



Globalization: Reconstructing Religious Identities for Development

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Abstract

In an era of nearly unrestricted information flow across territorial borders via technology, long held conservative religious values on the Islamic and Christian divides are being reshaped if not toned down. The point of convergence in shared humanity is therefore emerging despite religious inclinations. Men and women can share space in a bus in traditional Islamic societies, for example in Kenya and Nigeria. Such societies are increasingly recognizing the obvious fact of diversity, but differences should be respected and a critical platform for inclusion in the socio-economic and political processes by these divides is necessary and desirable. Freedom of expression in speech and dress and association is commonly shared on social media platforms and elsewhere without attracting the usual extreme intolerance from conservatives. Spaces for frequency of interaction have increased due to the flow of information and services. As a result, the capacity for tolerance by Muslims and Christians has been expanded in an era of steep competition that must bring many together for access to available space and resources. Religious and political leaders therefore need to leverage on opportunities provided by the forces of globalization to strengthen cooperation between Islam and Christianity for a more peaceful and harmonious world. It is recommended that a conception of religious identity negotiation and reconstruction necessary for development must be sensitive to social contexts, structural factors and power – relations.

Keywords: globalization, tolerance, shared humanity, development, religious identity

Introduction

The phenomenon of globalization has gained currency in contemporary scholarship and has also drawn the attention of national leaders, diplomats, and opinion leaders. This is because of its multidimensionality and its varied implications on individuals, cultures and nations. With the instrumentality of communication and transportation, technology and the role played by the media, globalization has largely contributed to the *deterritorialization* and the blurring of geographical spaces and boundaries.

This is why the world is now referred to by many as a global village where people, cultures and identities interact regularly. It is thus obvious that religion and indeed religious identities have not been vitiated by these changes and the resultant effects brought about by the current wave of globalization.

We state here very quickly that one noticeable interface of globalization with religion has been the fact of its apparent revival and resurgence and the obvious non-relegation to a few countries where their roots originally began. We also note that globalization has not just made religions more conscious of themselves as being “world religions” reinforcing their respective specific identities, but also seeking to appreciate the dynamics of the other religions in an ever-changing world.

This paper seeks to examine the role globalization has played in reconstructing and promoting religious identities around the world and utilizing information and technology in the process of strengthening cooperation especially between the two major religions, Christianity and Islam, in order to entrench tolerance and shared humanity.

Conceptual Issues

(i) Globalization

Globalization has become quite pervasive in the contemporary age. It has become very popular in its economic, political and socio-cultural dimensions. A growing aspect of the globalization problematic is the breaking down of national economic barriers, the international spread of trade, financial and production activities and the activities of transnational corporations and international financial institutions in these processes (Khor 2000). There is a historical context in which this understanding of globalization process is cast namely that the advanced countries of today had engaged developing societies of Africa and Asia over the past five centuries through trade and production activities especially during the colonial period. Economic globalization has accelerated through advancement in technological developments. The liberation of national economies involves breaking down national barriers to economic activities, leading to greater openness and integration of countries in the world markets.

National policies and policy making mechanisms have also been affected by the growing wave of globalization. This is in the areas of economic, social, cultural and technological life of the nations. Thus, the jurisdiction of states and people has come under the influence of international agencies and processes or of big private corporations and economic /financial actors.

This has greatly led to erosion of national sovereignties with attendant consequences especially for developing nations. The breaking down of national boundaries has also led to and is being led

by the free flow of communication and information technology. In this regard, cultures and beliefs have been easily transported across geographical boundaries.

Historically, globalization is the process that started in a small way in the 19th century, and Toyo (2000) records that globalization began when capital moved from Europe to open up new areas in America and Australia, mostly in the building of rail roads, systems and agriculture that would be central to the expansion of capitalism.

In its contemporary form, globalization is driven by variety of forces. These Banjo (2000) argue are flow of financial and economic resources with services and, to a large extent, labor, technology, transport, communications and information technology; the spread of cultures from one corner of the world to the other, and global diffusion of religious ideas as well as ideologies. It can be viewed as an interdependent process associated with peace and progress increasingly with democracy. People, firms, and markets matter the most, and states matter less because it is the economy that drives the states to make decisions and this is fueled by the international division of labor. As the world becomes more interdependent on one another, decisions are made as a collective whole in all fields of human endeavor, and not only by the independent political state.

(ii) Religion and Religious Identity

Religious identity is salient to people at least some of the time and to anybody who belongs to a religion. Indeed, many practices, such as Muslims praying five times a day, Catholics praying the Rosary according to a scheduled time of the day and of the week, and the Jewish observance of the Sabbath regularly make religious identity salient (Benjamin, et al., 2016). It is plausible to note that religion and identity are positively correlated. While religion addresses the issues of beliefs, modus operandi and vivendi, and spiritual teachings which might have an impact on the development of an individual's self-conceptualization, the special role of religion and spirituality in the development of identity cannot be ignored as it deepens our insights into the formation of identity.

Hammond (1988) notes that religion is a derivative of the social circumstances that create the enabling environment for involuntary acceptance of a way of life, especially as a consequence of group membership. For instance, people are made to manifest their sense of unity and belonging as a result of group membership through participation in rituals, ceremonies, belief systems or orientations and behavior towards symbols and objects perceived to be sacred and treated with a sense of awe and wonder. It has been acknowledged that there exists a correlation between religion and ethnicity, and this correlation holds whether one perceives ethnicity subjectively or even when one captures ethnicity using proxies of accumulation or assimilation of an individual into a group. For example, participation or membership in a religion that is characteristic of one's ethnic group is mostly found to be highly correlated with the degree of one's ethnic identity as it is shown with the association of northern Nigeria with Islam and the south with Christianity. The role of religion in different societies and epoch vary. Religion might be a powerful force in one society, less powerful in another, and in some societies, it might have negligible influence. The differential role of religion in different societies and epochs arguably does not eliminate in its entirety, the influence of religion on identity development and evolution over time.

There is no generally acceptable definition of religion due to the nature of the discipline –

which includes diversity of religions, diversity of religious experiences and origins, etc. Religion is derived from the Latin word *religare* meaning “to bind back” or “to rebind”.

Griffiths (2000) notes that etymologically, religion entails a process of reconnecting by worship a missing or broken intimacy between worshippers and the Supreme Being. Pecorino (2000) also states that a definition of religion should include involvement of the totality of life, openness to all kinds of people, dealing with issues in widely different activities, notions and beliefs practiced in both private and social milieus and which have repercussions perceived to be either harmful or beneficial to persons and groups.

Oppong (2013) sees religion as a feeling of man’s absolute dependence encouraged by man’s sense of inadequate protection, provision, sustenance and supremacy thus invoking a sense of dependence on a Supreme Being believed to be all powerful and all knowing. This arises from man’s recognition of his limitations such as inability to explain some of the mysteries of the world, like the origin of man, the origin and even cause of death, life after death, and so on. Man, therefore yearns for a Being that he believes has all the answers and solutions to these complexities and often unanswered puzzles about life.

It can therefore be discerned from the above that man’s acknowledgement of religion and belief in the existence of deity leads to infantile neurosis and irrational actions that leave him exploited. In view of the above definitions, religion appears to deal with the inexplicable relationship between man and the divine, mundane being and transcendental Being.

Proponents of religion sees religion as a force for good and order in the society. From this standpoint, religion plays an important role in terms of helping to ensure harmonious co-existence of human beings. On the other hand, opponents, such as Marx (1985), see religion as a force for evil. It is more of an instrument constructed and invented to oppress the downtrodden and poor masses. According to him, the state promotes inverted belief in religion just to pacify the exploited and oppressed class and consolidate the power of the ruling class in the society. In summary, religion seems to be instrumental in the formation of identity.

(iii) The Concept of Development

The general notion of development entails progress both to an individual and a society. It is a multidimensional process, that embraces the economic, political and social-cultural elements of the society. There is a dimension of development that has moved away from a paternalistic, charity based approach to progress of giving assistance to underdeveloped countries from the developed North. There is a rejection of the vertical conception of development and a proposal for a horizontal model based on what is referred to as shared human responsibility. This states that development is a shared human responsibility and a shared human possibility (Concord Dare Forum, p. 2011).

It is an initiative for the promotion of values that allow people to engage in respectful and open dialogue with others on equal footing, seeking to identify shared agendas for mutual benefits. The focus is on active global citizenship stressing social justice and human development, employing some human right based approach. There is citizenship awareness and critical understanding of the interdependent world and of their own role, responsibilities and lifestyles in relation to a globalized society and to support their active engagement in local and global attempts

to eradicate poverty, and promote justice, human rights and sustainable ways of living.

Sen (1999) opines that the concept of development should be viewed as an integrated process of the expansion of substantive freedoms such as freedom from poverty, famine, malnutrition, premature mortality and access to health. All freedoms are strongly interconnected, and they reinforce each other.

Agaba and George-Genyi (2013) therefore note that there is no single definition or even conceptualization of development, however, there are certain commonalities associated with the concept such as freedoms and the attempts at poverty reduction, increase in economic welfare, improved health and education, and increased political and social freedoms. In all of these, the emphasis is on the wellbeing of the individual in the society and not just improvement in institutions.

Globalization and Religious Identities

The advanced countries of today had engaged developing societies of Africa and Asia over the past five centuries through trade and production activities especially during the colonial period. Economic globalization has accelerated through advancements in technological developments. The liberalization of national economies involves breaking down national barriers to economic activities, leading to greater openness and integration of countries in the world markets.

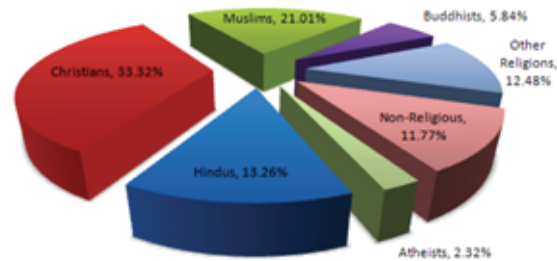
Indeed, Azzouzi (2013) notes that religion and globalization have engaged in a persistently flexible relationship in which the former relies on the latter for its thriving and flourishing while at the same time challenges its hybridizing effects.

Religion is not immune from changes brought about by globalization. This has resulted apparently in making the world a small village where people, cultures and identities come in a daily face to face contact with each other. Religions still have their respective home in specific territorial spaces where they originally appeared and where their respective shrines exist, their inner nature and general purpose to be embraced and practiced by people all over the world prompt them to spread throughout all the geographical spaces of the world. The technologies of globalization have thus come in handy for religions to make good use of. Thus, geographical frontiers have become blurred.

Sahlberg (2004) notes that globalization has two macro-level paradoxical effects on our daily lives. First, it simultaneously integrates and segregates. It integrates world cultures through the global communication networks and less restricted movement of individuals. At the same time, it creates a tension between those who are benefiting more and those who may be marginalized by the market values and consumer cultures that are typical to many societies especially in the areas that suffer from poverty or slower development.

The faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz has put the population of world religions graphically. Thus: Christianity, 33.32%, Islam, 21.01%, Hinduism, 13.26%, Buddhism, 5.84%, other religions, 12.48%, non-religious, 11.77% and Atheists, 2.32%.

THE DIVISION OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS



Historically, religion has been influenced by the process and course of globalization. Evolving trade routes led to the colonization of Asia, Africa, Central and South America right from the 16th century when the Portuguese traders and merchants set foot on the African soil. They were followed by the religious crusaders and thus religion became an integral part of colonization and later on globalization. It has thus become a major feature in some historical conflicts and the most recent wave of modern terrorism.

In contemporary times, religion is no longer just a set of beliefs that people arrive at by reflection, but a symbolic system which carries out identity and marks out social/ethnic and other boundaries. Indeed, religion provides powerful mechanisms for psychological and social processes and offers distinctive world views and identity (Ysseldyk, R. et al., 2010). Understood in this context, it is a concern for both the planet and humanity requiring changes and efforts from all actors by promoting values that allow people to engage in respectful and open dialogue with others on equal footing, seeking to identify shared agendas for mutual benefits, focusing on active global citizenship wish or emphasis on social justice, globalization and human development, and employing a human right based approach to education and positive campaigns.

As stated earlier, globalization has played a tremendous role in providing a context for the current considerable revival and resurgence of religion. Today most religions operate outside of their traditional milieu and are embraced in such new areas. Indeed, they have spread and scattered on a global scale and as Scholte (2005) makes it clear “Accelerated globalization of recent times has enabled co-religionists across the planet to have greater direct contact with one another” (p. 245). Global communications, global organizations, global finance, and the like, have allowed ideas of the *Transworld Umma* of Muslims and the universal Christian Church to be given concrete shape as it has never been done before.

Being a source of identity and pride, religion is always promoted by its practitioners to reach the level of globality and be embraced by as many people as possible. Muslims, for instance, aspire to establish the Islamic *Umma*, a community of believers. Christianity lays claims to its universal appeal, and information technology at the disposal of these religions via globalization has contributed considerably to their emergence, revivalism and fortification (Turner, 2007). Information technologies, transportation means, and the media have all played important roles in the dissemination of religious ideas and often breaking down misconceptions about the other. A lot of T.V channels, radio stations and print media are founded solely for advocating religions respectively. We find such TV channels as Igrae, EL Honda, etc., essentially religious channels

created for the strengthening and fortification of Islam. There are EWTN, Vatican Radio, and so on, for Christian and Catholic Messages. These technologies have helped religions of different forms, that is, fundamentalist, moderate, etc. to cross geographical boundaries and be present everywhere.

Having facilitated the way for religions to come in contact with each other and provided a context for their flourishing and thriving, globalization has brought such religions to a circle of competition and conflicts. Bryan (2007) notes that “Globalization transforms the generic ‘religion’ into a world-system of competing and conflicting religions” (p.146). This process of institutional specialization has transformed local, diverse and fragmented cultural practices into recognizable systems of religion. Globalization has therefore had the paradoxical effect of making religions (via their religious leaders and elites) more self-conscious of themselves as being world leaders. Typically, religious identities are strengthened by the factor of globalization since the different religions have their distinct internal structures, their connections to different cultures, and their inclusion of different ways of worshipping and practices, as the case with Islam and Christianity. They contradict and are mostly incompatible with each other. The point of becoming hybridized or homogenized has not arisen, yet these religions come in close contact with each other and find ways to promote accommodation and understanding.

There have been clashes and competition, but there have been structures put in place for interfaith dialogue and reconciliation as is done in Nigeria. We note however that it is difficult for religions to cope with globalization values such as liberalism, consumerism, rationalism, etc. These values advocate and promote secularism. Scholte speaks of the anti-rationalist faiths since he equates rationalism with globalization and considers religion anti-rationalist, and by implication anti-globalization. This contemporary revivalist movements have largely replayed a long-term tendency that predates contemporary accelerated globalization whereby certain religious cadres have from time to time revolted against modern secularism and scientism.

Religious Identity Negotiation and Reconstruction for Development

It is becoming increasingly apparent that nations need to live in peace in order to afford societal progress and development. In a world of diversities cutting across political, socio-cultural, economic and religious diversities, tolerance and accommodation by all become imperative, otherwise chaos and conflicts will become the defining features of our existence. It is obvious that there is a struggle over the claims of religious tolerance in this 21st century. Claims are made among the adherents of religions who are seeking for guidance to live in peace and harmony and also to have a mutual understanding for living together. The attempt by nations such as Malaysia to ensure religious tolerance has been associated with struggles and competitions. The dynamics of religious life seem to be promising good advantages but yet there are obvious setbacks. However, the onus is on the believers and adherents of religions to set benchmarks for producing positive outcomes especially as they seek interactions with other religious faithful.

This, therefore, is the imperative for tolerance. There are two main models of tolerance: first, passive tolerance which means accepting differences as factual; second, there is active tolerance, which means being involved with others in the midst of differences and variations. The outcome of tolerance is living side by side peacefully and accepting the variations that exist.

Tolerance certainly is a reciprocal process between two counterparts. Tamring (2008) states that “tolerance in general refers to the willingness of an individual to establish a relationship and co-exist with another individual of a different cultural and social background” (p. 147). Agius and Ambrosewicz (2003) had earlier noted that tolerance is a formula to develop co-existence in a civilized way between sides that are different in terms of faith, belief and view.

Most world religions preach tolerance. In Christianity tolerance either in social or religions claim is also categorized in a good manner as is indicated in the Holy Bible. Here Jesus forbids the apostle John from stopping a man who dispelled evil spirits from another – *saying that anyone who is not against us would be favorably disposed to us* (Mark 9: 38 – 40). In this case, it indicates that Jesus forbids rejecting those who do not believe in him and his teachings.

For Buddhism, the Dharma tolerance is known as *datta* and the teachings of this doctrine are necessarily based on not just good moral character but great moral tolerance. For Sikhism, the act of hating human beings while at the same time worshipping God is totally unacceptable because this religion teaches that to know God is through the relationship among other creatures.

Based on the above therefore, it is clear that the element of tolerance is perverse in most religions. In Surah, al-Quran explains that justice and goodwill towards others who are of different convictions is one of the main conditions that brought about tolerance (al-Muntahanah 60:8).

Unfortunately, even with this injunction from the different religions, the world has experienced great religious conflicts arising from intolerance of adherents of other faiths. Only in the period covering 1980 – 1995, there were 72 civil wars (ethnic, national, religious and racial wars). This continued after the 1995 aggression of conflicts involving different religions and religion-linked terrorist attacks in Kosovo, Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, Afghanistan, India, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia, Philippines, and a host of others, which were expressed in inter-denominational conflicts and religion-linked terrorist attacks. The Syrian religious conflicts have the main players as Bashar al-Assad and other Islamic groups. These have caused and intensified the refugee problems and migrations. This has heightened the tension within these nations and around the world.

Thus, religion-based conflicts have been on the rise and globalization with its elements has brought the consequences and implications of these conflicts to other nations via the means of integration. The world has thus become more and more multicultural with attendant consequences and implications of conflicts on other nations.

Globalization has through the development of scientific and technological forces it has unleashed, facilitated the extinction of the indigenous development of technology and distorted patterns of production in Africa, for example. This has made their economies dependent on the dictates of the international economic system. It has also reduced the capacity of governments to determine and control events in their countries and thus their accountability and responsiveness to their people, given the fact that the context, institutions and processes by which these decisions are taken are far from democratic. This has led to predisposing factors in these countries for tension, intolerance and consequently religious and ethnic conflicts. Democracy with its emphasis on tolerance and compromise can hardly thrive in an environment of conflicts and thus development has hardly been achieved.

We note also that globalization has its other side which can be explored for development.

Information and communication technologies have eased interaction among countries and peoples thus creating a global village out of a wide and diverse world of cultures and religions. It has opened people's lives to other cultures and all their creativity and to the flow of ideas and values. The availability of information on how other countries are governed and the freedom and rights their people enjoy has helped to reduce suspicion about others, and the way they do things including their creed and faith (Ibrahim, 2013).

Strengthening Religious Cooperation for Development in a Globalized World

Religion and religious identities are not immune from the challenges and effects of globalization. Globalization has increased the spread of religions on a global scale by providing a context for revival and resurgence. Adherents of the different faiths have utilized the instrumentality of the current wave of information and technological advancement to promote and entrench their religions. It is also hoped that the explosion in information technology will offer religious leaders and their faithful the opportunity for dialogue and for more understanding and acceptance of the others' faith.

In Nigeria for instance, there has been a Christian-Muslim dialogue initiative that has helped to build trust and respect, cooperation on humanitarian goals, and theological exchange to deepen understanding of each other's heritage in support of common action. For Christians, dialogue has been promoted by the Catholic Church since the 1960s through Vatican II and by the World Council of Churches (Helkman, 2006).

It is estimated that more than two-thirds of the world's population identify with a religion. Thus, when conflicts assume religious overtones, religious power-brokers can emerge apart from the formal institutions and chains of authority. At the core of its nature, religion is a critical consideration for development programs because it often transcends geographic boundaries and can be used to reach a wider network of followers. The result has both positive and negative implications for the world today. Actors in such religiously motivated conflicts can mobilize followers via information dissemination and awareness for peacebuilding using theological language and shared values by adherents to gain support for peace.

At a time when the world has become a global village, engaging religion and key religious actors in conflict settings can provide unique opportunities to intervene and provide meaning, identity and emotional support, empathy and compassion that can sustain reconciliation and problem-solving across divisions; promote values, norms and motivations that support non-violent approaches to raising and confronting differences.

In West Africa, in response to civil wars in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia, inter-religious councils composed of representations from Muslim, Protestant and Catholic groups provided leadership and resources to rebuild communities and advocated for refugees (USAID, 2009).

In Southern Sudan, peace conferences sponsored by the New Sudan Council of Churches aimed to improve dialogue between the parties engaged in conflicts, and mobilized communities towards local peace programs.

In Kashmir, the International Centre for Religion and Diplomacy has brought together Muslim and Hindu Youths in Kashmir to interact with each other in an attempt to lay the

foundations for long-term mutual trust and understanding. Essentially, inter- and intra- faith cooperation is very necessary for societies that are multi-religious and multi-ethnic to engage in peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding.

Dialogue and cooperation between religions are important. Below are two quotations that highlight the urgency and need for Muslims and Christians and other religions to cooperate. The first is taken from an address made by Benedict XVI (2006) to the Ambassadors from Muslim countries in which he said:

Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity on which in large measure our future depends. (p.1)

The second quotation is from a letter signed by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders from across the Muslim world and sent to Christian leaders in 2007. It says:

Muslims and Christians together make up over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. (Benedict XVI, p.1)

The above statements highlight the need for religious leaders to address the growing polarization between them which have been fueled by war, persecution, injustices and by individuals and groups stirring up religious divisions to achieve political or material gain. In a globalized world where interactions are easy, dialogue between Muslims and Christians is needed now more than ever before to address the issues causing this division. The fact that Muslims and Christians make up over 50% of the world's population makes dialogue and cooperation inevitable.

Conclusion

We have noted in this paper that globalization is a process which is systematically restructuring interactive phases among nations by breaking down barriers in the areas of culture, commerce, economy, religion, information, and communication as well as in several other fields of endeavor. It aims at the universal homogenization of ideas, culture, values and even lifestyles (Rahman & Khambal, 2013).

We also note that globalization has been associated with explosion in information and technological advancement and this has impacted on all aspects of the lives of the people and nations globally.

Globalization and religion have experienced flexible relationship that has impacted on each other in profound ways. Although religions still have their specific territorial origins and spaces, through a globalized world, they have been exported to other climes and practiced by people of other cultures and societies.

Religion has continued to assert its identity in the light of globalization. The question of

which religion is the ideal religion and ultimately the truest has always been raised and debated among people of different religions. Socio-economic and political challenges arising from governance deficits in nations have predisposed nations to the manipulation of religions for selfish and political ends.

This paper concludes that while maintaining some peculiar levels of exclusivities, the leaders of world religions can take advantage of information technology and the media available due to the workings of globalization and seek to promote religious tolerance and accommodation.

This is necessary for peaceful co-existence and a just society where human progress and, indeed, development can be achieved. Interreligious dialogue alongside other peacebuilding strategies are vital to achieving national development via religious harmony.

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