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FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Citizenship in the Global City: Catholic Social Teaching and Community Organizing in East London

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OWENS: Is there such a thing as a global city, or is every city with global citizens so different that it's hard to make general claims about it?

ROUGEAU: I think every city is rooted in a place, a tradition, a history and a culture. But what defines a global city is the nature of its inhabitants and the fact that, for whatever reason, this place has been identified as a destination for people from all over the world. I suppose that the broader the range of people in a city, the more likely one is to define that place as global. When you consider the places where this sort of broad, cross-section of humanity exists, only certain cities like London or New York City come to mind. It takes not only a very large city, but also the sense that people from a number of different continents have identified that place as somewhere they want to be.

OWENS: Do global cities look alike in terms of size, wealth and language variety? What else defines them apart from the fact that people want to be there?

ROUGEAU: I think we can look at it on several levels. First, there is an economic factor. People are drawn to a vibrant economy, a place where they believe that they can make a living and find economic opportunity. This applies to a wide range of people: the investment banker, the multimillionaire and also the low- or semi-skilled migrant. For an immigrant in a global city, there are plenty of places where a low-skilled worker can actually get a foothold.

Second, there is a cultural aspect. The broad range of cultures represented in global cities is producing something exciting, new and varied. However, it does

not create a situation where people from all over the world are assimilating into some preexisting structure or into the shadows. These people are out in the open, and the cultural life of the place is defined by a mixing of the cultures that you can actually sense. You hear different languages and smell different smells. There is a real sense that people from around the world—or at least from many places in the confines of the city—are gathering. Again, that affects the experience an individual has when he is in that place.

OWENS: What kind of community organizing are you interested in, and what topics are individuals organizing around in a global city like London?

ROUGEAU: The organizing in London has been around several different topics. What interested me initially was the idea that people in these diverse communities have come together to identify particular issues about which they are all concerned—issues like economic opportunity.

When you enter an office building in a global city like London, the women who are cleaning that building come primarily from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Maybe some are from Eastern Europe. They all arrive from different places, but when you gather them together in one place—like in the workplace or in the neighborhood—they developed shared concerns.

One community organizing issue that has gained momentum in London is the campaign for a living wage. This, in addition to problems like crime, education and immigration, is the kind of topic that people who live together in communities traditionally rally around together because they experience a shared sense of need or possibility. They come together because of their shared geographic space. They feel a sense of community and identity as members of a neighborhood in a particular city, but they come to the issue from very different perspectives. The neighborhood is not a group that has long seen itself as a unit. Rather, it is a community of people who are creating a new sense of unity and identity around a particular issue.

So on that level, a lot of issues arise that you would not necessarily associate with immigrants to modern cities. While they are not always low-skilled laborers, the only jobs they have access to tend to be relatively low-skilled ones. They are also trying to figure out a way to integrate into the preexisting culture.

OWENS: It seems that race and gender are both enormous points of discrimination within cultures. How do you deal with this when you are trying to bridge cultural boundaries between things that may have very different foundational starting points?

ROUGEAU: Well, that's a great question. If you go somewhere like London, for instance, where you have traditional white working class British neighborhoods which are now being infused with Muslims from Asia, Catholics from Africa and Eastern

European Poles—people who have some very different views on family life, alcohol and the role of women—you get conflict over issues. Negotiating those things can be kind of tricky.

These groups do not pretend that there is no conflict. Rather, they say that there are some things we share because we all live in this neighborhood or occupy similar positions in the economy, and we need to have a conversation about what this neighborhood needs. A lot of people come to these conversations from strong faith commitments, and so a lot of the organizing starts in churches or Muslim community centers.

We find that when people do this, they at least build a foundation around which they can actually start to discuss their differences in a more productive way without stereotyping. For instance, a secular resident of European descent in London may say that Muslims do not treat women fairly. But, once they start engaging this issue, they realize that they may not be getting the whole picture. (I am generalizing about the secular view in Britain.)

Now, this is not to say that these differences do not start real conflict on all kinds of levels. However, recognizing that we all live in a shared space provides the basis for overcoming conflict. We need to recognize that we cannot expel all of the people we do not like, and that we need to develop structures within our democratic, cultural and political traditions that will allow us to negotiate differences.

OWENS: What is the relationship between the sense of being in diaspora from various homelands and being part of a new global city? How do you navigate the idea of citizenship without telling immigrants to leave everything behind?

ROUGEAU: The question of what does it mean to be a citizen in the 21st century is a big focal point in this conversation. In the old models of citizenship that existed in Europe, people came into a country and assimilated. In the post-WWII era, the idea that people are supposed to abandon differences in an effort to live together in peace gets rejected. At least in the West, particularly in North America and Europe, this idea is rejected because we understand that difference is part of the equation. Part of respecting our dignity as human beings is recognizing the fact that we are not all the same.

New understandings of citizenship involve much more complex ideas of what it means to be a citizen. For instance, there is more acceptance of the idea of dual citizenship. There is bilingualism and notions of diaspora where people sometimes go back to their homeland. There is some reevaluation of history. In the United States, we have often underemphasized the idea of returning to the homeland. For instance, Italian immigrants went back in huge numbers to Italy, but we tend to think only of those who stayed.

What is new in this idea of citizenship is that people do not feel the obligation to assimilate completely. I suppose this is because our political, social and cultural understandings have changed to allow them to retain certain aspects of their identity. For example, we identify the fact that I do not have to drop my religion to become French as a human rights norm. However, this can still become a source of conflict because of the French secular state. The French understood religion in terms of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism, and never really thought about Islam as part of that conversation.

What will be the new understanding of what it means to be a citizen? How will we allow for some more complexity without going into total anarchy? I think some of us have a lot of faith that our democratic structures, human rights norms and traditions of democratic liberalism are flexible enough to allow for more complexity. Other people, however, feel that we are heading down the road to disaster.

OWENS: Such as Samuel Huntington?

ROUGEAU: Yes. Like Sam Huntington or Patrick Buchanan. There has been a lot of writing that suggests that this idea of citizenship is folly. But what these critics are really suggesting is a tribal notion of citizenship that depends on some sort of bloodline or phenotypic classification. Yes, in the past, this was often the way in which it was done. However, I don't see how that squares with our understanding of human dignity and human rights. Is there some ideal American? What is that ideal? And when we start seeing whom it excludes, are we going to be comfortable with that? Especially in Europe, it has been hard to become more comfortable with the notion of what a Dane looks like or what it means to be French.

OWENS: How then should we think about cities and cultures that seem to be failing at this global civic endeavor? A place like Amsterdam comes to mind, which has been both a site of cultural intersection and dramatic and violent rejection of that end goal.

ROUGEAU: Yes. I think Amsterdam might not be there yet, because it's a city with a lot of immigrants who are not necessarily integrated, nor do they feel a sense of possibility to become Dutch. I don't know the Netherlands well enough to make a judgment, but from my own personal experience, I think you are more likely to see this global civic model happen in the United Kingdom, France, the United States or Canada. Some countries are just much better able to see themselves places of migration and settlement. In the French case, I think French democratic tradition and culture has always brought in new people. It's a very assimilationist model.

But, it's assimilating to something that—at least in the mind of the French tradition and of the state—doesn't require a particular racial, religious or other

background. Everyone can become a citizen of the French republic. Whether or not there are some limits to this is currently being tested.

OWENS: Is it a deep irony that some of the biggest global cities were former colonial powers?

ROUGEAU: In part. I think that what we see in Europe is an idea that Seyla Benhabib has written quite a bit about: the movement from the periphery to the center. Traditionally, in the minds of Europeans and North Americans peripheral cultures are now moving into the centers of global economic wealth and political power. One of the reasons for this is colonialism. It's not a big accident that France's biggest immigration issue is with North Africans from its former North African colonies. The same is true in England. The Indian subcontinent is a big place of immigration, and immigrants come to Britain for obvious reasons.

Europeans are now having to reckon with their colonial relationships in a much more personal way. But it's not just happening over there. It's happening here too.

I think the American equivalent to Europe is the United States' relationship with Mexico. This relationship is not colonial, but it calls into question certain ideas about American identity that are rooted in a deeply Anglo-Saxon, Northern European understanding of identity.

OWENS: What does Catholic social thought bring to this conversation?

ROUGEAU: The exciting thing about Catholic social thought is that it talks about certain values and gives some intellectual content to those values that is very useful in bridging the differences between people. Because the Catholic Church has a tradition of being a universal faith, it has always had to be explained across divides of various types. And so it is a faith that has integrated learning and knowledge from other traditions. It has been in conversation with other traditions. Catholic social teaching seeks to promote foundational values that have a place in other traditions as well.

When you talk about the dignity of the human person or the idea of solidarity, those are things that resonate with people around the globe, even if they don't come to those values from the same perspective.

At the end of the day, situating the human person in the social group is something that most religions struggle with. So, it is important that the Catholic social tradition possesses a lot of intellectual material that it can use to have this conversation in a pluralistic context. We see in the community organizing work that we've done that this tradition communicates. It communicates to a Muslim audience. It communicates to a secular audience. It allows for people to come together around a shared idea, even though they may not come to that idea from the same place.

OWENS: Thank you for your time.