Changes in the World Cultural Situation since 1991

José Casanova
Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University, Washington, DC

Within the task assigned to me in this presentation I’ll try to do both, to analyze the most important changes in the world cultural situation in the last decades to which the church must respond today, and to examine how these new realities in the world situation affirm basic insights of the Church’s social teaching while calling for further development of some of those insights.

The most important cultural trend of the last decades has been the acceleration of processes of globalization, understood as the increasing global connectivity and the deepening of global consciousness among all peoples of the world. *Centesimus Annus* only towards the end refers explicitly to the phenomenon of “globalization,” in the narrow sense of “the increasing internationalization of the economy” (#58) Processes of globalization, both in the narrow economic sense and in the broader sense, referred above, are of course much older. Indeed, well before the term had been coined and journalists and social scientists had turned it into a fashionable buzzword the church fathers gathered at the Second Vatican Council had clearly recognized globalization as “a sign of the times.”

As we have just celebrated recently also the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of Vatican II, it is appropriate to point out that the three final and arguably the most globally consequential documents of the Council explicitly recognized globalization as “a sign of the times.”

*Nosstra Aetate* begins with the words, “In our time…day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger.”

*Dignitatis Humanae* reiterates the same idea in its concluding paragraph when it recognizes that “All nations are coming into even closer unity. Men of different cultures and religions are being brought together in closer relationship.”

The entire text of *Gaudium et Spes* can be read as a critical and prophetic discernment of both the positive dynamics and the negative consequences brought by global trends:

“Today the human race is involved in a new stage of history…Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty. Although the world of today has a very vivid awareness of its unity and of how one man depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces…True, there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems.”

The council could adopt such a prescient global perspective because, as stressed by Karl Rahner, this was the first truly global ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, a gathering of church fathers from all the parts of the globe. This was not a self-referential church but rather one open to the entire world, scrutinizing prophetically global trends decades before those ideas became platitudes in global media. Sociologically, there are solid reasons to assert that perhaps no other institution in the world is simultaneously as “global” and as “local” as the Catholic Church. No other institution has such a global presence, such a global outreach, such a global potential and such a global responsibility. Processes of globalization present “the People of God” with tremendous opportunities to become ever more “catholic” that is, ever more universal and more global, in its mission to bring “the good news” and to serve and accompany all of humanity in its earthly journey through history to the Kingdom of God.

However, our global secular age and our secular world also present the Catholic Church with very serious challenges, to which the Church will need to find some creative responses if it is to realize its global potential and its global responsibility. I propose to analyze those global challenges under four broad headings – ongoing secularization, irremediable religious pluralism and the need for interreligious recognition and dialogue, the revolution in gender relations, the pluralization and fragmentation of global media and the cacophony of voices it brings to our emerging global civil society.

1) The expansion of our global secular age and the ongoing secularization which it entails
The Catholic aggiornamento signaled a profound reorientation of Catholicism towards modern developments revising what had been to a large extent an anti-modern negative philosophy of history, and adopting a positive attitude which assumed the legitimacy of the saeculum, that is, of the modern secular age and of the modern secular world. But this affirmation took place in a European context in which there was no careful distinction between secularity (affirmation of the legitimacy of the secular spheres), secularism (an ideology which viewed the secular age as a post-religious condition and the public secular sphere as a sphere of laïcité, free from religion) and secularization (historical processes which in modern societies were supposed to lead irretrievably to a drastic decline of religious beliefs and practices).

Within a dichotomous understanding of a radical opposition between tradition and modernity, modernization was to lead necessarily to secularization. Becoming a modern secular person implied, therefore, leaving religion and other “traditional” customs behind. As a result of such strongly held secularist assumptions among European societies, sociological theories of secularization functioned not only as empirical analytical descriptions but became to a large extent a form of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Christian churches themselves as well as the analysis of great number of theologians internalized these secularist assumptions concerning “the secular city” and “the death of God” and suffered, as a result, drastic internal secularization. The massive secularization of so many priests and religious members in many parts of the world, but primarily in the developed North, was a telling indication of this internal secularization. In overreaction to this obvious threat, conservative groups within the Catholic Church closed ranks in an equally undifferentiated negative reaction not only to secularism but also to the various forms and manifestations of secularity and secularization.

We find ourselves luckily at a moment in which we can redress what had become pendular movements between extreme secularizing and anti-secular positions and find a more balanced condition for a critical rethinking of the implications of our global secular age. One of the most significant analytical-practical consequences of the recent revision of the traditional European paradigm of secularization, to which important Catholic thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Hans Joas and myself have contributed, is the recognition that secularization, in the sense of a drastic decline of religious beliefs and practices, is not a necessary consequence of modernization, and that different processes of modernization are connected with very diverse religious-secular dynamics throughout the world.

If by secularization we mean the historical process of institutionalization of the modern secular spheres of science and technology, administrative citizen states, and market economies which function autonomously from religious institutions and norms, then secularization is indeed a global process and we all leave in a global secular age. All these secular spheres function etsi Deus non dare tur and are in this respect part of what Taylor calls the secular “immanent frame” which has now become globalized. Let us call this process Secularization I.

If by secularization we mean, however, the decline of religious beliefs and practices which in most European societies has accompanied the historical process of secularization, then this process of religious decline, let’s call it Secularization II, is not a global phenomenon. On the contrary, throughout many parts of the world Secularization I is not accompanied by religious decline but rather by religious growth and by different types of religious revival or transformations.

Somewhat simplifying, one may say that one can observe two main divergent patterns with numerous sub-variations: there is on the one hand the dynamic which is clearly predominant in many European societies, namely the transformation from homogenous confessional church religiosity to homogeneous secularity, without any significant growth of religious pluralism (except for the one brought by new immigrants). Another alternative pattern, paradigmatically represented by the United States, shows that modernization may actually be accompanied by religious revival and increasing religious pluralization with limited secularization.

One can find throughout the world similarly divergent patterns of relatively homogeneous secularization or re-confessionalization and increasing religious pluralization: among Catholic societies, for instance, one can observe since the 1960’s radical divergent patterns in highly secularized post-confessional Quebec and in increasingly multi-religious post-confessional Brazil; among post-Soviet Orthodox societies, one finds a similar divergence between pluralist Ukraine and re-confessionalized Russia; modernization in India and China has led to similarly divergent patterns. Even among Muslim societies one may observe similarly divergent patterns between religiously pluralistic Indonesia or Senegal and societies such as Iran or Saudi Arabia which attempt to impose homogeneous Islamic confessionalization from above.

Thus, there is a need for critically reflexive post-secularist social science to develop much more nuanced models of comparative-historical analysis of diverse dynamics of modernization, secularization, and religious pluralization which can inform the Church’s most appropriate pastoral initiatives and responses in its “new evangelization.” In practical terms, this means that the challenges of secularization and increasing religious
pluralization are going to be different across different societies and even among different groups within the same society and that therefore the Church’s responses in order to be adequate will also need to vary accordingly.

Obviously the response to the challenge of aggressive atheist secularism has to be different from the response to simply hedonistic materialism, to solidaristic exclusive secular humanism, or to the religious competition from other Christian communities and non-Christian religions, or to the competition that comes from non-religious spiritual searches. Each of these phenomena, all of which may contribute to the unchurching of Catholics, may nonetheless be carried by and be attractive to very different groups in different societies, and therefore the pastoral response has to be appropriate and commensurable. No general and uniform pastoral strategy of evangelization will be able to address adequately all of these phenomena.

As an illustration, over the past several years Fr. George McLean, Charles Taylor and I devised a project to gather groups of Catholic intellectuals from various European and North American societies to examine growing disjunctions between Church and secular world on four different dimensions (spiritual search, models of authority, historicity of moral development, attitudes towards pluralism). The annual gathering of representatives of over twenty working groups from North America (US and Canada) and from various European countries (from Ireland to Ukraine), most of them based in Catholic universities, led to a truly enriching discussion and to a better understanding of the diverse and at times highly divergent dynamics within the various Catholic communities and to the diverse challenges of secularization.

This model could be replicated beyond the Northern hemisphere into other regions of the Catholic world. Such gathering would facilitate not only mutual understanding but also the formation of the kind of horizontal global Catholic networks that might serve to develop deep catholicity within the People of God. In a sense, this is the function of synodal and conciliar gatherings as well as of regional and national conferences at the level of the Church hierarchy. They can serve both to express and articulate particular differences as well as to mediate and facilitate Catholic consensual understandings. But in order to gather all the situated intelligence as well as the rich diversity within the entire People of God it would be advisable to find ways to multiply such gatherings not only at the level of the hierarchy in Rome and within national and regional bishops conferences but also among religious orders, scholars and intellectuals, lay religious movements and lay associations within and across regions.

After all, it is those various communities within the diverse People of God which are likely to be most effectively engaged in the task of evangelization. As Pope Francis has emphasized in the encyclical Evangelii Gaudium, in order to bear abundant fruit, today’s evangelization is a task that must be carried out by the entire People of God. As a pastoral strategy, facilitating the actual intersubjective gathering of the many sectors and communities constituting the People of God may be as important as the gathering of objective intelligence and scholarly mapping, particularly in order to gain mutual understanding and to strengthen catholicity within the global Church.

In this respect, processes of globalization present not only grave challenges, but also great opportunities to a global Catholic Church. Its deep and long-lasting global consciousness, its unparalleled global reach, global networks, and global intelligence capabilities, and its proven dedication to the common good of global humanity represent some of the most significant competitive advantages and assets of the Catholic Church in our global age.

2) Irremediable Pluralization and Pluralism (Internal and External, Religious and Secular) and the Need for Interreligious Recognition and Dialogue

Centesimus Annus asserted 25 years ago that “today we are witnessing a predominance, not without signs of opposition, of the democratic ideal, together with lively attention to and concern for human rights.”(#47). This predominance, while still noticeable is today diminished and is facing globally new signs of opposition. Nevertheless, the emergence of what I have referred to in my work as a new “global secular dispensation” is in my view one of the most significant trends of the last 50 years. Again, one could say that this new dispensation was recognized presciently by the Council Fathers at the Second Vatican Council as a new “sign of the times” in two of the most important documents of Vatican II, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, Dignitatis Humanae, and the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate.

Both documents marked a break with the millennial Catholic tradition of church establishment and discriminatory distinction between “true” and “false” religion. Our global age has been rightly characterized by the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor as A Secular Age. But ‘secular’ here does not mean without religion, but rather it means a condition of increasing pluralization of religious and non-religious options.

The key principle of the new global secular dispensation is the recognition of religious freedom as an inalienable individual right based on the sacred dignity of the human person. Not creeds or doctrines, but persons have rights. Persons have the right and the duty to follow their conscience without coercion. Truth
cannot be imposed coercively, it must be assented freely. In this respect, and this is what is radically new in the new secular dispensation, neither truth nor error have rights per se. Persons have the right and the duty to search the truth without coercion and to follow their conscience in good faith even when in the process they may err.

The second key component of the secular dispensation is an institutional one, namely the principle of a newly redefined secular state. The modern state needs to be secular, but not in the laicist or secularist sense of adopting a critical negative attitude towards religion, preserving for itself the right to regulate religion and to keep it in its place, excluding it from the public sphere. The state needs to be secular precisely out of respect for the freedom of religion of each and all its citizens. In this respect the secular state has the obligation to maintain a certain neutral distance from all religions in the name of religious equality, which implies not relativism but rather the principle of equal respect towards all religions. The secular state declares itself if not fully agnostic in matters of religion, at least theologically incompetent to arbitrate in religious disputes or in matters of religious truth, abandoning the role of protecting orthodoxy and the true religion while proscribing heterodoxy. In fact the secular state has to assume the opposite obligation, namely the role of protector of religious minorities from majoritarian discriminatory rule.

The third foundational principle of the secular dispensation is the recognition of a fundamental sociological fact of our global age, the recognition that global humanity is characterized by an irreducible religious and cultural plurality. This recognition in turn leads to the acknowledgment that religious pluralism, rather than being a negative fact that needs to be corrected and suppressed, is a positive principle that calls all religious communities to mutual respect and recognition, indeed to interreligious dialogue.

These three principles of the global secular dispensation – the principle of individual religious freedom, the principle of a secular state that ought to protect religious freedom, and the recognition of religious pluralism as a positive manifestation of the global human condition – mark a significant departure from the dominant religious dispensation that preceded it. In the case of the Christian West, at least since the Constantinian and Theodosian establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the empire, the Christian religious dispensation had been based on the fundamental doctrinal distinction between “true” and “false” religion.

The Catholic faith was the only vera religio, while the other false religions were differentiated into the various categories of Christian “schismatics” and “heretics”, Jewish and Muslim “infidels” and idolatrous “pagans.”

It was this logic that was translated into the principle of the Westphalian system, cuius regio ejus religio, a formula that put an end to the wars of religion of early modern state formation caused by the religious divisions and the religious pluralization that accompanied the Protestant Reformation. The formula gave the royal sovereign the authority to impose religious confessionalization in his realm. As a result, Northern Europe became homogeneously Protestant, Southern Europe became homogeneously Catholic, with three bi-confessional societies in between, Holland, Germany and Switzerland. Religious minorities, particularly the so-called religious sects were forced to flee, finding refuge first in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the only multi-confessional (Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox) state of early modern Europe, and eventually in the New World.

The transition from the Christian to the secular dispensation has been a complex process that has lasted several centuries and is by no means complete. Following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations after World War II, it is the threefold American model of individual religious freedom, of a secular state that protects the free exercise of religion in society, and of pluralist denominationalism that has been gaining ground on the global stage, rather than the European laicist-secularist model. Paradoxically, the expansion of the global secular dispensation brings in its wake not homogeneous secularization as European sociological theories of modernity and secularization had predicted, but rather diverse dynamics of religious revival and specially of increasing religious pluralization throughout the globe.

All the religio-cultural systems, Christian and non-Christian, Western and non-Western are now being transformed through these global interactive dynamics. But the emerging global pluralist religious system is not necessarily leading either to relativism or to radical secularization as some many commentators in Europe, religious as well non-religious, have argued for so long. Rather throughout much of the world it is accompanied by all kinds of novel religious transformations. Indeed, what characterizes the contemporary global moment is not only the fact that all forms of human religion, past and present, from the most “primitive” to the most “modern” are available for individual and collective appropriation. Equally relevant is the fact that increasingly they must learn to coexist side by side in today’s global cities.

But even if the expansion of this secular religious pluralist dispensation is the most significant global trend of the last 50 years, it does not mean that such a novel trend is being institutionalized everywhere in the same way or is accepted always without resistance. On the contrary, we also see in many parts of the world open
and at times violent opposition to the principle of religious freedom. After all, the recognition of the principle of religious freedom entails almost everywhere some radical change, and at times a significant break from older religious traditions and from historical patterns of church-state relations. The core principle of religious freedom and freedom of conscience is still not accepted throughout much of the world of Islam nor in many authoritarian states, particularly in communist and post-communist countries.

Our new awareness of the growing repression of religious minorities in many parts of the world is itself an indication of the expansive dynamic of the claim of individual religious freedom as a human right and to the resistance in many parts of the world to the growing institutionalization of a global human rights regime. There are, indeed, counter global trends of resistance to the three elements of the secular dispensation – individual religious freedom, tolerant secular states, and recognition of religious pluralism – which take many different forms. Let me analyze briefly four different types of resistance to the secular dispensation one finds throughout the world.

The first is the resistance to accept the very principle of religious freedom in the name of defense of “orthodoxy” and “the true” religion. This is accompanied by a growth of religious “fundamentalism.” Throughout the Muslim world, for instance, there is still much resistance to the three elements of the secular dispensation. As a monotheist established religion Islam still functions with the crucial distinction between “true” and “false” religion, that is, between orthodoxo and heterodoxy, and therefore it still uses the discriminatory distinctions between true orthodox Islam (Sunni) and schismatic (Shiite) and heretic (Ahmadiyya and Baha’i) Muslims, infidels (Christian and Jews) and idolatrous pagans. All the various forms of false religion may be at best tolerated within patterns of hierarchic discrimination. Frequently they are proscribed by the state. But even more frequently, religious minorities are often violently persecuted by fundamentalist groups in Muslim societies, while the state remains inactive, indifferent or ineffective in protecting those minorities.

The Chinese state, with its millennial tradition of caesaro-papist prerogative of defining orthodoxy and heterodoxy, represents today one of the most outspoken forms of resistance to the secular dispensation, insofar as it does not recognize either the principle of individual human rights or the identity of a non-ideological secular state that respects all the religions of its citizens. Today the Chinese communist state has abandoned its chimeric attempt to eradicate violently all traditional forms of religion and superstition in order to impose its own atheist state orthodoxy. It has relaxed somehow its repressive control of religion, accepting de facto the existence of five legally recognized but tightly regulated religions (Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism). It also tolerates and at times even promotes the revival of folk Chinese religions and of Confucianism, while reserving for itself the right to determine which forms of religion are “orthodox” and in harmony with the Chinese state and which ones are “heretic” and therefore can be classified as “evil cults” which endanger the unity of the state and the harmony of society.

The Russian Federation represents a third form of resistance to the secular dispensation manifested in the alliance of an imperial secular authoritarian state and the Russian Orthodox Church, which through the Moscow Patriarchate maintains its canonical territorial claims over many of the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, particularly over the so-called “Russian World” (Russkiy Mir). Despite its constitutional self-definition as a “secular” state, the Russian state makes de facto clear distinctions between three types of religion: a) Russian Orthodoxy under the Moscow Patriarchate which is privileged as the “traditional” religion of all ethnic Russians; b) The other “traditional religions” of Russia: Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and other ethnic Christians which had a historical presence within the Russian empire (Armenians, German Lutherans, Baptists, etc.), which are legally recognized and have a constitutional claim to free exercise; and c) All other new, non-traditional and non-historical religious communities in Russia, which are either hindered by cumbersome processes of legalization and local permits or are under close state regulation and surveillance, insofar as they are viewed as “foreign” agents and therefore as a threat to national security. Roman Catholicism, new evangelical and Pentecostal “sects,” Mormons and Jehovah’s and other groups identified with the United States, as well as new dangerous “sects” or “extremist” Muslim groups, all fall under this category.

Finally, India represents a fourth and very different model of resistance to one of the components of the secular dispensation, namely to the principle of religious freedom as an individual right, as manifested in the prohibition of proselytism and in the opposition to religious conversion. The religious conversion of single individuals and entire communities has been an unsettling political event in the life of Indian society from the British colonial period till the present. Particularly the conversion of so-called “scheduled castes” and “scheduled tribes” to non-Hindu religions, whether to Buddhism, Islam or Christianity, tends to provoke violent reactions of Hindu majoritarian nationalism against Islam and Christianity as “foreign” non-Indian religions.

One may point out that the secular state management of religion is everywhere under siege, or at least in need of substantive revision, as it confronts the expansion of the principle of individual religious freedom, as well as increasing religious pluralization and new transnational religious dynamics linked to immigration.
and globalization. It is in this respect that one may also talk of “post-secular societies,” as does the German philosopher Juergen Habermas for European societies which have become critically reflexive of their own secularist assumptions and have to accept the pluralization and pluralism of religious and secular world-views.

For the Catholic Church the proper response to increasing pluralization internally and externally ought to be not uniform self-enclosed exclusivity, but rather the recognition that plurality and pluralism in unity with the Bishop of Rome and with the local bishops is both, theologically and sociologically, a sign of universality, catholicity and wholeness. It is also sociologically speaking the most appropriate and effective pastoral strategy.

While the growing secularization of European societies represents a significant challenge for the Catholic Church, no less challenging is the significant growth of religious pluralism in many previously homogeneous Catholic societies, such as Latin America or the Philippines. Partly in response to the sociological evidence that in the United States and elsewhere, conservative churches were growing at the expense of more liberal churches, there has been what is in my view, a misplaced diagnosis of the challenges facing the Catholic Church today. Blaming the post-Vatican II liberalization for the confusion and the loss of the faithful, there has been the attempt to close ranks in a defensive, assertive and self-enclosed church which abandoned its “catholic” all-inclusive identity for a more pure and exclusivist quasi-sectarian community.

While such a strategy may be appropriate for Protestant denominations within an internally competitive pluralist religious market, it is self-defeating for a Catholic Church whose greatest competitive resource is its “catholicity” and its rich and complex internal pluralism, which can best accommodate the very different challenges of pluralization in various local and national contexts. As Pope Francis emphasized in Evangelii Gaudium, the local parish, the national churches and the global Church need to reinvent themselves as communities of communities. The face of the People of God is increasingly plural and diverse and the Catholic Church needs to embrace this rich internal pluralism, both to sustain itself and to respond adequately to the task of external evangelization in an ever more plural and pluralistic world.

For a global Catholic Church that has to adopt and respond to the most diverse local challenges, the promotion of a reach internal Catholic pluralism often nurtured from below is a more fruitful way to respond creatively to the diverse tasks of evangelization, than are centralized, homogeneous and clerically-led programs of evangelization promoted from above. A thriving global Catholic Church will be one which opens spaces for its diverse and rich historical spiritualities and can make room for Dominicans and Franciscans, Jesuits and Opus Dei, Communion e Liberazione and Liberation Theology, Focolari and Sant’Egidio, Charismatics and Traditionalists.

Given the irremediable tendencies of individuation and pluralization in our global secular age, only a church that promotes and welcomes internally greater individuation and pluralization in communion with the Bishop of Rome can truly prosper as “catholic” church and answer responsibly the plural challenges of our global age. By definition such a program of evangelization cannot be managed and controlled from the center but will have to respond to the increasingly diverse “glocal” challenges. Rather than uniform and homogeneous global Catholic responses what are most needed are “catholic” ones that are simultaneously global and local.

3) “The Gender Question” and the Specter of Feminism

From a long term historical perspective, indeed from the perspective of the global history of humanity, the most important socio-cultural change of the last decades continues to be the global expansion of the revolution in gender relations. “The gender question” is arguably the most serious and complex challenge facing the Church today and in the foreseeable future. Indeed, the future of the global Church may be determined to a large extent by the way in which the church hierarchy, Catholic theologians and intellectuals, and the entire People of God, particularly faithful Catholic women, are able to find creative and positive responses to the challenge. One could argue that until very recently, indeed until the arrival of Pope Francis, the response of the hierarchy had been mostly inadequate in so far as it tended to view and officially depict the very discourse of “gender” as a dangerous ideology produced by feminism, in the process turning feminism into an ideological foe, indeed into a specter not unlike Communism in the 19th century.

The modern moral principles of life, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness are converging most dramatically throughout the world around issues of gender equality and sexual morality. While the principle that “all men and women are created equal” is becoming an ever more self-evident truth, the task of somehow bridging the enormous gap between the norm of gender equality and the appalling reality of unequal worth, unequal status, and unequal access to resources and power which women suffer throughout the world is likely to remain one of the most important historical-political tasks and challenges for all societies and all institutions, including religious ones.
The “gender question” is in many respects the fundamental moral question of our times in the same way as “the social question” was the fundamental moral question since the middle of the 19th century. The Catholic Church, pressed by Catholic dynamics emerging from the grassroots of social Catholic movements eventually developed a commendable track record of addressing the social question. But when it comes to the gender question, the Church, at least the hierarchy and the magisterium, have mainly failed to address theologically the new challenge, contenting themselves with reaffirming traditional teachings which fail to come to terms with the radical social transformation and to scrutinize prophetically the signs of the times.

The radical change in circumstances produced by the modern democratic and sexual revolutions, and the fundamental transformations in gender relations and gender roles which both entail present a particularly difficult challenge to the sacred claims of all religious traditions. Not surprisingly, the politics of gender and gender equality are central to politics everywhere and religion is thoroughly and intimately implicated in the politics of gender. Indeed, many analysts have been tempted to interpret what they view as the global emergence of religious “fundamentalism” in all religious traditions as primarily a patriarchal reaction against the common global threat of gender equality, the emancipation of women, and feminism.

The discourses of feminism and secularism have become intertwined today in the same way as communism and atheism became intertwined in the 19th century. “Gender” has become in this respect the preeminently contested “social question,” while “religion” has been thrown, willingly or unwillingly, into the vortex of the global contestation. Traditional religious establishments tend to view feminist agendas and particularly the very notion of gender as a historically contingent, socially constructed, and therefore changeable reality, as the greatest threat not only to their religious traditions and their moral authoritative claims, but to the very idea of a sacred or divinely ordained natural order, inscribed either in natural law, shari’a, or some “right way” universally valid for all times.

At the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church embraced theological developmental principles grounded in the historicity of divine revelation, incarnation, and continuous historical unfolding of the divine plans of salvation for humanity, that require the Church’s careful discernment of “the signs of the times.” The Catholic aggiornamento represented in this respect a recognition of the fundamental moral principles of secular modernity. The human dignity of each and every person emerges as the guiding principle of the three most consequential documents of the Second Vatican Council, Gaudium et Spes, Dignitatis Humanae, and Nostra Aetate. All three documents share moreover the explicit reference to “the signs of the times” and the historicist recognition that we are entering a new age in the history of humanity with important repercussions for our understanding of the unfolding of the mystery of salvation.

Actually, the same historicist and developmental recognition appears most poignantly in the section directed to women in the Closing Speech of the Council when the Council Fathers asserted that “at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation … The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved.” Yet this prophetic vision of the unprecedented transformation in gender relations which humanity was experiencing did not have the transformative consequences one should have expected in the life of the Church after the council.

Indeed, on issues of gender and sexual moral theology, the Catholic hierarchy, since the publication of the encyclical Humanae Vitae in 1968, has reasserted a traditionalist ontological conception of human nature and of human biology based on the essentialist conception of an a-historical, un-changing and universally valid natural law. Such a traditional ontological conception is increasingly in tension with the historicist conception of human moral development upheld by the social sciences as well as with the conception of a changing biological-historical nature informed by the new evolutionary life sciences.

One should make very clear that the historicist principle of aggiornamento and a critical prophetic discernment of the “signs of the times” do not imply at all an uncritical accommodation to modern secular liberal culture. Not every change is for the better or entails “progress.” There are many signs of the times particularly in high divorce rates, teenage pregnancy, abortion, pornography, and the commodification and debasement of the female body and of human sexuality in general, which are negative violations of human dignity, that many social scientists also recognize as anomie. But the Church can only maintain a critical, indeed prophetic, relationship to secular cultural if it can differentiate its eschatological principles from their irremediable historical embeddedness in particular traditional historical cultures.

The issue here is not one of moral relativism, as a matter of arbitrary individual choice or preference, but that of the clash between fundamental “sacred” moral values. Theologically, any religious community has the right and the duty to uphold what it considers a divinely ordained sacred injunction or moral norm. Sociologically, however, the question is how long any religious tradition, particularly a “catholic” one, can resist the adoption of
a new moral value when a near universal consensus concerning the sacred character of such a value emerges in society. To denounce modern moral developments as a reversion to paganism or rampant relativism is to misunderstand modern historical developments.

Sociologically, in reaction to the Catholic Church's official defense of a "traditionalist" position on gender issues and a singularly obsessive focus on "sexual" moral issues, one can observe throughout the Catholic world a dual process of female secularization and erosion of the Church's authority on sexual morality. Perhaps for the first time in the accumulative waves of modern secularization women have left the Church in large numbers, most dramatically throughout Europe, but increasingly also throughout North America and incipiently in Latin America. Female secularization is probably the most significant factor in the drastic secularization of Western European societies since the 1960's and in the radical rupture of European Christian "religion as a chain of memory."

The evidence of increasing female secularization in Latin America is only incipient but it is in my view very serious. Every sociologist of religion knows that females tend to be more religious than males practically in all societies and in all religious traditions. Yet according to the 2010 census in Brazil, the largest Catholic society in the world, there were two million more men than women within the Catholic church. The figure points to a dramatic female exodus from the Church compared with the situation of the Catholic Church in Brazil only a few decades ago when there were more women than men or with the situation of every other religious community in Brazil today where one finds more women than men. The growing gender gap in male and female religious vocations throughout much of Latin America is even more dramatic. While male clerical vocations have been growing in Brazil and in other South American societies in the last decades, female religious vocations have been declining drastically.

Equally crucial and of grave societal relevance is the drastic secularization of sexual morality. Increasing numbers of practicing Catholic are disobeying the injunctions of the Catholic hierarchy and following their own conscience on most issues related to sexual morality. Moreover, there is increasing evidence from public opinion polls in Europe, North America, and Latin America that young Catholic adults are explicitly dissociating their sexuality and their religiosity, claiming that religion has absolutely no influence upon their attitudes toward sexuality.

We are witnessing on the one hand a church hierarchy which evinces an almost obsessive focus in defending traditional sexual morality, and on the other hand a majority of Catholic faithful in the secular world who not only ignore the moral injunctions of the hierarchy, but feel increasingly comfortable dissociating their religion and their sexuality. Such a radical dissociation of private sexuality from religion and even from morality is leading to a radical secularization of the private sphere of individual consciousness that parallels the secularization of politics and of the public sphere.

A renewed Church less self-absorbed in its own clericalism and embracing the poorest and the weakest must per force pay greater attention to women, who remain the poorest, the weakest, and the least respected in every society and every organization including "the People of God." It is to be hoped that lay and religious women will gain greater access and participation in the administrative authority of the Church at every level, in the magisterium, and eventually in the priesthood.

4) The cacophony of voices of global civil society and the need for legitimate norms and structures of global governance (pluralization and fragmentation of global media)

Centesimus Annus offers a "re-reading" of Rerum Novarum that was still written within the framework of an international society of nation-states and of national economies. Nevertheless in its brief discussion of development it already points to the need for a global perspective that corresponds to the new realities brought by processes of globalization:

"Just as there is a collective responsibility for avoiding war, so too there is a collective responsibility for promoting development. Just as within individual societies it is possible and right to organize a solid economy which will direct the functioning of the market to the common good, so too there is a similar need for adequate interventions on the international level. For this to happen, a great effort must be made to enhance mutual understanding and knowledge, and to increase the sensitivity of consciences." (#52)

As we are entering a new age of globalization we find ourselves in the midst of a transitional phase in which the structures of governance of the old system are in serious crisis, while new legitimate ones have not emerged yet. The mirage of the global triumph of economic and political liberalism, celebrated by Fukuyama's "end of
history” thesis, was soon replaced by visions of the ‘clash of civilizations’ and more recently by a widespread
down turn caused by what appears to be an expanding global disorder running out of control.

One should distinguish between three different levels of governance which though interrelated may actually
follow their own dynamics and work at cross purposes: 1) the geopolitical level of international relations; 2)
the economic level of global markets and financial structures; and 3) the socio-cultural and normative level of
an emerging global civil society aspiring to universality while having to recognize the irremediable plurality of
the many particular religions and cultures constituting global humanity. I will touch briefly upon the first two
structural levels of global governance, while dedicating greater attention to the third level. Geopolitically, we
have moved in short order from the bipolar system of the cold war to the monopolist hegemony of a single
power that coalesced briefly into an ephemeral Pax Americana, which is now been replaced by an increasingly
anarchic multipolar global disorder. The multiple simultaneous wars being fought in Syria with the involvement
of dozens of state and non-state armed forces and the inability of the international system to contain the violent
regional conflicts or to manage the resulting humanitarian and refugee crises offer the most clear evidence of
the global geopolitical crisis.

In the long term only the consolidation of a legitimate international system based on international law,
that limits the absolute sovereignty of each and every state, can offer the hope that the present crisis will not
lead to a new global conflagration between world powers. But in the short run, the principle “might makes right”
seems to be gaining the upper hand from the South China Sea to Crimea. Even the project of a European
Union, meant to overcome the nationalist conflicts of the past that triggered the two world wars, is in serious
crisis. The vision of a single European home from the Atlantic to the Urals is receding in the face of a European
Union unable to develop solidaristic economic policies that would benefit all its members, to respond in unison
to the immigration and refugee crisis, or to confront Russia’s new militarist challenge.

On the economic level of global governance there has been no stable recovery from the global financial
crisis of 2007-2008. The crisis itself manifested a collapse of internal corporate and financial governance
structures, the widespread failure of regulators, credit rating agencies, and market mechanisms, a lack of
transparency and ultimately a systemic breakdown in accountability and ethics. Governments that proved
unable or unwilling to regulate the economy before the crisis had to intervene afterwards to bail out the
financial system. Yet, their monetary policies often coupled with austerity measures have flushed the financial
system with easy money but have done little to stimulate the real economy. Market mechanisms alone appear
insufficient. Neither the advanced capitalist countries nor China seem to be able to function as engines of
growth for the world economy. Most emerging markets are in recession and the global economic peripheries
are confronting serious subsistence crisis. Most damangingly, economic inequality keeps growing everywhere,
reaching unsustainable levels and undermining the political system as well as the civic trust and the social
fabric in most societies.

In sum, the world economic system lacks internal self-regulating governance structures, while the national
political systems lack the ability, the political will or the know-how to regulate global economic processes in a
productive, fair, and beneficial manner. Nationalist populist responses popping up everywhere are a sign of
the malaise but are unlikely to offer long term creative solutions that may serve to overcome the crisis.

If new norms and governance structures are to emerge which may serve to regulate the global geopolitical
system and the world economic system they will have to be nurtured and grow within the emerging global civil
society. The crisis in global governance is ultimately a crisis of legitimacy, of accountability and of participation.
The ruling political and economic elites are too detached and inattentive to the people they represent and in
whose name they claim to govern. But the rise of populist demagogues, most evident in the United States and
Europe, will not serve to reform the system. Only greater democratic participation beyond electoral mobilization
can lead to greater accountability and in turn restore trust and legitimacy.

But ultimately it is from the transnational movements of an emerging global civil society that more solidaristic
norms of global governance may emerge, pressing national governments, international organizations, and
global financial and regulatory institutions to adopt a perspective which is more oriented to pursue the common
good of global humanity and of the entire family of nations. This is an area in which the Church has a long and
proven record of dedication and commitment both in its declarations and in its “witness of actions.”

Today the appeal to an emerging global civil society which aspires to the universal representation of global
humanity and to the universal common good must appear nebulous at best, if not utterly unrealistic. Any sober
look at the emerging world society reveals an irremediable and seemingly unsurmountable plurality of world
views, moral norms, cultures and religious traditions in open tension if not in outright conflict with one another.
How could paying attention to such a cacophony of voices, particularly those emerging from below and from the
margins, from popular movements and from the global peripheries, possibly help in the development of global
norms and governance structures? Global cosmopolitan elites would prefer to ignore all these discordant and
unruly voices from below and offer instead rational, positivist and technocratic rules which can be legislated uniformly from above.

But in the long term such a strategy most likely will fail to advance greater and more legitimate global integration. The reaching of consensus among global elites may be a sine qua non for the development of any viable global governance. But to be lasting such a consensus will need to be grounded in broader norms which find resonance in the moral, cultural and religious traditions of the diverse peoples who constitute global humanity. Such norms can only emerge from a sustained conversation and dialogue that recognizes the irremediable plurality of cultures, religious and secular, that coexist in our global era and will persist into the future. Legitimate global norms are only likely to emerge from a culture of encounter and dialogue, as so often stressed by Pope Francis in all his statements.

Long-lasting global norms which may serve as the foundation of legitimate structures of global governance will only emerge from sustained inter-religious, inter-cultural and inter-civilizational dialogue. Such a dialogue has to be grounded in practices of mutual recognition of our common human dignity and particularly in the recognition of the human dignity of each person, particularly of those who are weakest and marginalized. Only such a recognition can serve to develop structures of global governance that will promote world peace and social justice for all instead of protecting the national security interests of the superpowers, that will promote economic growth and well-being for all instead of protecting the economic interests of the ruling elites, and that ultimately will promote the common good of global humanity and the protection of the earth, our common home, from greater environmental degradation.