, in irony of course, to los Norteamericanos. This shows that, living on a small island, Cubans may tend to think too small.)

Who, in fact, are the "we" to whom the world's oceans belong? Although a completely accurate answer to this question would require including some reservations and qualifications and adding some codicils, the simple answer at the present moment in time is, "To the United States Government". The regime currently in power – I am here referring almost exclusively to the Executive Branch of the government, since both the legislative and judicial branches have on the whole, again with a few qualifications, deferred to it in all matters having to do with what is called "security" – has made use of the infamous events of September 11, 2001 and of the sympathy that was expressed for the United States immediately after those events in order to demand fealty from the rest of the world. As the de facto President, Mr. Bush, expressed it in his speech to Congress of September 20 : "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you

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[1] This contribution has first been given as a Conference in Moscow, June, 9, 2002.

[2] Lecture at Trinity College, Dublin, Oct. 12, 1999, as cited by Sam Gindlin in "Social Justice and Globalization : Are They Compatible?", Monthly Review, June 2002, Vol. 54, No. 2, p. 11.

are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."

And, we should add, the Bush Administration has arrogated to itself the power to determine what does and what does not constitute "terrorism," and to attack pre-emptively.

As someone interested in, among other areas of philosophy, the philosophy of law and political philosophy, I think that the events of recent months have brought to the fore many fascinating issues for discussion. The undermining of early modern notions of state sovereignty, already well underway as a result of such developments as the evolution of the European Union, the unapologetic practice by the World Bank and the IMF of requiring governments to implement pro-capitalist privatization measures in disregard of domestic laws and institutions and with no pretense of democratic process, and particularly the 1999 decision by NATO to attack Yugoslavia in the name of human rights, has now been complemented by the blatant rejection of international conceptions of human rights that were once supposed to have been a special concern of the government that has made a calculated decision to disregard them. But I have chosen here to focus primarily on cultural questions in the light of globalization, and so I shall, somewhat reluctantly, set aside more strictly legal and political issues, although as we shall see these different sets of issues cannot very neatly be separated from one another.

In past articles and book chapters, I have considered the fate of local and regional civil societies in light of the increasing cultural hegemony of a transnational culture that is dominated above all by American, and to a lesser extent by West European, elements. One question that I have raised in these essays – one that is not original with me, to be sure – has concerned the extent to which some of the most powerful transnational corporate interests are in fact in a position of dominance over political regimes – not just in the case of smaller countries, where it is perfectly obvious that they are, but even in the case of the Superpower. At present, it seems to me, the balance in this matter has tilted in the direction of the dominance of the Superpower, the United States Government, over the transnationals, for at least two interrelated reasons : first, because the Bush Administration is so completely dedicated to furthering the fundamental interests of the large capitalist firms and is so filled with individuals who have held high positions in the corporate world that at present very little gap remains between the two perspectives, and second because the huge increase in militarization and in police-state apparatus following the events of September 11 has vastly augmented the government's power, with no comparable increase in independent power on the part of capitalist corporations except those that manufacture weapons and so-called "security devices." These ominous developments may point to a future change in the very nature of the hegemonic culture itself, which, in addition to its obvious commitment to maximizing corporate profits, has until now been characterized above all as a culture of consumerism, epitomized in such companies as McDonald's and Coca-Cola; but no major change has yet occurred in this respect. As Bush said, in the same speech from which I quoted earlier, in answer to the question, "'What is expected of us?'," "I ask your continued

participation and confidence in the American economy." In other words, keep consuming at a high rate.

If indeed this transnational culture is hegemonic, or at least becoming so, then perhaps we should speak of intra- rather than of inter-cultural dialogue. This would certainly seem appropriate with respect to the economic system itself. Now, whether one wishes to consider the economic system, the system of "late capitalism" as Habermas used to call it, a part of the hegemonic "culture" in a broad sense of that word, as I do, is to some extent a matter of definition. But it is a fact that courses in the standard practices of 20th- and 21st-century capitalism are being taught all over the world, even in places where these practices were once despised, at least as extensively as are courses in English; thus, it would seem, the capitalist spirit has become a dominant part, even the most dominant part, of the global *paideia*. Our One World, seen in this way, consists primarily of a single global, economically-oriented culture, within which one may still find a few pockets of resistance and perhaps also a few locations that are so poor, powerless, and marginal as to be not worth the efforts of even low-level missionaries of capitalism to incorporate within the system. So Juggernaut-like is that system, according to this way of thinking, that the only conceivable resistance must take the form of acts of terror, since dialogue is no longer possible. Or if there can be dialogue at all, it is only possible, as I have suggested, intra-culturally, that is, on the basis of an acceptance of the general premises and parameters of the hegemonic culture.

Diametrically opposed to this nightmare vision of our world, which I myself am often inclined to accept without reservation in my more pessimistic moments, is another that seems to me at least as nightmarish, but much more obviously false. It is the worldview that is held by postmodern philosophers, such as Lyotard and Rorty, who insist on the incommensurability of different worldviews, and that is epitomized, in a more vulgar, less philosophically sophisticated way, in the "clash of civilizations" thesis espoused by Samuel Huntington. It is a great pity, in my opinion, that Huntington, an ideologist in the most pejorative sense, has had so much influence, or so I have been told, on the thinking of diplomats and others involved in global transactions : the success of his work is an excellent example, in my opinion, of the attractiveness of a simplistic but superficially clear idea that purports to summarize an entire world in a single phrase. During NATO's war against Yugoslavia Huntington was invoked to explain the supposedly vast gulf between Western and Orthodox versions of Christianity; three years later, when Bush and President Putin attended Orthodox services together in the spring of 2002, he was being invoked to explain the allegedly unbridgeable chasm between the West and the Islamic World.

Between these two extreme nightmare worlds – the hegemonic cultural monolith with a few remaining pockets of resistance still to be eliminated on the one hand, eight or nine incommensurable and inevitably conflicting cultures on the other – there are no doubt a number of other conceivable models of the cultural world of today and of the possible cultural world of tomorrow. One is the Enlightenment-inspired ideal speech situation of Habermas, who in his early

years was particularly influenced by Marx, himself very much an Enlightenment thinker; but Habermas' vision has always seemed to me far too idealistic, both in the sense of implying an impossible ethic and in the sense of departing into a world of abstraction much too far removed from the actual world to be of use. An alternative though related model, which also takes its inspiration from the thought of Marx, retains (as Habermas' no longer does) Marx's claim that a radical critique and undermining, in both theory and practice, of the capitalist system is an essential pre-requisite for a future flowering of more humane practices and institutions at a time when economic factors would no longer be dominant in society, while not insisting on the strongly materialistic and ultimately monistic ontology that characterized the former "orthodox" interpretations of Marxism and led to expectations of the eventual emergence of a single universal, homogeneous worldview.

According to the spirit of this model, the one in which I would of course like to believe, genuine inter-cultural dialogue remains possible as long as it is considered acceptable, and even essential from a moral point of view, to create new norms and ideals and/or to endorse old ones that are not reducible to the capitalist and consumerist goals of maximizing profit and accumulating goods. Such norms and ideals may, if one wishes, be called "spiritual" in the broadest sense of that word. I have deliberately used the word "create" with respect to their origins, because I wish to emphasize the constructive role of the human imagination in making social reality whatever it is at any given time; but to say this is to imply no disrespect for the reality that has been produced, since I value the human imagination itself very highly. To insist on the constructive role of the imagination does, however, imply disrespect for the many contemporary ideologues, the Herbert Spencer revivalists, who claim that capitalist "free market" competition is somehow ingredient in human nature, so that we cannot live a decent life without reference to "the bottom line," and should not even think of doing so. The morality, such as it is, of the bottom line is itself, in my view, ultimately a product of human imagination. It can in principle be replaced by a much better, more humane, such product.

Among the norms and ideals that are most frequently proposed as alternatives to profit and consumption maximization are norms and ideals connected with religions. (I am aware, by the way, as was Marx in Capital, that the maximization of profit and the maximization of consumption can and often do come into conflict with one another, but that is not my concern here.) Religious norms and ideals are often cited as the least susceptible, of all cultural phenomena, to genuine dialogue, and they have come to the fore of everyone's consciousness especially since the highly successful suicide attacks on buildings in New York City and Washington that were undertaken in the name of militant Islamic fundamentalism. I therefore think it very important for us as philosophers to consider religions as possible surds – ultimate, irremovable obstacles, even if and when all other obstacles have been dispatched, to the achievement of inter-cultural dialogue.

One initial problem in proposing such a discussion is that there are philosophers, some of whom may be found in any sizable group of philosophers today, who themselves are committed –

some deeply and unquestioningly, some less deeply and with more skepticism – to a specific set of religious beliefs. And the deepest of these commitments may, depending on the religion in question, be regarded as not only objectively and indisputably true, but also as radically unintelligible to non-believers. (Some belief commitments, in fact, may be classified as unintelligible even to those who themselves accept them, as is the case with the so-called "mysteries" of traditional Christianity, such as the Trinity.) This view may lead to behaviors of concealment or at least of refusal to participate in dialogue on the part of some believers. Their would-be interlocutors are then likely to be tempted to feel frustration or even anger.

But there are in every human being, from a very early age onward, areas of thought and/or experience which he or she wishes to keep private; otherness is ultimately irreducible; and complete transparency in human relations is at least an unattainable goal, if not also an undesirable one. I am inclined on the basis of wide experience to think, though I could never demonstrate this point conclusively, that there are at least some infinitesimal differences between the precise ways in which any two believers in any religion conceive of that religion and what it means to them, the proliferation of often warring sects within the great religions being simply a realization of this basic fact on a very large scale. The practical conclusion that I draw from these observations, in the spirit of John Stuart Mill, is one of tolerance, including tolerance of the refusal to engage in dialogue. Accordingly, I maintain that the only intolerable type of behavior, with respect to religion as with respect to many other types of belief and lifestyle, is any violent, coercive attempt by the holders of one belief and/or lifestyle to force others either to adopt their own or to suffer some sort of punishment, torture, or death.

Such attempts have been made often enough throughout history and are still being made, it is true; but by no means all, and probably not even most, of the relations between believers in different religions and non-believers or believers in other religions are of this type. Even in earlier times, "the peoples of the Book" co-existed in certain communities for many centuries, and in our own time the violence of Islamic terrorist groups, as far as I can gather from writings and interviews, is more often an expression of extreme anger and frustration at perceived humiliations suffered by their co-religionists at the hands of non-Islamists (the American military presence in Saudi-Arabia, the repressive policies of the Israeli authorities toward the inhabitants of the occupied parts of Palestine, etc.) than of a desire simply to eradicate those who do not share their beliefs. While on the one hand, then, I think it would be a mistake to carry tolerance to the point of withholding even very severe criticism of practices, such as the Taliban government's treatment of women or the ancient Mayans' resort to human sacrifice, that are evidently wrong even if based on religious convictions, it is equally mistaken to assume, after the fashion of the Huntington crowd, that clash is inevitable, so that dialogue is impossible.

To conclude this brief excursus into the question of dialogue and religious beliefs, I think it might be useful to consider, as a potentially illuminating alternative example, a religion that has few sects and that engenders relatively little heat these days as compared with Islam, but that I

regard as being even more foreign to my own ways of thinking than the latter. I am referring to Mormonism. I do not claim to have any expertise in Mormon theology, but I know that it is based on supposedly divine revelations, supplementing the Bible, that are contained in The Book of Mormon that was offered to the world by the religion's founder, Joseph Smith, in rural New York State in the 19th century. Members of the sect moved to a small town in Illinois, where they were persecuted and some were killed by a mob, and eventually they settled in relatively unpopulated land that is now the State of Utah, having driven away the Native American inhabitants and massacred a number of them. In On Liberty, Mill himself offered a very valuable two-page discussion of the persecution and denunciation of the Mormons at a time when they were still widely reviled: he regarded their beliefs as ridiculous, but of course he still opposed persecuting them. Several aspects of Mormonism strike me as especially interesting for my purposes : its relatively recent origin, which means that its evolution is much more fully documented than are the evolutions of the traditional great religions; the fact that many of its specific claims, such as its identification of Native Americans with the Lost Tribes of Israel, seem so thoroughly implausible to non-Mormons; its sudden historic switch in fundamental principles, in the late 19th century, from a belief in polygamy to a belief in monogamy that conveniently coincided with the Mormons' desire to get Utah, in which they have always constituted a majority of the population, to be admitted as a State of the United States; its strong commitment to making converts, though only by non-violent means; and its present high "respectability" within the American culture, despite the religion's aversion to all liquid stimulants, even Coca-Cola! (In fact, I have been told that many converts to Mormonism in other countries – this was specifically mentioned to me with respect to Chile – become Mormons less out of theological conviction than because they admire what they think of as American culture and take Mormonism to be a good expression of that culture). There is a Mormon university, Brigham Young, and most of the smaller state universities in Utah are Mormon-dominated; there are, then, Mormon philosophers.

How is dialogue with people holding such non-standard beliefs possible, it may be asked incredulously, even within American culture? Nevertheless, it takes place all the time. This has something to do, I maintain, with my earlier suggestion about the importance of respecting the products of human imagination, however diverse, seemingly strange, and often entirely unanticipated. Human beings constantly offer such respect, often very un-self-consciously, in their daily lives. I, for instance, have engaged in dialogue with Mormons, including sometimes asking them about their doctrines, and I have found those doctrines fascinating (and the related architecture of their temples wondrous!) even while sharing Mill's judgment that this religion as a whole is thoroughly implausible. In other words, its surd-like quality, at least as it appears to me, does not prevent dialogue.

I have taken religious beliefs and practices as a test case, because it is the most difficult to make, for endorsing an open model of inter-cultural dialogue that encourages diverse ideals and norms beyond the low-level hegemonic culture's supreme values of profit-making and

consumption. There are many other types of ideals of the spirit, such as social, ethical and aesthetic ideals in the widest sense of those terms, the cultivation of which is the hallmark of a humane society; but I maintain that they are all contradicted and jeopardized, as are religious ideals, by the glorification of pure self-interest that serves to justify the theology of late capitalism – for free enterprise ideology is nothing less than a simplistic kind of theology, with most schools of business administration serving as contemporary substitutes for divinity schools. To be sure, there are ways of effecting compromises : prominent Mormons in the United States, for example, have usually been strong Republicans, advocates of unbridled free enterprise, but at the same time the Mormon Church maintains an enormous financial reserve to help out fellow Mormons who are in need – in other words, free enterprise for everyone else but not for us. It still seems clear to me, however, that, at the limit, capitalist principles and spiritual values are simply incompatible.

This reference to the dominant theology of today brings me back to the present situation of globalization, in light of my introductory remarks about the nature of the present ownership of the globe and its connection with the hegemonic culture. When thinking or speaking about the ownership of the globe I keep hearing, in my mind, the words that Rousseau, in his Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, wishes that some person had spoken when the imagined inventor of private property "took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him." He should have warned, Rousseau says, "Beware of listening to this impostor; you are lost if you forget that the fruits belong to all and the earth to no one!" I also hear Marx, in Capital, opining that in the future the ownership of portions of the earth will seem as preposterous as the ownership of human beings as slaves seemed in his day. But in fact the preposterous, the absurd, really prevails today : just as many American citizens actually did own slaves until only a few years before Marx wrote those words, so the current United States Government really does in a certain sense, if ownership is defined as ultimate control for use, lay claim to ownership of the globe. How else are we to interpret its insistence on being free to attack at will wherever and whenever it deems it fitting to do so, its constant reiteration that its so-called "war on terrorism" will be open-ended and without foreseeable termination, its rejection of the jurisdiction of international courts, its repudiation of even a very mild and relatively ineffectual treaty on global warming, and on and on? And all these assertions are being made by a government which effectively dominates the world's major financial institutions, including the IMF and the World Bank, and of which the military expenditures this year will be greater than those of all the other countries of the world taken together!

It is true that the U.S. President, Bush, speaks of defending freedom, tolerance, and civilization against the barbarians, but he and his Attorney General have repeatedly announced new measures to limit freedoms and to curtail guarantees of procedural justice in the name of security, while adopting the most intolerant posture imaginable, to wit, in the words that I cited earlier, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Moreover, this government resorts constantly to the language of good and evil, often in an embarrassingly childish way – "good

guys" and "bad guys" and, most notoriously, the "axis of evil." In short, this is not the language of dialogue, far from it : it is the language of dictatorship, albeit of a very adolescent sort.

These remarks about the childishness of "Bush-speak" should not, however, be taken to imply that I would like to see all talk about "evil" eliminated from future intercultural dialogue. While certainly not endorsing its bizarre cosmology, I take Manichaeism much more seriously than did two philosophers for whom I otherwise have great admiration, Sartre and Beauvoir : they tended to focus on the injustice involved in ascribing total evil, in a Manichaean fashion, to oppressed groups, such as Jews in anti-Semitic societies, and hence to dismiss Manichaean thinking as such. But what of the profound evil that characterizes the oppressors themselves? For example, a recent issue of Le Monde Diplomatique carried a front-page article suggesting that there was indeed an "axis of evil," but that it ran through such organizations as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank rather than through Iraq and Iran. Today, if there is a heart of darkness in the world, it is located neither in Africa nor in Afghanistan, but in Washington.

So what about the American nation in the present situation, American civil society as a possible breeding-ground for resistance to the hegemonic culture for which the United States bears the greatest responsibility? That society is in fact very complex, and even at the height of the media rhetoric advocating unquestioning support of Bush and his lieutenants, before the obvious questions began to be raised about how what happened could have happened and how the September events were being manipulated to the advantage of the Administration, I always maintained that there was a great deal more skepticism and opposition throughout the country than most skeptics and opponents themselves imagined. There is still a great deal of fear and at least perceived intimidation; attempted manipulation of the public by the television news networks in particular, which are controlled by a smaller number of more powerful interests than ever before, has been fiercer than I have ever before witnessed. Nevertheless, dissidence is slowly spreading. So I do not advocate total despair over the future of American culture (as distinguished from the present American government). But I would like to urge the rest of the world to take a critical distance from all claims that may be advanced about what "the American people," or "American intellectuals," think or do not think, and particularly to urge that ideals of freedom, democracy, rights, and humane social services be constantly contrasted with current American practices which are so far removed from those ideals. The key word to remember in all of this is, of course, "hypocrisy." It is only by mounting such a global challenge to the hegemonic culture that we can avoid the nightmare visions that I sketched earlier and hope to be able to retain intercultural dialogue at all in this third millennium of the Common Era.