

POLITICAL ISLAM AND THE HEGEMONY
OF GLOBALIZATION: A RESPONSE TO
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THE SUBJECT OF GLOBLIZATION HAS ASSUMED A central position in international relations today. The topic has wide-ranging implications for North-South, East-West relationships in terms of the transfer of technology, control of the markets, and determination of material as well as ideological culture. In the post-Soviet era, globalization denotes the evolution of a supernational role that Western industrialized nations are going to play under the leadership of the United States in shaping the social, political, and economic future of humankind. Whether imagined or real, this emerging supernational role of the U.S. and its seminal influence in global politics is the source of fear in the rest of the world, including the European nations.

Professor Berger's paper does not address the critical question of how globalization leads to the First World's domination over the Third World. The marketplace that produces wealth by consuming imported goods and technical know-how and that fills the coffers of the industrialized nations is not neutral in value. There is a price to be paid in terms of domination by technocrats, mainly trained in the West, who wield and exercise the surrogate authority invested in them by profit-

making, multi-national corporations. This domination is seen by a number of keen native observers as a new type of colonization. Economic interests are not fully separate from political interests. Hence, globalization needs to be studied in light of the political interests that drive it, particularly in the relation between political Islam with its agenda to recover the losses of colonial periods, on the one hand, and globalization with its agenda of dominating the world market and all that is related to this market culture, on the other. A discussion of globalization cannot avoid larger questions about the sovereignties, political prerogatives, diplomatic or other matters connected with the geopolitics of the regions, and the autonomy of the communities in those regions.

Although Islam is a religion poorly understood in America, it is politically articulated for home consumption, both in the mass media and in academia. Many do not fathom the depth of politicization connected with the term “Islam” and its counter value-loaded term “the West.” They are intellectual constructs prevalent among social scientists, who speak about the way “Islam” represents the opposite of what “the West” stands for in terms of a culture and civilization. More poignantly, to a Western observer used to defining the political and inferior “other” by means of “use-value” rather than “real-value,” Islam represents a global threat because of its ability to mobilize unruly mobs opposed to our Western liberal values and determined to destroy our democracies and free-market economies.

To add to this preunderstanding about a religion and a people that do not belong to the orbit of what we regard as civil and rational is our post-Enlightenment conceptualization of religion itself. This tainted view of religion as something that needs to be confined to the private domain of human activity in order to control its divisiveness and its threat to civil society is not really helpful in understanding the unfolding of “Political Islam” and the way it engenders not only exclusivist religiosity but also a universalist secularity. This last feature, that is, universalist secularity, which we normally attribute to the genius of modern, secularized men and women, confounds most analysts of the Islamic religion as a very unlikely feature of this Abrahamic tradition. How could Islam be so retrograde and yet convincingly modern?

I use the word “secularity” very carefully here. This secularity is derived from the very scriptural source, the Koran, that is the main ideological tool used by fundamentalists to come up with radical solutions to world domination through economic globalization. I use “secularity” and not “secularism” because secularism suggests the well-being of humankind in the present life to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God or in a future state of salvation. “Secularity,” on the other hand, simply means that there should be a condition of self-limitation observed by the state in matters of religion. In other words, secularity regulates matters pertaining to this world without negating or disregarding non-secular or spiritual affairs.

In the modern world, we use the word “religion” in a very limited sense to mean a set of beliefs and practices that provide privatized, autonomous individuals spiritual connection to God. In contrast, Near Eastern cultures use religion in a very broad sense, referring not simply to an ideology founded upon a set of doctrines, but also to a blueprint for organizing the social and political affairs of human society. Thus, religion in the Near East has a wider and more comprehensive reputation, covering human interests for this and the next world.

This meaning of religion, with its comprehensive and even universal mandate to create an ideal society on earth, is a major source of tension in the modern world, which has set limits on religion’s claims to represent a wide range of human interests in the public domain. The claim of religions like Islam to have almost discretionary control over the future of humanity gives rise to a tension that needs to be explicated when dealing with globalization. Since the 1990s, a tension has arisen between globalization, which claims to be universal through its program of exchanges and the interdependence of economies that go beyond the state boundaries, and Islam, which, although particularistic, claims to be universal in its ethical application and to offer comprehensive directives covering all aspects of human existence.

We have often heard that, theoretically, Islam does not make a distinction between the “church” and the “state” or between the spiritual and the temporal. But, as I have shown in my work on democratic pluralism in Islam, based on the Koran itself, Islamic tradition recognizes in

practice the separation between the spiritual and the temporal by limiting human jurisdiction to the sphere of interpersonal justice, while leaving the spiritual realm entirely within God's purview.¹ Furthermore, in Islamic tradition human beings are empowered to create, regulate, and maintain all human institutions to further human relationships, but God's relationship with humanity is left strictly in the hands of God. Even the prophet, as God's envoy, has no authority to mediate or to interfere in God's special relationship to humanity.

Human institutions, then, are geared toward enhancing interpersonal human relationships in such a way that the Islamic division of jurisdictions, what I have identified as divine and human spheres of jurisdictions, actually sets the ground for secularity and, with it, modernity. As moderns we have come to maintain that modernity secularizes religion in such a way that it stops interfering in the public square—the arena of power and politics—and remains confined to the private domain of human life. This kind of religiosity can perhaps succeed in providing what we call civil society, a society in which human beings with different faith and multicultural communities can coexist in peace and harmony, more so in the midst of competing claims to the truth. Although by its very nature Islam reserves the right to speak for both the private and the public domains of everyday life, it recognizes the secularity embedded in its essential message, reminding the Prophet of Islam that his duty is to deliver and not to enforce religion: “There is no compulsion in religion.”² Hence, the matter of faith is an individual's prerogative to negotiate his/her spiritual destiny without any interference from the state. This is where Islam and modernity are in competition to create an ethically just society based on revelation and secularism, respectively.

In some unique sense, Islam as a global religion, with an international membership and a blueprint for an ideal society, and economic global-

¹ Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

² *The Koran*, chapter 2, verse 256.

ization, with its promise of opportunity and abundance for all regions of the world, are both messianic with promises of justice and equity that would replace injustice and oppression all over the world. In other words, what I am suggesting here is that economic globalization is in competition with religious universalism through the promise they make for the betterment of humankind. The agenda of each universalism, however, has its concealed ambition. There is enough evidence to suggest that economic globalization has the goal of increasing the availability of markets for well-developed, industrial nations, by becoming the provider of goods that are almost universalized. Sony, Lee Jeans, and Coca-Cola are everywhere. This is what the French call the “Cococolanisation” of the world. Religious globalization, on the other hand, is trying to win the souls of humanity by providing an alternative to economic hegemony through globalization by intensifying the divine promise of a better life in this and the next world. This will be done through international religious organizations that are preparing the way for the final victory of God’s religion—the establishment of, to use the language of Christian messianic promise, the Kingdom of God. These religious organizations are in the big business of creating parallel institutions that provide welfare and charitable support to large numbers of peoples who are otherwise neglected by international agencies or by their corrupt governments—governments that are perceived as lackeys of Western-dominated economic globalization.

When one keeps in mind what is being seen as the Western onslaught on the Islamic world, especially in Third World countries, it is clear that economic predominance is also seen as the cultural predominance of, and the domination of values by, the Western powers. In the Muslim world, one is not watching the factual “mondialisation” of CNN with total lack of concern for the oppressed and suppressed populations of the Muslim world. There are constant reminders to the people in the region that the powerful “masters” of globalization are devouring their resources, both human and natural, through the production of consumer goods, as well as weaponry that kills innocent civilians everyday. Muslims, especially radical preachers and influential teachers of Islam, are not only looking at news items passively. They are also aggressively reacting to the value systems that do not fit very well into the common traditional cultures of the regions. Moreover, they point to

these imported values as the perpetrators of the cultural and material gap between Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, even when there is an attraction to all forms of technological advancement, there is also a resistance to their inevitable accompaniments. There is an attraction toward the system that allows for freedom and democracy, but there is also a concern for the lack of native legitimacy of those foreign constructs, whether they are political or social as such.

It is important to keep in mind that religion's ascendancy in the world since the 1970s has been marked by a significant change in people's outlook and evaluation of religion and religiosity. It is not religion as we used to conceive of it in the '50s and '60s. In its external form it is inclined towards less rigidity and more practicality than what the world confessional religions offer. In substance it seeks realization of a universal global community with a common vision and destiny. Herein lies the apparent paradox between the goals of globalization and those of a religion with global and yet regionalized communities like Islam. Both seem to be concerned about moral constraints and their application in situations of deadly conflict. Inasmuch as religion is concerned with the creation of an international community, it is naturally concerned with peace. This sort of universal religiosity is visible in peace movements. For example, one can speak about the peace movement, Peace Now in Israel, and the kinds of people it gathers and the kinds of ideas that it brings together in order to put pressure on the government to negotiate political solutions to the ongoing conflict in the region. In different parts of the world, one can find similar kinds of issues bringing people together and emerging at the global level as global humanism—deeply spiritual and moral.

Environmentalism has become another important issue that brings people together. In itself a new form of religiosity, it is not thoroughly secular; it is very much informed by a religious and ethical commitment to nature as an abode of special spiritual connection, and, thus, worthy of preservation. This kind of new religiosity surrounds issues like the ethics of biotechnology, human cloning, and all sorts of ideas that were at one point very much limited to the Western regions of the world; whereas they are now becoming global issues affecting followers of major world religions. Open any newspaper in the Arab or Persian-

speaking world, and you will find discussions of cloning, physician-assisted suicide, and the environment. Thus, not only have information and technology become global but so, too, has the battle of values and interests. It is not a clash of civilizations, as some have hastily concluded. Instead, there is much empirical evidence to suggest that it is a clash of interests, or, more precisely, a clash generated by the critical question: “Where are my long-term interests, both material and spiritual, going to be served better?”

Organized religions have less to offer in these new international and religiously or spiritually inspired movements. The language of correct theology has given place to correct attitude and religiosity. The need for a general, rather than generic, religion in modern society seems to be an inevitable consequence of the irrelevance of much of institutionalized religiosity. Thus, Sufism and other forms of mysticism have their own attraction and a capacity for generating non-confessional and international groups of people coming together for a common purpose.

One important occasion, for instance, that brings together an international community committed to spiritual rejuvenation is December 17 in Konya, Turkey, the day that marks the birth of Rumi, one of the most widely known mystical poets of Islam. The international community comes together, united in a kind of mystical religiosity. It is non-confessional, and yet it is attentive to the common vision of the community of believers in mystical tradition. It is relevant to point out that in Konya these international groups are not simply discussing their mystical search, ecstatic moments, or the ineffability of mysticism. They are also interested in political, educational, and environmental issues that touch their deep-seated commitments to ecological and other related concerns. Thus, a politicization of religion, even mystical forms of it, takes place in Turkey and other parts of the world that are currently considered to be “secularized.” Are they correctly labeled as such? Are the observers engaged in what social scientists call a definition of “exchange value” in which the true definition assumes an imposed meaning that serves the purpose of the observer rather than what is being observed?

Given the variety of religions and the growing awareness of the diverse nature of the supernatural, the emerging religiosity of modern society does not view the church and religion as identical. This new religiosity is visible in those aspects of Muslim patriotism in which religious symbols inspire intense movement and commitment. If one's country has tended to downplay the ever-present exclusionary religiosity, then cultural and linguistic unity has been afforded a larger role in the relevant citizenry. A growing majority in every religious community is in search of a tolerant creed to further human understanding beyond an exclusionary, intolerant, and even militant institutional religiosity. Thus, the militant ascendancy of Islam in the public sphere from the 1970s to the present moment comes not from religiosity per se, but as a response to the domination of one's culture and marketplaces through gradual globalization.

Globalization, as seen by activist members of this new religiosity, presents a very different relationship to religion and religiosity. It is clearly viewed as a new form of colonization through the marketplace. The declining sovereignty of Muslim states (most of them autocratic) and their increasing inability to regulate economic and cultural exchanges are the two main issues that bring Muslims together to challenge globalization. This is important in understanding the rising militancy among Muslims.

Religions like Islam, as noted earlier, are modernist in their presuppositions. These modernist presuppositions regarding the pluralistic nature of human response to the presence of the divine are in competition with supposedly value-free economic and cultural globalization, which is viewed, in the Third World, more or less in terms of the ideological hegemony of the West. Economic and cultural globalization is also considered to be the hegemony of the First World over the Third World. This is where the conflict is; this is where the tension is very severe.

In our analysis of the role of religion as a counterpoise to the threat of economic and cultural domination, we need to pay attention to the following questions: What is left of religious commitment and conscience if religion is debarred from dealing with issues relating to justice and peace? Where does it stand? Is this simply a private matter

of connecting oneself to spiritual sources, or does one's spiritual commitment make one also politically sensitive? It is a fundamental issue in religiously inspired nationalism or socialism. How can one be spiritual and political at the same time? How can one be spiritually activist? Do they go hand in hand? The common understanding and expectation is that spirituality is peace-generating. Does this mean that peace is then the result of simple, disinterested religiosity, or is peace the result of overcoming injustices in society? This becomes a critical question in the new understanding of religion in the Islamic world.

Muslims are living in the shadow of the empire they once possessed, an empire that stretched between the rivers Nile and Oxus. This empire remains a very strong element in the imagination of Muslims and continues to inspire efforts to revive it in large measure because it was a successful empire. To revive this empire means to rebuild it as the kind of supernational entity that Muslims believe they used to be. This vision of a supernational empire is not so different from the world as we Americans imagine it to be, only it would be Muslim, not American. The vision of a supernational entity of the empire is inspiring the militancy in the Muslim world to which we are now witness. It becomes more militant as it is claimed in the name of a higher authority, that is, the authority of God. That is where the danger lies.

The globalization of world markets and their strong impetus to implement what are regarded as the absolute and normative values of the postmodern world order is a source of deep concern. Of course, this is a Western world order under the leadership of the U.S., and it seems to be telling the Muslim world: "We will tell you how to be democratic. We will tell you how to be free." This language smacks of militancy. This brand of militancy is in competition with the militancy founded upon the ideological glory of the fallen Muslim empire. The real danger is in what happens if the two competing forms of militancy become globalized. Globalization of any form of militancy, whether religious or secular, is in need of ethical, universal criteria to prevent it from becoming a source of further destruction to the sanctity of human life and dignity.