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God and globalization

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The global village. It's a cliché that has come to pass. Hundreds of thousands of refugees are fleeing from East to West right now as I write this. The world's demographics are undergoing radical structural change. The West will have to reconfigure its own cultural presumptions.

In Europe, and likely the United States soon too, there will be many more Muslims to share urban spaces with; there will have to be a sorting out of cultural norms by both local and migrant populations. Religion will yet grow in importance as a source of divergent social perspectives.

At times like these, when people run from their homes, what is not being written yet in the midst of international shock is how tightly immigrants often cling to their traditions when they become strangers in a strange land. And natives cling just as hard to their version of God and tradition when they feel overwhelmed.

The West needs to rally its civic institutions to play a mediating role in what will surely be local conflicts on the ground once the romance of Christian charity towards this swelling of foreigners fades into a daily grind of diversion of always scarce municipal resources. How will public schools sustain their educational quality while adding so many desks? How will municipalities take into account large numbers of new migrants seeking work? And how will the West absorb populations arriving with palpably different religious worldviews?

It is here that one American college offers a model that may help alleviate this demographic crisis. Wagner College finds itself next to a neighborhood named Port Richmond, in New York. Port Richmond has the highest rate of Mexican immigrants in all of New York City. That's not to mention it is a new home to other Latin American immigrant groups, plus growing immigrant populations from other areas such as the Arab world. There are also longtime native Italian-American and African-American populations. Ethnic tensions can easily bubble over, as has occasionally happened.

But Wagner College figured something out. These same populations that can so easily disintegrate into bitterly competing interest groups, can just as easily be brought together through local civic organizations into a private-sector alliance that thinks through its needs as a bonded community. Education is always evolving, and Wagner College decided that deep involvement with local democracy is education for today. The eminent political theorist Michael Walzer says something similar - that global justice has to start locally.

So Wagner College brought together what is now known as the Port Richmond Partnership. Dozens of local non-governmental organizations decided that four policy areas: healthcare, education, housing, and employment, needed to be addressed immediately. And while the religious difference here is less salient than ethnic diversity, the Port Richmond Partnership was wise enough to include local religious organizations as equal voices, rather than leave them behind as relics.

Under the aegis of a local college, churches, schools, and local social service providers moved fast and furious to create a district concerned more about the future than with getting bogged down in the growing pains of the present.

Imagine each town in Hungary, Austria, and Germany today quickly getting local universities involved in helping facilitate stronger civic partnerships to create diverse leadership teams for municipal synergies in areas of distress. Imagine especially the call of faith in the public square, often so much a source of conflict, positively co-opted by civic organizations by encouraging a religious contribution as a voice of community and a pluralist social cohesion.

Urban scholars Paul Kantor and H.V. Savitch coined the term “glocal” back in 2002 to describe the impact of globalization on local political economies. God too is glocal. Whether you are religious or secular, a believer or atheist, there’s no denying the reality that faith is a powder keg ingredient of the global village. Different groups’ theologies are part and parcel of globalization, and those theologies are making their way chaotically around the world right now. Local institutions need to thoughtfully welcome, rather than reject, religious organizations and their perspectives, and somehow, municipality by municipality, offer a leadership role to faith-driven institutions. God and globalization are intertwined. Rather than reject that reality, it needs to be embraced.