

## Fostering Global Religious Literacy

As a host of the 2006 Sant'Egidio International Prayer for Peace, I welcome this opportunity to speak about Georgetown University's integrated approach to our topic, *Living Together in a Globalized World: The Role of Religions*. Perhaps I can best begin these remarks with some reflection on where we are today, a quick look at our present global reality.

Thomas Friedman's book, *The World is Flat*, has now been on *The New York Times* best seller list for many months. Building on the analysis laid out in an earlier work, Friedman argues in this latest book that a broad set of related trends have converged in the past decade, and that this convergence affords extraordinary leverage to individual ambition and action. With minimal infrastructure, simply a computer and an internet connection, young people in Bangalore or Bangkok can perform many tasks as effectively as their counterparts in Boston or Birmingham; small companies in China can compete with large ones in Germany. We suddenly find ourselves, in other words, on a flat economic playing field in a world where communication is measured in microseconds. This is a "plug-and-play" world where billions of people have, or will have, access to unprecedented opportunities for creative ingenuity and entrepreneurship.

Global shrinkage has, of course, affected far more than the world's economic system. It has also produced opportunities for religious cooperation and triggers for religious conflict. Multiple forms of religious interaction, both positive and negative, present themselves to us as we open our newspapers, turn on our TVs, and scan our favorite web sites. How do we at Georgetown educate students for such a world? More specifically, how do we educate students to be both religiously 'literate' and to be equipped for the navigation of, and contribution to, this new terrain of globalized religious interaction?

First, we start by *recognizing* and taking advantage of being a Catholic and Jesuit institution. Historically, we can look at the extraordinary network of Jesuits worldwide and the rich heritage of Jesuit cultural engagement. Missionary scholars like Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci and Roberto deNobili offer extraordinary examples of creatively-conceived intercultural engagement. Obviously, not every aspect of this history is worthy of emulation—there is much to regret in the mindset and mores that shaped most missionary endeavors in earlier centuries—but the desire to know all peoples as God's good children shines through the accounts that we have of these activities. Further, we can 'talk religion' here at Georgetown: the secular ethos of much of American higher education has never become the prevailing mindset on our campus. Our university has sustained a long tradition of religious discourse. The conversation is not awkward; the language is not foreign.

Second, we are very conscious of *the context* of our educational effort, namely the two sides to the coin of globalization; within our university curricula we continually navigate the back and forth between the 'out there' of the international and the 'back here' of the domestic. The internationally oriented, the 'out there,' is represented by our Faculty of Languages and Linguistics with its programs of intensive language study and courses on

literature and culture; by our study abroad programs, through which more than half of our undergraduates matriculate in foreign universities; and by our Walsh School of Foreign Service, a major center for the study of international affairs.

Located in Washington, DC, we are a university community situated at the epicenter of US policy debates, actively engaged in all aspects of the ‘back here.’ We address this domestic realm through our strong social science departments, major law center and excellent graduate program in public policy. Across our university, a new hemispheric emphasis and a new awareness of our rapidly changing religious landscape motivate our teaching and research. Last fall, for example, I launched the *Americas Initiative* in Georgetown College. This initiative allows us to coordinate more effectively our present strengths in the study of both North and South America, their ever greater interpenetration and the increasing Hispanic profile of our United States in the twenty-first century.

Third we *build new programs* for students and faculty. This year Georgetown will inaugurate several new academic programs of particular relevance for today’s topic: PhD programs in religious pluralism and in Islamic studies as well as an undergraduate minor in Jewish civilization. Institutional initiatives are underway for increased attention to the international realm of religious interaction with the inauguration of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and its related centers and programs and for a more coordinated approach to domestic hemispheric studies with the launch of the College’s *Americas Initiative*.

In support of these new programs, Georgetown has hosted a number of major events within the last two years. These include the *Building Bridges Seminars* in 2004 and 2006, convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury; the 2005 conference on “The New Religious Pluralism and Democracy” and the 2006 conference on “The New Religious Pluralism in World Politics,” both forming part of the institution and the inauguration of the Berkley Center; and today’s Sant’Egidio International Prayer for Peace.

Fourth, we harness the *power of the classroom* to prepare our students for the religious globalization of our world. Let me cite but one example. Recently Fr. Ryan Maher, S.J. from Georgetown’s Qatar campus reported on his experience of teaching our introductory Theology course, “The Problem of God,” to a class of mostly Muslim students. As reported by Fr. Maher, every classroom session became a laboratory for intense interreligious exploration. Tough questions were engaged; challenging assertions were made and counter assertions were quick to follow. Through the constant interplay of views and voices, trust began to build. The classroom became a community that could contain both dialogue and dissension within its strong, secure boundaries.

Finally, Georgetown University *supports student groups as incubators* for religious interaction. On all of our campuses full encouragement is given to interfaith programming by Jewish, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant student associations. Campus activities promoted by these groups have included events such as the International Solidarity Fast for Darfur in October 2005, interfaith dialogue sessions during Islam

Awareness Week in February 2006, interfaith lectures and dinners sponsored by the John Main Center for Meditation and Interreligious Dialogue and even a fun evening of bowling last fall organized collaboratively by the Muslim Student Association and Mormon Student Association.

These are some of the ways in which Georgetown seeks to provide an educational experience that fosters religious literacy in our students and prepares them for lives of effective interreligious activity. Thank you for offering me the opportunity to explore this subject with you.

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