

2007

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Recommended Citation

Spickard, James V., "'Religion' in Global Culture: New Directions in an Increasingly Self-Conscious World" (2007). *Our House Chapters and Poems*. 42.
http://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_chapters/42

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‘RELIGION’ IN GLOBAL CULTURE:
NEW DIRECTIONS IN AN INCREASINGLY SELF-CONSCIOUS
WORLD*

by

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FINAL DRAFT (PRE-PUBLICATION)

Pp 235-250 in
Globalization, Religion, and Culture,
edited by Peter Beyer and Lori Beaman. Brill, 2007

Globalization involves much more than our newfound ability to telephone friends on the other side of the world. It involves more than the complex network of trade relations that bring coffee and tea to our breakfast tables. It even involves more than the interconnected financial markets that, on the one hand, let us use our credit cards in Timbuktu but, on the other hand, can collapse with worldwide repercussions, as they did in Mexico in 1994, East Asia in 1997, Russia in 1998, or in the U.S. tech stock crash of 2001. As significant as these links are, they are only part of the global picture. These connections both support and depend on an increasingly globalized culture—one that imagines the world much differently than was the case in previous eras. In this chapter, I shall explore certain aspects of this emerging global culture, focusing on the role that religions have played and are playing in it. This role is not one-sided, as global culture shapes today’s religions as much as it is shaped by them.

Let me start by noting what I do not mean by ‘global culture’. I do not mean the rise of the Internet, the spread of hip-hop and rock to all corners of the globe, the Davos World Economic Forum, and so on. Though technology, art, and interlocking economic elites are all aspects of our globalized world, they are not the level of culture that I find important. To an anthropologist, culture is a communal matter. It involves a group’s core outlook on the world as it manifests itself in daily living. It consists of that group’s root assumptions about the world. This includes the ways in which these assumptions generate both the taken-for-granted rules for living and the ‘things everyone knows’ about a given social scene.

What distinguishes the global era from others is the spread of certain cultural assumptions worldwide. It is not just that we connect (or don’t connect) with one another, listen (or don’t listen) to the same music, and watch (or don’t watch) the same mass entertainment. More importantly, we share core ideas—ones that our various ancestors would have found strange.

- Among other things, we observe that people throughout the world increasingly see themselves as individuals. They see themselves as having individual ‘rights’, whether or not they can articulate these at any depth. Furthermore, they see everyone as having such rights, no matter to which government they owe allegiance. These rights are seen as ‘universal’—a result of being human, nothing more.
- Among these rights is the right to ‘place’: a right to citizenship in one or another locality. This is typically a nation, but it can also, for some, be a tribe, a clan, or a region. Many people see themselves as having ‘ethnic’ ties to these nations, tribes, or clans, and they see these ties as being somehow primordial. To use Michael Ignatieff’s (1993)

* To appear in Peter F. Beyer and Lori G. Beaman, eds. Globalization, Religion, and Culture. Leiden: Brill, 2007

phrase, “blood and belonging” are seen to go together, especially in the nationalist violence that has wracked much of the world in recent years.¹ The notion that ‘they’ve been fighting for hundreds of years’ has much cachet today, if little reality.

- Interestingly, people simultaneously see themselves as global citizens, part of a common humanity-at-large that shares an essential status as rights-bearing human beings—including the right to associate with others of like ethnicity. The dual notion that everyone is simultaneously a citizen of a nation-state, often an ethnically based one, and also a world citizen is something new.
- Also new is the idea that all people have (or don’t have) a religion, and that they have (or ought to have) a certain kind of relationship to this religion (or non-religion). Specifically, ‘religion’ is something in which people are supposed to believe and to whose organizations they are supposed to belong.²
- Until recently, Euro-American intellectuals argued that religions would fade as world society grew more technical and scientific. This is now questioned, but elites still assume that religion is more strongly held by ‘less-developed’ peoples.
- Religious people claim that religion should be a center-point that orients people’s lives. Even those who oppose religious conflict in such places as Iraq, Sri Lanka, and Gujarat, see that conflict as somehow ‘natural’—as an outgrowth of deeply held religious loyalty. And they, by-and-large, see the loyalty (though not the conflict) as a good thing, the perversions of which only education and strong government can overcome.
- In some situations, ‘religious’ ties act just like ‘ethnic’ ones. ‘Shiite’ versus ‘Sunni’ in Iraq presents itself as an ethnic conflict, for example, and is popularly regarded as similarly primordial. The Bosnian civil war presented itself as an ethnic conflict, but the prime line of division was in fact religious—given that skin color, language, dress, or other external markers could not differentiate Serb from Croat from Bosniac. (Ethnically-based death squads often

identified their victims by asking what prayers they had learned as children.)

The naturalness of rights, ethnicity, and religion are so commonly accepted today that they are hardly noticed, except by scholars. True, these are a bit different from one another. All people are seen as having rights, but they do not necessarily share either the same ethnicity or the same religion. Though the content of their ethnicity differs, however, most people believe that ethnicity is an inevitable human attribute and they pretty much share the same idea of what it is.³ Similarly, though they may belong to different religions, or to no religion, they all share a sense of what religion is and how it can command allegiance.

When Roland Robertson (1992) notes that global economic integration has not been matched by an equivalent global cultural integration, he is not arguing that we don’t share notions such as rights, ethnicity, and religion. He is pointing out that, through migration and trade, people with different identities, skin colors, values, and views mingle on a level not seen since late Roman times. Despite their differences, all see themselves as individuals, with individual rights, and they also see themselves as at least somewhat integrated into ethnic, national, or religious groups. Almost everyone in the contemporary world expects people to have different ethnic and religious identities, and to hold them with varying degrees of certitude. Furthermore, they believe that people have a right to these identities and the right to defend them, though not the right to impose them on others.

If, at the level of content, we do not share much global culture, we share quite a bit at the level of form. The first task I have set for this chapter is to outline how religion has aided such ideas’ growth, as well as the role that such ideas have played in shaping contemporary religion. My second task will be to examine the quasi-religious nature of some of these ideas—and the social consequences of such quasi-religiosity. (Space forces me to be brief on all counts.)

¹ Some observers argue that this allegiance to nation, tribe, clan, or religious group is a reaction against globalization rather than characteristic of it. I shall argue below that it is a reaction to the decline of state power, particularly on the global periphery and semi-periphery. (For the definition of these terms, see Wallerstein, 2004.)

² That a major sociological analysis of religion could be titled subtitled “Believing without Belonging” (Davie 1994) testifies to the definitional importance of these factors. Cf. Voas and Crockett (2005).

³ Dominant ethnic groups sometimes have to be reminded that they possess ethnicity. In the United States, for example, one of the main goals of the multicultural consulting industry has been to show Northern White Anglos that their accustomed ways of doing things are as particularistic as are the cultural practices of urban Blacks, New Mexican Hispanos, working-class Chicago Poles, or Southern ‘Crackers’. This industry’s success demonstrates my point, as does the industry’s (countervailing) assertion that everyone must be treated as an individual rather than as a member of a group. Both ideas are core contemporary cultural assumptions.

Imagining a World Community

Benedict Anderson (1991) charts a major shift in socio-political imagination that occurred during the modern era. Beginning with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, but not fully implemented in Europe until after World War I (and even later in the rest of the world), this shift involved a rethinking of the notion of sovereignty. Before Westphalia, sovereignty was multiple and overlapping. A person living in the Rhine valley, for example, might owe certain duties and taxes to the local prince, others to the local free city (‘free’ because it was not under the prince’s rule), and yet others to the local bishop (who usually possessed temporal as well as ecclesiastical power). Rather than being strictly bounded, these sovereignties can be thought of as overlapping circles. As Anderson puts it, in pre-modern Europe “the fundamental conceptions about ‘social groups’ were centripetal and hierarchical, rather than boundary-oriented and horizontal” (p15). Any one individual divided her or his allegiance among several superiors, depending on how extensive or limited was each superior’s reach. Each superior received her or his due, in so far as her/his power made it so.

Westphalia changed all this by enunciating a new principle of socio-political life: that each state would have precisely one sovereign who would command the full allegiance of all those living within certain borders. ‘The state’ became the institution tasked with political sovereignty; ‘the church’ was relegated to sovereignty over souls. The state encouraged residents to see themselves as ‘subjects’ to a single ruler. The 17th and 18th century revolutions shifted this to an image of ‘citizens’, whose mutual citizenship became a tie that replaced family, kinship, and even religion as the source of community. Anderson shows how specific technical innovations—print capitalism, the national museum, maps and censuses—further imagined this citizenship as one of ethnic nationhood, not merely governmental allegiance. Each ‘people’, having one language, one history, one ethnicity, and one culture, should have one state of its own.⁴ Michael Ignatieff (1993) shows the role that such ethnic nationalism has played in recent history—a fate that has been largely avoided by those early states, such as the U.S. and France, which continued to imagine themselves as civic communities.

The key idea here is the relationship between concrete social practices and the nature of the connection people feel with one another. Massimo d’Azeglio, one of Cavour’s ministers, is supposed to have remarked, “We

have created Italy; now all we need to do is to create Italians”.⁵ The French state forged unity among the disparate peoples inhabiting ‘the Hexagon’ by imposing a common language and a centralized education system (Hobsbawm 1992b); so elsewhere have elites used various practical tools to create a felt sense of national ties. Not all of these have involved manufactured ethnicity (Hobsbawm 1992a; Bauman 1992), but many have. Anderson shows how this European project spread worldwide. From World War I on,

the legitimate international norm was the nation-state. ... The new states of the post-World-War II period ... took from linguistic European nationalism its ardent populism, and from official nationalism its Russifying policy-orientation. ... One sees both a genuine, popular nationalistic enthusiasm and a systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations, and so forth. (Anderson 1991:113-14)

The irony here is obvious: European ideas about what constitutes a ‘nation’ are now embraced worldwide. They are no longer the property of European culture, but are now part of global culture—part of the entire world’s accustomed way of seeing things. For those who hold them, these ideas make sense of recent ‘ethnic’ violence in places like Bosnia, Rwanda and Iraq. How can ‘different’ groups, who are divided by language, culture, ‘blood’, and/or religion, be expected to identify with the same political community? Is it not ‘natural’ that they are at each other’s throats?

In reality, so-called ethnic conflict is not primordial. Primordialist ideology says that ethnicity and culture go together, so different ethnic groups should have different views of the world, including different views of the nature and importance of ethnicity. Instead, global culture expects everyone to have a dominant ethnicity and also to be part of an ethnic community that deserves its own state. There is no room for difference, here. Primordialists think that those who fail to imagine themselves having an ‘ethnicity’ are unrealistic, if not deluded.

This is not, however, the only global expectation governing state formation and behavior. Alongside the global belief that ethnic communities and states go together stands a global belief that each individual

⁴ Robert Borofsky (2000) points out that anthropology’s famous four-field paradigm (linguistic, physical, cultural, archaeology) parallels this 19th-century image of the nation (shared language, race, culture, history) and is thus a part of the same ideological apparatus..

⁵ Among other things, some 30 different languages (not dialects) were spoken within the new state’s borders. Most are Romance languages, but many are related to Greek, German, Slavic, and Albanian. Many of the Romance languages are closer to French and Spanish than to modern Italian (which was based on the Tuscan dialect). France, by the way, still hosts over 20 native languages—not counting those spoken by immigrants. (Gordon, 2005)

human being possesses certain inalienable rights, particularly those found in the 1948 United Nations Declaration. As is well-known, this document lists two types of rights. The first are the political and civil rights enshrined in European and American constitutions: to life, liberty, freedom of speech, religion, and so on. These are individual rights—rights that are vested in persons *qua* persons, especially rights *vis-à-vis* the state. The second are the social and economic rights promoted by the former Soviet bloc: the right to meaningful work, to education, to social support in old age, to organize unions, etc. These rights connect people to each other, usually with state aid. The right to an education, for example, is something that a government is supposed to provide, while that same government is supposed to avoid suppressing individual religious choice. The logical conflict between first- and second-generation human rights has taken many forms in the last 60 years.

I have elsewhere argued that these two types of rights complement each other in the context of globalization (Spickard 1994; Spickard 2002:234-36). To the extent that our interconnected global society depends on individual initiative, and especially on individuals’ ability to develop their personal skills to the fullest, that society implicitly supports individuals’ right to be different from one another. The U.N. Declaration merely enumerates the civil and political rights that make this possible. This same global society simultaneously depends, however, on its interconnections—the globe-spanning ties that make economic globalization work. To the degree that governments protect individuals’ rights to education, meaningful employment, social support, and so on, they support these interconnections. Practically speaking, globalization thus amounts to an affirmation of mutual social responsibility. First- and second-generation human rights are not so disconnected after all.

The fact remains, however, that only first-generation human rights have reached iconic cultural status, at least in the West. America’s Bush Administration, for example, has had to hide its violations of international statutes on the treatment of prisoners, on the rights of the accused, and so on, behind claims of exigency—something that it has not had to do with its shredding of the U.S. social safety net. No one dares claim that only the wealthy have a right to a fair trial, a right to religious freedom, or a right to free speech; that would be unacceptable. On the other hand, it seems to be perfectly legitimate, at least in the American public eye, to limit education, old-age security, food, health care, and so on to those who can afford it on

their own.⁶ Put more abstractly, current international culture recognizes the legitimacy of individual rights more than it recognizes the responsibilities entailed by social connections. To use a religious metaphor, first-generation rights are still holy, while second-generation rights are not—or at least not yet. (I shall return to this below.)

The Role of Religion

What role has religion played in these imaginings? How did religion help us get from the multiply particular world that existed roughly before Columbus to the more unified cultural world in which we now live? Several pathways present themselves.

Instrumentally, Christian elites were heavily involved in the Euro-American colonial enterprise—sometimes as critics, but more often as fellow travelers. The so-called ‘Whiteman’s burden’ called for social and spiritual uplift, alongside the economic.⁷ Missions played a part throughout the colonies, even in Belgium, that most exploitative of imperial outposts (Hochschild 1999). To the degree that our globalized world is the successor to a colonial one, then Western religious personnel aided its creation.

Western religions provided more than staff, however; they also provided content. Alongside Christianity (in its various incarnations), missionary elites saw themselves carrying European enlightenment into the ‘heathen darkness’. From the Caribbean to New Guinea, from the Himalayas to South African, missions introduced core Euro-American cultural ideals that proved inseparable from religion in their minds. The notion that people should follow individual conscience rather than blindly following native custom, for example, was a staple of mission-based education. So was the idea of a transcendent God, who called individuals to dedicate their lives to higher purposes. As anthropologist Mary Douglas (1970) has noted, Western definitions of religion are not culturally universal. A good many of the world’s peoples had nothing corresponding to the 19th century European notion of religion as a transcendent life-sphere, grounded in strongly-held beliefs and supporting core life values. She notes that humans’ relationships with their gods can be crass and manipulative just as easily as they can be uplifting. Western missions were part of the intellectual process that gave global culture a new notion of what religion should be.

Peter Beyer makes a similar point, in noting that “the modern sense of what counts as religion ... is a product of a relatively recent, highly selective,

⁶ The Bush Administration touts this as “the ownership society” (White House, 2004), though others point out that it amounts to “YOYO [You’re On Your Own] economics” (Bernstein, 2006).

⁷ Edward Said (1978; 1985) famously describes aspects of this process.

and somewhat arbitrary historical (re)construction” (2003a:334). In his account, Western religious scholars looked at other parts of the world and saw things that looked like our post-Reformation Christianities; they named these ‘religions’. Those that did not look so much like Euro-American Christianity, they labeled ‘superstitions’ or ‘cults’.⁸

To some degree, this was a political process, one that involved non-Western elites as well. Indian nationalists, for example, reacted to the British missionaries’ claim that India had no ‘high religion’ by shaping ‘Hinduism’ from the welter of old texts, priesthoods, and forms of temple worship. See, they said: we, too, have a ‘world religion’ (Dalmia and von Stietencron 1995). Eastern and Western intellectuals similarly shaped ‘Buddhism’ from a jumble of popular practices, creating, in the process, more a mirror of their own concerns than a separable religious entity (Tamney 1992). The attempt to construct a similar Chinese ‘religion’ foundered on the response of Chinese intellectuals that China did not have any indigenous *zongjiao* (literally, ‘belief-cults’)—a term that fit their reading of what the Christian missionaries had brought them (Beyer 2003b:174-77). Ironically, this solidified a cross-cultural definition of religion—one modeled on the religions of the West. It was the exception that proved the rule.⁹

Mission education had other, more practical consequences. It gave (some) natives the skills, first, to staff positions in the colonial service and, later, to lead independence movements—transcendent callings *par excellence*. These movements were based on other (learned) Western principles, especially those of national self-determination and the right of democratic self-government. Indeed, the newly independent states of the post-World War II period embodied Western assumptions about the nature of political life, the relationship between statehood and ethnicity, and the rights of the governed—even in situations, such as post-colonial Africa, where ethnic conflict was justifiably seen as a danger. In short, missions and missionaries did not just spread Christianity (even where they succeeded in doing so); they also spread the now-global cultural imaginings mentioned earlier in this chapter.

The Western way of imagining religion posited a universal ‘religious sphere’, to which all societies must somehow respond. Scholars as well as missionaries saw this sphere as foundational, because Christianity claimed to

be the ground of life, and also to be transcendent, because Christianity claimed to transcend life. Based on their own history of religious wars, Westerners encoded religious freedom in their constitutions. As the world left the colonial age, this freedom was added to various international documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and so on. Thus ‘religions’ came to be seen as more than a Western product, but something basic to human life, not to be denied. In short, Beyer argues, though there was once no universal image of ‘religion’, there is one now. Where it was originally a result of Western political and ideological imperialism, it has outlasted that origin.¹⁰

The point is, almost everyone now treats ‘religion’ as a natural, if transcendent, part of human existence—even while holding different attitudes toward its value. Religion thus not only shaped global culture, it was (ideologically) reshaped by it. As in the colonial era, the post-colonial intellectual world still clothes itself in Western weeds.¹¹

Rights as ‘Religious’ Ideals

Sociologists have notoriously argued over the applicability of religious concepts to non-religious or quasi-religious phenomena. The issue is not so much whether ‘civil religions’, political ideologies, popular culture, and so on are or are not themselves religious, but whether the concepts that scholars have developed for analyzing religions can help us understand such phenomena. Without opening the question of whether contemporary human rights and ethnic nationalist ideologies are really ‘religions’, what can religious analysis tell us about them?

Let us start with human rights. I already mentioned the first two generations of human rights: civil and political rights (as enshrined in Western constitutions) and economic, social, and cultural rights (supported by Europe’s social democracies. A third set—the rights of socio-cultural groups—has been proposed as a new generation of rights, largely to protect various indigenous peoples, linguistic minorities, and so on. Finding their cultures, resources, and even lives threatened by outsiders, such groups seek either sovereignty or ‘self-determination’ within the boundaries of existing

⁸ Meredith McGuire (2003) describes the Reformations-era definitional shifts that shaped the new Christianities in both Europe and America.

⁹ Late-20th century religious scholars more successfully constructed ‘shamanism’ as a cross-culturally coherent means by which tribal peoples interacted with the spirit world—e.g. Smith (1991)—a success made possible both by the difficulty tribal peoples have in organizing politico-intellectual opposition and by the cachet that having their own ‘world religion’ gives to the relatively powerless.

¹⁰ Beyer (2003b:172-77) also notes that some societies view religion with suspicion, precisely because of its transcendent claims to human loyalty. The Chinese Communist Party, for example, “acknowledged both the legitimacy of the category of religion while also considering it to be problematic” (p176). Both China and Japan treat “religion as something other than the necessary foundation for a meaningful world, the good society, and the good person” (p177).

¹¹ For various approaches to this process, see Chidester (1996), Masuzawa (2005), and, above all, Smith (1982).

states. They proclaim their ‘human right’ to this sovereignty, though this right is so far recognized in few international agreements.

I have elsewhere argued (Spickard 2002:231-34) that each of these three generations of rights sacralizes a different aspect of our current global situation. Civil and political rights treat individuals as sacred, protecting them against state oppression. This corresponds to the increasingly important role that individual knowledge-workers play in the global economy. Unlike past economies, which were based largely on farming, manufacturing, or resource extraction, knowledge is now a factor of production (Bensman and Vidich 1971). Technical expertise makes global production possible; it also makes transportation and marketing work on a scale heretofore inconceivable.¹² Our economy is subject to significant inequalities (Ehrenreich 2001; Shipler 2004), but they are not the same inequalities that typified the eras of landed or industrial wealth. Land and money can be sequestered rather easily; education and skill cannot. Our complex, world-spanning division of labor rewards highly differentiated individuals, each possessing special combinations of skills. Though these workers are a minority, they are the minority on which all else depends. Given that anyone could, in principle, be so valuable, it makes sense for us to sacralize such individuality, for, by doing so, we honor the principles that make our own (collective) lives possible. As sacred symbols, individual human rights provide the ideological underpinning for a global social system that depends on individuals’ skills. Religious analysis tells us to learn from what people hold sacred. Sacred individuality corresponds to a core part of our contemporary world.

As noted above, second-generation human rights focus on the economic and social ties that connect people to one another. The ‘rights’ to meaningful work, to education, to old-age assistance, to join unions, and so on affirm these connections. They remind us of our interdependence. Pure individualism forgets that connection is just as important to our global economy as are differentiated persons. How better to symbolize the globe-spanning networks that make that economy work than by portraying them as positive rights that no person should be denied? Neo-liberal ideology, of course, plays down such connections, as it plays down state-sponsored social supports, efforts to limit economic inequality, and so on. The fact that some countries treat these ‘rights’ as aspirations, not as absolutes, is a good indication of what their elites do, and don’t, regard as sacred. Yet there is enough conflict over our collective social responsibilities to remind us that elites do not speak for everyone, certainly not in the developed West. The

¹² Bonacich and Appelbaum (2000), for example, note the importance of computer technology to the contemporary garment industry.

vehemence of that conflict—for example, between American self-proclaimed ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’¹³—tells us that competing visions of the sacred are at work. Though currently trailing neo-liberalism, the push for second-generation human rights is still in the race.

Taken broadly, first- and second-generation human rights symbolize two pillars of our emerging global social order: its reliance on individuals and its reliance on their interconnections. As a compressed symbol, the idea of ‘human rights’ thus stands for that order. Durkheim would have had no trouble understanding the reverence with which such symbols are held.

In this context, so-called ‘group rights’ seem counter-intuitive. Emphasizing groups seems to belittle both individuals and globe-spanning connections. It seems to elevate the local over the global. Are group rights really a protest against the social implications of globalization? Are they counter-cyclic efforts to return to an imagined past, in which people were imbedded in their local communities and those communities gave their members a secure sense of identity? Are they like the religious fundamentalisms¹⁴ that many accuse of similarly imagining a return to past security? Or is something else going on?

When I wrote about this topic a few years ago, I thought the movement for group rights had both pro- and anti-systemic implications. I distinguished the structural implications of first- and second-generation rights from the cultural implications of this (proposed) third generation. As I put it then,

Structural globalization makes cultural localism possible precisely because it makes economic localism irrelevant. ... Group membership (and the rhetoric of group membership) arguably serves as a counterweight to a feared massification and isolation, while not actually decreasing global integration. Localistic ideologies can thus fill globalization’s cultural void. (Spickard 2002:233)

I am not longer sure that this is true. Exploring third-generation human rights in the context of resurgent ethnic nationalism—read at the level of ideology—now seems to me to paint a more complex picture.

¹³ Many observers note that America’s self-styled ‘conservatives’ are not conservative in any meaningful sense of the term. Instead, both political and religious discourse has defined certain positions as ‘conservative’ and others as ‘not conservative’—with small regard for actual facts. Whether self-styled American ‘progressives’ are meaningfully progressive is a separate matter.

¹⁴ Clearly, there is no single ‘fundamentalism’ in the modern world (Cohen 1990; Marty and Appleby 1991; Antoun 2001). I use this term as a shorthand for religions that imagine themselves adhering militantly to tradition in the face of perceived secular hostility. See Jenkins (2002). See below.

Ethnic Conflict and the Culture of ‘Group Rights’

Ethnic conflicts seem to fall into two camps, which vary not by their level of violence but by their position in the world economic system (Wallerstein 2004; cf. Chirot 1977). Both involve shifts in the role of the state, though not in the same way.

The most peaceful, not to say the most tractable, of these conflicts take place within countries that stand at the core of the global economy. Belgium’s Flemish and Walloons, Spain’s Catalans, the U.K.’s Scots and Welsh, and Canada’s Quebecois have sought (and gained) a measure of socio-political autonomy vis-à-vis their respective states without violence, though not without hard feeling. France’s Occitans agitate for minority status, mostly by reviving their language and re-imaging the late-medieval ascetic Cathars as freedom-fighters against Parisian aggression.

Here, group identity seems as I had previously described it: as a cultural localism, made possible precisely because true economic localism is not up for discussion. The economic integration of Europe, for example, makes the state less relevant as the chief unit of economic activity (Goddard *et al.* 1994). Identities can thus shift more freely. There seems little point in continuing to organize governance along the line that used to divide, say, the Spanish Netherlands (Belgium) from the Free Provinces (Netherlands)—a Catholic south versus a (mostly) Protestant north—when religion has lost much of its salience to both camps. The Dutch/French language division affects life more directly, and the EU makes the choice of political dividing lines less weighty. To the degree that activists can convince people that a change lacks costs while rectifying perceived inequities, then soft ethnic nationalism can rule.

Not all ethnic conflicts in core countries are so balanced, but the opportunities opened up by growing globalization favor local identification. Some American Indian tribes, for example, have gotten rich by building gambling casinos—an ironic reversal of their previous impoverishment at the hands of bead-and-whiskey-wielding White traders. Where once they lost their land, they now take White folks’ dough. Rights-language, both individual and group, supports this irony, precisely because America can afford such localism. It does not threaten the big picture.

Conflicts in the global system’s semi-peripheral and peripheral regions have been more deadly. The former Yugoslavia imploded in part because of its semi-peripheral economic status, and in part because of real developmental differences between its constituent provinces. As the Titoist state collapsed, agitators framed the economic crisis as a matter of ethnic liberation, hoping thereby to capture whatever state power remained (Silber and Little 1994). Milosevic and Tudjman both succeeded, at least for a time, at the cost of two Serb-Croat wars. People found themselves forced to

identify with their purported ethnic group rather than with their ideals, their families, their occupations, or any of the other dimensions that they had previously enjoyed (Ignatieff 1993:25). Tekle Woldemikael (1993; 2005) has pointed out that war is one means by which ethnicity is made salient, and the memories of war fuel future inter-group conflict. This was certainly the case in Yugoslavia, where self-identified ‘Yugoslavs’ were systematically pushed to ally themselves with one or another of the exclusive ‘nationalities’ into which the country collapsed (Sekulic *et al.* 1994).

It is hard to equate this conflict with the cultural localism noted above. Yet semi-peripheral ethnic nationalism merely pursues the 19th century European dream of one ‘people’, one state (Llobera 1994). Core countries defined themselves ethnically, so why should not those seeking to join the core do so as well? The fact that core countries can now indulge ethnic localism may lead poorer peoples to imitate what they think is the path to development. The self-determination of ethnic states—the logical outcome of ‘group rights’—seems to outsiders to be a path to success. The reality is a good deal more brutal. As Michael Ignatieff writes,

Nationalism ... is a language of fantasy and escape. In many cases—Serbia is a flagrant example—nationalist politics is a full-scale, collective escape from the realities of social backwardness. Instead of facing up to the reality of being a poor, primitive, third-rate economy on the periphery of Europe, it is infinitely more attractive to listen to speeches about the heroic and tragic Serbian destiny and to fantasize about the final defeat of her historic enemies. (1993:245)

In such a context, ‘group rights’ are dangerous—both to those against whom the rights are claimed and to those who think the claims will bring them a better life. Only the demagogues profit.

If the dream of ethnic nationhood is dangerous in the world’s semi-periphery, it is doubly so in peripheral locales. In Rwanda, Afghanistan, post-invasion Iraq, Somalia, and other failed states, opportunistic struggle draws often uses ethnicity as an operating metaphor. In Rwanda, for example, Belgian colonialists transformed a native class division into an ethnic one, creating ‘Tutsi’ and ‘Hutu’ as primary identity categories (Fenton 1996; Prunier 1995). Post-independence politics accentuated these lines, producing first a civil war and then genocide (Gourevitch 1998). The fact that the killers targeted moderate Hutus as well as Tutsis belies the supposed ethnic nature of the conflict, but there is no doubt that ethnicity now provides the intellectual frame for events. As Ignatieff wisely writes after his investigation of Croat-Serb conflicts, “So often, it seemed to me, the violence happened first, and the nationalist excuses came afterwards.” (1993:244).

As I write this, Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis are fighting a civil war, guerrilla-style, which is similarly reported as ‘ethnic’ in the American press.

Religious differences that were not, in fact, terribly salient for centuries now determine who bombs whom—and who retaliates. Iraq’s country’s actual ‘ethnic’ division, between Arabs and Kurds, is not at the moment its most deadly. American troops seem unable to stop the violence, and many doubt that anyone else can either.

The important fact here is not the mistake of framing these conflicts as ‘ethnic’ rather than class-based, in the Rwandan case, or religious, in the Iraqi one. Instead, both illustrate the self-fulfilling nature of the current global cultural imagination. Our world thinks in terms of ‘ethnicity’ and so reads intra-state conflicts as ethnic conflicts. We can imagine wars between states (Iran vs. Iraq, Iraq vs. Kuwait, Vietnam vs. Cambodia, etc.), but we can scarcely imagine wars within states along any but ethnic lines. This is one aspect of the global culture that we all share.

Things were different thirty years ago. Then world culture took Marxist ideas more seriously, and intra-state warfare was usually interpreted along class lines. In Guatemala, Colombia, and Peru, for example, rural rebellions presented themselves as class-based, and were so interpreted by intellectuals (Debray 1967; Stern 1998). Only later were they widely reinterpreted as Indian movements against ethnic oppression.

Why this shift in framework? What does the growing salience of ethnicity on the world stage tell us about global culture?

A key, I think, is the decline of the state, especially at the margins of the global economic system, and the growing importance there of sub-state identity to people’s survival. Even core states have increasingly lost power to transnational economic concerns, both private and public. WTO, NAFTA, CAFTA, EU, IMF, and the World Bank, alongside Nestle, Shell, Exxon, Pfizer, OPEC, and Walmart, now contend with all but the strongest states as equal players. What leverage can far weaker peripheral states have? If an increasingly globalized economy makes cultural localism possible in core societies, shifting power there from the state to both local and international entities, then state decline at the periphery and semi-periphery forces people to turn elsewhere for protection.

This process is not merely cultural revitalization (Wallace 1956)—neither to ‘globalization’ nor to an imagined loss of past stability—largely because there are no pure cultures to revitalize. Arjun Appadurai points out that neither at the core nor the periphery of the world system do we encounter self-enclosed local cultures. In his words, “the landscapes of group identity ... are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous” (1996:48). Instead people nearly everywhere know about U.S. television shows, Japanese *anime*, GPS technology, and international migration (Nelson 1996). People

may embrace these or reject them, but such elements shape “the imaginative resources of lived, local experiences” (Appadurai 1966:52).

Appadurai argues that globalization produces what he calls “constructed primordialisms”. Contemporary ethnic identities are not holdovers from the past. Rwandan Hutu and Tutsi, Iraqi Shiite and Sunni, Serbs, Croats, Bosniacs, and so on are not reinvigorating long-established struggles. Instead, they are fighting to create protective communities that can carry them into the future. As he puts it, “the violence that surrounds identity politics around the world today reflects the anxieties attendant on the search for nonterritorial principles of solidarity” (p165). If the declining significance of the state in the global core makes ethnic localism possible, state collapse makes imagined ethnic solidarity crucial for survival on the periphery.

Back to Religion

What does religion have to do with this picture—or this picture with religion? Beyond the quasi-religious aspects of human rights ideologies (Ignatieff 2001) and some people’s quasi-religious devotion to ethnic nationalism, I think it points to a neglected aspect of worldwide religious ‘fundamentalism’.

It is not news that self-styled ‘conservative’ religious movements have gained strength in the last 30 years, nor is it news that these are by no means all technically ‘fundamentalistic’ (Cohen 1990; Marty and Appleby 1991; Antoun 2001). They all, however, lie toward the sectarian end of the religious spectrum. That is, they all see themselves as possessed of truth, and they see others as benighted, if not downright evil. The degree varies, of course. The Iranian Mullahs, the Taliban, and the partisans of the Israeli Kach Party sit on the extreme end of the spectrum, as all have used (or have sought to use) state power to purify their respective territories. The ‘conservative’ Christians about whom Jenkins (2002) writes have, by and large, not held state power, and their movements have also been diverse enough to require considerable cross-boundary accommodation. But they are sectarians, nonetheless.

Is religious ‘conservatism’ a backlash against globalization?¹⁵ If by backlash we mean a wish for religious certainty on the part of people uncomfortable with the open-ended freedoms of late-modern life, I think the answer is “no”. Despite various claims that most religious people favor the certainty of ‘the good old ways’ (Finke and Stark 1992; Stark and Finke 2000), it strikes me that ideological certainty is not such movements’ chief

¹⁵

See, *inter alia*, Lechner (1993), Tjissen *et al.* (1995).

appeal. Social certainty seems much more likely to be at stake, here. In a world whose economic order has, in the words of two classic critics,

pitilessly torn asunder the motley ... ties that bound ... man and man, ...has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade (Marx and Engels 1848:44)

the preservation of human solidarity seems a worthwhile undertaking. To the degree that globalization weakens states in the international system, and to the degree that people find themselves under threat because of that weakness—as they especially do in semi-peripheral and peripheral regions—it makes sense for them to turn to ideologies that draw firm boundaries between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. Religious sectarianism is akin to ethnic nationalism in its promise of secure group membership for the chosen. It is also like such nationalism in its claim that people outside its own group do not matter.¹⁶

If my analysis of the cultural logic of third-generation human rights is at all valid, globalization should favor the growth of multiple religions in the core regions of the world economic system. There, economic integration has progressed far enough to allow multiple localisms. These provide their adherents with a sense of identity without threatening either of the social pillars of the global order: individual differentiation and globe-spanning socio-economic networks.

The situation in peripheral and semi-peripheral regions is somewhat different. There, declining state power exposes people to threats against which they construct religious and/or ethnic primordialisms. These do not solve their problems; indeed, they leave people open to demagoguery. But such communalisms bring hope and common purpose in a world that seems organized for others’ benefit.

On both a social and a cultural level, religious ‘fundamentalism’ and ethnic nationalism may well have more in common than we suspect.¹⁷

¹⁶ One might argue that the Bush Administration’s approach to international politics arises from a similarly sectarian sense of threat. Though the events of 11 September, 2001, show that the threat is real, they do not fully account for the extreme us-versus-them response. Perhaps core economies also have their sectarian pressures; Richard Hofstadter’s (1964) classic description of American political sectarians might profitably be read in this light.

¹⁷ Ibn Khaldûn (1377-99) famously used the same set of concepts to describe both religious and ethnic solidarity. This would be a useful avenue for modern sociologists to pursue. See Lechner (1994); Spickard (2001).

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