

Conceptualizing Religion and Globalization in the Sociology of Religion

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ABSTRACT: What is new and specific to contemporary global forms is the extent to which religions globalize, the way in which they adapt to global conditions or the new morphologies they adopt. The global, however, does not only represent a range of social, political, economic or technological conditions, but also symbolizes a theoretical paradigm that requires a shift in focus and urges the sociology of religion to think beyond national contexts and in a comparative manner. Consequently, by adopting a global point of view, the deepening of religion has changed nowadays where the world thinks globally rather than nationally or regionally. The article explores how world religions have shaped civilizational transformations and their interaction with globalization, and analyzes how they contribute to the global landscape from both a historical and contemporary perspective.

KEYWORDS: globalization, sociology of religions, conceptualization

The analysis of the role of religion in the path to globalization is not consensual, but religion is regularly mentioned as a parameter or as one of the main historical forces in the achievement of globalization. In Martin Albrow's view, globalization is indeed considered a "New Age" (Albrow, 1996). Albrow's position argues for dominant patterns of history, cut into substitute sequences: in this model, the age of modernity is followed by either an age of postmodernity or an age of globalization. Since Karl Jaspers' 'axial age' theory, it is frequently assumed that the world's great religions play a

key role in 'civilizational' transformations (Rotaru 2023, 62-79), whether they occur before or with globalization, although this is not always explicitly stated. Some authors have attempted to identify this role of globalization, at least historically. Göran Therborn, for example, has introduced a model comprising six 'waves' of globalization, one of the first being characterized by the emergence and spread of world religions (around the 4th century) and the impetus they gave to the geographical expansion of cultures and societies by virtue of their missionary expansionism (Therborn 2000, 151-179). Are religions, therefore, the subjugators of globalization, or did they generate it? Scholars' opinions on this question are rather mixed, and the exact nature of the relationship between religion and globalization in ancient history remains unclear. Others have tried to construct a more complex model, investigating the roles of religions in each sequence of globalization. In all cases, however, religions (especially world religions) have always crossed the boundaries of political units and have therefore long been deeply involved in what is now called 'globalization' (Juergensmeyer 2003, 5).

Consequently, globalization (as modernisation did in its time) helps to define a firm theoretical framework through which the transformations of religion or religions are presented to us. On the other hand, the global approach to religion does not refer to a theoretical unit, nor does it set out to study religions. Nevertheless, many authors - whether or not their research falls under 'religious studies' - cautiously explore the complex relationships between religion and globalization. Malcolm Waters, for example, laments the lack of *sacriscapes* in global landscape theory (Waters 2001, 187), which is why the term has subsequently managed to be defined (as „religioscapes“) and is now widespread.

However, studies of globalization do not provide a unified picture of contemporary global conditions, nor do they agree on their impact on religions. At opposite poles of the narratives of a world committed to a 'global' path are two contrasting portraits of 'globalization.' On the one hand, globality is portrayed as a 'multiverse of cultures' living in a 'genuine interculturality' (Van Barloewen 2003, 28), while on the other, globalization is seen as offering a 'chance' for the spiritual traditions of humanity to live in harmony. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the extremely visible fact of the violence produced by globalization, which has left its bloody mark in every region of the world.

So far, the tension between religion and globalization, which is a tension between particularism and universalism, is not only embodied in the prosaic forms of the negotiated borders between globalization and religions. Globalization is also flooding into our lives in more spectacular (much more mediatised) forms of conflict and violence, which have crystallised fundamentalism across the globe and thus called into question the two faces of globalization: contemporary violence and the precise role that religions play in this space, either as an aggravating factor or, conversely, as an actor in preventing or resolving political and ethnic conflicts. This modern tendency towards conflict would be, firstly, the responsibility of large socio-political units, such as the ‚civilisations‘ (Huntington 1996) highlighted by Samuel Huntington, or, secondly, the responsibility of smaller entities or communities. Thus it has been suggested that, on the one hand, globalization is dependent on the tension between contemporary ethnic conflict, and thus driven to manifest itself by the forces of ‚cultural hegemony‘, those which press certain sections of globalized societies towards homogenization, and, on the other, it is the defiance of ‚ethnic heterogeneity‘. In other words, there is a tension between the processes of integration of groups and societies into a world-system, and the resistances of these groups and societies against the civilizational project that comes with the expansion of the global system (Dunaway 2003, 7).

Firmly embedded in a sociological perspective inspired by Émile Durkheim, who admits that „society” is the conceptual matrix for understanding religion, and by Niklas Luhmann, from whom he borrows the claim that society is characterized by modes and forms of communication, Peter Beyer has repeatedly argued that the study of a „global religion” must first be grounded in a theory of „global society”. The „global religious system” he pioneered is not, in Beyer’s terms, a religious tradition that has become „global”, i.e., whose doctrines and practices have spread throughout the world. This „global religion” involves a diversity of forms and expressions and represents one of the subsystems of a global society, „not a mere agglomeration of religious ‚things’, but rather the social differentiation and social construction of a category of recognized religious actions or a mode of communication that manifests itself primarily through numerous social institutions” (Beyer 1998, 8–9). In Beyer’s view, globalization is a religiously and socially differentiated system, like those seen in the monotheistic and Western context, but with a global extension that transcends the distinctiveness of traditions. But if Beyer then opts for

a structural and systemic picture of an ordered world, the hypothetical new „order” of the religious world also corresponds inversely to a chaotic clash of civilizations, as Huntington showed, for whom in the perspective of this civilizational paradigm, he saw the world „order” of political units and religious entities in the international context as a dynamic and constantly changing continuous adjustment and, consequently, disorder.

A global world of religions

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida subscribes to the idea of the global expansion of a „Latin”, i.e., Western and Christian, model, in his own words, a „mondatinization” - a kind of contraction between globalization - globalization - and Latinization (Derrida 1998, 48). More recent research has enhanced this one-sided perspective and added to the analysis the complexity of the forms of religious traditions in globalization.

In Beyer’s systemic paradigm, however, Western monotheisms, and Christianity in particular, have shaped the form of a „global religious system” much more structurally than culturally. According to Beyer (1998, 4), indeed, „the global religious system bears the marks of its origins and early developments in Christian society” and „the contemporary global religious system thus seems somehow Christian, not in a religious sense, but only in a sense parallel to the way globalization looks like Westernization.

The religious traditions of the contemporary world have thus undertaken a process of shaping, on the structural and functional criteria of Christianity, a tradition that has unravelled the sacred and the profane, that has brought about the distinctive autonomy of the religious, sphere’ from the other, spheres’ of human life, and that has finally redefined its social and cultural spatiality as a result of its recent confrontation with secularist ideologies. As a result, the global religious system is socially differentiated due to the alignment of non-Christian and non-Western traditions with the standard model of Christianity.

Religious reactions critical of globalization are, according to Mott (2004, 184-187), as diverse as those against modernization, varying according to their unique trajectory in modern and global environments. Judaism, as a diaspora religion, first accompanied it from earliest times but transforms into ethnicity and eventually nationality with the rise of Zionism. Christianity first, politicizes’ under a territorial entity - kingdoms and empires in the Middle East, and southern and northern Europe - then universalises and finally, humanizes’ with

the age of enlightenment. Islam initially takes on a universal and supra-cultural form before being marginalized by Euro-centred globalization and eventually becoming hostile to the 'Westernization' of the world (Mott 2004, 184-187). According to this political scientist, the options of religious traditions are limited to a community defence or an alliance with fundamentalism on the one hand, or a „social secularisation” (Rotaru 2006, 251-266) on the other (Mott 2004, 188 – 193). As far as theologians are concerned, the consequences of globalization are also to be imagined as bringing about a „global and diverse ecumenical community” (Küng 1991). In fact, religious responses to globalization processes are much more complex and locally determined than these broad-spectrum theorizations.

Much more than the world religions, which manifest a broad lexical surface in this study, the „new religions” exemplified primarily the most authentic and typical religious forms of modernity, initially, and of globalization more recently. It is assumed that their growth in number and worldwide spread have captured the attention of scholars far more than the world religions (Rothstein 1996, 195). However, some authors argue that the scientific literature on the subject remains relatively small (Arweck 2007, 276). Nevertheless, sociology's focus on the New Religious Movements is based on a certain perspective of the New Religious Movements that does not exclude a broader approach to ‚religion’ as a whole. But their rise and spread have given sociology a new place to confront its theoretical models with religious change. Some religious movements globalize, others adapt to global settings, and in these ebbs and flows, the New Age movement (Rotaru 2005, 193-216), torn between unity and diversity, comes to embody a new global religiosity. Because of their doctrinal and practical authenticity, but also because of their expanding dynamics, the new religious movements should indeed represent the kind of ‚exemplary’ or ‚paradigmatic’ cases of religious globalization, such as Protestant evangelization or Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Thus, it is argued, unlike world religions that remain anchored in their national contexts, the new religious movements tend to be supra-national and therefore favor their link to globalization.

The magnitude of the new configuration of religions and religious landscapes implies an adjustment of pre-existing theoretical models of religious change, overlooked by all the theorists of modernity but not of globalization. Therefore, a major problem is not only trying to highlight the dynamics of religious change but also explaining what and how religions adapt to globality.

Acculturation and social change

As a result, religions, whether traditional or new, are subject to the dialectic of „universalization” and „particularization,” following the pattern of societies and cultures in a global context. The contemporary tension between religion and globalization is to be found in the mismatch between, on the one hand, religious differentiation and antagonism on a national or local scale and, on the other, the homogenizing convergence of traditions in the structural standardization mentioned above. It is a tension that Friedman describes as a „cannibalizing dialectic between tendencies towards homogeneity and tendencies towards heterogeneity” (Friedman 1994, 210). But religions also depend on processes of transformation that are not necessarily associated with modernity or globalization. Moreover, another question arises: which religious traditions are acculturated to global settings, since their contemporary metamorphoses are labelled in terms of ‚adjustments’ or ‚adaptations’ to globalization?

Finally, several recent models have attempted to bring together, in a single framework of analysis, the various matrices of religious reconfiguration in globalization. Thus, for Neil J. Smelser, four main trends delineate the morphology and dynamics of the global religious landscape: sectarian conflict, mutual tolerance, new cleavages in the boundaries of religion and the emergence of a religion of globality. These seem to embody the parallel processes of fragmentation and „conflictuality” on the one hand, and adaptation and convergence on the other, but in a comprehensive global movement (Smelser 2003, 110-111).

As for Csordas (2007, 262-265), he sees globalization as the theatre where the religious imagination becomes embedded in the global economy and technology, where new pan-Indian spiritual movements emerge and where global flows now turn back to the West and where global culture becomes sacred. In the same way that ‚culture matters for globalization’ (Tomlinson 1999, 12), it can also be argued that ‚religion matters for globalization. But as far as culture is concerned, religion symbolizes an ‚ideological battleground of the modern world system’ (Wallerstein 1990, 31-55). According to Csordas (2007, 266), „surely the time has come for a serious theorization of religion and globalization and the globalization of religion.”

While the global perspective calls for a profound, but by no means complete, regeneration of the trends and scope of the sociology of religion,

it does not seem to be participating in a radical transformation in all areas of knowledge. The reference to globalization does not imply that the concept has to be established on empirical grounds. Globalization (Rotaru 2014, 532-541) therefore refers to a set of conditions and processes whose originality lies more in their configuration and intensity than in their nature or form. Moreover, attributing 'global' to the very *raison d'être* of religious transformation is as inaccurate as modernity, when it was considered the first and main, 'cause' of the morphological metamorphosis observed in the religious domain of

Several studies now show that the dynamics of religious transformation and resistance to economic change, for example, of a political and ethnic nature, are pre-dating globalization, but identical to those usually attributed to it. The discussion of how religions are globalizing, or are affected by global processes, or are themselves becoming vectors of globalization is not new, which is why globalization does not only generate new religious forms. Global changes in religions could be seen as adaptations of ancient religious forms rather than as the production of original ones (Smelser 2003, 102), or, as Csordas says: „Perhaps we are simply beginning to recognize, what we have known since ancient times, that the waters of religion fill the newly constructed channels that flow between the local and the global” (Csordas 2007, 265). Moreover, the very historical and ontological identity of a religious globalization is in question, paralleling globalization as a whole. In this sense both then go „hand in hand” (Kale 2004, 96), or each is a part of the other or, not least, apart from the other.

Conclusions

What is new and peculiar to contemporary global forms is the extent to which religions globalize, the way they adapt to global conditions, or the new morphologies they adopt. The global, however, is not only a set of social, political, economic, or technological conditions but also symbolizes a theoretical paradigm that requires a shift in focus and urges the sociology of religion to think beyond national contexts and in a comparative manner. Consequently, by adopting a global point of view, the deepening of religion has changed nowadays where the world thinks globally rather than nationally or regionally, which is why: “the impact of the phenomenon, to be fully appreciated, must also be seen for what it is, a religious reform on a global scale and, as such, can only be fully understood in the context of global society” (Clarke 2006, xiii).

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