

The Role of Media in the Threats and Opportunities of Globalization for Religion

H. Ayatollahy

Allameh Tabatabaai University

Abstract: The process of globalization, which has influenced many dimensions of human life, is an obligatory process that transforms contemporary human destiny. However, this does not mean that it cannot be acted upon; those following the project of globalism (or Westernism, or even Americanism) know that an active role can be played in this process. Within the field of cultural studies, attention has been paid to the economic, industrial, and political dimensions of globalization. Still other researchers are studying the role of religion in this process. This article investigates the complex interplay between globalization and religion. Then, various types of collaboration between religion and media are explored as an important element of globalization. Finally, the specific position of Islam is outlined in the context of these changes.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, researchers and academic groups have focused attention on the cultural dimension of globalization. Although globalization emerged in economic, industrial, communicative, and political contexts, the phenomenon of culture is at the center of the debate. This is partly attributed to UNESCO, which implemented the World Commission's recommendation by publishing two editions of a *World Culture Report* focusing on "culture, creativity, and markets" (United, 1998) and "cultural diversity, conflict, and pluralism" (United, 2000). This enterprise, however, was subsequently abandoned by UNESCO. This has left a void that needs to be filled. Fortunately, a rich and growing body of globalization literature is filling this void. However, because this literature focuses mainly on economic globalization and international law, social dimensions of globalization have been understudied. The *Global Civil Society Yearbook 2001* (Anheier et al., 2001) and UNDP's *Human Development Report* (2004) are among the few publications addressing social

Correspondence should be addressed to Hamidreza Ayatollahy, Associate Professor of Philosophy Department, Faculty of Literature, Allameh Tabatabaai University, Allameh Tabatabaai St., Modiriyyat Bridge, Chamran Freeway, 19815 Tehran, Iran. E-mail: h.ayat@ihcs.ac.ir

issues. Cultural aspects have been even less acknowledged, and much work needs to be done in this area of globalization studies.

Nevertheless, a series of major policy publications are moving culture to the center of international debate on globalization. These include initiatives by *Our Creative Diversity* (1996) and the report of the *World Commission on Culture and Development* (UNESCO), which introduced a strong policy link between culture and development. It called for a “commitment to pluralism” as a middle course between universalism and radical cultural relativism. The notion of a “constructive pluralism,” developed subsequently by UNESCO, suggests the active and dynamic co-existence of groups, and incorporates the conditions for a public domain that allows creative contact and transformation. American scholars recognize that the *2004 Human Development Report* was written in the context of concerns about the increasing cultural dominance of the West, in particular the United States, and a strengthening of identity politics.

This brief report introduces and organizes the cultural aspects of globalization and suggests how it might be explored in the future. Moreover, the religious dimension of cultural globalization has been little considered and there is much room for exploration in this matter, which one hopes will be done in the future.

RELIGION AND GLOBALIZATION

Globalization, as an inevitable process of accelerated change, will influence all dimensions of human culture, including religion. Because religion is a cultural universal, it is intertwined with all other dimensions of human life, thus making it a key concept in the study of globalization. Putting it another way, globalization, defined broadly, cannot be fully understood by researchers without attention to religion.

PASSIVE OR ACTIVE ROLE IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD?

Globalization is an inevitable process; it is the result of developments in science, technology, ease of communications, and so forth. Cultural values emerging from this process beg for further examination, including Western values, the ideology of which may be imposed on peoples throughout the world. These developments raise many controversies about the ideological role of media, cultural imperialism, and responsible use of international media.

Globalism, as an overall term, conceals its Westernism and Americanism (Spybey, 1996; Taylor, 2000). It attempts to change other parts of the world in accordance with Western interests. There are challenges between Western interests; the United States, with its imperialistic view, seeks to be the leader

of the new imperialism of globalism. The U.S. wants to be alone in imposing itself on other cultures, and is interested to give other Western countries a secondary role.

However, we do not concern ourselves here with this kind of globalism. Instead, we go beyond Westernization and Americanization in examining globalization. New developments in globalization may well influence religion, and, in turn, religion may influence religion. Our task is to examine these actions and reactions.

Because globalization is an inevitable process in the world today, it is assumed that new developments in technology, economics, and politics have brought it about. Therefore, it follows that we are passive, that it is the destiny of human beings to accept all the results of globalization without any free choice. We are only able to study it as viewers, not “players.” I disagree with this view of globalization. While there are incentives to act consistently with the global position, our free will and ability to go beyond boundaries enables us to make choices or change direction. These potentialities allow us to play an active role in this complex process. We, who try to find our responsibility in a global world, should know the results of globalization, its threats, and its opportunities in order to play the best role in this situation, and perhaps thwart some of the worst consequences of globalization.

I believe that all religions, especially Islam, must have an active presence in the world despite a global atmosphere in which religion is relegated to secondary status. To have this active role, religions must know their strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities and threats. With this knowledge, they can participate in globalization intelligently and in optimal ways.

INTENSIVE INVOLVEMENT OF ISLAM IN GLOBALIZATION

Islam, like Judaism, embraces religious jurisprudence. This is not the case with Christianity and Buddhism, which emphasizes different aspects of morality. Because of this tradition, religious laws penetrate all aspects of a Muslim believer’s life. Furthermore, Islamic social laws involve religion more in the everyday activities of a society. Islam does not concern itself only with the personal relationship between man and God but also with the relationship between man and society. Islam emphasizes that the relationship between man and God is contingent on the fulfillment of the believer’s social duties. These social duties involve all dimensions of life, that is, economics, politics, culture, and social development. Therefore, a good believer is defined by the accomplishment of social duties.

Because social law is essential to Islam, globalization must be examined in this context. Islam has a framework of economics based on a certain set of values. It also has an essential doctrine in politics. It rejects some political thought (e.g., racism, imperialism, and compulsion in acceptance of a political government), while accepting others. Therefore, Islam has much to say about globalization, especially in terms of economics, politics, security,

environmental positions, and culture. Perhaps more so than other religions, Islam poses a unique challenge to globalization because of the different, contrary values it imposes on human beings. Therefore, Islam has unique challenges regarding globalization.

Another important difference between Islam and other religions is that mundane matters are essential in religious life. While many activities do not seem sacred, in Islam all human activities are religious. For example, sexuality is considered religious similar to other forms of worship. In Islam, sexuality is not far from being a spiritual duty of man. The meaning of worship differs in Islam. Mundane matters are spiritual activities. Endeavors in this world cannot be separated from strivings for eternal life. Consequently, secularism is a problematic concept in Islamic society.

Therefore, Islam, perhaps more than other religions, poses many challenges to globalization. It has more involvement with globalization (and more with globalism). However, one should not expect a rigid reaction of Islam against globalization. The element of *Ijtehaad* in Islam, especially Shiism, makes the presence of Islam in the globalization process possible and safe. *Ijtehaad* seeks to find solutions for making divine law compatible with temporal situations without leaving Islamic foundations behind. It not only promotes a better world through spiritual values but also takes into account the facts of the world today; it seeks solutions that address real problems. Every branch of Islam applying this concept is more likely to participate in globalization in optimal ways.

ROLE OF MEDIA IN OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS OF GLOBALIZATION FOR RELIGIONS

Focusing on the external opportunities and threats of globalization, I now discuss the dangers and advantages of media for Islam. Both negative and positive views of globalization are expressed by contemporary thinkers. That is, religions have many problems and opportunities in a global world.

It is generally accepted that media play a role in globalization (Ploman, 1984, p. 37; Gates, 1995, pp. 8–9). Media are salient in all dimensions of globalization, including economic, politics, security, and culture. Financial interests are yet another reason media industries have become an important feature of globalization. We now examine some of the opportunities and threats facing religions and Islam, in particular, in the present era of globalization.

Opportunities

New Technologies and the Wide Distribution of Religious Messages

Media have made religion ubiquitous in the world. Religious activities are not restricted to physical places nor to those who want to attend religious

services; anyone can have access. Religious propaganda will also develop within these new conditions, suggesting another subject for future research.

Religious Participation in Moral Solutions to Environmental Pollution

While the 20th century was known for developments in science and technology, there is growing suspicion about these phenomena in the new century. This is due primarily to some of the disasters of technological development in past decades (Peccei, 1969; Commoner, 1971; Meadows et al., 1992). Thus, the 21st century has become the century of the environment. This new approach brings bioethics to the core of scientific and technological discourse. The insufficiency of secular bioethics has underscored the importance of religion in removing environmental pollution. Professor Nasr analyzes the role of religion in solving environmental problems in his book *Religion and the Order of Nature*. He argues that the greatest capacity in this respect can be found in Islam. Media present the problems and dangers of pollution as well as raise the need for a solution. While media have pointed out the weaknesses of past solutions, there is an opportunity for religion to play an even stronger role in the future.

New Emphasis on Local Culture

In the past, there was a perspective that Western culture, as the developed culture, was the ideal or goal of every other culture. Rejecting traditional culture, intellectuals saw Westernization as the only means of development. Western culture, in the last century, emphasized secularism and relegated religion to only one of many competing worldviews. In recent decades, Western culture has shown its deficiencies and, in some cases, its dangers for humanity. The failures of Westernization, renewed attention to regional cultures, and the value of reliance on indigenous cultures has become the new intellectual discourse. These developments have restored religion to the center of cultural activities of most countries. The imposition of Western values through media has been impeded by easy access to information about Western tragedies, thus increasing awareness of the deficiencies of Western culture and the advantages of other traditions and culture. The awakening of a new Islamic consciousness among Muslim peoples is evidence of this.

Improved Understanding among Religions

In the past, the imagination of other religions was so weak that there emerged enmity among religions in a dark atmosphere where the strengths of others were poorly understood. Although the media are guilty of giving poor impressions of some religions, satellite television and the Internet have presented an opportunity for a more mutual understanding among different religions

(Robertson & Garrett, 1991). Increasing dialogue among religions can result in this kind of development. In such dialogue, Islam has the advantage of introducing itself as a complete religion with universal doctrines for all aspects of human life, while other religions restrict themselves to particular human activities.

Strengthening of the Religious Dimension of Culture

In the past, access to information about one's own religion was not guaranteed. An opportunity to strengthen belief through access to scholars and other sources of knowledge is, perhaps, stronger today than at any time previous. Media in a global age can encourage deeper knowledge of every religion, accessible in homes throughout the world.

Knowledge of How Other Religions Participate in Globalization

Every religion has its remedies for global problems. Today, these approaches can be examined and evaluated for all religions. Those that are flexible in terms of new circumstances, without neglecting their foundations, will have the opportunity to progress and develop. In a global age, problems are the same and all religions compete by demonstrating their ability to introduce solutions. Because of the fundamental element of Ijtihad in Shia Islam, it is likely to develop and introduce itself. Media disseminate information about various religions and their reactions to global problems which could be useful to other religious communities.

Religions That Are Equipped to Understanding the Contemporary World Will Develop and Flourish

Religion in the past restricted itself to some a priori dogmas and doctrines without much flexibility. Activities were restricted to small groups in confined areas of the world. However, globalization engages religion in social and cultural problems beyond local communities; local and international spheres are blurred. Thus, religions seeking growth cannot neglect new circumstances and must be prepared with strategic solutions to global challenges. This leads to further development in of religious communities as well as more substantive religious interaction with the world at large. Because of the strong social dimension of Islam, it may be more adaptable to changing global conditions. The role of media in this respect is very important. They can facilitate discussions between members of religious communities and other stakeholders in world affairs, thus promoting better understanding among groups. The media, in recent years, have shown their capacity to attract people for these kinds of negotiations all over the world.

Increased Involvement within Religious Societies

The simultaneous rise of postmodernism and decline of the atheistic trend in late modernity is creating new opportunities for religious participation. The essential character of late modernity in the 19th and early 20th centuries was an atheistic worldview; it argued that the religious approach must be abandoned. This led to restrictions of religious expression. Postmodern philosophers have helped remove such restrictions. Modernity, the core of this atheistic approach, has been called into question; its philosophies and anti-religion rhetoric have been weakened. In addition, postmodern values are emerging in local cultures, displacing dominant Western values (Albrow, 1996; Harvey, 1989). According to Turner's view, there are two possible replacements: postmodernity and Islam, thus creating a unique opportunity for the latter.

Easier Access to Information in Less-developed Countries

By improving media technologies, especially the Internet, globalization has brought all parts of the world into communication (Wriston, 1992, pp. 170–171). Less-developed countries have benefited even more from this kind of communication (Fredrick, 1993; Lee, 1996; Harcourt, 1999). People in these countries now have access to the same science and information that previously afforded advantages to powerful countries. Powerful countries' access to information brought little benefit to them; for others, this access can lead to advancement. It is also possible to disseminate information within powerful countries that used to be filtered by the West. This is an opportunity for Muslim thinkers to introduce themselves via Internet and e-mail, and have influence in other countries. Petitions and publicity, such as the boycott of anti-Muslim American companies, are examples of such activities.

Renewal of Religious Life

The global problems of modernity along with the inability to create a better life has led many to rebuff secular attitudes and approaches. This, in turn, may lead to a re-establishment of religion, following its diminution in the modern era. In other words, this situation creates an opportunity for religion to increase its influence (Muzaffar, 1993).

Threats

Continuation of Cultural Imperialism

Western imperialism is based on the identification of sources of cultural power. Imperialism is the view that those who benefit most are those who

gain power (Tomlinson, 1992, 1991; Petras, 1993) through economic systems of consumption. It is a challenge for religions to oppose imperialists whose values often neglect spirituality and morals. Because Islam embraces social-religious values as well as personal-spiritual values, this challenge will be more serious. Because cultural power is most important for imperialists, the media are important instruments.

Destruction of Older Traditions by the Predominance of Western Culture

Globalization instigates cultural competition where power is a determining factor (Ling, 2000). Traditional values of family, human relationships, respect, and so on, could be eroded by this global competition. This erosion is a danger for religions tied to local traditional values. New lifestyles propagandized by media are directed at the rejection of old traditions (Schiller, 1991). The gap between two generations (which is a media phenomenon) is a natural threat to globalization. Because Islam actively rejects Western values, it is at the core of this tension.

Diminution of Human Values

Because the dominant value of globalization is pleasure, global economic strategies focus on indulgence and bodily welfare. Globalization tends to restrict eminent and transcendental values that cannot have meaning in the producer-consumer relation. Secular morality is for the service of personal pleasure. Globalization has introduced values that compete with love for one another, family, respect, and so on. Religion, on the other hand, attempts to uphold such values. For example, media of globalization convey values of sex and violence. Religions can help establish a structure of values designed to resist the threat of Western fashion, which is central to globalization.

Threat to Cultural and Mental Security

The neo-liberal economics of globalization favors the individual. This can result in detachment as well as personal and social turmoil. However, individuals require connections to the past as well as community in order to achieve mental security. The culture of globalization works against the rooted cultures that provide individuals with a set of values. Religions have an important challenge in this regard. Religious values and the individual's need for mental and spiritual security contrast with the values of globalization. The latter stresses individualism and defines people according to the attainment of benefits. Mass media play a role in the reinforcement of such values. Therefore, media are at the forefront of this challenge to religion and the pursuit of happiness.

Cultural Predominance of Powerful Countries

In a global competition of cultures, power defines the dominance of one culture. A key threat of globalization, then, is the rise of one culture at the expense of other cultures, regardless of what they have to offer. Media are the instruments for this predominance through, among other things, their negative depictions of religion, especially Islam.

The Undermining of Religion's Efforts to Reverse Social and Moral Decline

Producers of media seek to expand audiences by appealing to values of gratification and pleasure. Globalization, which is based on the superficial welfare of man, wishes to gain greater support for its aspirations. This results in deleterious media content: crime, decline of chastity, absence of modesty—all antithetical to religion.

Undermining Initiatives for Political, Environmental, and Economic Progress

Underpinning globalization is a single ideology, namely, neo-liberalism; it is the dominant perspective and competing worldviews must give way. As a result this thinking, the world will lose the special abilities of diverse cultures, along with their initiatives and solutions for human problems (Mander & Goldsmith, 1996). The neo-liberal approach has not only been shown to be deficient in providing a better life, but has created new problems by interfering in global matters. The media, whose technology and influence are largely governed by this neo-liberal approach, are partly responsible for promoting this ideology, while ignoring or rejecting alternative views.

The Triumph of Relativism

Tolerance, which is necessary for global interchange, has been confused with relativism. Relativism is the unfortunate result of attempts to explain the globalization of pluralism (Axford, 1995; Luke, 1955; O'Tuathail, 1996, ch. 7). As a result, there is nothing reliable in life other than the desires cultivated unconsciously by media. Relativism is a philosophy that runs contrary to the idea that values can be consistent and enduring.

Control by Economic Interests

Although many today assume they have free will, and that through democratic participation they freely choose, a deeper analysis reveals that globalized media influence this freedom. Audience members may feel they are free, but are led by media that are in turn directed by larger corporations. This situation

is of great concern, especially to religions; it impedes their support of human freedom (in its deepest sense), peace, mental tranquility, and transcendence.

Imposition of Humanism and Secularism

During the last century, these philosophies were used in support of unsavory activities including fascism, racism, and Nazism. Humanism, as a doctrine of globalization, advocates a personalized and individualized religion. Globalized corporations are adept at imposing humanism and secularism (Leizer & Davies, 1944, pp. 39, 201, 205, 219). The role these two ideologies played in tragedies of the last century, such as the Second World War and the emergence of Marxism, fascism, and racism, is not yet fully understood.

These are proposed opportunities and threats of globalization and its instrument, the media. They are highly relevant to religions, especially Shi'a Islam. The situation must be analyzed in greater detail to decipher one's active role with respect to these issues. The future belongs to those who actively engage in this process, not those who passively observe the consequences of globalization.

REFERENCES

- Albrow, M. (1996). *The Global Age: State and Society beyond Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Anheier, H. K., Glasius, M., & Kaldor, M. (2001). *Global Civil Society 2001*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Axford, B. (1995). *The Global System: Economics, Politics and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Commoner, B. (1971). *The Closing Circle: Confronting the Environmental Crisis*. London: Cape.
- Fredrick, H. (1993). Computer Networks and the Emergence of Global Civil Society. In L. Haraism (ed.), *Global Network: Computers and International Communication* (pp. 283–295). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gates, B. (1995). *The Road Ahead*. London: Viking.
- Harcourt, W. (1999). *Women & Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace*. London: Zed.
- Harvey, D. (1989). *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Conditions of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lee, E. (1997). *The Labour Movement and the Internet: The New Internationalism*. London: Pluto.
- Ling, L. H. M. (2000). Globalization and the Specter of Fu Manchu: White Man's Burden as Dark Irony. In J.-S. Fritz & M. Lensu (eds), *Value Pluralism, Normative Theory and International Relations* (pp. 132–159). London: Macmillan.

- Luke, T. W. (1995). New World Order or New World Orders: Power, Politics and Ideology in Informationalizing Localities. In M. Featherstone, *Global Modernities* (pp. 91–107). London: Sage.
- Mander, J. & Goldsmith, E. (eds.). (1996). *The Case against the Global Economy and the Turn to the Local*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.
- Meadows, D. H. (1992). *Beyond the Limits: A Global Collapse or a Sustainable Future*. London: Earth Scan.
- Muzaffar, C. (1993). *Human Rights and the New World Order*. Penang: Just World Trust.
- Peccei, A. (1969). *The Chasm Ahead*. London: Macmillan.
- Petras, J. (1993). Cultural Imperialism in the Late 20th Century, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 23: 2, pp. 139–148.
- Ploman, E. W. (1984). *Space, Earth and Communication*. Westport, CT: Quorum.
- Reiser, O. L. & Davies, B. (1944). *Planetary Democracy: An Introduction to Scientific Humanism and Applies Semantics*. New York: Creative Age Press.
- Robertson, R. & Garrett, W. R. (eds.). (1991). *Religion and Global Order*. New York: Paragon House.
- Spybey, T. (1996). *Globalization and World Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Taylor, P. J. (2000). Iizations of the World: Americanization, Modernization and Globalization. In C. Hay & D. Marsh (eds.), *Demystifying Globalization* (pp. 49–70). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Tomlinson, J. (1995). Homogenisation and Globalization, *History of European Ideas*, 20: 4–6 (February), pp. 891–897.
- United Nations Development Program (UNDP). (2004). *Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (1996). *Our Creative Diversity*, Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (1998). *World Culture Report: culture, creativity and markets*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2000). *World Culture Report: cultural diversity, conflict and pluralism*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- Wriston, W. B. (1992). *The Twilight of Sovereignty: How the Information Revolution Is Transforming Our World*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.