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The Role Of Religion In Globalising Civil Society

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Introduction

I do not intend to offer at this point a detailed empirical and descriptive account of the fate of religion in an age of globalisation. There is an embarrassment of analytical possibilities to choose from, indicative of the fecundity of the studies in religion project. My intention is to offer an overview of the effects of globalisation on religious forms of life, the changing relationship between religion and society that it implies and critical and evaluative assessment of this process for the study of religion as a professional practice.

In the tradition of Eliade (1959), I would like to claim that such an assessment, if it is not reductionistic, is itself an ethical and spiritual enterprise or a quest; that is, an exploration of the spiritual and ethical valencies of the structures of globalisation cannot be free of choices and estimations of the nature of the human condition.

One of the primary challenges of the phenomenon of globalisation has been a radical or fundamental challenge to the sovereignty of nations. The state, still the primary focus of concern for the common welfare, is being challenged from without by forces of globalisation and from within by neo-liberal challenges to the role and legitimacy of the state. As democracy is, by and large, a phenomenon of the nation state and below, this is a fundamental threat to democracy at the very time when it has claimed a victory (Sores, 1997).

Into the gap created by this strangulation of the nation has flown a number of new creations and paradoxes, including a revival of interest in civil society; that is, on what has been lost through modernisation and marketisation; and new forms of individualism not envisaged by the founding fathers of liberalism (if we accept argument at this point put forward by Bellah, et al., 1991).

This changing situation adds new dimensions to the discussion of the relationship between religion and religions and society. And while moral philosophy and moral theology have been concerned with that issue, there has scarcely been an

adequately developed moral *Religionswissenschaft*, the majority of efforts remain safely within the two former approaches. Does the study of religion really have nothing to say?

Globalisation: a contested concept

As scholars of religion, we are familiar with the notion of ‘religion’ as a contested concept. We should not be surprised then to find that exactly what the term ‘globalisation’ means also involves various referents and reactions. Globalisation is a process not a state. Globalisation describes the process of extending the horizon of human connection and exchange to the planet as a whole. It encourages us to think beyond boundaries, breaking down barriers confining and constraining various human practices. Globalisation may be without boundaries, but it is not without rules. In practice, we find that the process is structured by the usual gradients of bias: gender, race and class.

Because such a process is embedded in the allocation and distribution of resources, the dominant institutions shaping global interchange focus on trade and finance. The paradox at the heart of the process creating ‘one world’ is that it accelerates the deterioration of global resources, radically circumscribes national sovereignty and increases internal conflicts. Part of the ideological effect of globalisation is the routine assertion of its matter-of-factness – what can be done, must be done.

Anthony Giddens (1999), in the 1999 BBC Reith Lectures, offered his own peripatetic account of the differing assessment of globalisation from the sociological point of view. The ‘radicals’, he argues, see globalisation as a new phenomenon impacting on everyday life. The ‘sceptics’, on the other hand, see globalisation not as a fundamentally new situation but a continuation, at a more global level, of patterns of capitalist exploitation begun in the last two centuries.

Giddens claims that these sceptics represent an old Left point of view, one that supports the myth that ‘governments can still intervene in economic life and the welfare state remains intact’. I think he is out of step in this characterisation of the sceptics as essentially old Left. There are other expressions of scepticism. To be sure, many of them have a Leftish pedigree. Let me give two examples. The first is those concerned with labour issues. They see a problem with globalisation being embraced and promoted by national governments in a piece-meal way. Labour movements have long had an international dimension and it is this dimension which is being revived. ‘The working men have no country’. The way forward, as they see it, is not protectionism, but international labour solidarity to protect workers rights and to improve the rights of workers across the world. The problems of globalisation, they claim, must be addressed through direct transfers to the poor global assistance (Guille, 1999). They point out a chronic bias in the way in which the developing ‘world society’ enforces its norms; for example, decisions on world

trade can be binding, while decisions on labour issues are not.

The other source of scepticism is from those who see globalisation not just as an economic process --- how it likes to conceive of itself -- but as cultural, social, political and technological process. These sceptics are more sensitive to the multi-dimensional forms oppression can take.

Giddens, himself a 'radical' subscribing to the view that globalisation is a new process impacting on everyday life, delivered his lecture from a different city (London, New Delhi, Hong Kong and Washington) and conducted discussions on the Internet. This seemed to reinforce the erroneous view that globalisation is about travel and traversing the globe via the media; though this fact is not new to anyone who has watched a cricket test or a live sporting event, or even a moon landing for that matter.

Far more important than this touristic view of globalisation as a capacity to *pull* information from around the world is an appreciation of its attendant capacity to *push* information and choices across the globe. The nature of the global marketplace is the ability of all kinds of information to be transferred. It is not the instantaneousness of this which is of concern (though it will create problems of its own), but rather the fact that so much of the marketplace, and the financial structures which support it, are data based. The data transferred is stripped of its local cultural significance and the circumstances, both personal and social, of its creation are discounted. A recent installation at the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Art (APT-3) at the Queensland Art Gallery dealt with this. Called, 'Made in China', it consisted of an array of small, everyday plastic objects, household items and toys from around the world, all manufactured in China. In the midst of this array were monitors containing images and scenes of people and places in China where these global objects had been created. It was an informative and provocative contrast between globalised objects and local cultural significance.

We all have globalisation stories to tell. I encountered one dimension of this in developing flexible learning materials at my university. The key points to remember when producing these materials, my colleagues and I were informed, were: (1) plain English, (2) inclusive language, (3) cross-cultural perspective, and (4) think global. Our notes, we were told, ought to be able to be understood by a student in Malaysia. What they would make of my reference to examples drawn from the recent history of corruption in Queensland, or our current practices in public hospitals in Brisbane, I do not know.

There is sense, then, in which this concern for globality pushes us towards forms of knowledge as artificial as the trans-Atlantic accents which once characterised Hollywood movies. Does the process of global information transfer force us to expect real knowledge to be universal rather than culture specific? What is the fate, then, of those cultural facts, including religion, which constitute the thick knowledges which shape concrete lives?

The bias in this stripping effect of universalism has been well charted with

respect to the fate of religion in liberal discourse by Marion Maddox (1997). Liberal tolerance of religion, she demonstrates, is biased towards the conception of religion as belief rather than practices. It is perhaps interesting in this regard that Peter Beyer's (1998) recent work on religion and globalisation has been criticised on the same account; that is, that it is prone to use theories of globalisation (in particular, as influenced by Thomas Luhmann's systems as systems of communication account) which see religion as essentially belief systems, and not as incorporating more opaque dimensions of ritual and practice (Padgett, 1999).

Human beings are by nature, it seems, quite pliable and at the same time quite resilient. They are capable of creative cross-cultural communication at the most fundamental levels; yet, in the flow of lived life, they also resort to routine and traditions to smooth exchange. One only has to travel in Europe today to see these paradoxes at work. You may be presented a bill in Francs and Euros, you might be entitled to carry a single currency, but trying to cash a £50 note in the UK is fraught with anxiety. An article on antiquarian bookstores in Berlin can look suspiciously similar to the one you saw on antiquarian bookstores in London a few days earlier. Paris can be festooned with black and orange decorations in anticipation of Halloween, while the daily papers decry and debate this sad concession to 'Maco-Disney' cultural imperialism. There might be gendarmes covered with glow-in-the-dark silly string, at the same time as Parisians cycle home with a baguette in their basket, the end chewed off in the stereotypical fashion. There might be a Irish pubs, with fittings shipped from Ireland, just around the corner, in any major city in Europe.

You can visit Berlin and find it hard to find a German meal being served amidst the Thai, Indian, Italian, Mexican and even Australian cuisine. Is this high class gourmandism really any different than eating at McDonalds on the Champs Elysee or Pizza Hut at the Zoo Station, or arty and university types packed in to a Berlin cafe serving fish and chips a la English style in the Mitte, in Berlin. (I even saw a sign, in German, advertising typical English meals, 'like Moussaka').

But the signs of resistance, the opacity of the local, thick culture are there. When one walks outside of the hotel lobby or the tourist-oriented shop in a large European city, one immediately confronts the myths of globalism. Of course, everybody does not speak English. You can find someone who does, given time. It takes effort.

For an example of cultural opacity, consider this scenario from the UK northern city of York, where the local FM station is call Viking-FM, reminding us of a past era of attempted globalisation. The DJ has nightly challenged that he can find a caller anything they desire before his shift finishes or he will give them 10 quid. A caller rings in wanting to know where he can buy steak and kidney pudding. Forty-five minutes of misinterpretation follows as callers assure the he can buy them just about anywhere. No, he tries to explain, not steak and kidney pie, but steak and kidney pudding. Well, the upshot of this is that steak and kidney puds seems to be only available as takeaways in Manchester where the caller is originally from and it

seems he will be pud-less till he returns all of 50 miles home.

Giving lectures from studios in New Delhi, Hong Kong, Washington and London links directly to the old patterns of colonialism and imperialism. These new technologies will both liberate and oppress. It is a salutary experience, for example, to visit the museum of slavery in William Wilberforce's House in the East Yorkshire City of Hull. As you follow the history of this most ignominious of institutions, it dawns on you. All this was impossible without writing: without accounts, diaries, reports, bills of sale, certificates of all sorts. Without writing, humans would still directly oppress other human beings, but writing made it possible to exchange human beings across the vastness of the known world. What an amazing paradox this is when we realise that, at the same time, writing can offer us sources of inspiration and hope. Through the medium of writing we can yearn for a better world, express our deepest outrages and compassions, and seek to persuade. Globalisation, it seems, also has these two sides.

According to Giddens, we need to learn that we live in a 'world society'. It would be a mistake to interpret this as a natural state of affairs, merely reflecting the dimensions of our social life writ large. There is perhaps no better example of the artificiality of this global society, and its ideological biases toward the market at the expense of government and politics than in the comparison between international trade agreement and international labour agreement. The former are enforceable by law and sanctionable, the later are only guidelines. This regulatory bias in favour of the marketeers ought to make us aware that 'world society' is not comfortable as it sounds. Perhaps the most serious effect of globalisation has been the radical increase in the gap between the rich and the poor, both globally and nationally.

In some ways, I agree with Giddens, we do need to learn to live in a world society. Attempts to revive protectionism, and economic nationalism, rather than economic rationalism, will ultimately fail in any country which needs to rely on exports. A better way forward will be in enriching the dimensions of that society; that is, to define it in broader terms than the economic. It is here that religion kicks in. Are traditions and traditional forms of religion doomed? Well, the answer, as always, seems to be yes and no.

Traditional forms of religion come under great pressure; first from cultural contact itself; but more importantly from the ethical and spiritual reactions that flow from it; that is, the need to reinterpret frameworks and narratives which organise religious life. The religious significance of such contact have been charted, for example, by Charles Long (1983), and on a grander cultural scale by Edward Said (1985). The fate of the 'other', in the history and current situation of cultural encounters, is a primary ethical concern.

In a conversation with a Murri colleague, we talked about fundamental differences between Aboriginal and Western epistemologies. I accepted her point, and then asked, 'How, within that framework, do Murri's interpret their encounter with other religions?' Her reply was apt and chastening, to a point. 'They do not

have to; they have it thrust down their throats'. Certainly, this has been undeniably true of religious contact to this point in time. Nevertheless, it seems many Murriss do draw a sense of satisfaction and solidarity from interest in alternative forms of spirituality. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Murriss also must be able to give and account of the other from their perspective.

Global contact, then, as well as challenging traditions, presents opportunities for exploring new forms of solidarity. Linkages between indigenous religion and environmentalism is one example. Buddhism, in its Tibetan form, at least, has also been spectacularly successful in linking traditional religion to concerns for human rights. Nevertheless, globalised caricatures of traditions often fare better than local traditions themselves; for example, pan-Celtism, or Native Americanism as a commodity spiritualities, alongside crystals and runes.

Indeed, one of the oft-discussed primary effects of globalisation, flowing on from the destabilisation of the nation-state, has been the revivification of local identities (cf. Bauman, 1995). This has increased risk and anxiety in some societies formally united by dominant state apparatuses, for example, in Eastern Europe. This increase, though, can then lead to increases in risk-management, including a return to religious forms of certainty and leverage against anxiety. We can expect some religious revivals in the wake of these profound changes.

Civil Society

The profound changes in Eastern Europe in the last decade have led some to talk of the 'triumph of capitalism' and the end of failure of communism; even though a large proportion of the world's population still lives communism in China and Cuba, and a significant proportion of the non-communist world could be euphemistically classed as 'authoritarian democracies. Even those proponents of freedom within Capitalism are sounding warnings of a need to attend to and cultivate democracy, rather than leaving everything to market forces (Sores, 1997). There had been much talked and written about the so-called civil society. Civility, as it is being used here, is an attempt to swing the liberal democracy equation in favour of democracy. Globalisation can be understood as the triumph of liberalism, particularly economic liberalism, over all forms of collective accountability, including, paradoxically, democracy at the national level. Critics such as Hutton (1999) have challenged globalisation as 'a disembowelling of power; a huge exercise in global privatisation'. This will, undoubtedly, sit well with those forms of religious forms of life which see the public/private divide as to their advantage. Again, we can expect revivals, utilising global technologies and financial arrangements to their advantage; though materialism will be the ever attendant profane threat to the sacred.

In what ways then could globalisation and or a reaction to it structure itself as a religious?

It should not surprise us to find globalisation, as ‘a power shaping everyday life’ (Giddens, 1999), is itself a potential locus of religious manifestation (if not essence) (cf. van der Leeuw, 1979) It remains, after all is said and done, a ‘vague somewhat’, and it has something of the character, for many, of a *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans* (Otto, 1958). It is awe-inspiring in its bigness. It makes the individual feel small and insignificant, yet it attracts us, or seduces is, through in its power, potential and actual.

Globalisation certainly meets anthropologist Sherry Ortner’s (1973) criteria for identifying key symbols. Key symbols, she writes, ‘will be signalled by more than on these indicators:

1. The natives [sic] tell us that X is culturally important.
2. The natives seem positively or negatively aroused about X, rather than indifferent.
3. X comes up in many different contexts. These contexts may be behavioural kinds of action situation or conversation, or X comes up in many different symbolic domains (myth, ritual, art, formal rhetoric, etc.).
4. There is greater cultural elaboration surrounding X, e.g. elaboration of vocabulary, or elaboration of detail’s of X’s nature, compared with similar phenomena in the culture.
5. There are greater cultural restrictions surrounding X, either in sheer number of rules, or severity of sanction regarding its misuse.

Substitute ‘globalisation’ for ‘X’ and we can see that, whatever we may think of globalisation as an actual process, it is a powerful cultural symbol in its own right. Whatever the reality, a large amount of that power may derive from it symbolism (Beckford, 1981; Smart, 1981). It is this which opens up the possibility for the ‘enchantment’ of the global economy; its ability, though incomprehensible, to hold millions in its thrall.

Globalisation as profane

Thus we should look more closely at globalisation as a medium of desacralisation or secularisation. Globalisation can be interpreted as an unwinding of the processes and structures underlying desacralisation. Roland Robertson (1985), in an earlier consideration of the relationship between religion and the ‘world system’, pointed out that: ‘the notion of “the world” has traditionally been used by students of religion to refer to the “domain of the secular or mundane”’. A degree of worldliness and a degree of world renunciation have been central to the consideration of the social dimensions of religion. In this sense, globalisation also can connote an absence of the sacred, or at least a horizon of limitation, and thus a challenge to religious forms of life.

Globalisation and cosmologies.

Roland Robertson (1985) questions ‘whether globalisation could have occurred

without 'assistance' from global mythologies or modes of discourse concerning the world-as-a-whole. This would lead us to consider the relationship between globalisation and the variety of major religious cosmologies. Frederick Streng (1985) described four types of belief about and response to the nature of physical existence: as sustained by an external creator God; as an eternal rhythm and cycle of cosmic energy; as an illusion to be transcended by cultivating awareness of reality beyond it; and as an material object to be transformed by equally material forces of scientific understanding and technological manipulation. We can, then, expect variations in religious response to globalisation in line with these cosmologies.

Globalisation, for some, will be a process affecting the arena in which a transcendent God intervenes and interacts. It will be new territory to be won over for God, and utilised for further God's purposes. Globalisation is attractive to those who proselytise, offering expanding horizons for expressing faith. The very universality of the transcendent God challenges localism in all its forms.

For others religious worldviews, globalisations creates new lines in which the cosmic forces which sustain the world are played out. For yet others, globalisation will only be the most recent aspect of the veil of illusion which keeps us all from experiencing the really real: just more of the ephemeral crap that clouds our consciousness.

Globalisation also has serious implications for the scientific rationalist understanding of the world, as it can increase both the rate of environmental destruction and physical decline, while at the same time increasing the rate of communication and technological interchange to meet the challenges of global deterioration.

Globalisation as having features of the sacred.

Long ago, Roland Robertson (1985:353) argued that there is always a sacred character to global forces by virtue of their deep-structural 'secretness'. There is always a level of mystery to it, a level of transcendence of the mundane everyday reality.

Transcendence is one of the cross-hairs which help us to pick out religion. The other is a sense of ultimacy, of ontic depth. From this perspective globalisation will structure religious response as it become a focus of what theologian Paul Tillich (1968) called 'ultimate concern'. David Korton (1998), for example, has argued that the forces of globalisation have serious spiritual consequences. Globalisation is a site of contestation about what is ultimate. In what could be describe as a Westernised rhythm-of-the-cosmos type worldview, he explores the impact of the material dimension of globalisation on the spiritual aspects of human life. For Korton (1998: 66), 'Money derives its energy from our own spiritual energies'. It can lead to a 'downward spiral of increasing alienation from living, from our own spiritual nature', the fulfilment of which ought to lie in experiencing living in its fullest through relationships with family, community, nature and the living cosmos. Processes of globalisation are attended by increased privatisation and compulsive acquisition.

Overconsumer societies are built around financial pursuits; just and sustainable societies are built on a community's social, ethnic, cultural and spiritual foundations.

At one stage, it would have seemed safe to observe that globalisation would be unlikely to deliver a centre of moral and spiritual value for most individuals. Globalisation's protean nature makes it hard to find a place to stand, at least for those who do not find themselves at the top of the process, controlling decisions. Moral and spiritual grounding in localised experiences of religious faith and practice provide a fulcrum on which some leverage can be generated. The length of the lever itself, and its ability to transform society at large, will be determined by the amount of horizontal solidarity the 'many' can generate against the 'resources rich' few.

Prima facie, it could be argued that globalisation would be fighting uphill to reproduce the kind of ritualisation that builds and sustain communities of value at local levels; although the phenomena such as the 'Chat-room' and marriages via Internet contact, show that globalisation can bring people together. Furthermore, looking back on the long history of world religions, we know that desire to expand, to reach out to others, to build the kingdom of god on earth, shifts the focus of ritualisation from the cyclical rhythm of the congregation rooted embedded in the local rhythms of nature, to the ritual processes of evangelisation and conversion embedded in situations of traversal and contact.

In essence, globalisation itself is evangelistic. It does not simply exist, but it proselytises, requiring individual commitment to larger, opaque transcendent forces. There is no doubt that globalisation can be experienced as a kind of transcendence of mundane, localised realities. As such, it may be appropriated as a symbol of the supramundane, and a means of transformation towards universal love and solidarity. We become citizens of the globe; we can watch the whole world. But the reality of own processes of ritualisation, will continually subvert these moments of *communitas*. Globalisation, whether it be through economic exchange or the Internet, provides an experience of transcendence, linking us *beyond* individual concerns, but it does not always extend us, or stretch us, or allow us to link to the *depths* of understanding which might give us some sense of certainty, of truth in the old-fashioned sense, as depth of understanding which prevents disappointment. We do not come to a deeper appreciation of other cultures, simply because our can of soft-drink has ingredients listed in six languages.

Globalisation, religious identities & civil society

In the Reith lectures, Anthony Giddens in his observation of the impact of globalisation on traditions, observed that many of the so-called manifestations of traditions in the modern world are less than two hundred years old. He argued that the concept of tradition itself is a creation of modernity, and emerged with the industrial revolution. If we see globalisation as an intensification of the industrial revolution in terms of technologies of communication, then there would seem to be

a concomitant opportunity for the intensification of tradition through the alignment of practical concerns, particularly at the affective level, in bounded communities.

The future of religion is linked to the affects of globalisation on nation-states and their reduced significance as they lose their purchase on fundamental economic process. Religion, then, plays its part in the new tribalism which fills the emotional and collective commitment gap left by the weakening of the nation-state.

Religion's ambiguous relationship with democracy will also be reshaped through globalisation. Giddens talks of a need to democratise *above* the level of the nation. But, again, the history of religion indicates that this must be accompanied by a *deepening* of democracy as well. Robert Bellah, et al, (1991) refer to this as 'paying attention', as being involved. Democracy as a process requires levels of responsibility and trust that seem underdetermined at the global level, a deficit dramatised in the ritual encounter on the streets at the December 1999 round of World Trade Organisation talks in Seattle, USA. Whatever globalisation potential as a vehicle for political transformation along liberal lines, we need to remain aware of the economic, spatial and gendered segmentation of liberal opportunity in the history of the democratic project. Liberal rights and freedoms remained for centuries the preserve of propertied males.

Domestic economic rationalism has already had profound effects on nations. The revival in interest in what has been called *civil society* has taken many forms. One has been the rejection of the commodification of civil responsibilities and obligations, inherent in neo-classical economics. A truly civil society, it is argued, is one that recognises the social interdependence of its members, rather than asserting their economic individuality as the primary locus of value. A key feature of this view is the notion of *social capital*, 'the processes between people which establish and networks, norms and social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit' (Cox, 1995). Social capital is increased by working together voluntarily in egalitarian organisations. The name most often associated with the concept of social capital is Robert Putnam (1993). He used the concept to account for the variable success of new regional democratic structures in Italy. He argued that these institutions tended to be more successful in those areas where social capital was high. There is much debate about the indices Putnam used to measure social capital, and perhaps its most controversial aspect for us, as scholars of religion, is the exclusion of religious organisations from the kind of organisations that count – on the assumption that they are non-voluntary. Philip Hughes, John Bellamy and Alan Black (1998) have recently done a survey which addresses some of these concerns in the Australian context.

Religion's relationship with democracy has always been ambiguous. There has often been a disjuncture between forms of polity internal to religious organisation and those of the surrounding culture. Many liberals make much of religion's anti-liberal tendencies on the one hand or, on the other hand, allow for religious freedom only in the realm of individual expression. However, fundamental to the debate over

globalisation is that fact that economic institutions are placing themselves outside of, and potentially in control of, civil governance. They want to be treated as autonomous agencies, as supra-individuals in the free market; yet, internally these organisations' forms of polity can be as radically at variance with surrounding civil cultures as religions are claimed to be. Paradoxically, as essentially collective enterprises, they claim the rights of individual freedoms.

The debate about globalisation, then, intersects with the wider debate surrounding liberal versus communitarian understandings of society. For example, there is much criticism of globalisation and economic rationalism from 'right communitarians', who interpret the process as a disintegration of values that need reaffirmed, if not reimposed. Terry Copper (1997) has pointed to the moral valances of two types of communitarian responses. Using the terms somewhat arbitrarily, he distinguishes between *moral communities* and *ethical communities*. Moral communities tend to be culturally homogenous, have shared histories and overarching traditions. Community is experienced as given rather than chosen. Moral standards are imposed or devolved. 'In contemporary urban societies, where the power of tradition is broken, moral community takes the form of attempts to deal with the near chaos of life by either of two means: (1) by imposing a uniform moral code on everyone living within a given society or (2) separation into distinct enclaves' (Cooper, 1997:11)

Ethical communities, on the other hand, Cooper argues, are forms of chosen solidarity, where values and ethical principles are interpreted and reinterpreted in particular situation. They are involved communities rather than devolved. Furthermore, ethical communities involve moral processes of engagement, rather than effete forms of toleration,

Globalisation and the study of religions

The study of religion as an international enterprise is itself an aspect of globalisation; though that enterprise, as an enterprise, rather than necessarily in its content, remains basically Eurocentric. Nevertheless, the study of religion does tend to promote both respect for and critique of religions. The challenge of globalisation requires the study of religion to always move beyond effete relativism and phenomenological defensiveness to more engaged interpretations, appreciations and evaluations of the current state of religion in the human condition.

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