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## Beyond the Boundaries of Identity: Interpreting Religious Boundaries in Local- Global Dynamics

**Abstract:** Regardless of which religious cultures we belong to, which furthermore mark our identity, the evidence of religious diversity is undeniable. In the dynamics of social, economic and cultural interaction, religion is caught up in the pace of globalisation. Globalisation is the reality of the 20th and 21st centuries, which, on the basis of new communication techniques and economic trends, is generating a certain type of representation of religious cultures *in relation* to one another. This article intends to highlight what are the challenges of globalisation to religions and how global trends redefines particularised boundaries of religious cultures.

**Keywords:** globalisation, religion, boundaries, identity

In a comparative and objective logic, today's world differs substantially from yesterday's world, and tomorrow's world will differ in many respects from today's world. The reality of transformation is undeniable. The progress of modernity has imposed new vectors upon the rhythm of life in all its dimensions: social, religious, economic, cultural, which has led to an elasticisation and the broadening of horizons in such a way that the world has become the *common* space of all. The territorial boundaries that delimited nations, the cultural boundaries that delimited civilisations, the religious boundaries that defined particular theological configurations of the relationship with the Divinity / Ultimate Reality, are today overcome by what is called *globalisation*. As Samuel P. Huntington stated in the 90s, the world of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is a 'multi-polar, multi-civilisational world' in which the essential differences between people are not political, social, economic, but cultural and religious (Huntington 1996, 21-29). Differences delineate identities framed by boundaries, and some of the most obvious boundaries in global interconnectivity are the religious ones.

An analysis of the way in which religious boundaries are establishing new profiles of representation in global dynamics is generated by the fact that religious issues have returned to the public sphere of the 21st century.

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In fact, religion, at the personal rather than the institutional level, has consistently remained an essential human dominant. However, if at the theoretical level, sociological research in the 60s postulated a radical dilution in the presence of religion in society in light of the secularisation thesis, today's reality completely invalidates such an assumption. Religious revitalisation, marked by the social effervescence of certain religions or religious trends (Islam, Pentecostal Christianity, the new religious movements, etc.), the increase in religious diversity on the basis of new sociological data<sup>1</sup>, are serious reasons which have led some sociologists, philosophers and historians to revise their position on the disappearance of religion. This is the case of P. Berger, who in the 2000s put forward the thesis of the *desecularisation of religion* (Berger 1999).

I will not elaborate on this thesis here, as it is not the subject matter of the topic under analysis. But I would like to mention that religion has reappeared within the scope of research for at least four reasons: (a) the intensification of religious diversity through globalisation; (b) the need for political and civil regulations within secular states to deal with the plurality of religions within them; (c) the intensification of religious conflicts and terrorist attacks in the West (TE-SAT 2010-2021); and (d) the metamorphosis of the social substratum in economically developed countries through the phenomenon of migration. All these factors put pressure on the religious identity of every believer, an identity circumscribed within the parameters of the boundaries that define its status and presence in dogmatic, cultic, spiritual and ideological terms.

### **The experience of globalisation: challenges, dilemmas, opportunities**

Globalisation is a multilateral process that defines a new structural dynamic under the guise of an optimised level of interconnectivity and interdependence on a planetary scale (Pieterse 1995, 45). From a psychosocial point of view, globalisation introduces us to the experience of a new reality, namely the heightened awareness of the world as a whole (Robertson 1992, 8) or, in other words, the experience of a world that perceives its borders and limits differently (Robertson 2009, 8). We are aware of our particular identity, but we take into account the plurality of cultures, religions, ethnic groups, races (Volf 2015, 40).

It should be noted that societies' response to this type of new social reality is situated on a scale between acceptance and rejection, with the intermediate positions of coexistence and synthesis. There is also a vehement religious-cultural reaction against globalisation for at least two reasons: firstly, globalisation is generated by modernity, and the discourse of

counter-modernity represents a large part of the religious hermeneutics of fundamentalist factions; secondly, the risk of uniformisation, standardisation and, implicitly, relativisation, of cultural and religious identities creates a certain degree of reluctance to take part in this dynamic (Stahl 2007, 335-354).

Globalisation, in essence a continuation, albeit in an intensified and accelerated form, of the challenge of modernisation, inevitably leads to an increasing transparency of local traditions and the opening up of more options in terms of beliefs, values and lifestyles. If for some globalisation implies the promise of an international civil society, favourable to a new era of peace and democratisation, of mutual knowledge, for others it implies the threat of a Western-style economic and political hegemony, the cultural consequence of which is a homogenised world resembling a kind of *metastatised Disneyland*. After all, man is being taken out of his own universe, or, in other words, challenged to move out of his own universe into a relationship with the universe of an other, situated in the same spatial and communicational proximity. Even in a theological order, man is a person and the person can be thought of edifyingly and comprehensively as a relational entity.

From a cultural theoretical point of view, two distinct views on the effects of globalisation in the transnational arena have been formulated: *homogenisation* and *heterogenisation*. *Cultural homogenisation* occurs when cultural particularities of one place are established in another location, without being modified as a result of their implementation in the new cultural environment. *Cultural heterogenisation*, on the other hand, occurs when the migration of cultural particularities from one place to another creates new cultural forms that encompass the characteristics of several identity places simultaneously. This process creates *cultural hybridity* by combining the cultural particularities of several places. There are also theories that conceptualise globalisation as a complex mixture of *homogeneity* and *heterogeneity*, which implies the *universalisation of particularity and difference* as well as the *particularisation of universality and identity* (Robertson 2006, 613).

Globalisation is not a unidirectional force, levelling everything in its path. The breakdown of time and space is best illustrated by Marshall McLuhan's influential *global village* thesis of 1962 (McLuhan 1962, 21). According to this thesis, *instant communication* will destroy power imbalances rooted in geography and create a *global village*. McLuhan's notion of the *global village* involved the worldwide spread of television, bringing distant events into the homes of viewers everywhere. Building on this concept, McLuhan argued that all accelerated communications produce an *implosion* of personal experience: distant events are brought to the immediate attention of people around the world. Today, in 2021, it is easy to see that what was anticipated decades ago has become a concrete reality. Facebook or Instagram adjusts a

person's identity to a global visibility. Basically, the circulation of identity cultures allows individuals to *participate* in extended social relationships that cross national and regional borders. Cultural globalisation involves the formation of shared norms and knowledge with which people associate their individual and collective identities (Berger 2002, 2). To reinforce the idea of the participatory interconnectivity of the local in the global, I propose the example of a football match. If we reflect on the globalising dimension of a football match from a world or European championship circuit. Hundreds of thousands, millions of viewers from different countries and cultures are engaged in a widely televised participation. We can deduce that the experience generated by globalisation is not *levelling*, but *participation* in cultural and religious otherness, facilitated by new communication and mobility techniques. I would like to point out that this virtual participation made accessible by digital media techniques is experienced in practice in Western metropolises where ethnic, social, religious and cultural diversity is a daily experience.

### **Transnationalisation of religion through globalisation**

Globalisation directly leads to an emulation of religion in the public sphere and interaction, a kind of *transnationalisation* of it. Religion is not a reality projected by itself and through itself, but it is articulated by those who have a theological belief and who formulate their identity by belonging to a group, a community, a church. Following this rationale, when we talk about the relationship between globalisation and religion we are taking into consideration the way in which one's religion, in its personal and public expression, is engaged in a series of reshaping and reconfigurations. In essence, it is not religions per se that interact in the global arena, but people as religious subjects.

Camil Ungureanu and Paolo Monti outline the key terms of the relationship between *globalisation* and *religion*:

‘The relationship between globalisation and religion is not only reactive or adaptive. Universalist religions drive globalisation towards the amplification of trans-regional forms of life and belonging. Globalisation represents a new opportunity for religion - in terms of communication, acculturation and conversion. The global arena is becoming a fertile ground for complex and meaningful interactions between adherents of different faiths and between religious and non-religious people. Religion offers resistance to the logic of commodification, radicalisation and deculturation’ (Ungureanu & Monti 2018, 277-278).

They bring into discussion, on the basis of philosophical, scientific and religious interpretation, two different and opposing theses, which set globalisation and religion in a bivalent relationship: (a) the divergence thesis and (b) the convergence thesis (Ungureanu & Monti 2018, 278).

The divergence thesis is based on the irreducible elements arising from the clash between different civilisations, these differences being the determining factors of global conflicts. While the convergence thesis is based on political philosophy from the perspective of a pluralist approach. Religious identities are aligned with the global techno-capitalist society, undergoing a bivalent process of *de-territorialisation* and *de-culturation*, but this process does not mean a restructuring of identity itself, in its structural content, but a re-localisation of a religious identity in a spatial and cultural sense. In this context, migration is a powerful impetus for re-localisation. In Peter Beyer's opinion, religious globalisation is best understood as a process that establishes local versions of a global pattern of religious beliefs and practices and whereby religion becomes simultaneously global and local (Beyer 2003, 379).

In another instance, David Lehmann invalidates contemporary theoretical accounts of the relationship between religion and globalisation, which are subservient to a model of globalisation as the inexorable spread of a standardized modern mono-culture that is applicable everywhere. He proposes a contrasting perspective in which religion is seen as the *original globalizer*, distinguishing between two forms of *religious globalisation: cosmopolitan* and *fundamentalist* (Lehmann 2002, 345). In what way is religion a globalising factor? An answer to this question suggests a critique of the general assumption that economic markets are the primary driving force behind globalisation. At the same time, it is at odds with the assumption that globalisation is dismantling borders, leading to relativisation, standardisation.

Globalisation of the *cosmopolitan* type is specific to erudite and institutionalized forms of religion and involves attempts to introduce a historical and contextualized theory of other cultures into the interaction of religious systems. This type of globalisation involves an equation of the power position of one religion in relation to an *other* through the theory of inculturation, with religious practices being spatially and temporally embedded (Lehmann 2002, 348). The second type of globalisation is characteristic of contemporary forms of religion, which are often labelled *fundamentalist* or *barismatic*, fundamentalist not in the pejorative meaning of the word associated with the radicalized tendencies of some political-religious movements. Such a religious version is driven not by an institutionalised hierarchy, but by a mass of independent actors who pick and choose elements from different cultures, regardless of the constraints of an official religious hierarchy governing religious life (Lehmann 2002, 345).

In this process of expanding horizons, the traditional meaning of religion is increasingly understood as religiosity or spirituality, and belonging to a community/group, but without canonical adherence regulated by religious authority.

Unlike cosmopolitan forms of religious globalisation, *homogeneity* (identity) is a more salient feature of fundamentalist globalisation than *heterogeneity* (variety). However, despite its universalising tendencies, this second fundamentalist form of globalisation is also characterised by a remarkable capacity to adopt and adapt to local customs and to establish local forms of identity (Lehmann 2002, 353).

### **Boundaries in the flux of globalisation: the *de-localisation* and *re-localisation* of religions**

As we can see from David Lehmann's remarks, at the heart of the relationship between religion and globalisation, beyond the theoretisations that are indispensable to deciphering any sort of meaning, lies the reality of *boundaries* as a factor that gives meaning to identity. One aspect in which borders play a decisive role in the dynamics of globalisation is that this phenomenon generates religious diversity. Religious identities become, to a large extent, mobile, *de-localised*.

The interaction of religions involves defining boundaries and drawing the boundaries of one's own identity. We are talking about *macro boundaries* – between religions or between religious communities / traditions, *micro boundaries* – between members of the same religion, but also boundaries between a religious community and society. Globalisation imports and articulates diversity in many local contexts, diversity that comes together as a conglomerate of boundaries. Thus globalisation does not imply the destruction of cultural boundaries; on the contrary, it generates a proliferation of new, reformulated and transversal boundaries through the spheres of culture and religion.

It is not easy to frame this *boundary* in a religious and conceptual order. Religious boundaries, in addition to specific theological, cultic and spiritual elements, have a complex fabric made up of social, psychological and cultural factors. Without these determining factors, religious boundaries cannot be understood. Two hypotheses have been advanced in scholarly research: (a) boundaries demarcate 'who is like me and who is not,' suggesting that boundaries construct and maintain cultural and social evaluations of similarity and difference; (b) boundaries represent a differential access to power, with groups on opposite sides of a given boundary having unequal access to both material and symbolic resources. Boundaries based on religious beliefs are interspersed with other

boundaries, such as political boundaries, which social actors consider to be of equal if not greater importance in determining who is similar or different from them (Fuist & Josephsohn 2013, 196).

Todd Fuist and Thomas Josephsohn point out that having a particular belief or practice does not inherently mean that that belief or practice is significant for the way a person relates to others beyond their own identity boundaries. Religious communities with specific beliefs share commonalities with other religious communities:

‘Beliefs, including religious beliefs, are not deterministic; they may be resources in creating and maintaining boundaries, or they may be less relevant than other cultural elements. Because beliefs, values and other cultural elements are resources for creating and interpreting boundaries, but do not necessarily determine them, the content, practice and meaning of beliefs matter. The properties of cultural elements, such as beliefs, highlight what boundaries mean in a context and how evident they are to individuals’ (Fuist & Josephsohn 2013, 197).

Boundaries maintain two variables: *permeability* and *relevance*. *Permeability* refers to the ability of religious people to interact across the boundary that circumscribes their identity. They may recognise a boundary but see no difficulty in interacting with others of other faiths on the premise of shared common tendencies towards the common good (Fuist & Josephsohn 2013, 199). For example, a Christian and a Muslim, from the same region, despite being aware of the differences between their religions, cooperate, express themselves tolerantly and communicate with each other for the purpose of social coexistence or even friendship. However, if a boundary is impermeable, communication between subjects across this boundary will be almost impossible. This is the case of a communication experience on the relevance of doctrinal truth. At this point, both the Christian and the Muslim cannot go beyond their dogmatic boundaries, due to the fact that these theological components define their socially, culturally, culturally expressed identity.

*Relevance* here refers to how important a particular boundary is for the day-to-day interaction between communities and people of different religions. A relevant boundary shapes interactions between people. The relevance or permeability of a boundary results from the meaning it gives to individuals. The types of meaning that individuals use to define boundaries as more or less permeable and relevant are based on relational principles, principles that define how individuals understand and differentiate themselves from each other: truth, trial, tact and tolerance (Fuist & Josephsohn 2013, 203-204).

Globalisation stretches religious boundaries, and in some contexts even erodes them. Under this impulse, man is taken out of his social, existential and religious context and brought into the experience of relating to the other. Gary D. Bouma makes an important note of caution: relating to the other, through the filter of one's own boundaries, can be achieved by *imagining* him as an *otherness*. It clarifies the boundaries that differentiate my self from your self. But the rhetoric of imagining the other can easily be framed and built on stereotypes. In many regrettable situations, the imagining of the other has been suggested by religious authorities on the basis of political interest, independent of the concrete reality of the *other*, whether we are talking about a person, a group or a religion. In these cases imagining the other is fed by misinformation in order to motivate oneself to relate in a certain way to the other. Basically, this happens in the rhetoric of radicalized religious groups. For a radicalized militant, the *other* is the representative of evil that threatens one's own identity (Bouma 2007, 192-197).

Finally, it should be noted that in the West, the socio-cultural context of post-modernity requires a redefinition of these boundaries in ways that affect the recognition, evaluation and definition of differences, including religious ones. Postmodern secular societies are characterized by *hyper-differentiation*. In postmodernity, religious boundaries are less legalistic, less organisational and much more fluid and volatile (Bouma 2000).

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, within globalisation we have a process in which all forms of boundaries (political, economic, cultural, religious) are *seemingly* crossed. Reality proves the obvious. It is not globalisation that has abolished the identity and presence of religion in society, but simply that religion no longer has the relevant resources to offer itself to the believer as a meaningful purpose in life. Globalisation does not shape the cultures that meet in its dynamics into a single homogeneous whole. On the contrary, globalisation generates an unfolding of local religious complexes and identities, but in the process it creates multiple identities and overlapping borders, in such a way that the evidence of diversity is a reshaping of trends in the visibility of religions and spiritualities. In the encounter of two religious cultures, one entrenched in a certain space, the other radically alien to that space, there is no abolition of the pre-existing religion, but the establishment of relationship between the exponents of the two religions based on observation and awareness of the particular characteristics of each. This causes a reshaping of personal attitudes on the basis of experience and

observation of the other, an inter-religious exchange, by setting new limits to structural differences.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Research conducted by *Pew Research (Center demographic projections)* in 2015 unambiguously highlights the reality of religious pluralism in the world of the 21st century, a pluralism that is much more visible and analyzable through new communication and sociological research techniques in statistics. The religious map of the world is as follows: Christians 31.2%, Muslims 24.1%, religiously unaffiliated 16%, Hindus 15.1%, Buddhists 6.9%, popular religions 5.7%, other religions 0.8%, Jews 0.2% (Hackett & McClendon 2017).

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