

GLOBALIZATION AND RELIGION

Peter L. Berger

Peter L. Berger is University Professor and Professor of Sociology and Theology at Boston University and the Director of the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture. Professor Berger has written and edited numerous books on sociological theory, the sociology of religion, and Third World development, which have been translated into dozens of foreign languages. Among his more recent books are The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics (1999); Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World (with Samuel P. Huntington, 2002); and Modernity, Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning (with Thomas Luckmann, 1995).

GLOBALIZATION IS A WORLDWIDE PROCESS, DRIVEN by economic and technological forces. It brings with it a multitude of social and political developments, some benign, others anything but benign (as recent events have made clear in a compelling way). But globalization has also had massive consequences in the area of culture, including the central cultural phenomenon of religion. It is this latter phenomenon that is the subject of this paper. Given our present situation, it is tempting to concentrate on the manner in which religion serves to legitimate the most horrendous acts of violence (and perhaps tempting to agree with those Enlightenment thinkers who saw all religion as a very bad thing). Let me suggest, however, that this would lead to a very distorted picture. Religion is above all a constituent in the ordinary lives of millions of ordinary people far removed from acts of violence. In order to get the picture right, we must cultivate a measure of detachment from the screaming headlines of the day, difficult though this is in our present circumstances.

The research center that I direct at Boston University recently completed its most ambitious project, a ten-country study of the cultural impact of globalization. In most of the countries studied, religion is an important area in which this impact is felt. It cannot be the purpose of this paper to give a summary of the study, but the picture that comes out is reasonably clear: There is indeed an emerging global culture. It has both elite and popular dimensions. It is mostly Western and especially American both in origin and content. Its *lingua franca* is English, and American English to boot. It is perceived as a great promise by some, as a great threat by others, both outside and within the West. But that is not the whole picture. The emerging global culture is not an irresistible juggernaut. It is neither uniform nor unchallenged. It is differently received in different countries, and it is modified, adapted, and synthesized with local cultural traditions in many, often startlingly innovative ways. What is more, there are cultural movements, many of them religious, that originate outside the West and that have an impact on the West. These movements constitute alternative globalizations, opening up the intriguing possibility of alternative modernities. Put simply, it is very unlikely that over time most of the world will look like Cleveland.

Social scientists and historians frequently differ in their assessment of the novelty of modern developments. The former tend to think that this or that development is an absolute novum; the latter can be relied upon to come up with a remarkably similar thing centuries ago. A correct assessment, of course, is usually somewhere in the middle. A useful parallel to contemporary globalization has been proposed by my colleague, the Chilean historian Claudio Veliz, who has described the present situation as “the Hellenistic phase of Anglo-American civilization.” The Hellenistic era, like our own, was marked by a luxurious pluralism, especially in the area of religion, but also by the dominance of a Greek-derived and Greek-speaking culture. In this view, American English is the equivalent of the *koiné*, a somewhat vulgarized Greek (“basic Greek,” as it were)—the language in which, not so incidentally, the New Testament was written. But there are significant differences, both in the scope and the pace of cultural penetration. I think it is safe to say that Hellenistic culture was mainly dominant in the urban centers of the Mediterranean world, in places like Alexandria or

Antioch. A few miles away from these centers—say, in villages in Upper Egypt or in rural Syria—indigenous cultural life was largely unaffected. And, of course, modern means of communication have enormously accelerated the speed with which cultural influences can penetrate societies. To stay with the aforementioned metaphor, today bits and pieces of Cleveland can be found almost everywhere, and ever more so.

All of this is very pertinent as one turns one's attention to religion. For historical reasons that are not difficult to specify, the United States is in the vanguard of the contemporary "Hellenistic" pluralism. Diana Eck has called the United States the most religiously diverse society in history—a slight exaggeration, perhaps, but plausible all the same. I invite anyone who doubts this to get into a car and drive north on 16th Street in Washington, DC, from the White House toward Walter Reed Hospital. There is a religious edifice on almost every block. There are churches of every major Protestant denomination, a large Catholic church, synagogues of the various branches of American Judaism, a Greek Orthodox church and a Serbian Orthodox church, a Buddhist center, a Bahai center, and a large temple of a Vietnamese sect that I could not identify. As far as I can recall, there is no mosque, but only a short distance away is a splendid Islamic center. If America is the "vanguard society" of religious pluralism (Talcott Parsons' term is rather apt here), it is not the only place in which this phenomenon can be observed. A recent study has suggested that more people in England attend mosques every week than attend services in Anglican churches. In some English schools Sikh children outnumber Christian ones. Muslims now constitute the largest religious minority in France, outnumbering Protestants and Jews. When I visited Buenos Aires for the first time recently, eagerly looking forward to experiencing the city celebrated in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, the first thing I saw upon leaving the airport was a huge Mormon temple, topped by a golden statue of the Angel Moroni (who might well have found a place in one of Borges' stories).

If we are to acquire a valid picture of the global situation of religion today, one of the conventional ideas we must give up is the idea that our age is one of secularization. Put differently, we must give up the idea that modernity and a decline of religion are inexorably linked phenom-

ena. I shared this idea in my earlier work as a sociologist of religion. Along with most people in the field, I had to give it up under the sheer pressure of empirical data. (Curiously, the idea is still held by many theologians, who regard it as an urgent task to accommodate Christianity to the alleged worldview of “modern man.”) Our age is *not* an age of secularization. On the contrary, it is an age of exuberant religiosity, much of it in the form of passionate movements with global outreach.

This does not mean that secularization is not there at all. It is an important, but *limited* phenomenon. I would say that a delineation of these limits is one of the important tasks of the sociology of religion today. While I am ready to modify my view of this as new data come in, I would suggest the following picture: Most of the world today is as religious as it ever was, and in some places is more religious than ever, though there are two exceptions to this. One exception is sociological, the other geographical. The sociological exception is a cross-national cultural elite, consisting mostly of people with Western-style higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Let me call this the “faculty-club culture.” The geographical exception is western and central Europe. I have called this “Eurosecularity.” Both behavioral and subjective data (that is, data about religious practices and about expressed religious beliefs) indicate that those European regions are exceptional. It also seems that secularization is part of the package of a common European culture, as it has spread from north to south (dramatically in Spain and Italy in the postwar years) and from west to east (in the wake of the demise of Communism). Ireland, once arguably the most Catholic country anywhere, is a fascinating case in point, as its “Europeanization” has brought with it a dramatic decline in the cultural dominance of the Catholic church. The very vortex of this European secularity may be located in eastern Germany and in the Czech Republic. Paul Zulehner, an Austrian sociologist of religion, has described these two territories as the first societies in which there has been a cultural establishment of atheism. There are a few other interesting locales, such as Australia and Quebec; perhaps they may be described as cases of “Europeanization at a distance.” In any case, the comparison between Europe and America is very important in this connection: If modernity and secularization go hand in hand, how does one explain the United States? It is a vibrantly religious society, yet it is

difficult to maintain that it is less modern than, say, the Netherlands. One often hears about an American “exceptionalism.” This may be a useful term in many areas, but definitely not in the area of religion: it is Europe, not America, that is “exceptional” when it comes to religion.

If the equation “modernity equals secularization” does not hold up, there is another proposition that holds up much better: modernity fosters pluralism. There is no great mystery about this. It is the result of the breakdown of isolated cultural communities, as people and ideas move freely and massively across all cultural borders. Pluralism has one very important consequence: it undermines the taken-for-granted status of beliefs and values, a process that affects religion as much as any other component of culture. This does not mean (as secularization theory maintained) that people *give up* beliefs or values, but rather that these are now *chosen* rather than taken for granted. Put differently, pluralism does not necessarily change *what* people believe, but *how* they believe. Again, America, with its long experience of pluralism, is in the vanguard of this change. It is beautifully expressed in the very American term “religious preference.” Contrast this with the traditional term “confession”: “My religious preference is Catholic,” versus “I am of the Catholic confession.” There is a world of difference between these two terms, and the core of the difference is, precisely, choice. If one wants to dignify my proposition here with the title “pluralism theory,” then its difference from secularization theory can be summarized rather neatly: What characterizes our era is not that there is too little religion, but rather that there is too much of it. This is a formidable challenge to theology and, more importantly, to the religious beliefs of ordinary people.

Arguably the two most dramatic cases of globalizing religion are Evangelical Protestantism, especially in its Pentecostal form, and renascent Islam. The two are obviously different in terms of their religious and moral contents, but they also differ significantly in their relations to the emerging (“Hellenistic”) global culture. Evangelical Protestantism, I would propose, is an expression of the new global culture on the popular level. Renascent Islam is definitely not such an expression, representing at least a deliberate modification of that culture, in the form of an alternative route to global modernity, and at most a determined opposition to “Hellenism.”

Pentecostalism

Evangelical Protestantism in various forms has expanded worldwide for the last half-century, but Pentecostalism probably accounts for some eighty percent, if not more, of this expansion. It is by far the most dynamic form of globalizing Protestantism. David Martin, the British sociologist who has studied this phenomenon for many years, estimates that there are at least 250 million Pentecostals in the world today, and possibly considerably more, since we know that there has been a growing Pentecostal movement in China, which is largely underground and thus difficult to enumerate. Outside the United States, where modern Pentecostalism originated about one hundred years ago, the great majority of Pentecostals are new converts. The most explosive growth has been in Latin America, where Martin estimates there are about 50 million Pentecostals. The movement has different dimensions in different Latin American countries, with Guatemala being the foremost case (for reasons that are unclear to me), with about 25% of its population now Protestant, and an even higher percentage in the capital area. These numbers, however, give an inadequate picture of the impact of Pentecostalism on what many still think of as a Catholic continent. Most Pentecostals are very active in their churches; most Catholics are not. Thus, research in Chile has shown that, although Pentecostals are still a minority of somewhere between 10% and 15%, the number of actively practicing Pentecostals is about the same as the number of *actively practicing* Catholics. No wonder that a Catholic bishop exclaimed some years ago: "What has democracy brought to Chile? Pornography, prostitution and Protestantism!" (In his mind, I suspect, the third is the worst of the three.) What is very important to understand is that this religious transformation has brought with it a cultural revolution. The new Protestants evince to an astounding degree the values that Max Weber called "the Protestant ethic," which played an important role, he claimed, in the development of "the spirit of capitalism" in Europe and North America. This has far-reaching social, economic, and even political consequences in a number of Latin American countries, notably in the emergence of an entrepreneurial and increasingly vocal Protestant middle class in several of them (Brazil is probably the most important case). I may sum this up by suggesting that Max Weber is alive and well, and living in São Paulo.

But if Latin America is the most important region for this religious explosion, it is not the only one. Pentecostalism has been rapidly spreading in sub-Saharan Africa, sometimes by itself, often in a synthesis with indigenous religious traditions, as in the so-called African Independent Churches. There has been significant growth in all overseas Chinese communities, in addition to whatever may be going on in China itself, and in the societies of the South Pacific. Pentecostalism has made inroads in eastern Europe, including Russia, where the Orthodox church, with the support of the state, is trying to repress it. Pentecostalism is also spreading in the most unlikely places, typically among marginalized people—among the Dalits (formerly known as Untouchables) in India, among the people of Nepal, and (most astounding of all) among European Gypsies. In sum, Pentecostalism is a truly globalizing movement.

I would contend that, as such, Pentecostalism has a positive relationship with the emerging global culture. It is, if you will, “vulgar Hellenism,” as distinguished from elite “Hellenistic” movements such as feminism or environmentalism. It has shown remarkable adaptability to local conditions. Thus, in Latin America it uniformly uses Spanish and Portuguese, even if some of the texts used are translations from English, and almost all of its ministers are natives of the respective countries (indeed, Latin American Pentecostals are now routinely sending missionaries to Latinos in the United States). There is a lot of interaction between American Pentecostals and their coreligionists elsewhere—an emerging Pentecostal internationale, if you will. There is also the interesting phenomenon of what has been called the “Pentecostalization” of mainline Protestant churches, for example in Korea, where formerly staid Presbyterians are breaking out into glossolalia.

Historically, of course, all of this has its origins in the United States and thus represents a global outreach of a distinctly Western form of religion. I think, however, that there is a more important reason for seeing Pentecostalism as having a positive relation to the emerging global culture, namely in its psychological and moral consequences. The most important of these is an *individualized* religiosity, pitting itself against traditional hierarchies and collectivities. Pentecostalism thus

has the character of a cultural dynamite, which is very reasonably feared by those who would uphold traditional culture. At least in Latin America, Pentecostalism arguably constitutes a “school for capitalism” (and thus a vehicle for social mobility in a modernizing economy), and perhaps even a “school for democracy” (here are people, most of whom have never had a voice of their own, creating and maintaining institutions of their own making). Thabo Mbeki, the president of South Africa, has been speaking of an “African Renaissance.” It would be an intriguing turn of history if this renaissance were to be significantly shaped by a religion that started out in Los Angeles.

Renascent Islam

Renascent Islam has an equal dynamism, although it is somewhat less global in its scope. It is mainly located in populations that have been traditionally Muslim, such as the Islamic countries from North Africa to Southeast Asia and the Muslim diasporas in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in North America. There are some conversions, to be sure, notably among African Americans and to some extent among the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, a region in which Islam clashes directly with the new Protestantism, but the phenomenon is mainly one among people who were already Muslim, but whose faith is being invigorated and activated by new religious movements. Unlike Pentecostalism, which mainly erupts among poor and marginalized people, renascent Islam is both a popular and an elite phenomenon. One obvious reason for this, of course, is the fact that Islam can look back on a civilization-al history of immense cultural riches and intellectual sophistication, which Pentecostalism totally lacks. Thus, it is often the children of Westernized, secularized elites who take on a passionate Islamic identity, as in the Arab world, Turkey, and the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Here, too, the religious transformation has far-reaching cultural consequences, as when the daughters of Harvard- or Oxford-educated intellectuals put on the veil to manifest Islamic modesty and the sons grow beards to symbolize Islamic manhood, typically to the great chagrin of their parents. It is accurate to say that no Muslim society between the Atlantic Ocean and the China Sea has remained untouched by this development.

It hardly needs saying these days that there are elements within renascent Islam that are fanatically opposed to everything associated with the West and with Western-tainted global culture. Such passionate anti-“Hellenism” was not invented by the current crop of homicidal terrorists. Some decades ago the Ayatollah Khomeini already inveighed against America as “the Great Satan,” and there were passionately anti-Western Muslim movements at least as far back as the nineteenth century (one may recall, for instance, the Mahdist insurrection in the Sudan). It also does not need saying that this form of Islamism is enormously important politically, providing at least a partial verification of Samuel Huntington’s thesis about a “clash of civilizations.” It is all the more important, especially these days, to emphasize that this type of extremism does not represent the totality of renascent Islam. There are different voices, different movements in the Muslim world, even if for the moment they appear overwhelmed by the turbulence of extremism. Thus, Robert Hefner has shown in his recent work how a very different version of Islam—moderate, pacifist, open to pluralism and democracy—has developed in Indonesia. It was represented very impressively by Aburrahman Wahid and his movement, and one of the tragedies of his failed presidency is the weakening of this movement, which would have gained in influence throughout the Muslim world if Wahid had succeeded in leading Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country, into a period of prosperity and democracy.

However, even in its more moderate forms, renascent Islam represents a very real alternative to the emerging global culture. Inevitably, it posits alternative visions of social and political life, of the relation of religion and the state, and very significantly of the proper roles of women and men. It thus intends what the Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt and the Harvard Sinologist Tu Wei-ming have called an “alternative modernity”—a modernity, that is, which will differ in important ways from the modernity represented by the Western-inspired global culture. Whatever else it may turn out to be, it will certainly not be secularized. The political developments of the near and not-so-near future will determine whether this vision will be capable of realization.

Other Western Religious Globalizers

While Pentecostalism is the most visible case of a Western-derived religious movement with a global reach, it is not the only one. In a broader sense of the term, of course, “global” has always described the reach of the Roman Catholic Church. It does so today in the context of contemporary globalization. Increasingly, the demographic profile of the Church has shifted to regions outside Europe and North America, a fact reflected very clearly in the geographical distribution of the College of Cardinals, as well as the Curia. This fact is important if one is to understand the policies of the Vatican. Positions and actions that embarrass many educated Catholics in Western countries are exactly those that are popular among masses of people in less developed countries. The global activities of the church occur on both elite and popular levels. Thus, on the elite level, there is the impressive program of Opus Dei, which has attained considerable influence in several Latin American countries and in the Philippines. On the popular level, there are movements such as the Legionnaires of Christ and Liberation and Communion, again evoking widespread interest and support.

The demographic shift away from the West also affects other Christian communities, such as the Anglican community, whose Lambeth Conferences are increasingly attended by bishops whose faces are not white and whose views differ sharply from those of progressive Anglicans in England or the United States. The Mormons, too, have been very successful in recruiting new adherents in regions far removed from Salt Lake City, particularly in the South Pacific region. Judaism, while in the main continuing a long tradition of not seeking converts among non-Jews, has its own global outreach, very noticeably in the influence in Israel and the ex-Communist countries in Europe of Orthodox movements with headquarters in the United States.

From East to West

As I have stressed before, globalization not only proceeds “from the West to the rest.” There are also important movements going in the other direction, which Colin Campbell has described with the apt term

“Easternization.” Islam is undoubtedly the most important case of this, but there are others. Buddhism has made significant inroads in Western countries, especially in the United States. Estimates about religious groups here are unreliable, since the official census is legally prohibited from asking questions about religion, a fact that may please constitutional lawyers but is quite frustrating to scholars of American religion. The estimates of Buddhists in the United States rest somewhere around five million. The majority consists of immigrants and their children from Buddhist regions of the world, but it is estimated that there are some 800,000 converts. This includes people whose understanding of Buddhism is quite idiosyncratic, if compared with the traditional schools in Asia. It also includes people who are serious adherents of this or that school (mostly Mahayana in character). In all of these groups, there are interesting attempts to “Americanize” Buddhism, not only in the outward forms of organization, which often resemble those of Protestant denominations, but also in terms of religious and moral content (for example, with regard to reincarnation, rejected by some, and the attempt to find a Buddhist rationale for social and political engagement). The work of my colleague Stephen Prothero has been pioneering in describing the cultural adaptations and modifications of Buddhism, as well as Hinduism, in the United States. The latter tradition is less represented in this country (estimates hover around the figure of two million), but is very visible in Britain, where there is also a significant number of Sikhs. It is probably too early to tell, as it is in the case of Islam, whether distinctively Western versions of these religions will eventually emerge. Such versions will not only constitute cases of “alternative modernity,” but alternative definitions of national identities that have traditionally been largely Christian. In 1955 Will Herberg published his influential book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, in which he argued that the range of socially accepted religions has steadily expanded from its original Protestant base to include Catholics and Jews. Since then, the range has widened. When Herberg was writing, the conventional view had become that American democracy was based on “Judaeo-Christian values.” More recently there has been the so-called “Abrahamic” proposition, including Islam in a triumvirate of religions all worshipping one God and as such providing legitimacy to the American regime. Whether this proposition will survive the present crisis is uncertain. But even if it does, this does not answer the question of how to include those who adhere to the non-

monotheistic traditions of southern and eastern Asia. How can one reconcile the Buddhist view that the self is an illusion with the idea of the rights of the individual? Or the Hindu valuation of caste with American egalitarianism? Add to this the enormous differences in the understandings of gender roles and sexual freedom. Mutatis mutandis, similar questions about a redefinition of national identity and political legitimacy are raised in Europe, especially in connection with Islam.

But, as Campbell points out, “Eastern” influences in the West are not circumscribed by formal adherence to non-Western religions. There is the very significant phenomenon of so-called New Age religiosity, which has been present in Western countries for a long time but which has gained a sharp ascendancy since the 1960s. It is a diffuse cultural phenomenon, rarely manifest in organizational forms, but nonetheless bringing about important changes in the lives of many people, especially in the United States. There are probably millions of Americans who regularly meditate, who try to establish a distinctly non-Western relationship to their own bodies and to nature, who believe in reincarnation, and whose political views are shaped by a Gandhian ideal of non-violence. And here, of course, there are innumerable cultural adaptations. For example, Asian meditational techniques originally designed to make contact with metaphysical realities (such as the cosmic Buddha or the Brahman) are instrumentalized to provide better mental health or even economic productivity (“yoga for stockbrokers,” say). For another example, while reincarnation has been perceived as an endless horror to be escaped from in the religious imagination of India (the origins of Buddhism and Upanishadic Hinduism are incomprehensible apart from this perception), reincarnation now makes an American reappearance as yet another opportunity for a second chance. We don’t have a clear picture as yet of the degree to which New Age ideas and practices have advanced in Western cultures, but where they have advanced there have been significant “Easternizing” changes in these cultures.

Challenges to the West

It seems to me that the developments I have described present Western societies with two challenges, one civic and the other religious. In prin-

ciple, both challenges have considerable positive potential. I have already touched on the civic challenge, which is a challenge to the definition of national identity. What does it mean to be a German with dark skin, who kneels to pray in the direction of Mecca five times a day? What is a Sikh Irishman? Let me put this in American terms by taking an example recently used by Stephen Prothero: Imagine that you are a civics teacher at a high school in Honolulu. The majority of your students are of Asian ethnic backgrounds, many of them non-Christians. Do you still say that American society is based on Judaeo-Christian values? If so, how do you explain this to these kids? If not, what *do* you say? Will you include non-Christian, non-Jewish religious values as having something to do with the moral foundation of American society, and how will you do this? Or will you have to fall back on a purely secular view of how American society is to be morally legitimated? The example of a high-school civics class is useful, because it underlines the fact that these are not just academic questions, to be dealt with in academic colloquia, but are questions relevant to the ordinary lives of ordinary people. I believe that the future character of Western democracies will at least partially be shaped by the answers given to these questions, in Europe as much as in America.

The religious challenge is to the self-understanding of Christian and Jewish religious communities. It is, *au fond*, the great challenge of pluralism, which, as I have suggested earlier, is more important than the challenge of secularization. The Jewish response is complicated by the nature of Judaism as both a religious and an ethnic identity, and in this respect at least, the Jewish confrontation with pluralism resembles that of Eastern Christian Orthodoxy, (an issue that I cannot address here). For the churches of the Christian West, Protestant as well as Catholic, something like a paradigm shift will have to take place in the way they understand their contemporary situation. For nearly two hundred years that situation has been interpreted as existence in an age of secularity with which the churches have had to come to terms both theologically and in practice. An empirically more plausible paradigm puts pluralism at the core of the situation in which the churches find themselves. There is now a growing body of Protestant and Catholic thinkers who have understood this, and it has motivated the growing dialogue with non-Christian religions. Needless to say, different theo-

logical positions have emerged in this development, and very interesting insights have come out of this widening dialogue.

The challenge of religious pluralism is not just a concern to be addressed by academic theologians; it is very much a concern of lay people, and not least of their children, as they rub elbows in school and elsewhere with children of other religious traditions. As with the civic challenge, this religious challenge, too, should be seen in positive terms. It provides a fertile occasion for a re-examination of the grounds of faith and of the identity of believers and their communities, and very importantly for an assessment of what is central to their faith and what is not. Put differently, this concerns what might be “surrendered” in the dialogue with other faiths and what must be held onto, even if one has to say “no” to the interlocutors from other traditions. In the historical development of Christianity, for example, there have been a number of defining confrontations: at its very beginnings with official Judaism; then with the culture and thought of the Graeco-Roman world; in the Middle Ages, with the then superior civilization of Islam; and most recently, with modernity. Today the confrontation with the great religions of southern and eastern Asia will be an equally important occasion for a renewed understanding of both the Christian and Jewish faiths.