

## Religion and Globalization: Challenges and Opportunities

Anselm Kyongsuk Min

Claremont Graduate University, Southern California

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For some decades now we have been suffering--or enjoying--globalization that has been hitting us all with the force of a flood or, better, a hurricane. The signs of globalization are everywhere: interethnic marriages, the dominance of English, the globalization of economic crises, the cancelling of distance and boundaries, the instant access to practically all things through the internet.

In discussing the challenges of globalization to religion in general I would like to begin by noting five characteristics of globalization. First, globalization means the world-wide interaction of a sheer diversity of things, not just goods and services, but also economic interests, ideas, values, ideologies, images, information, intelligence, religions, cultures, nations, regions, and above all human beings of all sorts, business persons, international students, immigrants, migrant workers, refugees, tourists, scholars like ourselves, and troops, and all of these in their sheer variety. Globalization, it seems, is a festival of diversity and pluralism including the pluralism of pluralism itself. A radical pluralism of agents coming together in the “global public square” across all the conventional boundaries of identity is an astonishing characteristic of globalization. Second, globalization is being led by capitalism as its chief driving power that is creating an entire world after its own image and value, seeking to maximize the economic freedom to make a profit in a ruthless competition in the global market and monopolize the fruit of universal, global labor for the sake of the particular, private interests of businesses, subjecting public,

political considerations of human dignity and solidarity to the profit-making priorities of private corporations. Capitalism globalizes the contradictions of private and public, universality and particularity that used to be limited within the boundaries of nations and regions. Third, globalization means not only the radical diversity of agents inhabiting the global public square but also the radical diversity of agents who must struggle and compete under *unequal* conditions of power and resources, which necessarily produces the struggle of the stronger to dominate and the struggle of the weaker to resist and liberate themselves from domination. Globalization produces a world that is not only differentiated in a radically pluralist way but also deeply divided and ridden with conflicts among groups, interests, perspectives, images, ideologies, and values. Fourth, globalization thus contains a twofold dialectic, the diversifying, centrifugal dialectic of the radical pluralism of agents, interests, ideologies, and perspectives with its inevitable conflicts, and the integrating, unifying, centripetal dialectic of having to produce a minimum of justice and peace to enable the plural but divided agents to live together in common public space. How can the different but also divided agents live together in the globalizing world?

This dialectic of globalization is concretely expressed in the many contradictions and conflicts, economic, ecological, political, military, cultural, religious, and humanitarian. For reasons that should become clear, I want to focus on the cultural and humanitarian aspects.

Cultural globalization has been celebrated by some as the diversification and hybridization of cultures, often inspiring the cultural revival of local uniqueness, but I am afraid that on the whole cultural globalization really means the globalization of a single culture, the culture of capitalism and its values, images, priorities, and perspectives, largely bent on reducing human beings to the ideal consumer, someone who is always ready to respond, blindly, spontaneously, without a

critical reflection, to the ever-changing stimulation of images and appearances promising pleasure and fulfilment without continuity, consistency, and substance. Capitalism no longer produces only goods and services, which remain external, but also images, values, pleasures, ideologies, and sensibilities that constitute the interiority of the human subject. By reducing the human subject to a mere succession of externally stimulated images and feelings capitalism spells the death of the subject capable of thinking and deciding on one's own with criticism and consistency. Cultural globalization is globalization of sheer nihilism.

From the humanitarian point of view, globalization has been producing millions of human victims of economic inequality who lose their jobs to outsourcing and who become migrant workers in other nations, of military imperialism and conflict who become refugees in other lands, ethnic and religious minorities in their own countries who suffer discrimination, and the social consequences of cultural nihilism in all nations that destroy whatever stability used to be provided by local traditions. These victims embody in their visible suffering the contradictions of capitalist globalization.

From the perspective of human dignity and human solidarity, globalization raises four ethical demands as essential human challenges of globalization: first, the preferential concern for the victims of globalization, the unemployed, migrant workers, refugees, and cultural and ethnic minorities; second, resistance to economic, political, and military imperialism; third, the protection of the environment; and fourth, resistance to the cultural nihilism that destroys the very subjectivity of the subject.

Any of these challenges should be considered a challenge to the integrity of religion, but I would consider the cultural nihilism inherent in capitalism the most radical and comprehensive threat to the authenticity of religion. It not only corrupts religions with the pervasive temptations

to materialism, love of money and wealth and the pursuit of power, but more important, it destroys the very possibility of religion with its reduction of the human subject to a succession of temporary, always changeable moments of pleasure and feeling. In radically weakening the capacity of the human subject to know and the will to decide, it makes impossible any sort of religious commitment to a truth considered ultimate, eternal, or transcendent. If the religious spirit can be defined as the capacity and willingness to make an ultimate commitment, it is this capacity and willingness that is being destroyed by the cultural nihilism capitalism is promoting. I dare say that this threat of cultural nihilism is the most radical threat that has ever faced religion. Traditional threats like persecution and discrimination are external and do not touch the very religious interiority of the human subject in its capacity for transcendence, but cultural nihilism weakens and destroys this very subjectivity as such. Atheism, which used to be considered the most serious threat to religion, especially theistic religion, several decades ago, still presupposed the human capacity for critical transcendence and proposed its own criteria for human authenticity without believing in God. Cultural nihilism destroys this every subjectivity and thereby the very possibility of any commitment, theist or atheist, religious or non-religious.

I take cultural nihilism, however, not only as a threat to all religions but also a challenge and an opportunity for religion to return to itself, to what it should be. Here I propose four tasks facing all religions. The first task is what is proper to religion as religion, its essential function as a comprehensive and radical critique of human life. What is known as the critical theory of the Frankfurt School is a critique of human life limited to the critical understanding of the constitution and operation of society and its structures. Religion, however, is a critique of human life in its totality and in its roots, a comprehensive and radical critique. The content of this critique differs from one religion to another and constitutes the perennial topic of interreligious

dialogue and comparative religion, but what is common to all religions is that human beings should stop chasing illusions, falsities, deceptions, empty images, mere appearances of things, the fleeting and transitory promises of pleasure and glory. Human beings must return to the deepest truth and reality of their life from which they are alienated. This truth may consist in the identity of Atman and Brahman as in Hinduism, Emptiness and the insubstantiality of all things as in Buddhism, or the communion of all creation with the triune God in Christ as in Christianity. For these differences, common to most religions is a counter-cultural function as a radical and comprehensive critique of the passing fashions, self-images, self-deceptions, and ideologies of the age. Each religion must renew itself from its own roots, from its founding ideals, insights, and critiques of life. Either religion returns to its own origins and roots and revitalizes itself, or else declines and disappears under the dominance of cultural nihilism. This choice, I submit, is a choice cultural nihilism is imposing on us. Renewing its own radical origins is the only way of both preserving its profoundly religious character and protecting its own identity as a specific religion.

The second task of religion, I submit, is to practice love, compassion, or humaneness in the most effective way possible, that is, politically. The victims of globalization are crying out for help, and purely individual acts of charity, while valuable, do not go far enough. The state must intervene with its political authority, with its national resources of legal and economic power. The state alone has the resources to deal with the magnitude of the human suffering produced by globalization, whether unemployment, refugees, migrant workers, or discrimination against ethnic minorities. Just as the oppressive state can be a far greater source of human suffering than any wicked individual can be, so the properly functioning state can be a far greater source of human good than any saintly individual can be. Politics in the sense of promoting the proper

functioning of the state for the common good, whether as a critic or as a participant, is the most effective way of practicing charity, compassion, and humaneness. It is regrettable that many religions are still hampered by a mistaken dualism of sacred and profane. It is time that religions realized politics as the most effective way of helping fellow human beings out of their suffering and oppression. Politics is a sacred vocation.

The third task of religion is to take the practice of civic virtues as the practice of religious virtues as such. The citizen is someone who is aware of his dependence on fellow citizens for all the important things of life as a member of the community or *polis* and is willing to do his share in the creation of the common conditions of dignified life for all fellow citizens. The citizen is not the atomistic individual of Enlightenment rationalism and modern capitalism. There are five elements of the virtue of the citizen or civic virtue, which can and should be considered religious virtues as well.

The first element is a commitment to a clear distinction between what belongs to the community as such, the power and resources of the state as an organ of the common good, and what belongs to the realm of private concerns and interests, and to make sure to preserve the integrity of the state against all abuses and manipulations for private interests, the preeminent source of human suffering and oppression today. The citizen will consider the violation of the powers and resources of the state for private interests the most serious crime to be avoided and the promotion of the common good the most praiseworthy obligation to perform.

The second element is the willingness to concretize this commitment to the community and its common good by paying appropriate taxes, observing all legitimate laws, and above all enlightening oneself on the issues facing the community so as to vote and participate in public debates in the way most conducive to the common good. The citizen does not vote for someone

who will benefit one's own group, class, or religion but only for someone who will promote the common good of the community, which is not the same as the greatest good of the greatest number any more than it is the simple sum of all individual goods.

The third element of the civic virtue is egalitarian consciousness. We are all equal before the law, but this is not an easy thing to accept. Our natural tendency is to exalt ourselves above others and feel superior to them. To accept equality before the law and to live on equal terms with everyone else requires renunciation of privilege, authority, hierarchy, sexism in relation to the other sex, racism in relation to other races and ethnic groups, classism in relation to other classes, regionalism in relation to other regions, and sectarianism in relation to other religions. Genuine egalitarian consciousness is the political application of the traditional religious virtue of humility, of the consciousness of the ontological equality as non-beings before God or Emptiness. The times require that we also practice humility politically, not only religiously.

The fourth element of the civic virtue is pluralistic consciousness. We are increasingly living in a "society of strangers," and justice in society requires respect for one another as fellow citizens. This entails overcoming our tribal arrogance and the practice of genuine collective humility before those individuals and groups who do not belong to our own identity group. It requires the practice of collective self-denial and asceticism. Again, the times call for the transformation of the spirituality of self-denial into political terms.

The fifth element is the promotion of the culture of dialogue. In a democracy citizens solve differences of opinion not by violence nor by appeal to authority but by reason and dialogue. This again puts a restraint on our natural tendency to solve disagreements by sheer dogmatism, sheer appeal to authority, and often by resort to violence. It means listening to others with respect and sincerity, something not easy to do, until this becomes a habit, a virtue, and a culture.

These five elements of the civic virtue, the virtue of the citizen in a modern society, are the most concrete political expressions of what religions consider the highest virtue, love, compassion, and humaneness. All of them require transcendence of self-interest or self-emptying in solidarity with others. Not everyone born into a community is naturally a citizen. The citizen is not born but made. We can only become true citizens by cultivating the five elements of the civic virtue, which are in reality only the traditional religious virtues made concrete and political. This politicization of the religious virtues is what globalization is crying out for, and it is also religion becoming truly itself in this most nihilistic age. One does not have to seek a specifically religious way of practicing love. Our concrete life in the city provides all the opportunities we need, and what we need is only to take the civic virtue as such as a religious virtue. The challenge of the globalizing world in all its complexity can only be met together or through cooperation, that is, politically.

I have mentioned three tasks of religion in this age of globalization, its function as a comprehensive and radical critique of life, its political turn, and the adoption of the civic virtue as itself a religious virtue. I now mention the fourth and last task: From its own depth religion must provide the spiritual resources for a transcendent solidarity that can overcome the conflict between different religions, different human groups, and between humanity and nature. History tells us that religions have compromised themselves by becoming sources of conflicts among different human groups. The contemporary world that has become a society of strangers to the extreme cries out for reconciliation based on justice between different religions and between different social groups as well as between humanity and nature. Many secular humanists such as Jurgen Habermas have long admitted that enlightenment rationalism is not capable of providing a motivation and a principle for transcending the self-interest of the autonomous individual while



all the issues facing humanity at the national and global level require a sense of solidarity equal to the magnitude of cooperation needed at those levels. He has been indicating that only religions can provide the spiritual resources that will empower and motivate such transindividual, transregional, transnational, cosmopolitan sense of solidarity. The great challenge of our time is to find a motivating source for a truly transcendent solidarity connecting not only human individuals and groups to each other but also humanity and nature. And I think Habermas is quite right. All great religions deep down are religions of cosmic solidarity. All things, human and natural, are one in their Buddha nature, in the mystical body of Christ the logos of all creation, and part of the unity of heaven and earth according to the Confucian tradition. Furthermore, from the religious point of view, this unity or solidarity is the deepest ontological reality of all things, whether human or natural. It is time that religions should go into their own mystical depth, rediscover this sense of human and cosmic solidarity, and provide the resources for solidarity so sorely needed today for overcoming the many conflicts in the globalizing world. In the light of this deepest ontological reality we can learn to love one another, as Raimon Pannikar has been urging us, even if we cannot agree with one another or even understand one another after much dialogue. This, I submit, is what all religions, both old and new, are called upon to do today.

Religion as such cannot provide concrete policies and solutions to the compelling problems raised by the contradictions of globalization, but it can provide basic perspectives and motivations for human dignity and human solidarity, the essential conditions of any just and peaceful solutions, and this is what I have tried to show in this paper. Thank you.

#### *Abstract*

As a result of rapid globalization we are living in an increasingly pluralistic society, not only in the well-known sense of the pluralism of religions and cultures but also in the rather

comprehensive sense of the pluralism of economic, political, ethnic, cultural, ideological, regional, and other types of collective interests. We are also suffering all the unresolved contradictions of these interests struggling for domination and resistance to that domination in the common space of the global public square. These pose both challenges and opportunities to all religions, old and new. I discuss four ways in which religions can respond to these challenges that are both so necessary yet also so difficult: (a) religion as radical critique of life and its countercultural function, (b) the appreciation of politics as the most effective way of practicing *ren*, compassion, and love, (c) the cultivation of the civic virtue of solidarity, and (d) the mobilization of religion as the power of transcendent, cosmic, and universal love and solidarity.

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