

Spirituality at the crossroads: Schooling in a global setting

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 15, 2001](#) issue

In this new millennium, globalization and pluralism are preoccupying themes. Theologians across the spectrum struggle with both, as do businesspeople who work in global markets, executives who wrestle with “spirituality in the work place” and parents who care about preparing children to live in this globalized and pluralistic world.

Where better to observe global and pluralist phenomena than in the crossroads called Hong Kong, where so many peoples, so many worlds and so many religions come together? And where better to get a close-up view of educators and parents who are dealing creatively with these urgent issues than at the Hong Kong International School?

HKIS has long fascinated me. When I describe it to others, they are often bemused to learn that it was founded by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a body that understands “globalization” as part of its approach to missions, but is less friendly to pluralism and the ecumenical or interfaith implications connected with it. LCMS people continue to have leadership roles at HKIS, and they are not put off by pluralism and what it entails. Instead, they see the Hong Kong setting as the kind of milieu in which all Christians will soon operate, a petri dish in the global laboratory. Of course, it is also a school full of lively children—2,650 students from 40 nations—in whose future these educators have made heavy investments.

Well backed by the corporate community and a mix of Hong Kong elites, the school—with two campuses and dazzling white buildings—does not lack equipment or personnel to pursue its mission. The students are privileged academic whizzes, bound for schools like Stanford. To me they were attentive, courteous, and responsive in ways that demonstrated they are somehow unspoiled and clearly not bored.

I had a half hour with 60 first-graders. We discussed “How big is God?” “HUGE,” they decided. (I hear the same answer from Nobel-level scholars as well as American elementary students.) I fielded some questions about Hong Kong and Chinese burial customs. “What happens to the bodies and bones of buried people when the cemeteries are full?” “Heaven” kept coming up, and I could not put it down.

In seminars and lunches with faculty and other leaders—they represent 22 different nationalities and who knows how many faiths—I pursued the question of how educators from a very defined confessional framework deal with the diversity of students. Over half of those registered at HKIS list themselves as Christian, and one presumes that they have no difficulty with Christian chapel services, which are only one of the instruments for spiritual development here. About one third do not list preferences, perhaps because they don’t find the religion question congenial. The ethos of the school attracts people we might call “religion-friendly,” but most would not be members of bodies like the Lutheran church.

Necessarily, any blatant confessional voices are somewhat muffled. School leaders do not engage in any overt evangelization that would subvert the trust with which, say, Buddhist or Confucian or Muslim parents bring their children to HKIS.

All these parents and their visibly eager children are attracted by the “international school” posture. Some say HKIS is the largest school of its kind anywhere. Teachers, of course, are expected to be “friendly to the mission of the school” without necessarily sharing in all the details. That mission reads: “Dedicating our minds to

inquiry, our hearts to compassion, and our lives to service and global understanding: an American-style education grounded in the Christian faith and respecting the spiritual lives of all.”

With that confessionalism-in-pluralism question in mind, this visitor kept wondering: Is HKIS one more chapter in the history of secularization, a match for what happened to many once-church-related colleges in the U.S.? I couldn’t get anyone at the school to see its evolution as a story of religious decline and fall or decline toward fall. The founders were business leaders from various religious backgrounds who asked the church to help them. The comparisons I heard constantly were to Lutheran and other church-related colleges in the U.S. which do not set out to convert students from other faiths; to church-based hospitals whose mission does not involve making captive audiences of patients in order to evangelize them in their times of weakness; and to Catholic and Lutheran inner-city school teachers who address their mission first as educators, not as proselytizers. Some used the language that Lutherans favor about “vocation,” the vocation of educators.

Visitors to HKIS may walk away, as I did, with a beautiful heavy plastic-encased red card. On one side is a delightful paraphrase of Luther: “This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness. . . . All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.” On the other side are these words: “Academic Excellence,” “Spirituality,” “Character Development,” “Self-Motivated Learning,” “Contributing to Society” and “Chinese Culture.”

Some of these goals are easy to pursue. The record of graduates “contributing to society” occurs during their times of volunteer activities in Hong Kong and the larger China. As for “Chinese culture,” Mandarin is taught to non-Chinese students, of whom there are hundreds.

“Character development” is challenging in the setting of globalization and pluralism. It is challenging too in most North American schools, but more intensely so here where “character” (which Aristotle said develops through practice and habits) and “values” (which connect with our deepest commitments, usually religious ones) arise from cultures labeled Confucian, Buddhist, nontheist and many others. At HKIS, parents and school leaders, and especially teachers, have to be deliberate and thoughtful in areas where many Americans think they can still coast.

“Spirituality” is the tough one. “Students will understand and respect Christianity and other religions and will identify and develop their own spiritual identity” is the way the mission statement states the goal. HKIS deals with this theme most readily with its Christian constituency, but it has to be thoughtful about the student body at large. The parents with whom I talked, no matter what their background, spoke favorably of the outcome.

Admittedly, my stay was brief. Had I been on the scene longer, I might have encountered more gritty evidences of struggle and conflict. But on my flight home, as I thought about this distinctive experiment in globalization and pluralism among the young, I concluded that HKIS counters the notion that when Christian-based schools stop being walled-in sectarian ventures they land on the slippery slope to secularization. I think the school offers a model for how others might deal with the one and the many, with one’s own faith and the faiths of others, in the only kind of world that believers will face in this new century. Maybe here, as so often, a little child shall lead them.