Religion and Globalization
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ABSTRACT

In thinking about the relationship between "Religion" and "Globalization" these days, one of two views immediately comes to mind. First, there is the way in which globalization flattens out cultural differences, erodes local customs and beliefs, and spreads a secular, capitalist way of life that is at odds with religions of all sorts. At the same time, there is the way in which religion serves as the source of globalization's greatest resistance and as a haven for those standing in opposition to its ubiquitous yet often subtle power. In both of these views, the relationship between religion and globalization is antagonistic—one of struggle and conflict. While opposition is an important aspect of the relationship between religion and globalization, to see them only as foes misses some of the complexities of their interaction, not only in the past but in the post-modern world as well. 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. 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."

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I. INTRODUCTION

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. It calls to mind "homogenizing exports of the US" such as Nike, McDonald’s, and MTV. However, since globalization can be defined as a process of an “ever more interdependent world” where “political, economic, social, and cultural relationships are not restricted to territorial boundaries or to state actors,” globalization has much do with its impact on cultures. As goods and finance crisscross across the globe, globalization shifts the cultural makeup of the globe and creates a homogenized “global culture.” 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. As a result individuals “search for constant time and space bounded identities” in a world ever changing by the day. One such identity is religion. Generally, religion is a “system of beliefs and practices.”

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.” 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.” Hence, “in order for a person to maintain a sense of psychological wellbeing and
avoid existential anxiety,” 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. First, this research paper 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 research paper 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 difference.

Globalization brings a culture of pluralism, meaning religions “with overlapping but distinctive ethics and interests” interact with one another. Essentially, the world’s leading religious traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—teach values such as human dignity, equality, freedom, peace, and solidarity. More specifically, religions maintain the Golden Rule: “what you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others.” 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. 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. 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.

Furthermore, religious organizations have, themselves, been involved in interreligious dialogue. The Parliament of the World’s Religions of 1893, 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. 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. 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. 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.” 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.

II. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

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. Furthermore, television allows for religious channels that provide visual religious teachings and practices. 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.

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. But as the next section shows, the same process that engenders greater religious tolerance also creates a backlash of religious parochialism.

III. CONCLUSION

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,” meaning their beliefs can be “rediscovered, reinvented, and re-conceptualized.” As interesting examples, in their attempt to create the tradition of non-violence from diverse religions and cultures, three paradigmatic individuals—Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—have, indeed, “rediscovered, reinvented, and re-conceptualized” the beliefs of the world’s major religions.

The three individuals indicate that “it is possible for narrative diversity to generate a shared ethic without sacrificing the diversity of particular religions.” 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. 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. Nevertheless, the story about Barlaam and Josaphat has “worked its way into virtually all the world’s religions.”

Similarly, Gandhi, when he encountered Tolstoy’s writings, drew his attention to the power of the Sermon on the Mount. In encountering Jesus’ Sermon, Gandhi became motivated to “turn the great Hindu narrative from the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, in order to find the message of nonviolence within his own religion and culture.” By finding that Tolstoy understands 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. As a result, Gandhi 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.

Lastly, Martin Luther King, Jr. also drew insight from Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Judaism. For instance, connecting Gandhi with Jesus Christ, he saw Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence as similar to Jesus’ suffering on the cross. 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. In general terms, King’s theology focused on values grounded in religion—justice, love, and hope. In short, as Tolstoy, Gandhi, and King illustrate, “narrative traditions are not mutually exclusive.” They are connected through themes and, therefore, allow religions to engage in interreligious dialogue.

Thus Religion is hardly epiphenomenal to the processes of globalization in our own day. It continues to be a player in intricate and even contradictory ways. To besure, it was once thought that secularization was the inevitable outcome of the processes we call “modernity.” Clearly this has not been the case. Religious faith persists in a complex interaction with the structures and processes of the modern world and that complexity has only intensified under the conditions of contemporary globalization.

IV. REFERENCES

[3]. ibid., p. 151.

Cite this article as: