# Religion and Globalization

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Globalization is often described as a process: steadily progressing over time, pervasively spreading over space, and clearly inevitable in its development. But globalization is also a revolution, one of the most profound revolutions the world has ever known. Indeed, globalization is the first truly world revolution.

All revolutions disrupt the traditions and customs of a people. Indeed, they threaten a people’s very security, safety, and even identity. The world revolution that is globalization in some measure threatens the security of every people on the globe.

### Insecurity, Ideology, and Theology

When peoples have had their security threatened in the past, they have responded, even reacted, and these responses and reactions have had great and even grave consequences for the peoples around them. In the nineteenth century, the insecurities produced by the French and the Industrial Revolutions resulted in the ideologies of nationalism and socialism. In the twentieth century, the insecurities produced by defeats in the First World War resulted in the ideologies of Soviet communism and German National Socialism. Ideological responses to deep insecurities were characteristic of a particular era, however. This was the modern era, when the Enlightenment and secularization made secular world-views and their ideologies seem the natural and logical way to interpret what was happening in the world around oneself.

In other eras— until the eighteenth century in Europe and America and until the twentieth century in much of the rest of the world— the responses to deep insecurities were not ideological, but rather theological or religious. This was the case in early modern Europe, when the commercial revolution and the European expansion into the New World (a still earlier stage on the path to globalization) created insecurities that were addressed by the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counterreformation. But it was also the case in much of the pre-modern world for millennia reaching back to the origins of civilizations. Indeed, the origins of such diverse and enduring religions as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism (the “world religions”) can be interpreted as responses and reactions to the deep insecurities produced by radical social disruptions.

But now, at the end of the twentieth century (and at the beginning of the third millennium), we are not only in the globalization revolution, but also in the post-modern era. What will be the responses of peoples in this new era to the deep insecurities produced by globalization? Is it possible they then may be more theological and religious than ideological and secular?

### Three Perspectives on Religion

There are three paradigms or perspectives from which one may view the role of religion in the globalization process: (1) the modernist, (2) the post-modernist, and (3) the pre- modernist.

The Modernist Perspective. The modernist perspective will seem the most familiar. It is the perspective of most intellectuals and academics.

The modernist perspective has had a particular and peculiar view of secularization. Beginning with the Enlightenment, modernists have entertained the prospect that all secularizations would eventually look alike; the different religions would all end up as the same secular and "rational” philosophy. This prospect seemed natural enough during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the only prominent secularization was that of Christianity. But even at that time, it should have been clear that secularized Protestantism was different from secularized Catholicism, and that there were even differences among the secularized Protestant denominations themselves.

In the simplest version of the modernist view, Enlightenment and secularization progressively spreads from the educated elite to other people as well, from the center of society to the periphery. If any religious communities should remain, they are composed of marginal people — marginal geographically, economically, or ethnically. Religious communities are almost like social fossils.

On occasion, of course, these fossils may come into conflict with each other, or with the enlightened center and the secular groups of a society. In doing so, they bring bizarre and atavistic conflicts into an otherwise modern, secular, and rational world. Leading contemporary examples have been Northern Ireland (1960s-1990s), Lebanon (1970s- 1990s), Yugoslavia (1990s), Sri Lanka (1980s-1990s), and Kashmir (1940s-1990s). Many modernists would also add Evangelical Christians in the United States (1980s-1990s). But, from the modernist perspective, these religious conflicts are peripheral in space, temporary in time, and marginal in importance: In the end, secularization, which is now massively reinforced by globalization, will eliminate these fossils and conflicts.

At a somewhat more sophisticated level, the modernist perspective sees religion revivals as sometimes being a reaction to the Enlightenment and modernization. Entire societies, including their elites and not just their marginal groups, are judged by modernists to be reacting to modernization, as being irrational, unreasoning, "fundamentalist.” Leading contemporary examples have been the Islamic revolution in Iran (1970s-1990s) and the Hindu revival in India (1990s). Here too, however, the religious reaction of peripheral countries is seen as being of secondary, temporary, and marginal importance, even if on a larger scale and for a longer duration than is the case with the religious reaction of marginal groups. Again, the view is that, in the end, secularization — now massively reinforced by globalization — will convert even these fundamentalist societies.

It is important to note, however, that revivalist Islam and even revivalist Hinduism have not been just reactions to the successes of modern, secular ideologies and projects. In reality, they have been responses to their failures— to the failures of Arab nationalism and socialism and of Iranian nationalism and secularism, in the case of revivalist Islam, and to the failures of Indian socialism and secularism, in the case of revivalist Hinduism. It is interesting that, even as the failures of the Arab, Iranian, and Indian secular ideologies were becoming evident in the 1970s or 1980s, none of the Western professional — and secular— experts on these regions predicted the religious revivals.

At a still more sophisticated level, the modernist perspective sees religion as sometimes being a reform of distortions of the Enlightenment and modernization. The now-common version of the modernist perspective sees free markets and liberal democracy to be the culmination of Enlightenment values. Accordingly, it sees both communism and right-wing authoritarianism as distortions of the Enlightenment. From this perspective, it is not surprising that there would arise opposition to communism and to right- wing authoritarianism and that some of this opposition could come from religious communities.

Thus, in the 1980s modernist proponents of the free market and liberal democracy acknowledged and even applauded the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church to the communist regime in Poland. And they could especially applaud the Solidarity movement, which, although largely Roman Catholic in membership and inspiration, was also a labor union. Similarly, in the 1990s they have applauded the opposition of the Tibetan Buddhists to the communist regime in China. In the opposite direction, in the 1980s the modernist proponents of the free market and liberal democracy applauded the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church to the right-wing authoritarian regimes in Latin America and the Philippines. And they could especially applaud the Liberation Theology movement, which, although based upon Roman Catholic theology, also exalted the idea of human liberation. Similarly, in the 1960s they applauded the opposition of the Vietnamese Buddhists to the authoritarian regime in South Vietnam.

All of these religious organizations and movements have been praised as useful corrections to distorted modernization. But from the modernist perspective, the prospect and ideal is that they too will disappear after they have performed their proper — and temporary— role. Indeed, now that Soviet communism and Latin-American right-wing authoritarianism have disappeared, most modernists wish that the Roman Catholic Church, indeed all churches, would disappear too.

It is important to note, however, what religious opposition movements have not been praised by modernists. In communist countries, including China and Vietnam, these have been Evangelical Christians (“Christian fundamentalists”). In right-wing authoritarian countries, such as the Shah’s Iran and Egypt, these have been revivalist Moslems (“Islamic fundamentalists”). In other words, for modernists, the ultimate enemy is religious fundamentalism.

It is again important to note, however, that most of these religious opposition movements have been reactions to the failures of modern, secular ideologies and projects. These failures have been particularly spectacular in the cases of Soviet communism and Latin-American right-wing authoritarianism. But again none of the Western professional and secular experts on these regimes predicted the strength of the religious opposition.

The Post-Modernist Perspective. The post-Enlightenment, post-modernist perspective joins with the Enlightenment, modernist one in rejecting traditional, pre-modern religions. But this perspective also rejects the Enlightenment, modernist values of rationalism, empiricism, and science, along with the Enlightenment, modernist structures of capitalism, bureaucracy, and even liberalism. The core value of post-modernism is expressive individualism.

The post-modernist perspective can include “spiritual experiences,” but only those without religious (in the original sense of “binding”) constraints. The New Age movement can be interpreted as the ideal-typical post-modernist spiritual expression. Post-modernists are also drawn to superficial, Americanized versions of certain Eastern religions, especially “lite” Buddhism and Hinduism. They are also drawn to an Americanized version of nature worship, a sort of neo-paganism.

For the most part, however, post-modernism is largely hyper- secularism, and it joins modernism in predicting, and eagerly anticipating, the disappearance of traditional religions. Globalization, by breaking up and dissolving every traditional, local, and national structure, will bring about the universal triumph of expressive individualism.

The Pre-Modernist Perspective. There is an alternative perspective, one which is post-modern in its occurrence but which is pre-modern in its sensibility. It is best represented and articulated by the Roman Catholic Church, especially by Pope John Paul II. The Pope’s understanding obviously has drawn from his experiences with Poland, but it encompasses events in other countries as well.

From this pre-modernist perspective, many of the great modern, secular ideologies had manifestly failed by the 1970s-1980s. This was true of Soviet communism, Arab nationalism and socialism, and the nationalism and modernization project of the Shah’s Iran. All of these were ideologies, even idolatries, of the state.

When the ideology’s failure became manifest, however, the really effective opposition to it and to the state that it exalted did not develop among the secular sections of society, such as intellectuals, professionals, and managers. Rather, the only effective opposition movement developed among religious believers. It was only in the organized religious communities that there could be found large numbers of people willing to sacrifice their individual security for the greater movement. It was their religious faith and the religious community that supported it that gave these believers the commitment and the courage to persist in their opposition.

Even where secularization has occurred, the result has not been a homogeneous, or commonly shared, secular philosophy but rather a variety of different secularizations. Each religion has secularized in its own distinctive way, which has resulted in its own distinctive secular outcome. This suggests that even if globalization brings about more secularization, it will not soon bring about one common, global worldview.

### The U.S. As the Leading Power in Globalization and Secularization

In the past two decades, secularization has been accelerated and accentuated by globalization. This process has been led by the United States. Now “the sole superpower,” “the high- technology economy,” and “the universal nation,” the United States has vigorously and consistently supported the revolution of globalization. It has done so by systematically pressing to remove any national barriers to the free movement of capital, goods, and services. It has done so through the great international, now global, financial institutions, especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). And it has done so because it has the political, economic, and military power to get its way. The triumphalist United States, which has reached the heights of being the sole superpower at the culmination of the "American Century” and at the end of the modern era, now seeks to lead the world into the globalized economy and the post-modern era.

The principle sources of resistance to globalization and to the grand project of the United States have become several of the great religions. Especially strong in their resistance have been revivalist Islam and a developing neo- Confucianism, known for promoting “Asian values.” Also resistant have been revivalist Hinduism and Eastern Orthodoxy. The great religions correctly see the globalization led by the United States to be closely connected with secularization and therefore to be a threat to themselves.

### The Protestant Rejection of Hierarchy and Community

The American role in international affairs has been, and continues to be, shaped by the Protestant origins of the United States. But the Protestantism that has shaped American foreign policy over two centuries has not been the original Protestant (especially Reformed) religion, but a series of successive, secularizing departures from it on a down-sliding scale. I will refer to this descending scale as the Protestant declension. We are now at the end point of this declension, and the Protestantism that shapes American’s global role today is a peculiar heresy of the original religion. It is not the Protestant Reformation but what might be called the Protestant Deformation. In the 1990s, with the United States left as the sole superpower, this Protestant Deformation is at its greatest, now global, influence. But because it is such a peculiar religion, and indeed is correctly seen as a fundamental and fatal threat by all the other religions, its pervasive sway is generating intense resistance and international conflict.

All religions are unique, but Protestantism is more unique than all the others. No other religion is so critical of hierarchy and community, or of the traditions and customs that go with them. Indeed, most other religions are based upon both hierarchy and community (in addition to Roman Catholicism, also Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, and even, to a degree, Buddhism). At its doctrinal base, however, Protestantism is anti-hierarchy and anti-community.

The removal of hierarchy and community, traditions and customs — of any earthly intermediaries between the individual and God— strips away, at least for the most important purposes, any local, parochial, cultural, or national characteristics of the believer. In principle, grace, faith, and salvation can be received by anyone in the world; they are truly universal or catholic, in the original sense of the latter term. The Protestant reformers saw the vast variety of cultures and nations through a universal perspective, one that was even more universal than that of the Roman Catholic Church.

### The Protestant Spread into Secular Life: The American Creed

In the three centuries after the Reformation, this Protestant rejection of hierarchy and community in regard to salvation spread to their rejection in regard to other domains of life as well. Some Protestant churches, particularly Reformed ones, rejected hierarchy and community in regard to church governance and local traditions. This was especially the case in the new United States, where the conjunction of the open frontier and the disestablishment of state churches enabled the flourishing of new unstructured and unconstraining denominations.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Protestant rejection of hierarchy and community had spread to important arenas of temporal or secular life. Again, this was especially the case in the new United States. In the economic arena, the elimination of hierarchy (monopoly or oligopoly) and community (guilds or trade restrictions) meant the establishment of the free market. In the political arena, the elimination of hierarchy (monarchy or aristocracy) and community (traditions and customs) meant the establishment of liberal democracy.

The Protestant Reformation was giving birth to what by the early twentieth century would become the American Creed. The fundamental elements of that secular creed were free markets and equal opportunity, free elections and liberal democracy, and constitutionalism and the rule of law.

The American Creed definitely did not include as elements hierarchy, community, tradition, and custom. Although the American Creed was not itself Protestant, it was clearly the product of a Protestant culture and was a sort of secularized version of Protestantism.

### The Culmination of Secularized Protestantism: Universal Human Rights

The final stage in the Protestant declension has been reached only in the last generation. In the 1970s, American political and intellectual elites began to promote the notion of universal human rights as a fundamental goal of American foreign policy. The American Creed was replaced by the universal conception of human rights or, more accurately, the elements of the American Creed were carried to a logical conclusion and to a universal extent.

In this new ideology, human rights are thus seen as the rights of individuals. The individual’s rights are independent of any hierarchy or community, traditions or customs, in which that individual might be situated. This means that human rights are applicable to any individual, anywhere in the world, i.e., they are universal, and not merely communal or national. There is thus a close logical connection between the rights of the individual and the universality of those rights. Individual rights are universal rights, and universal rights are individual rights.

Numerous social analysts have noted that the United States has become in the past two decades a new kind of political society, what has been called “the republic of choice". It is characterized by the “rights revolution” in law, “freedom of choice” in politics, “consumer sovereignty” in economics, "question authority” in attitudes, and “expressive individualism” in ideology. In regard to spiritual life, one manifestation of this new mentality is “New Age."

The ideology of expressive individualism thus reaches into all aspects of society; it is a total philosophy. The result appears to be totally opposite from the totalitarianism of the state, but it is a sort of totalitarianism of the self. Both totalitarianisms are relentless in breaking down intermediate bodies and mediating institutions that stand between the individual and the highest powers or the widest forces. With the totalitarianism of the state, the highest powers are the authorities of the nation state; with the totalitarianism of the self, the widest forces are the agencies of the global economy.

Expressive individualism — with its contempt for and protest against all hierarchies, communities, traditions, and customs — represents the logical conclusion and the ultimate extreme of the secularization of the Protestant religion. The Holy Trinity of original Protestantism, the Supreme Being of later Unitarianism, and the American nation of the American Creed have all been dethroned and replaced by the imperial self. The long declension of the Protestant Reformation has reached its end point in the Protestant Deformation. The Protestant Deformation is a Protestantism without God, a reformation against all forms. The foreign policy of the republic of choice, of the Protestant deformation, is universal human rights.

As has been discussed by Samuel Huntington, this universalist and individualist project of the United States has generated resentment and resistance in societies whose religious traditions are different from the Christianity of the West. Huntington has called this “the clash of civilizations,"— a struggle between “the West and the rest” (1996, chapter 8). There has been almost no resistance in those nations with a Protestant tradition. There has been some resistance in those with a Roman Catholic tradition. The greatest resistance has come from those countries with an Islamic or a Confucian tradition.

We can not now know the outcome of this “clash of civilizations,” this struggle between the West and the rest, between the Protestant deformation and the skeins of the other great religions. But the ultimate answer may lie in the character of the Protestant deformation itself.

The Protestant Reformation was a prime movement in the making of the modern era. Almost five hundred years later, the Protestant deformation is a prime movement in the making of the post-modern era. Through its rejections, Reformed Protestantism was the most unique of all religions. Today the Protestant deformation seeks the end of all religions, or rather it seeks to replace the worship of God with the expression of the self.

The Protestant Reformation brought into being early nation states, such as the Netherlands and Britain, which became leading great powers of the modern era. The most Reformed Protestant of all nations was the United States, and it became the greatest of all great powers as well. Much of the power of the United States can be traced to the energy, efficacy, and organization that was a legacy of its Reformed Protestantism. However, the Protestant deformation, because of its universalist and individualist creed, seeks the end of all nation states, including any American one, and to replace loyalty to America with gratification of oneself. It relentlessly undermines the authority of the United States, the superpower which promotes that creed throughout the world.

In his The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Edward Gibbon once wrote that the Roman Empire spread the Christian religion throughout the ancient world, but that the Christian religion then undermined the Roman Empire. In our own time, it seems, the American empire is spreading the Protestant deformation throughout the modern world, but the Protestant deformation is beginning to undermine the American empire itself.

For more on this subject, see Faith and Statecraft, a special issue of Orbis, Spring 1998.

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