

Connecting: Time, Space, and Faith in a Global World
Dartmouth College Baccalaureate
June 12, 2004

Diana Eck

There is no greater and more complex image of the relatedness of the community than the image of the body, the image Paul uses to describe the church in the passage we just heard from I Corinthians 12. We belong together. We are knit together by the very sinews and bones of the body. But recognizing our belonging is not easy. We are not all alike. Our ways of belonging to the whole are different. And yet the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

Paul calls upon the body image to convey an understanding of the church as a community of faith. In his time, this small community was gradually coming to include both Jews like himself and Gentiles, women and men, high and low, slave and free. Any student of history knows how hard it has been for the Christian church to live up to this powerful image of belonging. There have been mutual excommunications, fissures and divisions, reformations and counter reformations, and denominations galore. Even within single denominations, such as my own United Methodist Church, there have been plenty of times when the eye has said to the hand, "I have no need of you!" As I often remind students who study religion, our human religious traditions are not boxes of consistent dogma and belief, passed from hand to hand, generation to generation, but long impassioned arguments—in this case, an argument over meaning of being part of a body of belonging. Who do we mean when we say "we"?

This "we" question is not a Christian question alone, but a Muslim question, a Jewish question. Indeed, it is a human question, even for those who do not think of themselves as religious at all. And the body as an image of this human belonging is also employed in many religious traditions. As a professor of Hinduism, I often turn to the "Purusha Sukta" hymn of the Rig Veda, an ancient hymn that evokes the creation of the entire universe through the division and distribution of the primordial Divine body. "From his mind the moon was born, from his eye the sun, from his ears the four directions." Classes of people are created from the Divine body as well—from the head, the arms, the thighs, the feet.

We do not have to embrace class hierarchies or particular forms of human division and difference to understand that the body represents, above all, an image of integral relatedness. Yes, at one level, we have feet that do the tap-dancing, hands that grip the axe, shape the pottery, and play the piano, minds that analyze and dream. But we know full well that this little body-cosmos we inhabit is a complex of mind, body, and spirit in which every part participates in the dancing and the dreaming. The eye, the hand, and the mind of the baseball pitcher at the mound are intricately connected in every pitch by years of training.

I turn to these images of human belonging today because every community, even the Dartmouth College community that gathers on bonfire nights and great days of celebration like this one, is continually seeking, imaging, strengthening and enacting the bonds of belonging that draw so many different people together. There is no community so small or homogeneous that the fact of difference disappears. The hope that somehow we can create a society, join a fraternity, start a new church, start afresh in a new world where only the like-minded live is always a receding and hopeless hope. History forever presents us with our differences. So, how do we understand our belonging and our differences at one and the same time? Let me put the question to you: When is difference a problem? A challenge? A gift? This is our question today –in any community, large or small, religious or civic, local or global. Grappling with our differences and discovering our relatedness is a critical issue for us as human beings. It is a challenge far wider than that of the Christian community, the Hindu community, or any one religious, ethnic, or national community.

This is our question, for those of us who are Americans, seeking to discover “we the people” amidst our unprecedented diversity. The first Europeans who came to these shores sought religious freedom –for themselves. They did not think of creating a basis for living together with people different from themselves. Puritans of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts warned Jews and Catholics out of town. Yet when the Constitution of a new republic was framed two centuries later, religious freedom was affirmed for everyone, an abiding principle that has expanded our diversity of faiths and given us by now a country in which Muslims and Sikhs, Buddhists and Hindus, and our many Native peoples struggle to claim and enjoy freedom of conscience, faith, and practice. For the past four decades, new immigrants have brought to the U.S. not only their dreams of freedom or economic prosperity, but their Bhagavad Gitas and Qur’ans, their images of the Bodhisattva Guan Yin and the Virgin of Guadalupe. We the people wear yarmulkes, headscarves, and turbans now. We build temples, mosques, and gurdwaras.

Finding a common belonging amidst our many differences is also, as we know, a major issue for our complex and troubled world. From one perspective, we are planet earth, seen from the distance of space: that beautiful blue planet, swirling with clouds. From another perspective, we Earthlings are riven with conflict, competition, and discord, with anxiety and ambition, with fear and flattery. If there ever were a time when we needed to spin out a new fabric of belonging and a wider sense of “we” for the human community it is certainly now.

During the course of the past four years, your college years, the term globalization has become more broadly and liberally scattered in our discourse. For most of us, however, globalization has remained an abstraction --the linkage of our world- systems such as banking, commerce, communications, and security. Economic and political events in one part of the world resound in other parts of the world. Fiberoptic cable and satellite communications now connect far distant parts of our global home. In concrete terms this means that Brazilian soap-operas are seen in Turkey. American prime time sit-coms are broadcast in

rural Egypt and South India and they convey our image, yours and mine, for better and for worse, to people who do not know us. CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera bring their respective versions of the news to the whole world. In concrete terms, globalization means that wireless communications systems, like that of Dartmouth College, enable you to sit in the sun on the steps of Sanborn House or on the porch of the Dartmouth Skiways and read the *Times of India* on the internet. And it means that a high school student in Madras can log into the Dartmouth website and dream about coming to this exotic place. Globalization signals the expansion and quickening of our world of connection and information.

At a practical level, globalization has meant the twenty-four hour work day. This is a world in which, at the end of the day, you might send your data processing tasks half way around the world and have full day's work done on them by someone in India by the time you get up the next morning. It is a world in which your parking tickets in Queens might be processed in a village in the Himalayan foothills. A call to the help desk at Dell will likely connect you to a technician in Bangalore, who speaks English perfectly and who may, indeed, have your job.

Globalization has also had a tremendous impact on the image and understanding of religion. Bridges of connection link us now, we who for centuries have relied on second-hand rumor and report for our interpretations and misinterpretations of others. Religious communities can represent themselves, speak in their own voices, articulate their own visions –those that might bring us together and those that tear us apart. The Vatican and the World Council of Churches, the Muslim League in Riyadh and the Muslim Public Affairs Council in Washington have their own websites. Whether you are religious or not, you will need to understand just how powerful religious movements are in their global dimensions. When American Christian Evangelicals like Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell speak in denigrating language of Islam, their voices are heard around the world and create an image of American Christians in the minds of Indonesians. And when Arabic newspapers print outrageous views of Jewish people, their words are heard and amplified by the Jewish media-watch groups. We do not speak of one another in private anymore. We all overhear one another, and especially where the news is ugly or violent, we all know each other's darkest sides.

The veins and arteries of our global body are the communications links that circle the skies, the fiberoptic cables that lie under the seas, the wireless access points that spread nets of connection. These have changed the very axis of space and time, the very meaning of borders, all of which compose our lived-in world. Think about it. Space, the space in which we live, has in one sense extended to the whole of the virtually borderless world, and time has collapsed to the instant. Yesterday, all the world saw the riderless horse in Ronald Reagan's funeral procession. All the world saw the casket in the sunset last night and the intimate moment of Nancy Reagan's grief. Just as globalization extends the reach of human sympathy, it also quickens the reverberations of events. It amplifies outrage when the world witnesses prisoner abuse in Iraq. It also

amplifies the possibility and responsibility for urgent response when we see the immanent famine in the Sudan.

We have not thought seriously enough about what it really means for us that time and space have been altered in this way. This is challenging for scholars of religion whose task it is to think about the views of the religious, cultural, global worlds we imagine and inhabit. And it is a new challenge for all of us trying to understand the meaning of “we” in such a world, trying to find our body of belonging in a world of difference.

Ours is a world simultaneously more connected and more divided than ever before. The connections, indeed, emphasize the divisions. The Human Development report of the U.N. released a few years ago put it this way, “The collapse of space, time, and borders may be the creation of a global village, but not everyone can be a global citizen.”¹ No indeed, for the report documents that the wealthiest twenty percent of the world control eighty-six percent of the world’s product, while the poorest twenty percent are left out of the growth of globalization and control only one percent of the world’s domestic product. We can access this sobering report on our computers, for we in the United States own more computers than the rest of the world combined. Twenty-six percent of us in the US are on-line, as opposed to four hundredths of one-percent in South Asia. We can print out the U.N. report, as I did, for we in the richest twenty percent consume eighty-four percent of all the world’s paper.

There are many serious ethical and religious questions to ask ourselves in this context. How will we use our gifts of education and connection to be global citizens? How do you and I think about inequities of this global economic revolution? How is our well-being linked to the well-being of those with whom we share this planet? Can you and I be secure, if others are perpetually at risk? Has the communications revolution now become the bearer of a new kind of orientalism, a new cyber-globalism, a new order of domination based on rapid and expansive access to information? Can we use our access and connection to create a better world for everyone? After all, the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. If one part suffers, all suffer together. If one part flourishes, all rejoice together.

In the four short years you have been in college, the meanings of globalization have become more vivid, and more profound. You began your college careers in the fall of the year 2000, in the millennial year. In the fall of 2001, your sophomore year, all of us suddenly became cognizant of the new shape of our globalizing world. A new consciousness dawned that September morning, Tuesday, September 11, 2001. You all saw the images on television, and so did everyone else in the world. In villages with a single TV set in parts of the world where “New York” is just a word, people saw the footage of the planes crashing into the tall towers, and saw the towers collapse. Hundreds of millions of people saw the face and heard the words of Osama bin Laden, delivered by messenger to Al Jazeera and broadcast to every television set in the world. Those were times in which we all began to see in a new way the dimensions of a new

¹ See *The Boston Globe*, July 13, 1999, p.A17. The full text is on the UNDP website.

global reality –something far more complex than the ability of financial and commercial conglomerates to move money and materials around the world.

In the aftermath of 9/11, we have seen more clearly how space, time, and borders have collapsed in a new world. We have recognized ourselves as part of a world where our borders have been superseded by our vast and complex forms of connection. We are part of a world knit together by vast webs of airline flights and sea-lanes, by bank transfers and multinational companies, by electronics, computers, and telecommunications, by fiberoptic cable and satellite television, but insufficiently linked by networks of knowledge and bridges of understanding. The truth is, no matter how many shoes we scan, no matter how many fingerprints we take, no matter how many walls we build, our world is simply more intricately interconnected than ever before, and we know it. We are simultaneously more connected and more estranged. The irony is that you and I now live in a world in which we in Hanover and Cambridge can be instantly linked to counterparts in Hanoi and Capetown and yet find ourselves not knowing what in the world to say.

These are times when all of us need to discover the human dimensions of our new global reality. The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh describes our world as one of “interbeing.” Everything is interrelated. The very paper on which my text is printed is dependent upon and related to the sunshine and rain it took to grow the trees from which it was produced, the labor and machinery that produced it, the forms of commerce that marketed it. It is a classic Buddhist observation, but he puts it in modern and practical language: we “inter-are.” St. Paul would certainly have liked this language. We do not exist of and for and by ourselves, but in relation to a larger community. Refining the awareness of our inter-being is certainly one of the great intellectual and religious tasks of our time.

In today’s world, we are interdependent, but for Americans who have long cherished the ideals of independence, the term “interdependence” has only slowly found a place in our vocabulary. The fact that we “inter-are,” as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, is often not easy for us to accept, with our American rugged individualism and our commitment to self-interest. It makes us uncomfortable to recognize that we cannot achieve our visions and aspirations, even the most noble of them, by ourselves. We cannot go it alone, for there is no such thing as “alone” in an interdependent world. We will need to develop and enlarge our relations with others, including people of other faiths.

The Indian philosopher Radhakrishnan, lecturing at Oxford in the 1930s, prophetically pointed to the dimensions of this interdependence more than seventy years ago:

For the first time in the history of our planet its inhabitants have become one whole, each and every part of which is affected by the fortunes of every other. Science and technology, without aiming at this result, have achieved the unity. Economic and political phenomena are increasingly imposing on us the obligation to treat the world as a unit. Currencies are linked, commerce is

international, political fortunes are interdependent. And yet the sense that humankind must become a community is still a casual whim, a vague aspiration, not generally accepted as a conscious ideal or an urgent practical necessity moving us to feel the dignity of a common citizenship and the call of a common duty.²

Radhakrishnan concluded, "The supreme task of our generation is to give a soul to the growing world consciousness." This "supreme task" is still the burden of my generation and of yours. You must find a thousand inventive and creative ways to use the connections that scientific and technological genius have created to expand our humane knowledge and our human relatedness. The bridges have been built. Now we need the traffic and the back and forth flow of creative people and ideas. It is your task to give mind, soul, and spirit to a complex world community waiting to be born.

² S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 2.