CHAPTER 3

VIRTUES IN A GLOBALIZED CONTEXT

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Globalization presents particular challenges to our moral sensibilities and performance, raising questions for us that are unprecedented in human history. This emerging challenge to our moral life in turn raises particular questions for the great religious traditions of the world. These traditions have always had a concern in one way or another with reflecting upon and improving our moral life. While there are various ways in which the issue can be explored, in this chapter we shall consider the role of the world’s religions in promoting virtues that can contribute to global flourishing.

Over the past decades, some impressive work has been done on the issue of a global ethic. Particularly notable are the works of Hans Küng and the Center for Global Ethics. This work has gained considerable support from various religious bodies, including the promotion of a “Declaration towards a Global Ethic” from the Parliament of the World’s Religions. This approach seeks to develop an ethical framework for a global world through the identification of three levels of response: binding values, irrevocable standards, and interior fundamental attitudes that can be a basis for a global ethic. The methodology adopted by Küng was to develop a declaration that was capable of producing a consensus among the great religions, so that disputed positions would not find their way into the final document. As always, this leads to a minimalist rather than a maximalist approach, but it remains a substantial contribution to the debate on globalization. It is not my intention to analyze or argue with the approach adopted by Küng and others on the question of a global ethic. Rather I would like to pose the question in a different way. The questions I would like to pose are, What virtues can contribute to
global flourishing? and, concomitantly, What vices contribute to global decline? This form of the question presumes that there is some form of global flourishing that is yet to be achieved, without specifying what form it might take. It invites consideration of different patterns of behavior that might promote human well-being on a global scale. It recognizes that different religious (and nonreligious) traditions will bring different perspectives to the table that can add to the debate as to the form such flourishing might take. My own contributions will clearly be colored by my own Christian tradition.

I pose the question this way so as to reflect the growing interest in what is called “virtue ethics” in light of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and others.4 Virtue ethics conceives of the human subject as a system on the move from the relatively unformed responses of a child to the more determined moral responses of an adult, in a dynamic dialectic of transcendence and limitation,5 who in the transformative search for the good finds ever new patterns of embodying the good in a dynamically changing world. The mean between transcendence and limitation is never a static “once and for all” given, but is constantly extended as we grow in virtue to embrace a larger field of responsibilities for the world. It also presupposes the existence of communities that practice, promote, and sustain virtue, that nurture virtues in their children, and that honor virtues in their adults. It recognizes that virtue is not taught so much as caught. Through the practice of virtue one learns to appreciate the “internal goods” that the virtue embodies, not just the external rewards and approval it may generate.6 Religious communities are particular communities that promote such practices.

Globalization and the Scale of Values

To speak of virtues that contribute to global flourishing is also to assume that there is a telos operating in the process of globalization.7 There is a good to be achieved (or perverted) in the process of globalization and an obligation to work toward that good. That telos is grounded in the material unity of the human race, evident in our common genetic heritage. It is evident in the movement from tribe to village, from village to kingdom, from kingdom to nation, from nation to larger political, economic, and cultural structures such as the European Union, and so on. The material unity grounds the possibility of more formal union.

The other issue here is that of identifying exactly what constitutes human flourishing. Do we presuppose some thick account of human flourishing, a substantial vision of what the good life contains, or do we opt for a thin or procedural approach that is more minimal in content