

## **UC Santa Barbara**

### **Other Recent Work**

#### **Title**

Thinking Globally About Religion

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9175s301>

#### **Author**

Juergensmeyer, Mark

#### **Publication Date**

2002-05-21

## Thinking Globally About Religion

Mark Juergensmeyer

Maps can deceive. Several decades ago, cartographers were fond of providing maps that allegedly demarcated the spatial locations of world religions. A great wash of red would stretch from Tibet to Japan, engulfing China, to show where Buddhism was. The Middle East would be tinted green for the terrain of Islam, a yellow India for Hinduism, an orange for African religion, while Christianity's color--often blue, I recall--was brightly emblazoned on Europe and the Western Hemisphere. Some of the more sophisticated maps would make a distinction between the light blue of Protestant Canada and the United States, and the dark blue of Catholic Latin America, but there was no question as to clarity of the demarcation. I imagined slipping across the border from a Buddhist red zone to an Islamic green one and suddenly encountering mosques where previously there had been only stupas, temples, and chanting monks.

It has never really been like that, of course. Although there are regions of the world that serve as dense centers of gravity for certain religious traditions, much of the world is less certain as to its religious identity, and always has been. Even Hindu India was a quarter Muslim before Pakistan was created, and even today fifteen percent of the Indian population reveres Islam. Indonesia--the largest Muslim country on the planet--is the home of a rich Hindu culture in Bali and contains at Borabadur one of the world's most important ancient Buddhist shrines. China has such diverse religious strata, with most of its population simultaneously accepting Confucian values, Taoist beliefs and Buddhist worship practices, that most scholars prefer to speak of a multicultural "Chinese religion," rather than any of those three strands by itself. Much the same can be said about the religions of Korea and Japan. In the Western Hemisphere, Haitians are said to be ninety percent Roman Catholic and ninety percent followers of Vodou; needless to say, it is the same ninety percent. Jews, of course, are everywhere, and have been since biblical times.

Today it seems that almost everyone is everywhere. The city of Los Angeles, for instance, is the second largest Filipino city in the world. It is also the second largest Iranian city, and the second largest Mexican one. In Southern California, Tibetan Buddhists do not hide in the mountains in monasteries. They drive Lexus SUVs to the studio lot for a photo shoot: some are rich, some are Caucasian, and some are among Hollywood's celebrities. In Beijing the Chinese government has to contend not only with new forms of Chinese religion, such as the Falun-Gong, but with dissident Chinese Muslims and Christians.

Scarcely any region in the globe today is comprised solely of members of a single strand of traditional religion. In an era of globalization the pace of cultural interaction and change has increased by seemingly exponential expansions of degrees. So an accurate coloration of the religious world, even fifty years ago, would have to show dense areas of color here and there with enormous mixes and shadings of hues everywhere else. Moreover the map would have to be changed from time to time, perhaps even from decade to decade, and re-tinted as religions move and intertwine.

This fluid process of cultural interaction, expansion, synthesis, borrowing and change has been going on from the earliest reaches of recorded history. In fact, the most ancient epic to which we have access—the Gilgamesh Epic of ancient Sumeria some two thousand years before the time of Christ--tells the story of a great flood brought on by divine wrath, and a human who built an ark to escape it. It is a story retold within the context of the biblical book of Genesis and now respected by the great religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, was fond of pointing out that even as ordinary an artifact as a string of prayer beads illustrates the interaction of religions: Smith speculated that the Roman Catholic idea of the rosary was borrowed from Buddhists in Central Asia who in turn stole the idea from Brahmans in Hindu India. The expansion of Christianity from the Mediterranean world into Europe was a gradual one, involving "archipelagos of centrality in a sea of insouciance," as the historian Peter Brown described it. Along the way Christianity picked up many pre-Christian indigenous European cultural practices, including the idea of saints and the festival seasons of Christmas and Easter-- the latter named for Eostre, the pagan goddess of spring.

Religion therefore has always been global, in the sense that religious communities and traditions have always maintained permeable boundaries. They have moved, shifted, and interacted with one another around the globe. If one thinks of religion as the cultural expression of a people's sense of ultimate significance, it is understandable that these cultural elements would move as people have moved, and that they would interact and change over time just as people have. Though most religious traditions claim some ultimate anchors of truth that are unchangeable, it is indisputable that every tradition contains within it an enormous diversity of characteristics and myriad cultural elements gleaned from its neighbors.

All this is part of the globalization of religion. Religion is global in that it is related to the global transportation of peoples, and of ideas. There is also a third way that religion is global, which might be called the religion of globalization--in which forms of new religion emerge as expressions of new interactive cultures. In this volume we will consider all three kinds of religious globalization: diasporas, transnational religion, and the religion of plural societies.

### **Global diasporas**

The term diaspora comes from a Greek word meaning "to scatter," and it referred originally to the dispersion of the Jewish people and their culture. The first diaspora was in biblical times, when Israeli kingdoms were conquered and the Jewish people taken into Babylonian captivity. The second occurred after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple in 70CE, with Jews scattered around the Mediterranean world--and later dispersed to Europe and much of the rest of the world. Perhaps no religious tradition has had such a long sustained existence without a geographic homeland as Judaism. It is the very paradigm of a transnational, diasporic culture.

Judaism is not, however, the only religious tradition in which its members have been scattered far and wide and taken their customs and loyalties with them. Increasingly every religious tradition is a religion in diaspora. There are Pakistani Muslims in New Jersey, Tibetan

Buddhists in Germany, and European Catholics in Hong Kong. The rapid and easy mobility of people has produced expatriate communities of dispersed cultures around the globe. Almost half of the world's twelve million Sikhs, for instance, live outside their native area of Punjab in northern India. There are large concentrations of Sikhs in Houston, Washington D.C. and Northern California; others are to be found in London, Africa, and Singapore. Though one thinks of Hinduism as the religion of the people of India, Hindus have traveled abroad and settled in such diverse places as Trinidad and Fiji, where they make up almost half the population.

In these cases we are talking about people moving from place to place and taking their old religion with them. But when they settle in a locale as an expatriate community, we are talking about the possibilities of new forms of religion, as they interact with the cultures around them. Sometimes this interaction is hostile, as Sikhs discovered when they had to confront the prejudices of European-Americans in California in the early part of the twentieth century, or as Hindus have found when they tried to exert their political muscle among the indigenous population of the South Pacific island nation of Fiji. But regardless of the initial response from the local population, in time a certain amount of cultural interaction occurs.

In the Sikh community in the United States the older generation has been deeply suspicious of attempts to "Americanize" Sikh culture. Disputes have arisen over such matters as whether young Sikh women should go on dates with non-Sikhs, whether Sikh men should shave their beards, and whether those attending a Sikh function should be allowed to sit at a table to eat rather than sitting on the floor. The more conservative members think--correctly--that their culture is changing. At the same time, Sikhs in the Punjab fear that the sheer size of the diaspora Sikh community, the diffusion of the religion's authority around the world, and the steady erosion of traditional cultural practices in these expatriate societies are changing the nature of Sikhism as a whole. And they too are right.

The global diasporas of peoples and cultures can transform traditions. Though it is likely that Sikhs will retain certain fundamental elements of their tradition--just as Jews and Chinese have in expatriate communities that they have established abroad--it is also likely that there will be changes. They will face some of the issues of acculturation and transformation that Judaism has encountered, some that go the core of their religion. For example, can outsiders convert to Sikhism? Or is it a religion, as some Jews claim about their own community, that it is defined by a distinct ethnic character that can only be demarcated by kinship? The way a community deals with questions such as these will shape the way that Sikhism and other religions in diaspora become global religions.

### **Transnational religion**

In other religious traditions, such as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism, there is no doubt about whether outsiders can convert to the faith. In these traditions, at the very core of their faith is the notion that their religion is greater than any local group and cannot be confined to the cultural boundaries of any particular region. These are religious traditions with universal pretensions and global ambitions. It is a hallmark of Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists that they believe that their religious ideas are universally applicable. The followers of each of these competitive global ideologies often regard their faith as intellectually superior to the others; some adherents feel that their own traditions alone have a birthright to inherit the earth.

These are transnational religions, religions of expansion. But they also have geographic and cultural roots. Buddhists revere Sarnath where the Buddha first preached, and study the Sanskrit and Pali of early Buddhist texts. Muslims go on pilgrimage to Mecca where the message

of Allah was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and respect the Arabic language in which that revelation was made. Christians have a certain appreciation for Jerusalem; Roman Catholic Christians look to Rome and learn the Latin, Hebrew and Greek of their textual tradition.

Yet despite these emblems of cultural homogeneity, each of these traditions are remarkably diverse. What holds transnational traditions together are their cores of central ideas, images, and customs. Because these are thought to be universal they must be available to everyone. And as the many everyones join the faiths and adopt these central teachings and practices to their own contexts, the religions take on a rich diversity. Yet despite the cultural differences between the celebrity Buddhists of Los Angeles and the chanting monks in Chinese villages, constants remain. Although there are many kinds of Buddhists, and thus many Buddhisms—and for that matter, many Christianities and Islams—the interesting feature of transnational religion is its ability to transcend any particular region's claims.

Perhaps for that reason there has been a persistent tension between transnational religions and the state. Political leaders have employed Buddhism, Islam and Christianity as ideologies of conquest in their attempts to subdue regions over which they have triumphed militarily. When the Spanish conquistadors marched into South America during the seventeenth century, for instance, they were accompanied by priests. The idea was not only to spread the religion and win more souls for Christ; the Spanish also hoped to domesticize the native population and make it more susceptible to rule through what they regarded as the civilizing process of religious conversion. The goals of Buddhist military leaders in Central Asia and Muslim generals in the Middle East were much the same.

Yet although religion and politics have been linked through the ages, transnational religions have not been very reliable allies for state power. The same Christianity, Buddhism and Islam that provide for some rulers a supportive ideology has been for others a basis for rebellion. By latching onto their ideologies some rulers may think they are harnessing religion's vision of global expansion for their own political fortunes. But it is just as likely that these same religions could be the resource for anti-national or trans-national forces that would undermine the legitimacy and support of state power. Such is the tension in Islam at the dawn of the twenty first century between new religious nationalisms in such states as Iran, Afghanistan, and the Sudan, and the transnational guerilla forces of Islamic activists such as Osama bin Laden's al Qaida warriors whose activities and organizations are beyond any national borders. Although these rogue transnational activists find safe harbor in some Muslim states the contradiction between their purposes may ultimately lead them to be at odds.

### **The religion of global societies**

This contradiction between transnational religion and the religion of nations is overcome in instances where religion is itself the expression of a transnational culture and society. The early Christian church is an interesting example. Although Christianity had its roots in Jewish messianism, the apostle Paul brought the transnational elements of Jesus' teachings to the Mediterranean world. This was a region studded with dense population centers much like today's cosmopolitan global cities. In Paul's day, the urban communities of Rome, Antioch and Corinth were comprised of multiple ethnic groups--displaced persons uprooted from their traditional cultures and religions, thrown together in urban melting pots. In such simmering contexts, new religions were concocted; many of them thrived. The worship of Roman gods, Gnostic ideas from Greek culture, the deity cults from Egypt, astrological sects from Persia--all of these

competed with the radical Jewish group of Christians for the multicultural population's attention and support.

Ultimately Christianity won. It did so for a variety of reasons--one was sheer luck, as the Emperor Constantine decided to honor a vision he had during a dream and in 325CE made Christianity the state religion of the Roman empire. But Christianity had more than Constantine's imprimatur: it had an appeal of its own. Part of this attraction came from the transnational, character of its central messages of love, salvation and redemption. Another part of its appeal was global. Christianity had within a hundred years or so of its existence in the Mediterranean world become a religion of a multicultural population. It had absorbed into its beliefs the idea of the logos from gnosticism, the devil and the promise of heaven from Zoroastrianism, messianic prophecy from Judaism, and civic responsibility from Roman emperor worship. Its ideas were therefore eclectic, touching many of the traditional beliefs of its potential adherents. Its practices were also portable—relying on prayer and worship that could be performed virtually anywhere. And its ability to create its own community and lines of authority was a powerful appeal to people who came from fragmented backgrounds and felt displaced and alienated from the cultures in which they found themselves.

The people of the Mediterranean world were much like the urban populations of global centers today. But official forms of Christianity today are institutionalized and defensive, and hence unable to respond readily to pluralistic cultural settings in the same way that the early Church did in the formative years of the Christian tradition. Much the same can be said of every institutionalized religion. In some cases, however, radical forms of traditional religion--such as the Islamic Ahmaddiya movement and Japan's Soka Gakkai provide a religious expression for modern cultures. In other cases it is relatively new branches of old traditions, such as Hindu guru movements and the Mormon Church, that appeal. In yet other cases, this need is filled by new religious movements such as the African syncretic religions and America's Scientology. Still other movements incorporate elements of nature worship and indigenous practices into a kind of religion of global ecology.

Thus religion evolves as the world changes. The various forms of economic, social, technological, and cultural globalization at the dawn of the twenty-first century are the channels for new expressions of religion. New opportunities for the global transmission of religion are created through social mobility and the establishment of diaspora communities, and through the ability to communicate easily the universal ideas of transnational religions to their expanding communities world-wide. As populations merge in plural societies, religions of globalization emerge as well. In an era of shared communication, culture and ideas, it may be possible to imagine the evolution of a global civilization with its own global religion. Widely-revered figures such as Mohandas Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama and Mother Theresa may be the forebears of such a religion's pantheon of saints. As in the past, religion in the future is certain to adapt as it responds to changes in the world around it.

### **Thinking about religion globally**

This volume is intended to help expand our thinking about the way that religion is evolving in the emerging era of globalization. Most studies of religion focus on single traditions, and even these studies often present the traditions as if they were discrete immutable entities that seldom change or interact with the cultures around them. Religions' own philosophical and theological understanding, however, has often been more sensitive to the existence of other religions. The writings of the early communities of both Islam and Sikhism contain appreciative

comments about the various religious cultures around them, and display attempts to appropriate these religions within their own theologies. Christian theologians in recent centuries have become increasingly aware of the necessity of positioning their own understandings of God within a multicultural context. The early nineteenth theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, posited true religion as transcending the dogmatic limitations of confessional faith. The nineteenth century Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, thought that a natural religiosity lay beneath the apparent diversity of religious traditions. Early in the twentieth century, F.S.C. Northrup wrote about the “meeting of East and West;” William Ernest Hocking imagined an evolved form of Christianity in a transforming interaction with other faiths in what he imagined to be the “coming world civilization;” and Arend van Leeuwen understood Christianity’s role in world history as one of leading all religions into a global secularism that would transcend the cultural limitations of particular religious creeds. One of the last writings of the twentieth century Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, was devoted to Christianity’s encounter with other faiths and the necessity of moving beyond a religious exclusivism. In the twenty first century, the Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, proposed a global interfaith ethic to be endorsed by all the world’s religious communities.

The field of comparative religion that developed in the twentieth century also contributed to the idea of that a universal form of religion could link all faiths together. Although most comparative studies limited themselves to the objective analysis of the similarities and differences among religious traditions, some ventured into subjective speculation about the universal elements of religiosity. One of the mid-twentieth century’s best-known comparative religionists, Mircea Eliade, who studied the myths and rituals of ancient and arcane cultures, was sometimes accused of advocating the idea of an essential religion to be found at the heart of all mythic imagination. Joseph Campbell, relying on the psychological insights of Carl Jung, made explicit what he thought were religion’s common archetypes. Huston Smith mined the ideas of the great religious traditions to discern a “perennial philosophy” found within them all. And the Harvard scholar of comparative religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, proposed that a “world theology” could be fashioned that would eventually surmount the cultural limitations of particularistic faiths.

At the end of the twentieth century and in the first decade of the twenty-first, this somewhat cheery optimism faded, and the role of religion in global society was seen as not necessarily leading to harmony and spiritual union. The eruption of religious violence and strident forms of religious nationalism seemed to counter the unifying trend towards a global religion. The civilizing role that Arnold Toynbee, writing in the first part of the twentieth century, imagined that religion would contribute to world society, was in stark contrast to the image of religion in world society portrayed by Samuel Huntington, writing at the end of the twentieth century, when he envisaged religion’s role in a clash of civilizations. At the beginning of the twenty first century in a project analyzing the cultural aspects of globalization, however, Huntington, paired with sociologist Peter Berger, observed that despite the variety of cultural perceptions of globalization, religion and other forms of culture need not always be hostile to globalization and can play a positive role in it. Other sociologists of religion, including Martin Riesebrodt, Roland Robertson, and myself have also observed that despite the role that religion has played in endorsing parochial movements in the last decades of the twentieth century it can also be a useful resource in creating a global civil society. On the one hand religion has often been a part of the ideology of antiglobal movements. But on the other hand, the absolutism of

religious language and images can help people reach beyond the limitations of their narrow creedal affirmations to a wider sense of tolerance and global understanding.

One of the founders of the modern field of religious studies, Ninian Smart, presented a positive vision of religion's role in an increasingly global world. In an essay on the global future of religion written for this volume and completed shortly before his death, Smart observed that religion was sometimes linked with violence in protests against global modernity. Writing eight months before the Sept 11 terrorist attacks, Smart prophesized that "weapons of mass destruction" might be used "for religious purposes" to destroy New York or other cities in what Smart said would be considered "the first major crime of the twenty-first century." But Smart also speculated on the emergence of a spiritual and ethical dimension of global civil society—a "global higher order" of civility—that would provide the cultural basis for international order and transnational regulations. This new form of religiosity Smart predicted would be "the coming global civilization."

What will become the global religion—and the religion of globalization—in the twenty first century? This is the question that lies behind the essays in this volume. Their authors, some of this generation's most thoughtful social analysts of religion, have attempted to understand how religion has been altered by, and in turn is helping to shape, a globalized world. The essays in this volume are part of a larger project in which some sixty scholars have written on the diversity of religious traditions. The larger volume, *Global Religions: A Handbook*, explores the variations of Christianities, Islams, Judaisms, Buddhisms, Hinduisms, and other religions, and helps us understand how these traditions are shaped by their changing cultural contexts in various parts of the world. The lead essays that introduce each religious tradition are to be found in this abridged volume.

In this volume we have asked scholars who are close to the religious communities they study to describe how these communities have changed over time, how they have responded to the plural cultural contexts around them, and how they are shaped by the current forces of globalization and social change. The result is a series of essays that not only gives an up-to-date insight into the world's great religions, but also provides a broad view of global religion in a new millennium. These essays show that, if the history of religion is a guide, we can expect religion's global future to be much like its global past. The religious imagination in a global era reaches out to encompass a rich diversity of images and ideas that stretch beyond the limitations of particular and parochial affiliations to animate all levels of spiritual sensibility—its social vision and intimate individuality, its arresting particulars and expansive universals, its disturbing depths and soaring heights.