

Religion and Globalization: New Possibilities, Furthering Challenges

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As a contested term, globalization has many definitions, each worthy of merit. Generally, globalization is first thought of “in economic and political terms, as a movement of capitalism spreading across the globe.”[1] It calls to mind “homogenizing exports of the US” such as Nike, McDonald’s, and MTV.[2] However, since globalization can be defined as a process of an “ever more interdependent world”[3] where “political, economic, social, and cultural relationships are not restricted to territorial boundaries or to state actors,” globalization has much to do with its impact on cultures.[4]

As goods and finance crisscross across the globe, globalization shifts the cultural makeup of the globe and creates a homogenized “global culture.”[5] Although not a new phenomenon, the process of globalization has truly made the world a smaller place in which political, social, and economic events elsewhere affect individuals anywhere.[6] As a result, individuals “search for constant time and space-bounded identities” in a world ever changing by the day.[7] One such identity is religion.

Generally, religion is a “system of beliefs and practices.”[8] More specifically, the word comes from the Latin “*religare*” which means “to bind together again that which was once bound but has since been torn apart or broken.”[9] Indeed, with the globalization of economics and politics, individuals feel insecure “as the life they once led is being contested and changed at the same time.”[10] Hence, “in order for a person to maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety,”[11] individuals turn to scripture stories and teachings that provide a vision about how they can be bound to a “meaningful world,” a world that is quickly changing day-by-day.[12]

Nonetheless, the relationship between globalization and religion is one with new possibilities and furthering challenges. On the one hand, while religion takes advantage of communication and transportation technology, it is at the same time the source of globalization’s greatest resistance by acting as a haven for those standing in opposition to its power.[13] On the other hand, because globalization allows for daily contact, religion enters a circle of conflict in which religions become “more self-conscious of themselves as being world religions.”[14] This essay argues that the relationship between religion and globalization is complex, one with new possibilities and furthering challenges. However, this essay cannot provide a comprehensive overview of religion and globalization, as the terrain is too vast. Still, it does provide several examples to illustrate the complex relationship between the two.

First, this essay explains how globalization engenders greater religious tolerance across areas such as politics, economics, and society. Second, it explains that as globalization does so, it also disrupts traditional communities, causes economic marginalization, and brings individuals mental stress, all of which create a backlash of religious parochialism. Third, although globalization paves the way in bringing cultures, identities, and religions in direct contact, this essay also explains that globalization brings religions to a circle of conflicts that reinforces their specific identities. Finally, using three paradigmatic individuals and their use of religious ideals in their human rights work, this essay provides some suggestions on how not just religions but humanity can use existing religious principles as ways to overlook religious and cultural differences.

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Globalization Engendering Greater Religious Tolerance

Globalization brings a culture of pluralism, meaning religions “with overlapping but distinctive ethics and interests” interact with one another.[15] Essentially, the world’s leading religious traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—teach values such as human dignity, equality, freedom, peace, and solidarity.[16] More specifically, religions maintain the Golden Rule: “what you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others.”[17] Therefore, through such religious values, globalization engenders greater religious tolerance in such areas as politics, economics, and society.

In political areas, globalization has built global political forums that integrate cultural, ethnic, and religious differences—ideologies that were once perceived as dividing the world—through a large number of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well regional organizations like the European Union (EU), the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), or the African Union (AU). When discussing issues such as international peace and security, health issues, poverty, and environment, these organizations generally share many of the same basic commitments as religious traditions—mainly peace, human dignity, and human equality, as well as conflict resolution in which they actively engage in negotiation, mediation, and diplomacy.[18]

In addition to these political organizations, religious communities such as the Roman Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches, and the Jewish Diaspora also take part in international affairs.[19] For instance, they have taken part in events such the Jubilee 2000, an international effort advocating for cancelling Third World debt by the year 2000, and the World Faiths Development Dialogue, an effort of international faith leaders along with the World Bank to support development agendas corresponding to the UN’s Millennium Development Goals.[20] Furthermore, religious organizations have, themselves, been involved in interreligious dialogue. The Parliament of the World’s Religions of 1993, first conveyed during the 1893 Chicago World Exhibit, brought the world’s diverse faith traditions—from African indigenous religions, the major religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), to any forms of faith that would agree to civil dialogue through mutual encounter—to use their similar values and discuss world affairs.[21]

In terms of economics, as the economy of the major countries of the world has grown, the main religions of each of those countries have also grown financially, providing more financial resources for religions to spread their beliefs.[22] For example, although it may seem as an old tactic, missionary work—especially in light of globalization—is strong in many Third World countries where religious representatives convert the natives.[23] As a result, the major religions today have scattered across the globe—Christianity turning “southern” and “black,” Islam turning “Asian,” and Buddhism turning “white” and “western.”[24] Still holding on to their original territorial spaces where their shrines exist, religions are fulfilling their general purpose of spreading their beliefs to people all over the world.[25]

Finally, religion has tremendously benefited from technological advancements. For example, websites provide information and explanations about different religions to any person regardless of his or her geographical location, as well as provide the opportunity to contact others worldwide and hold debates which allow religious ideas to spread.[26] Furthermore, television allows for religious channels that provide visual religious teachings and practices.[27] Hence, by making the leap onto the information superhighway, which brings religious teachings into every home and monitor in a global setting, religions have come together into one setting.[28]

In short, globalization allows for religions previously isolated from one another to now have regular and unavoidable contact. As a result, globalization brings to the light the fact that since religions have similar values, not one of them is “correct” and, therefore, can be changed.[29] But as the next section shows, the same process that engenders greater religious tolerance also creates a backlash of religious parochialism.

Globalization Creating Backlash of Religious Parochialism

Since globalization is considered as “the first truly world revolution,” “all revolutions disrupt the traditions and

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customs of a people”—that is, “people’s very security, safety, and identity.”[30] As globalization disrupts traditional communities, causes economic marginalization, and brings mental stress, individuals feel these less desirable consequences of globalization. With religion’s power to “convey a picture of security, stability, and simple answers” through stories and beliefs—unlike economic plans, political programs, or legal regulations—individuals turn to religion.[31]

First, globalization breaks down traditional communities and replaces them with larger, impersonal organizations. As globalization creates a “global village,” it dramatically alters what individuals traditionally understood themselves by—“citizenship,” “nationality,” and “immigration.”[32] For instance, the European Union (EU) does not call their members by country of origin but rather by their greater title, European citizens. Moreover, such organizations set universal standards upon all members, causing individuals to believe that they are not fairly represented. As a result, feeling that these organizations have shattered their “protective cocoon” that has shielded them in the past, many individuals find comfort in religion.[33]

In giving individuals a sense of belonging, religious groups help them to find themselves in modern times. For instance, religious leaders, pointing to modern society’s loss of ethical values and increased corruption, preach, “the only answer to the current ‘decay’ is a return to traditional values and religious norms.”[34] Hence, religion supplies these individuals with a feeling of being a part of a group that represents their interests and allows them to regain their traditional sense of who they are.

Second, globalization brings economic marginalization. For example, as transnational corporations increasingly take over the role of the state’s involvement in the economic sector, the government loses its status as a welfare provider. Moreover, increasing the gaps between those who have benefit from the global market (generally the West) and those who have been left behind (generally the Global South), globalization is seen as “Western imperialism,” as well as “Americanization.”[35] For instance, globalization “encourage[es] people to buy American goods and services, which ultimately “undermines deep-rooted communal values.”[36] Simply put, individuals are bombarded with McDonald’s, Nike, and MTV.

By responding to individuals’ desire for welfare, as well as acting as a cultural protection against globalization, religion plays a social role and gains more recognition from the marginalized, particularly those in Third World countries.[37] For instance, religious organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, World Vision International, and Islamic Relief Worldwide help serve the disadvantaged in areas such as poverty relief, health care, the HIV/AIDs crisis, and environment problems.[38] In fact, even if only promising prosperity and hope of economic relief, these organizations draw massive followers as, by lacking “extensive transnational bureaucracies and chains of command,” they provide “the strength of collective identity and the depth of ethical commitments.”[39]

Last but not least, globalization causes mental stress. Although globalization allows for crisscrossing borders, it also leaves individuals worrying about losing work, status, or other privileges.[40] Moreover, since globalization favors material prosperity as the aim of life over inner peace, individuals focus on attaining some material possession such as a house, car, game, or simply any object.[41] When they attain such item(s), however, they find themselves empty inside and, therefore, realize that inner peace can never be achieved through material possessions.[42]

To these individuals then, religion provides them the way to inner peace and the sense of personal fulfillment. For example, individuals who feel insecure in the globalized world, in business or personal life, will often pray to God for his spiritual support.[43] In addition, these individuals realize that getting involved within their communities and organizing together in social movements for a good cause brings more satisfaction to them than do material possessions.[44] They see themselves as being part of something important and worthwhile.

In short, in face of rapid changes in the globalized world, to regain the sense of certainty, many individuals turn to religion for a clear explanation of what is going on in the world. With its strength as a powerful identity that brings the message of unity and security in times of crisis, religion provides the idea of a “home.”[45] But as the last section demonstrates, this religious identity becomes a major ingredient that reduces the self and the other to a number of cultural religious characteristics.

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Religious Identity and Globalization: Furthering Challenges

As the previous section shows, since God has set the rules and has made them difficult to challenge, religion provides answers to questions concerning self-identity.[46] However, in providing such answers, religion also institutes a notion of “truth,”[47] which implies an automatic exclusion of the one—called an “abject”—who does not adhere to such “truth.”[48] In times of uncertainty like globalization, therefore, collective identity is reduced to a number of cultural religious characteristics —“them” and “us” and “they” and “our.”[49] In other words, the abject suddenly becomes recognized as a threat.

For example, since the 9/11 attacks, there has been a tendency of the West to link the religion of Islam with terrorist practices while Al-Qaeda links the US as Christian or a Judeo-Christian nation.[50] On the one hand, Al-Qaeda men who hijacked the planes on 9/11 saw the passengers and those working in the World Trade Center and Pentagon as “abjects” of Islam.[51] On the other hand, the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq turned into wars of “Islamofacism” and a “crusade” to the divine in getting rid of evil.[52] Moreover, other attacks on innocent people based on cultural religious characteristics occur today: Muslims in the United States, Western Europe, or India, Kurds in Iraq, and Jews in France.[53] In other words, though socially constructed, these cultural religious characteristics become a unifying force against others not adhering to a particular truth.

Interestingly then, the idea of religious identity in this era of globalization may hold in-line with Huntington’s thesis. According to Huntington (1990), while conflict during the Cold War occurred between the Capitalist West and the Communist Bloc East, current and future conflicts are most likely to occur between the world’s major civilizations, and not the states, including Western, Latin American, Islamic, Sinic (Chinese), Hindu, Orthodox, Japanese, and the African.[54] In a broader sense, having paved the way for religions to come in direct contacts with one another, globalization has, indeed, brought religions to a circle of competition and conflicts. As long as religions see themselves as “world religions” and reinforce their specific identities, the chance for religions to avoid conflict among one another is grey.[55] Luckily, the final section brings some hope on how religions can use their existing principles as ways to overlook their differences.

Conclusion

In a time in which globalization has yet to fully complete its process, religions must use the communication easily available through advanced technology to focus more on the humane and pluralistic forms of their teachings—values such as human dignity and human freedom—as means to manage religious diversity and avoid violence. In other words, religious should be open to other traditions and what they can teach. In fact, though having “fixed texts,” the major world religions do not have “fixed beliefs,” “only fixed interpretations of those beliefs,”[56] meaning their beliefs can be “rediscovered, reinvented, and reconceptualized.”[57]

As interesting examples, in their attempt to create the tradition of nonviolence from diverse religions and cultures, three paradigmatic individuals—Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—have, indeed, “rediscovered, reinvented, and reconceptualized” the beliefs of the world’s major religions.[58] The three individuals indicate that “it is possible for narrative diversity to generate a shared ethic without sacrificing the diversity of particular religions.”[59]

For instance, although coming from a gentry class in Russia and receiving fame and fortune from his novels, Tolstoy converted to Christianity in part after reading a story about how a Syrian monk named Barlaam brought about the conversion of a young Indian prince named Josaphat, who gave up his wealth and family to seek an answer to aging, sickness, and death.[60] Deeply indebted in Buddhism for his conversion to Christianity, Tolstoy, attempting to live his life by the teachings of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, gave away all his wealth and spent the rest of his life serving the poor.[61] Nevertheless, the story about Barlaam and Josaphat has “worked its way into virtually all the world’s religions.”[62]

Similarly, Gandhi, when he encountered Tolstoy’s writings, drew his attention to the power of the Sermon on the Mount.[63] In encountering Jesus’ Sermon, Gandhi became motivated to “turn the great Hindu narrative from the

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Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, in order to find the message of nonviolence within his own religion and culture.”[64] By finding that Tolstoy’s understanding of the Sermon on the Mount lacked “nonviolence as an active rather than a passive virtue . . . capable of producing an active resistance to evil,” he found it present in the Bhagavad Gita.[65] As a result, Ghandi transformed the Bhagavad Gita from a story that authorized killing to one of nonviolence reflected from the story of Jacob wrestling with the stranger and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.[66]

Lastly, Martin Luther King, Jr. also drew insight from Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Judaism.[67] For instance, connecting Gandhi with Jesus Christ, he saw Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence as similar to Jesus’ suffering on the cross.[68] Therefore, King’s theological theme was the idea that “unmerited suffering is redemptive,” meaning he constantly reminded blacks that they would experience a “season of suffering” before they would achieve justice.[69] In general terms, King’s theology focused on values grounded in religion—justice, love, and hope.[70] In short, as Tolstoy, Ghandi, and King illustrate, “narrative traditions are not mutually exclusive.”[71] They are connected through themes and, therefore, allow religions to engage in interreligious dialogue.

As this essay’s previous sections show, religions have, indeed, taken part in dialogues beforehand. As a further example, religious leaders gathered at the UN’s Millennium Peace Summit in September 2000 to mark the turn of the millennium.[72] A milestone in itself, as the UN is not a common ground in the sense of a ecumenical meeting inside a church, synagogue, or mosque but rather a global common ground, the Summit’s conversation encouraged that world’s religious communities stop fighting and arguing amongst themselves and begin working together for peace, justice, and social harmony.[73] As then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan addressed to the Summit, “Whatever your past, whatever your calling, and whatever the differences among you, your presence here at the United Nations signifies your commitment to our global mission of tolerance, development, and peace.”[74]

Moreover, as transnational corporations increasingly become actors in the international system, one could argue that religious communities have agreed on “the emerging global ethic” which consists of three major components: 1) corporations are prohibited from involving in bribes and corruption, 2) corporations are prohibited from discriminating on the grounds of race, religion, ethnicity, or gender in the conduct of business, and 3) corporations are prohibited from activities that pose a significant threat to human life and health.[75] Simply put, these components are, in themselves, religious values used to regulate the way transitional corporations increasingly engage in the global market.

The bottom line is that the pieces of interreligious dialogue to manage religious diversity and to avoid violence are there, but the problem may be of globalization’s intentional and/or unintentional consequence of making religions more conscious of themselves as “world religions,” as well as the undesirable consequences of disrupting traditional communities, causing economic marginalization, and bringing individuals mental stress—all reinforcing religious cultural characteristics and identities. Hence, the relationship between religion and globalization has brought new possibilities but also furthering challenges.

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[74] Kofi Annan, "Secretary-General, Addressing Millennium Summit of Religious, Spiritual Leaders, Urges Participants to Set Example of Interfaith Cooperation," August 29, 2000, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2000/20000829.sgsm7520.doc.html> (accessed April 25, 2014).

[75] Ronald M. Green, "Religions and the Ethics of International Business," in John Kelsey and Sumner B. Twiss, *Religion and Human Rights* (New York, NY: Project on Religion and Human Rights, 1994), p. 237.

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Date written: May 2014*

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