

Religion, Globalization and Visibility: Some Problems of Definition

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Who today can ignore the dramatic ways that religion has resurfaced as a theme of public discussion, within and across so many discrete nation-state contexts? Islamic outreach movements, Pentecostal megachurches, international blockbuster movies like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, Roman Catholic World Youth Days, Hindu nationalist politics, and New Age meditation retreats are only some examples of the religious dimensions of globalization, and global dimensions of religion, that occupy the attention of academics, journalists, policy-makers, and other interested parties. Yet much of what is said about such phenomena is founded on misleading, if not entirely specious, assumptions about the "place" of religion in the contemporary world order — at least in so far as observations tend to be couched in the language of "religious revival," "the return to religion," or even that dreaded phrase, the "clash of civilizations." What is the problem with this vocabulary? And is there a better way to talk about religion and globalization?

Before trying to answer these questions, we should first concede that, just as we do not really know what the word globalization means, so too we do not possess a definition of religion that refers to a set of objects on which we can agree in advance. It is important to guard here against the nominalist error of assuming the universal existence of religion as an autonomous realm of power and knowledge, somehow separated out from other arenas and dimensions of social life, such as science, politics, or economic exchange. In particular we cannot accept the idea (however prevalent and seemingly self-evident) that religion refers strictly to matters of individual belief, or even to the institutional organization of groups of people united by shared beliefs, since that definition is embedded in a larger set of narratives that originate in a particular — not a universal — cultural, historical, and geopolitical context. Religion is often thought of on terms that have been defined by the discipline of comparative religions, framed by Orientalist scholarly canons of philology and archaeology. Yet this academic tradition has important roots in the history of the Christian Inquisition and in the work of missionaries, and related legacies of competition and exchange between Christian and non-Christian representatives both within and beyond the borders of Europe, including the Church's encounter with witches, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and the many varieties of so-called "primitive" religion, found throughout the world. It was out of this dialogic arena that universal definitions of religion were able to emerge: the idea that in every society there existed a phenomenon called "religion," the essential features of which could then be compared in terms of localized forms of belief, practice, and institutional organization. Such efforts at constructing equivalencies had as their consequence that things hitherto possessing no referent in their native idiom could now be understood within the classificatory system of comparative religions.

This is not the place to review the ways such comparisons have accorded privilege to Christianity as a normative principle, and in particular have advanced a definition of religion on the model of post-Reformation Protestant ideals of voluntary association and private belief. At their worst, such comparative gestures have done little more than confer legitimacy on what Jacques Derrida, in a related context, provocatively named the power of *mondialatinisation* (globalatinization): the

metaphysical and political promotion of ostensibly universal (but in practice unavoidably particularist and territorializing) ways of seeing and knowing the world inscribed by the discourses of Roman imperialism and Christian brotherhood. In this sense, the history of comparative religions can be tied to the historical constitution of the West as "father" of the family of nations, and self-appointed guardian of "the civilized world." For the purposes of this discussion, suffice it to say that it is not tenable — even for the most well-intentioned comparativist — to render commensurable the disparate forms of knowledge, practice, performance, and discourse, ways of organizing space and time, structures of authority, and patterns of economic and symbolic exchange, as they are found in different places around the world, and to succeed in making all these things fit into a single framework called *religion*.

But even if we presuppose (at least for heuristic purposes) the existence of communities, institutions, and movements that can be called "religious," we have further definitional problems associated with the pronounced public visibility of religion on the contemporary world stage. In particular, we need to flag here the highly problematic term "secularization," which has long served as a master narrative, an interpretive lens, and a normative ideal against which forms of religious publicity, their visibility, and their political relevance in the modern world are measured. Theories of secularization have — often silently — worked to organize the dominant historical narratives about the rise of modern nationalism, and its institutions, governmentalities, disciplinary techniques, political subjectivities, and resources for imagining community. The Westphalian cartography of a world divided into autarchic nation-states depends upon an image of the public life of the nation marked by the retreat of "traditional" (religiously inscribed) forms of power and authority, and with this, a decline in belief, a slackening of faith, and a generalized devolution of the sacred into the private sphere of personal choice. Secularism has not only been inscribed in national historiography, but also in the prescriptions of modernization theorists, and others who seek to align different societies along a single, teleological trajectory leading to a future, secular world. These are the terms on which social formations identified with religious modes of thought and practice continue to be located on the far side of modernity.

Encased within the linguistic imaginary of secularism, accounts of modernity have tended to give credence to a quite specious division between, on the one hand, things that are ostensibly "religious" in nature, and on the other, the range of "properly political" activities and concerns that fall within the remit of territorial nation-states. This division not only understates the sacred foundations of modern nationalism and state authority (as political theologians have long insisted), it also distorts our vision of the most recent period of global religious restructuring, by couching things in the language of "religious revival" or the "return to religion." Indeed, by treating contemporary religious movements as signs of a new, worldwide upsurge of anti-modernism, one risks producing what, following Arjun Appadurai, we might call "germ theories" of social life, according to which illiberal, implacable, or even violence-prone populations, marked by their religious commitments, are regarded as an invading force, sapping the lifeblood of its national host, and upsetting the procedures and norms of the modern national imaginary, including the ideals of deliberative democracy, liberty of the person, or freedom of speech (an issue to which I shall return below). In all these ways, religion is confirmed as a return of the repressed, or to make use of Jürgen Habermas's famous term, as the sign of a "refeudalization" of modern public spheres.

Such descriptions are particularly unhelpful for any serious study of contemporary forms and modalities of religious discourse, conduct and imagined community in relation to globalizing forces and trends. For one thing, as even a casual observer will likely note, patterns of adherence to religious community have existed on a transnational scale for centuries. Religious communities might even be thought of as prototypical forms of what we often refer to today as "global society." They are

among the oldest forms of association interconnecting local cultures around the world. Consider the centuries-old history of Christian missionaries, Muslim Sufi brothers, and Buddhist monks (among others), as they moved across vast territories, following along trade routes or in the footsteps of conquering armies, and established their presence in new places as providers of welfare and education, and drawing new populations into their orbit through religious conversion. Religious communities have seen world empires and kingdoms come and go; they have been around much longer than most nations; and there is no reason to assume that they will not outlive the current world order defined by the distribution of sovereign states and the family of nations. In this sense, the religious field constitutes a map of the world which hardly conforms with the geography of nation-states, dividing the globe instead according to its own frontiers — such as the world of Christendom or the Islamic world — and with its own capitals, such as Jerusalem, Vatican City, Wittenberg, Mecca, Najaf, Varanasi, Amritsar, Lhasa, or Ile-Ife.

All the same, it is undeniable that the religious field has undergone a dramatic restructuring over the course of the past one hundred and fifty years — a process that has gained considerable momentum since the late 1970s. However hesitant we might be to define "religion," and however much we find ourselves entangled in the prejudicial language of secularism, we still require some sort of analytical framework that can account for these recent changes. Throughout the world, we can note significant patterns of reorganization of institutional structures of religious life, and we would be naive to suppose that the consolidation of the world system of modern nation-states has had little to do with such shifts. But we might also note how religion has been transfigured by the global profusion of new techniques for self-cultivation, increasingly being conducted outside the "customary" institutional sites of religious practice, and beyond the reach of "traditional" religious authorities. This has brought to the fore new questions about religion and the self, and the relation of religious subjectivity to matters of bodily health, security, pleasure, or mastery of the senses. We can further note the proliferation of recent conflicts carried out "in the name of religion," from the intimate micro-politics of religious prescriptions for personal conduct (such as dress codes), to the globally resonant activities of crusading states, holy warriors, and other international agents.

But most importantly, I suggest, we can note the growing, and increasingly globalized *public visibility* of religious actors, religious actions, and religious modes of discourse. This expanding visibility is centrally, deeply, and inextricably tied to the range of technological, symbolic, and economic shifts that have given rise to the modern global media landscape. As we know well, over the course of the past century, and especially over the course of the past thirty years, new institutions and technologies of communication have radically altered the global mediascape, engendering new possibilities for both long-distance and ever-more intimate forms of talk, travel, broadcast, narrowcast, surveillance, visualization, and archivization, in all these ways radically altering the spatio-temporal contexts of social life, of knowledge and practice, and of cultural identity and difference. It should therefore hardly surprise us that this geography of economic flows, symbolic exchanges and technological materialities has also radically altered the terms of religious identity, thought, and practice, and has been doing so on a worldwide scale.

Religious ideas and symbols have of course always been mediated. But in increasingly intimate ways, mediated performances and media products are now preceding, and predetermining, all varieties of religious experience. Through a dizzying array of genres, aesthetic forms, technologies, and performative repertoires — such as instruction manuals, pop-psychology books, Internet blogs, cartoons, trading cards, rap music, bumper stickers, audio-cassettes, video games, or televised and cinematic versions of religious epics and mythologicals — media have extended the religious field beyond the customary confines of institutional loyalty, face-to-face interaction, or the localized

boundaries of "ritual time." Ever-accelerating processes of mediatization have led to an ever-greater blurring of the distinctions between, for example, pilgrimage and tourism, between religious ritual and news event, between religious festival and entertainment, or between the powers attributed to icons and artistic and scientific images (and thereby, the organization of visualizing practices within the institutional spaces of temples, museums, and laboratories). In these ways, the "place" of religion in modern life has undergone a significant shift, not only at the level of practice among actually existing institutions and communities of faith, but also at the level of broader, cultural constructions infused by religious imagery and figures of discourse, including notions of transnational belonging and multicultural citizenship, tolerance and intolerance, hospitality and war, or faith and credit, to say nothing of the "religious" experiences associated with the finitude of the human body, and the uncanny, magical, and even sacred powers attributed to the advanced technologies that are reshaping the world today.

Rather than attempting (quite futilely) to produce an exhaustive review and typology of such processes and trends, I would like to consider a single example which, I think, is particularly illustrative of the ways questions of religion and globalization are rendered visible in the modern global mediascape. My example will be familiar to many readers, since a great deal has already been written about the publication, and re-publication, of twelve cartoons depicting, among other things, the Prophet Muhammad. These cartoons originally appeared on 30 September 2005, in the Danish newspaper, the *Jyllands-Posten*, and they were subsequently reproduced in newspapers in the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, Germany, and Canada, among other places, and they also have appeared on dozens of websites, establishing the transnational, if not global, resonance of the "Danish cartoon affair," as it has come to be known. From their initial appearance to their international circulation, these images pitted champions of "free speech" (as enshrined in the genre of the political cartoon) — and in particular, defenders of "freedom from religious authority" — against a range of audiences and actors for whom the images were insulting, injurious, and (for at least some) a violation of religious taboo. And, most remarkably, this conflict culminated in a series of dramatic conflagrations staged on city streets and within the circuits of global media.

The Danish cartoon affair has been explained in various ways, not least by noting how it builds upon a much longer history of interdependency, exchange, competition, conquest, and occupation that for centuries have linked a putatively Christian Europe with a putatively Muslim Middle East. Many have also noted how this case illustrates the ways patterns of migration, settlement, labour, inter-generational tension, racism, and social exclusion have defined the specific experiences of recent generations of Muslim-minority communities living in the West, and at the same time, how the local dynamics of intercultural relations between Danish Muslims and their neighbours get linked up with social movements located in far-away Muslim-majority countries, such as Pakistan, Iran, or Lebanon. In these latter cases, once they entered the public realm, the Danish cartoons were more or less seamlessly integrated within patterns of political protest that have long defined the position of Islamic movements within larger geopolitical dynamics of local state authoritarianism, American military hegemony, and the gross inequities of the international petrodollar economy.

This is all familiar enough. I only wish to highlight two dimensions of this story which I consider to be particularly relevant for my review of keywords for the study of religion and globalization. The first has to do with the accelerating pace of telecommunications technologies and the forms of visibility they enable. Indeed, as I have already suggested, the Danish cartoon affair is relevant before anything else as a public spectacle, produced not simply by its principal actors, but also through the global circulation of printed and electronic texts, the reporting of rumours, and the cascading flow of images (including the images of protestors against images). Taken together, these circuits of perception and

visibility invite us to rethink the politics of so-called "religious revival" in our current global moment. Among other things, they offer a vantage point for situating the most recent phases of cultural and political revolution often referred to as "the Islamic Awakening." Through the lens of modern media, their capacity to construct detailed visual representations of the *umma* (the world community of Muslims), and to link distant local contexts through the circulation of such images, the Islamic Awakening cannot be reduced to simplistic accounts of reactionary, anti-modern reflex. On the contrary, within this global mediascape, it is impossible to separate the so-called Islamic radicals, protesting on the streets of Damascus, Beirut, Tehran, Islamabad, London, and other cities, from the systems of circulation that render such protests visible, and that enable the participation of a diverse and refracted global audience. Protestors who seek to challenge what they perceive as the inequities of a world system that marginalizes Islam, and Western journalists and public intellectuals who claim to act in defence of a liberal civil order under threat from religious fundamentalism, are both of a piece with the mediatic construction of the global as a unitary field of visibility: a proscenium upon which political conflict is choreographed, performed, and made available for global consumption.

My second observation is that the Danish cartoon affair also touches on the very question of visibility and its status at the borderlands dividing "religious" and "secular" systems of legitimacy in the modern world. It has often been stated that Muslims around the world have taken offense at the publication of the cartoons because they violate a fundamental prohibition within Islam against the visual representation of the Prophet. There is much that could be said here about the specific religious texts upon which such claims have been founded, and the traditions of interpretation and accommodation with what in any event should be regarded as a much-exaggerated principle of Islamic aniconism (absence of holy images). Traditional Islamic proscriptions against *shirk* (idolatry) were never automatically translated into prohibitions against pictorial art, as evident from the numerous instances, both historical and contemporary, of strategies to legitimate the representation of the Prophet in Islamic art (such as through the depiction of his face as a featureless void emanating light). By the same token, we should exercise caution here in assuming that Muslims find the Danish cartoons "blasphemous," since it is at best indiscriminate to try to substitute the term *blasphemy* for terms indigenous to Islamic discourse such as *kufr* (unbelief) or *ilhadd* (heresy). It would be more appropriate, perhaps, to note instead the ways that blasphemy continues to exist (however dimly recognized) as a legal norm within numerous Western societies. Indeed, despite their self-proclaimed secularism, several countries in Europe still retain blasphemy laws within their penal codes, including Denmark itself, as well as Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Spain. Moreover, such laws — even if only rarely exercised — are organized around the normativity of Christian dogma, and it is notable that no Muslim group living in the West has ever succeeded in provoking their enactment.

But lastly, we might also note how the so-called secular world also depends on its own system of forbidden images. Consider, for instance, the complex taboos surrounding images of the bodies of dead soldiers, of children, or of tortured bodies, as consecrated in the ethos of professional journalist practice, and also enshrined in national, and even international law (such as in the case of the Geneva Code's proscription against the circulation of images of prisoners of war). Rather than assuming as self-evident that it is morally opprobrious to produce and display such images (and that, by contrast, no reasonable person would take offense at a mere cartoon), we might wish to explore the origins of the Western secular aversion of images of the humiliated and suffering body. For one thing, it is interesting to note how, for many religious actors — including Catholics and *shia* Muslims, among others — images of suffering bodies are not at all offensive, but on the contrary serve as legitimate objects of adoration and imitation. This suggests, perhaps, that the Danish cartoon controversy has not simply revolved around a contest between secular-liberal proponents of free

speech and intolerant zealots determined to overturn such rights. We might be better served by describing this conflict in terms of two divergent, and colliding, economies of visibility, each organized by distinct notions about what constitutes a forbidden image, and each resting on distinct ideas about the relationship of pain, truth, and their commensurability. And just maybe, such an investigation would also contribute to the construction of a more reflexive approach to the study of religion and why it matters in our current global age.

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