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Religion and Culture in a Global World: a Sociological Approach

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Abstract:

The complex nature of the globalization process has contributed to the development of a vast and varied scientific literature on the topic. Theoretical and political conflicts are frequent and there is vivid debate aimed at assessing the impact of globalization on culture. Religions occupy a key place in this discussion. This paper investigates how the cultural globalization process has been presented by mainstream sociological theory and how religion has been conceptualized as part of this process. To do this, the paper first presents the three main approaches to cultural globalization: the homogenization thesis, polarization thesis and hybridization thesis. Secondly, it links these theses with the phenomenon of religion.

Key Words:

Clash of Civilizations, Globalization, Hybridization, Homogenization, Polarization, Secularization.

Resumen:

La naturaleza compleja del proceso de globalización ha contribuido al desarrollo de una amplia y variada literatura científica sobre el tema. Conflictos teóricos y políticos son frecuentes y existe un intenso debate con el objetivo de evaluar el impacto de la globalización en la cultura. Las religiones ocupan un lugar clave en esta discusión. Este artículo investiga cómo el proceso de globalización cultural está siendo presentado por la corriente sociológica principal y cómo la religión ha sido conceptualizada como parte de este proceso. Con este propósito, el artículo muestra en primer lugar las tres aproximaciones principales a la globalización cultural: la tesis de la homogeneización, la tesis de la polarización y la tesis de la hibridación. Y, en segundo lugar, liga estas tesis con el fenómeno religioso.

Palabras clave:

Choque de civilizaciones, globalización, hibridación, homogeneización, polarización, secularización.

Religion and Culture in a Global World: a Sociological Approach[1]

1. Introduction: culture as a key dimension of globalization

The purpose of this paper is to review the influence of the cultural globalization process on religion and culture. Hence, it introduces the main theoretical accounts and perspectives on cultural globalization in order to describe the changing role of religion in the global world. To do this, this paper expands previous research on cultural globalization (Martín-Cabello, 2007), extending the scope from culture as a whole to religion.

The two past decades have been witness to the publication of thousands of books and articles on globalization. It has been argued that the concept of globalization is multifaceted and polysemic. Nayef Al-Rodhan (2006) found 114 different definitions of globalization. Therefore, there is no agreement about the scope and content of the concept. However, some key ideas about it can be identified. The first one is the lessening of spatial boundaries and time constraints. Malcolm Waters define globalization as:

> A social process in which the constraints of geography on economic, political, social and cultural arrangements recede, in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding and in which people act accordingly (1995: 4-5).

Secondly, it implies the complex connection of people, organizations, institutions and countries while, lastly, it means the redefinition of modern Social Sciences, traditionally centred on the nation-state.

The origin of the globalization process appears unclear. Nevertheless, although many authors have delayed the emergence of globalization by hundreds – even thousands – of years, in another publication, I attempted to show that this is a relatively current process (Martín-Cabello, 2013). Thus, the concept describes an accelerated, historically recent and contemporaneous process of social change which affects not only the economy, but also culture and religion. Anthony Giddens (1990) points out the importance of culture in the globalization process and, in fact, several studies have addressed the importance of the globalization process to religion (Beyer, 2001, 2006, 2013; Beyer and Beaman, 2007; Juergesmeyer, 2003).

The paper is presented in two sections. Section 2 describes the main approaches to cultural globalization: the homogenization, polarization and hybridization theses. Section 3 applies the model described in the preceding section to religion. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing these approaches in order to produce an overview enabling us to understand the multiple connections between globalization and religion and their ambivalent relationships.

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2. Global culture or global cultures?

Agreement can be found in academic literature about the emergence of a global culture and its increasing role in the contemporary world (Giddens, 1990; Robertson, 1992a). However, there is no such agreement on describing the character of global culture and its social, economic and political consequences. Schematically, it is possible to outline two main answers: first, one of the most common responses says that global culture is a unique Western, commercial, secular, homogeneous and hegemonic culture. When global culture is viewed from this perspective, the main issue is exploring the impact of the expansion of global culture on regional or local cultures (and even on other global cultures). If global culture, as proposed, is a hegemonic domination of a particular culture, there are two possible scenarios that emerge as result of the response of local cultures. On the one hand, it had been argued that global culture will produce the homogenization of local cultures. Furthermore, other social scientists had affirmed that regional and/or local cultures could resist the impact of global culture. The outcome is a scenario of cultural polarization.

Second, other authors have argued that global culture is product of a mixture of different local cultures. In this sense, we are observing the emergence of a new hybrid culture. *Manga* comics, South American *telenovelas* and Latino music are part of the global culture in the same way that are Hollywood, MTV or CNN. Thus, most authors talk about "global cultures", not about "a global culture". These scenarios are summarized in Table 1 and they are explained in the following sections.

Table 1. Three paradigms on the relationship between global and local cultures.

Author/Thesis	Homogenization	Polarization	Hybridization
Stuart Hall	Dominant-hegemonic code	Oppositional code	Negotiated code
Ulf Hanner	Global homogenization scenario (fast) and saturation scenario (slow)	Peripheral corruption scenario	Maturation scenario
Jan N. Pieterse	Convergence (Modernization, Westernization, Americanization, McDonaldization)	Differentiation (Clash of civilizations)	Mixture (Hybridization, Mestization, Creolization, Syncretism)
Robert Holton	Homogenization	Polarization	Hybridization

Source: Hall, 2002; Hanner, 1996; Holton, 2002; Pieterse, 2010.

2.1. Homogenization thesis

The first thesis – the domination of global culture and the homogenization of local cultures – is widespread in mainstream globalization theory. Global culture has often been seen as the consequence of the global diffusion of modernity (Appadurai, 1996; Giddens, 1990; Martín-Cabello, 2007; Ortiz, 1998). This thesis argues that:

> The expansion of European powers overseas helped entrench new forms of cultural globalization with innovations in transport and communications, notably regularized mechanical transport and

the telegraph. These technological advances helped the West to expand and enabled the secular philosophies which emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – especially science, liberalism and socialism – to diffuse and transform the cultural context of almost every society on the planet" (Held and McGrew, 2002: 31).

Within Social Sciences, the theory of homogenization has taken various formulations. First, the concept of "cultural imperialism" has emerged. This concept tries to emphasize that the political and economic dependence between the metropolis and their colonies (now independent states) were replaced by cultural dependence (Eudes, 1984; Tomlinson, 1991; Merrouche, 2006). The dominance is based nowadays on soft power rather than hard power (Nye, 2011), and on symbolic violence rather than physical violence (Bourdieu, 2000).

Second, it has been argued that cultural globalization can be seen as the expansion of Western culture or "Westernization" (Latouche, 1992) and, more specifically, of American culture or "Americanization" (Beck et al, 2003; Kuisel, 1993; Peels, 1997). Recently, Daniele Conversi (2010) maintained that globalization could still be seen in terms of Americanization. Although cultural globalization began chronologically in 1980, it maintained strong ties to the United States of America's (USA) expansion after the Second World War. Finally, some concepts have been created specifically to analyse cultural homogenization: "Grobalization" (Ritzer, 2007), "McDonaldization" (Ritzer, 2011), "Coca-colonization" (Wagnleitner, 1994) or "Disneylization" (Bryman, 2001, 2004). In any case, all these notions have been used to describe the expansion of a modern culture across the planet and the homogenization that is produced by this process.

It is interesting to note that the homogenization thesis builds a picture of global culture based on four main assumptions. Global culture is seen as a homogeneous whole, or as having some consistency, and with few contradictions and internal conflicts. The main objective of this culture is to expand globally and dominate local cultures. The consequence of this cultural imperialism is the homogenization of the cultures of the entire planet. Finally, this thesis considers that the expansion of global culture is an inexorable and teleological process, because local cultures cannot resist the pressure of global culture.

2.2. Polarization thesis

The second thesis emphasizes the resistance of local cultures against the assaults of global culture, which produces the appearance of a conflicting cultural world. This thesis is well represented by the verses of Rudyard Kipling in *The Ballad of East and West*: "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never twain Shall meet". Several accounts had been made using this perspective.

First, literary and cultural studies had developed two popular concepts to express this perspective: "Orientalism" and "Occidentalism". The concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism attempt to address stereotypes arising from the experience of colonialism and are strongly related to the notion of cultural imperialism. Edward Said (1978) coined the term "Orientalism" in order to explain the romantic distortion of the Middle East by European intellectuals. Fascinated by the colonized peoples, at the same time they justified colonial domination. These peoples' cultures were seen as more authentic and original, but also considered backward, ultraconservative and reactionary. The peoples of the colonized countries were not considered fully adult and, therefore, as needing to live under the control of the metropolitan government.

To address these stereotypes, others of a contrasting perspective arose during the

decolonization process. The concept of Occidentalism is used to describe the distorted images that colonized peoples had regarding Western peoples (Carrier, 2003). These images usually emerged during struggles for political independence, and did not disappear when independence was achieved.

Both positions generate strong stereotypes that emphasize differences and obviate cultural contacts between the two cultural worlds. Paradoxically, both ideologies share strong connections.

> The view of the West in Occidentalism is like the worst aspects of its counterpart, Orientalism, which strips its human targets of their humanity. Some Orientalist prejudices made non-Western people seem less that fully adult human beings; they had the minds of children, and could thus be treated as lesser breeds. Occidentalism is at least as reductive; its bigotry simply turns the Orientalist view upside down. To diminish an entire society or a civilization to a mass of soul-less, decadent, money-grubbing, rootless, faithless, unfeeling parasites is a form of intellectual destruction (Buruma y Margalit, 2004: 10).

Secondly, the polarization thesis has been popular among political scientists. The most influential approach had been developed by Samuel P. Huntington (2003) around the notion of a "clash of civilizations". For the American political scientist, the world is divided into different civilizations trying to maintain their cultural integrity and facing a proselytizing West anxious to expand its culture auto-defined as universal. With a similar argument, Benjamin R. Barber (1996) argues that the global spread of capitalism and consumerism collides with answers like that produced by Islamic fundamentalism. He coined the term "McWorld vs. Jihad" to reflect this conflict. Thomas L. Friedman (2000) used the metaphor "Lexus vs. Olive Tree" in the same sense. The result is not a culturally homogeneous world, but a polarized world.

Finally, sociologists have developed their own version of this thesis. Manuel Castells (2011) talks about the resistance of local cultures against the global culture of transnational capitalism, and Zygmunt Bauman (1998) sets up a dichotomy between the cosmopolitan elite who control the globalization process and the people anchored in the local context. The conflict between global culture and its global elites with local culture and local peoples is the natural dynamic of our times.

In summary, the polarization thesis argues that cultural globalization is cultural imperialism. If cultural globalization is not stopped, it will lead to the cultural homogenization of other cultures and, consequently, to their demise. In contrast with the vision outlined in the previous section, emphasis is placed on the defensive capacity of local cultures and their own strength and internal coherence. This would lead to a world polarized between a hegemonic global culture and local cultures full of conflicting claims to western expansionism. The analysis therefore fits the homogenization thesis, but does not fit the outcome of the process. The resistance scenario suggests that global culture tries to build an hegemonic discourse, but that local cultures resist this attempt. The result would be the appearance of a world of mutually exclusive polarized cultures.

2.3. Hybridization thesis

The third thesis does not see the extent of global culture as a process of cultural homogenization or as a process of confrontation between a global culture and local cultures.

For this approach, local cultures are not passive or defensive recipients. They act as active agents in the creation and gestation of global culture. Two broad approaches that maintain this position can be identified: the first approach points out that global culture is not simply an extension of modern Western culture, although it initially could be, since local cultures interact with it, modifying and adapting it to their needs. For the latter, global culture is increasingly the result of the mixture or fusion of different cultures throughout the planet.

The former approach has developed a new account of modernity using the concept "multiple modernities". According to this theory,

> the modern character can manifest in many different ways, which in turn are conditioned by the customs, social patterns, political cultures and other locally specific factors. (...) The cultural program of modernity is manifested by locally specific forms (Sachsenmaier, 2010: 110, 116).

In other words, modernity has to negotiate its extension in specific local contexts. The outcome is an incoherent, mixed and complex modernity. In the cultural field, the idea of multiple modernities finds expression in the concept of "glocalization" (Robertson, 1992a, 1992b), which emphasized the idea of the blended nature of global culture.

The latter approach goes further and suggests that global culture is a hybrid culture (García Canclini, 2005; Pieterse, 2009). It is the result of the combination of different local cultures that come into contact exploiting modern media and transports. In this sense, the global culture cannot be seen as a game between dominant and resistant cultures: its essence rests on the connection between the different cultures that are influenced in many ways and always generate hybrid responses. In short,

> The relations between different cultures established in the new cross-cultural social spaces and supported by new technologies and capitalist markets, represent the core of a new fundamental social dimension in determining cultures: the open relationship with the other has replaced the nationalist and ethnocentric model and it has even relativized the Western model. And it is increasingly the model of the future world culture (Steingress, 2003: 80).

3. The role of religion in a global world

Religion is a key-dimension of cultural globalization. Several authors have maintained that globalization has produced a deep impact on religious institutions (Esposito et. al., 2007; Hopkins et. al. 2001; Reid, 2003). However, they do not agree about the consequences of that impact. In fact, it is possible to describe three scenarios which roughly fit the thesis presented above. First, the homogenization thesis presents cultural globalization as a threat to religion: secular society is overlapping and destroying religious institutions. Second, the polarization thesis describes religion in the age of globalization as the key dimension in a clash of civilizations. Finally, the hybridization thesis posits the emergence of new syncretic religions and the interbreeding of religion institutions as the natural consequence of cultural globalization.

3.1. Homogenization as secularization

The first scenario involves the decline of religion as a result of the extension of secular global culture. In this sense, the modern global culture is a non-religious and post-metaphysical culture

(Habermas, 2006). New sets of values replace religious values in current societies. Roland Inglehart (1997), using data from the World Values Survey, has argued that an increase in "moral relativism" and a concomitant decrease in "religiosity" are present in the change from traditional to modern and postmodern societies. Moreover, "secularization" did not mean only the backward movement of religion and its moral values; it implied the emergence of new secular ideologies such as socialism or liberalism. In other words, the secularization thesis describes the cultural globalization as a process of Westernization and retreat of traditional religions.

Following this discourse, one of the leading theorists on religion and globalization, Peter Beyer (1994), has asserted that globalization brings a marginalization of religion. The response is to defend a particularistic religion or, on the contrary, develop a liberal religious ethic. The first answer drives directly into the polarization thesis reviewed in the following section. The second one tries to deal with the experience of some western countries – primarily the USA – that continue to give religion and religious institutions an important place in public life. This phenomenon appears directly opposed to the secularization thesis.

The most plausible solution to this paradox would be the emergence of a liberal religious ethic in USA. In one of his most recent books, Niall Ferguson (2012) holds that the USA's religiosity is far from traditional religiosity. In fact, religiosity in the United States is close to a "religiosity of consumerism" that makes very few demands on its believers. This persistence could also be explained by the strong competition among churches in the USA in contrast with European religious monopolies. This competition promotes more diffuse religious controls in order to increase congregations. In this sense, John Drane (2000) has argued that churches have become empty shells that use the same tools as commercial franchises. As result of this process, churches become less and less creative and more consistent with the commercial and secular spirit of postmodern societies. In other words, cultural homogenization is having a profound effect on religion.

3.2. Polarization: the clash of religions

In other studies, findings were inconsistent with the results suggested by the homogenization thesis. British historian Christopher A. Bayly (2004) argues that European imperialism did not bring secularization to non-Western societies. On the contrary, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism reinforced their sacred doctrines and practices using modern means of communications. These religions build more solid bureaucracies and stronger educational institutions. The overall goal was to preserve their religions and cultural heritages in order to stop, on the one hand, Christian missionaries and, on the other, secular ideologies such as liberalism or socialism.

The metaphors "Jihad" or "Olive Tree" have been used without ambiguity in order to reflect the opposition of Islam to global western culture. Similarly, religion is at the core of the "Clash of Civilizations" theory because Huntington's list of civilizations is basically a list of religions. The hidden assumption is that religions are homogeneous entities that configured civilizations that are structurally in conflict. This position is not only supported by Western intellectuals: as Shahzadi Pakeeza and Ali Asghar Chishti have pointed out: "Muslims generally believe Globalization is being essentially directed by the West and those who are under its sphere of influence, such as Japan and some of the South-East Asian states" (2012: 727). In other words, religions are fighting against Western global culture.

Other authors have maintained that globalization facilitates the triumph of religions as an imagined community in their competition with nation-states. In other words, globalization

allows religions to escape from the modern cage of iron imposed by the nation-state (Casanova, 2001). Transnational Catholicism or Global Pentecostalism would be good examples. Modern Islam suffers the same dynamics. Islam cannot change the current international system based in nation-states. Nevertheless, this religion is a key factor in the global system. Thus,

> Islam is unlikely to *replace* the state system as such but it leaves open the possibility of growing international and intra-national influence in the name of Islam. In other words, *culture* can provide a transnational dimension to patterns of governance (Beeley, 1995: 196).

In both cases, religion appears as a deterrent of global culture and in opposition to the current system of nation-states. The outcome is opposition between local religions strongly linked with nation-states or transnational religions (alternative cultural globalizations) and secular and western global culture.

3.3. Hybridization: from religious syncretism to the New Age

The last scenario shows an interbreeding of human cultures and religions. As Peter L. Berger points out:

> What is happening in different parts of the world is that people, often with a great ingenuity, are trying and often succeeding in blending Western-derived modernity with elements of traditional culture. It seems to me that this is a very positive development, and religion plays an important part in it. (Berger, 2003: 7).

In that sense, Western modernity is suffering a process of mixing that could change its own configuration. Some sociologists maintain that modernization is not a one-way process and that, on the contrary, it is a multiple-way process that always implies negotiation with local societies and results in the production of complex reinterpretations of modernity. Thus, secularization is part of Western modernity, but it is reinterpreted in local contexts. In this regard, it is possible to speak of the emergence of a new post-secular society (Rosati and Stoeckl, 2012). Post-secular society entails the co-existence of secular and religious thoughts, a religious pluralism and a pluralisation of the sacred.

Some theorists have argued that syncretism is the natural state of religion. For example, there are descriptions of syncretism between Christian and traditional African religions (Peel, 1968) or between paganism, Christianity and Islam in some regions of Eurasia (Yagafova, 2011). The novelty could be seen in the growth of this pattern due to cultural globalization inside Western society, which traditionally had built its identity around strong, monopolistic religions.

Traditional religions have been substituted by new forms of spirituality in current societies which are trying to avoid the false dichotomies of modernity and deal with the new global conscience. The "New Age" represents an attempt to blend different religious influences into an open spirituality (Martín Velasco, 2006: 534-536). Cultural globalization is the context that permits the existence of these new syncretic movements both inside and outside Western societies.

4. Conclusions

Cultural globalization appears as a central process to modern religiosity. However, there is no agreement between social scientists about the character and scope of cultural globalization. This paper has maintained that there are three frequent theses suggested in this regard. First, the homogenization thesis argues that there is one single, homogeneous and integrated world culture, usually produced in Western countries. This is a hegemonic culture that will create a homogeneous world culture that blurs the lines between it and local cultures. Second, the polarization thesis maintains that global culture will battle with local cultures in a never-ending war. This thesis expands the characteristics of global culture to local cultures. Finally, the hybridization thesis states that global culture is pluralistic and heterogeneous because it is created by the interrelationships among different world cultures.

Strongly linked with the typology proposed above, a similar classification can be applied to describe the currently changing role of religion. The first scenario describes the homogenization of world culture into a secular Western culture. Religions cannot resist its strength and are watering down or reinterpreting their doctrine to accommodate global culture. The second scenario, on the contrary, proposes the resistance of religions and the emergence of a world society affected by conflicts between religions and global culture. The last scenario suggests the emergence of new hybrid religious forms inside and outside Western countries.

The paper, in its limited format, is part of a wider attempt to combine the ideas of the Sociology of Culture and Cultural Studies with the aim of proposing a more integrated approach to dealing with the cultural globalization process. Additionally, it attempts to make a small contribution towards the development of a more open Social Science, one far removed from "methodological nationalism". Religion is at the core of human cultures, and the globalization of culture generates multiple changes in it. Unfortunately, nowadays we believe that Social Sciences cannot read the direction of history, and thus it is not clear which of the three proposed scenarios is more plausible. However, the actors, rules and scenario are clearly defined.

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Brief biographical note

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