

Developing Christianity

Religion is becoming more and more pervasive in the lives of religious practitioners. With the rise of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish subcultures and counter-cultures, religion has found ways to permeate nearly every part of one's life if one allows it. An easy example here in America is the Contemporary Christian Music industry and the strong attachment American Evangelicals have to listening to “Christian” music over “secular”¹ music—even though the majority of the “Christian” music industry is “secular” owned². It would be wrong, though, to assume that this zeal for “Christian” music is a result of some kind of authoritative declaration coming down from a central authority. This desire among American Evangelicals stems from an identification with a community at the supranational, global level. The desire is no longer for a Christian State, but rather a global Christianity that transcends borders and cultures. What these “born again” believers are looking for is the unwritten identification with the greater community and the self-enforcement of their own moral code. By looking at what Olivier Roy describes of Islam in his *Globalized Islam*, we will be able to find a parallel line in American Christianity. With these two examples in Islam and Christianity, we can then look more closely at Roy's description for a more generalized form of globalized religion. We will see how globalization relates to both identification and power and

1 That is, something not created for a strictly Christian audience by professing Christians.

2 The “big 3” (Word, Sparrow, and Provident-Integrity) are each owned by non-Christian organizations (Warner, EMI, Sony/BMG, respectively).

authority. By analyzing a recent movement within American Evangelicalism, we shall discover a trend towards globalization. Additionally, we will look at the third major “Western” religion, Judaism, and find its own parallel in Christianity. By looking at Christianity in other cultures, we will discover a second trend: that of secularization. Can these two trends continue to coexist?

Globalized Religion

The roots of globalization can be traced to a change in signification and, closely related, deterritorialization. Similar to Heidegger's concept of “thrownness,” Deleuze argues that “the world begins to signify before anyone knows *what* it signifies.”³ Also significant in Deleuze's argument here is that signs only refer to other signs where a sign may be the one giving meaning as signified for a moment, but “it continually glides beneath the signifier, for which it serves only as a medium or wall: the specific forms of all contents dissolve in it.”⁴ In other words, the process can be seen as a snowball taken from a pile of snow and thrown back into it: only for a few moments is the snowball distinct from the pile of snow until it dissipates back into the amorphous mass. Signs slide into and out of the chain of signification that ebbs and flows between sense and nonsense. At one moment, a sign (or set of signs even) may make complete sense to a person. At another moment, however, those signs may have lost all of their earlier

3 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005), 112.

4 *TP*, 112.

meaning. Those signs may have even been recycled and given new meaning. This process can be seen as a hint at Nietzsche's eternal return because it is never-ending and infinitely circular.

Globalization happens when this circularity of signs begins to be unwound and decoded. It is a search for a stable, transcendent identification and needn't be religious in nature. This is done by a procedure unique to what Deleuze calls the postsignifying regime: subjectification. The circular signifying regime becomes a linear progression of “waves” that ebb and flow—a “proceeding that runs its course, at which point a new proceeding begins.”⁵ This proceeding *is* the line of deterritorialization. Taking the progression to its next level, the globalization of religion recalls its earlier incarnation into a simulation of it. The simulation, then, is given new meaning by placing in its same position as before but without the associated power of signifier. This simulacrum of authority is left as a facade of the power of authority. It is a betrayal of the earlier incarnation and the sovereignty which it claimed for itself.

The betrayal of the signifying regime by the postsignifying one is reciprocated and becomes a double betrayal. This then only breeds further the subjectification of the postsignifying regime, resulting in a greater departure from the signifying regime into “a linear proceeding into which the sign is swept via subject.”⁶ Signification becomes individualized and

5 *TP*, 120.

6 *TP*, 127.

given over to the subject. Embedded in this passion of the subject arises a new form of slavery which feeds on one being in command as a subject—a slavery to oneself. Globalized religion appeals to individuals and not to groups. For it to effectively reach individuals, globalized religion must take control of the symbolic sphere for those individuals. Roy argues that this is why the Taliban government destroyed statues of the Buddha, but they would have done so even if the statues had no religious meaning whatsoever.⁷ In other words, not only must the religion be deterritorialized, but also the context it is in must also be deterritorialized. There cannot be alternative regimes of signification for a globalized religion. This is why groups like al Qaida attack *symbols* of the West instead of more logistical targets. It is not because they are unaware of how a hierarchical State works; it is because they are seeking to destroy the symbolic foundation of the West, which is perceived more as capitalism than anything else.

Where does this path of deterritorialization leave religion? First off, religion becomes an identification with a supranational community of believers with an imagined center. This community has individually pondered and determined what it means to be a “believer.” Through the use of the imagined center, then, it is assumed that not all who use the name of the religion are “true” believers because they are not “born again” or they are “cultural believers.” Because the community is imagined, the “born again” believers are akin to small pockets of nomads. There is no

⁷ Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam* (New York: Columbia University, 2004), 261.

group authority and those who do hold a form of leadership only do so temporarily as individual desires shift. Cohesion is kept primarily by appealing to the imagined center, even though it has no actual power or authority over the individual believers. This center is the point of identification. It can be seen in the usage of old geographic names for locations that are different on the current map (e.g. Babylon for what is roughly Iraq). For a globalized religion, the imagined center is an old world oddity that exists primarily as a means of identifying with the previous form of religion (under the signifying regime) and nothing more. It is a totem now in a museum with a loss of meaning.

This use of an imagined center for identification fits well into the concept of an imagined universal community. By becoming an amorphous collection, the universal community uses the imagined center in lieu of a name for identification. The name (e.g. "Christian," "Muslim") has lost meaning and value in the economy of globalized religion—anyone can claim the name without actually being a believer. The new economy, then, focuses on the imagined community, the imagined center, the imagined unity, etc. In other words, it focuses on its *simulation* as its identification. With this, then, globalized religion isn't "real" in the same sense that the European Union is "real" because its identification is based on simulacra. Yet, it is very real in the hearts and minds of the "born again" believers because of its immanent nature. It is immediately accessible, regardless of

its imagined being. The globalized religion is immediately accessible through the use of technology and media (e.g. the internet) both by individuals who are part of the rhizomatic network and by others.

The identification with an imagined universal community does not correlate with unity. Just as the signifying regime and its State had differences, so does the globalized religion. By its very nature of being individualized religiosity, difference ensues. Power, then, is the result of the relations internal to the imagined community, disregarding any difference. Power is no longer hierarchical; it is the strength of connections much like weak forces in the atom.

Islam and Christianity

In *Globalized Islam*, Roy begins with fundamentalism and notes how its relationship with politics quickly dissipated its zeal as a religious movement. Out of its ashes arose a form of Islam that cared less about national politics and more about a global community while still remaining faithful to the conservative ethos in the former. Ultimately, this is the result of minoritization—Muslims becoming a minority in a foreign land because of their being uprooted from their homelands. It isn't just a “fist out of water” scenario, but a complete change in social context without any kind of preparation beforehand (if there is any). The uprooted people then find themselves integrating with the foreign culture while their offspring have been so enmeshed in it that it has always been a part of their lives. Yet with

the younger generations comes a lack of “tradition.” The first generation immigrants brought with them their culture, practices, and beliefs into a land that has a different set. Without that context, the younger generations fail to understand their own cultural identity, while also not being able to obtain an identity in the “new” culture because they are outsiders. As outsiders to the land they live in and the tradition they’re from, these younger generations search for a method of identification that is not based on their parents' cultural past (i.e. their “homeland”) or on their own current residence. This search for identification leads them to a form of their religious past that has removed cultural ties: a global community of believers. This global community, the *ummah* for Muslims, does exactly what these resident aliens desire: a manner of identification that has stripped away any cultural context of the early immigrants and transformed the entire system of culture and ritual into a transcendent, universal religiosity. In what way does this transformation affect Islam?

One of the main factors of this transformation according to Roy is a lack of effect by the religious on the politics at the national level. With Islam, this failure of politics was enacted in both “new” countries (e.g. France, Germany) as well as “old” (e.g. Turkey, Egypt). The failure includes both the “secularization” of religious political groups whereby the religious motivations for political action is removed from the field of play and a failure to successfully enact the religious groups' political agenda(s). In

some cases, this leads to unrest in the followers of such a religious group as well as violent groups. The second ingredient comes in the form of a minoritization of the particular religious group. For Islam, this occurred by people moving to foreign lands that did not have a large community of Muslims. As a result, the immigrant Muslims soon began to “lose” their culture and become more Westernized. As second and subsequent generations grew up as natives of the foreign land, their cultural and historical heritage was removed from their normal experiences. This led to the desire for an identification that could flow between their heritage and their current country of residence. That identity was found in a strand of “born again” Islam based on one's religious commitments and not one's geographical origin. The third part for this shift in identification lies within the objectification of one's religious commitments. It is no longer just outsiders asking what makes one a “Muslim.” Even the believers ponder this and redefine what it means to be part of that religion. There is, then, a look for ahistorical data to determine what makes one “Muslim,” and the answer typically comes in the form of a transcendent identification. Hence, we find the “born again” Muslims defining Islam as a global community without any kind of historical or cultural context necessary. As a consequence of this re-thinking of Islam, “born again” Muslims began to sacralize everyday life into a religious practice. Both ritual worship and

normal life is recast as a duty for God. There is no singular “sacred space” because everything has become sacred.

While Christianity and Islam have many differences, the same arc that Roy looks at in Islam can be seen in Christianity. This may be more true in America than in Europe because it seems that Christianity “secularized” quietly in Europe, possibly due to a lack of concern from the important parties. But in America, Christians continue to claim a more integral role to the national image. In many ways, American Christianity is just starting to see the political failure of Christianity, something that Muslims experienced 20 years ago. More and more leaders are becoming either completely detached from their religious tradition or fail to link Christian religious convictions to a national political campaign. Today, most of the religious groups that deal in politics do so less and less from a religious point of view (e.g. Jerry Falwell⁸). Additionally, many of the well-known proponents of Christian politics prove in spectacular fashions their own lack of “Christian morals” (e.g. Ted Haggard's “scandal”, Pat Robertson's comments on Chavez), appearing to the public as no better than the “secular” people in politics. Yet Christians who do accept this model do so to such an extreme that alternative positions are likely to be painted as being “anti-Christian.”

Corresponding to this failure of political Christianity is an increase in “Christian spirituality” or an increase in religiosity. There is less

⁸ Jerry Falwell's newsletters (“Falwell Confidential”) use Christian symbols (Jesus, Gog, Ten Commandments, etc) but only when they work towards his political goals.

identification with a particular group or denomination and even denominations try to hide their ties by setting up churches that claim to be “nondenominational.”⁹ With this push towards removing any kind of localized identity, American Evangelicalism is making room for a new, global identity: the *Church*. It is identification with no longer a local church but with the universal Church that American Evangelicals are turning towards. We can see this in figures like Rick Warren whose recent travels included some interesting words in Syria, as well as what is considered the world's most populated church in South Korea. American Evangelicalism is untying itself from its national roots and seeking to identify with a greater, global community.

A third influence on this change in American Evangelicalism is its attempt to minoritize itself. By seeking to create a Christian subculture—something more akin to minority groups fighting for their identity, American Evangelicals are willingly letting go of the national image even while blaming this on the “secularization” of the nation. Furthermore, American Evangelicals are questioning what it means to be “Christian.” While the “old guard” still sees this in terms of national identity (e.g. “America is a *Christian* nation”), younger groups increasingly identify in terms of an ahistorical religiosity. This can be seen in the name for Robert Webber's project: the Ancient-Future Church. By seeking to find roots in an

⁹ I have personal experience with one such church that claimed to be “nondenominational” while also being active members in the Southern Baptist Convention's local association.

earlier incarnation of Christianity while ignoring whatever context(s) it was in is the exact same movement we see in the globalization of Islam. The one aspect of the globalization of Islam that hasn't been developed in Christianity is the return to the old code of law (e.g. Sharia for Islam). This may be because no such equivalent is perceived in early Christianity. Yet, as the West further "secularizes," we shall see this globalization of Christianity occurring more.

One last similarity between Christianity and Islam in terms of globalization is the dissipation of religious authority. Denominations maintain some guise of hierarchy, but do so on a voluntary basis. Most churches are free to leave their denomination, join another, or go "independent" without much fuss. Even within the denomination, authority is based more on majority rule than some mandate. Denominations have become democratic playgrounds. Religious authority itself has become more decentralized, especially within American Evangelicalism, as the focus has shifted almost entirely to personal interpretation of the Bible—what one reads is what one believes. If one doesn't want to accept a different interpretation, then one can always go to another church. Unlike Islam, Christianity has become a consumer commodity no different than one's choice of fast food. The subculture of Christianity that rejects this is where globalized Christianity begins.

Christianity Globalized

One of the primary subcultures in Christianity that is growing at leaps and bounds now falls under the name of the “Emerging Church.” This movement is found both in American Evangelicals who have felt the failure of political Christianity as well as in developed countries that have long lost any kind of political Christianity (e.g. Australia, Great Britain) and in developing countries that have never seen a Christian political movement (e.g. Kenya, Nigeria). This movement shares no required central beliefs besides possibly some basic creeds (i.e. Nicene and Apostles' creeds), yet is largely a reaction to *American* Christian politics. In America, there is a resurgence of individual religiosity over some kind of cultural identity, with voices such as Donald Miller consistently arguing for “Christian spirituality” against “institutional religion.” The Emerging Church movement in America seeks to identify more with a global community than with any kind of local branch or denomination. This new movement focuses less on orthodoxy (and its history, development, philosophy, etc) and more on orthopraxy and community. Much like its counterpart in Islam, this movement is apathetic towards Western symbols while being fully immersed in the West. We can see that many proponents of this movement prefer global associations and reject military actions. In many ways, we have a movement that claims to be post-liberal, post-conservative, and post-evangelical.¹⁰

¹⁰It seems that one prominent characteristic is the use of the prefix “post-” in description.

In its early stages during the 1990s, the Emerging Church movement went by many different names (Young Leaders Network, etc) without ever settling on a single one until 2001 when the main part of the movement (the Terra Nova project that descended from the Young Leaders Network) became known as Emergent. This group started with wanting to develop theology in a postmodern context and looked to people like Stanley Grenz as their main guides. Another guide was Leonard Sweet, a voracious writer who focused more on liturgy and practices in a postmodern context. As a result, the movement began to drift away from the theological applications and focused on practices. This led the group to the mystical side of Christianity and looking to people like Julian of Norwich and Theresa of Avila as their heroes. The dance with mysticism created a need for a new kind of leader and found it in Brian McLaren. It is interesting to note that McLaren never claimed to be a leader of the movement, something that has upset many conservative Evangelicals who want some people to stand up and claim leadership of the group. It seems that as McLaren published more books on the subject, he consistently rejected being considered the leader of this movement... even as people read his books and considered him the de facto spokesman of the movement.

In its continual rejection of leadership, the Emerging Church movement showed itself as the deterritorialized Christianity: no hierarchical leadership. For a few years, there seemed to be a prescribed silence from

the group of people who were creating this movement as to which were “leaders.” In fact, leadership seemed to be utterly lacking because of the prolonged silence. Even those who wanted to join in the movement were met with no defined leadership. Finally, in June 2005, the movement published a letter titled “A Response to Recent Criticism” and provided a list of the authors,¹¹ all of which have been considered leaders in the movement for some time. While this did not give absolute certainty on the matter, it did confirm what others had suspected for a while. This was confirmation that a small group of people were directing the movement, regardless of which direction it was going. Near the end of 2005, the movement began to split: one of the original members, Mark Driscoll, parted ways and formed his own group that began to think of theology in a postmodern context but remaining centered within the Reformed tradition.

The Emerging Church movement further shows itself as the early stages of deterritorialized Christianity: no defined set of doctrine, except for “acceptance” which became the measure for many other accepted beliefs; if a belief did not show enough “acceptance,” then it was excluded as yet another rejected belief. The movement became more of an example of negative theology than of any radical movement. For all of its desire to be radical, however, the movement quickly drifted back towards a liberal theology that matched its more liberal politics. The “new kind of Christian”

¹¹ Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones, and Chris Seay.

McLaren proclaimed looks much like the old one. For example, Robert Webber once complained that the national meetings of the Emerging Church movement look and feel much like the megachurch phenomenon they are trying to replace.¹² What is significant about this movement and how does it relate to the Globalization of Christianity? It would seem that this movement is only the precursor to Globalized Christianity in that it calls for a global community but it fails to remove its cultural context. The *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* recently spent one of its issues on the Emerging Church movement and how it looks internationally. Most of its content, however, came from English-speaking people from English-speaking lands (Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, the United States). The Emerging Church is still lacking in diversifying beyond the English-speaking lands and will probably continue to do so as it is unable to create a form of identification that includes non-English peoples.

Enlightenment to Dispersion

The other primary trend in Christianity and the Emerging Church in particular is that towards secularization. Whereas the trend for globalization seeks to create an imagined community based on ahistorical concepts, this trend seeks to localize its community and remove itself from national and international fields (e.g. politics) as its own entity. That is, its

¹² Philip Harrold, "Deconversion in the Emerging Church," in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6.1 (March 2006), 86.

members can engage in these fields, but the community itself does not have a single voice in them. The community is represented by its members; and its members may have a diverse set of opinions. This may be more noticeable in Western countries outside America because many of these had a need to secularize years ago. The two trends, however, are not mutually exclusive. With an imagined global community, instances of a localized group does not contradict the global. Because the community is imagined, the chances for diversity among the instances are high. There is no global structure or creed. This brings localization into the focus.

A prime example of a tradition that has secularized is in modern Judaism. Since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Judaism has had to reinvent its self-image. It has largely chosen to enter diaspora peacefully. In diaspora, however, there was no longer a central locus of the tradition (i.e. the Temple). As a result, Judaism slowly shifted to a decentralized religion. Instead of sacrifice and the Temple as sacred space, Judaism focused on study and the Sabbath as sacred time. This shift also brought the concept of religious belief to a new understanding. Instead of a central set of beliefs that are ahistorical and acontextual, Judaism began to embrace the reinterpretation of its beliefs in light of its situation. Commentary and discussion became more important than declarations and answers *ex cathedra*. The commentaries (e.g. Misnah, Talmud, Midrash, etc) became as central to understanding the Jewish faith as the Torah itself.

Compared to the line of absolute deterritorialization in globalization, secularization forces a religion to conform to the cycle of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The past is revived as a communal memory, yet it is not considered to be absolute for all. A Jew from Eastern Europe will have a communal memory that diverges and intertwines with a Jew from Western Europe. It is not expected that the one ought to conform to the other. These two will have points in common, but the line of history each traces will be different. Western Christianity does have this sense, although often forgotten, in the form of Eastern Christianity. After the schism between the two, Eastern Orthodoxy took a divergent path from its Western counterpart. The two have had some points in common, but their paths have remained different. Eastern Christian theology has differences both subtle and not from Western. These differences create an interesting area of interpretation. As a new development occurs in one, it may permeate the other. Each side influenced the other, but they have remained distinct entities. We can see the trend in the Emerging Church movement to import ideas from Eastern Christianity (especially mysticism) in order to bring a more global community. By attempting to break through the differences of Eastern and Western Christianity, the Emerging Church seems to be erasing secularization as an option. How will this movement continue to develop?

Global or Secular?

As a result of the two trends in contemporary Christianity, it is left with two main possibilities: secularize or globalize. Even within the Emerging Church movement is the roots for either trend to take a controlling share. Christianity can, like parts of Islam, move towards globalization. This will entail a more radical movement than that of the Emerging Church. If this occurs, American Evangelicalism will have to acknowledge the failure of political Christianity. There may be more radical movements to institute an “unchanging” religious community. The other primary option is that Christianity secularizes like Judaism has done. By entering an era of dispersion, Christianity will become more localized. Transnational communities will fade in preference for local communities. In either case, Christianity in particular and religion in general will have to respond to the increasingly different world.