

faith and development

CENTRE L.-J. LEBRET - 49, rue de la Glacière - 75013 Paris
Tel. +33 1 47 07 10 07 Fax +33 1 47 07 68 66 e-mail : lebretri@club-internet .fr

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Religions, a challenge for liberal globalization

by Felix Wilfred*

In its autumn 2003 issue, the journal, *Recherches*, queries: “*What is the religious?*” A volume of more than 400 pages ... without proposing a real answer! On the other hand, the reader finds a rather baffling question: “*How do we explain the present revival of religious belief on the ruins of established religions?*” The determination, of a scientifically inclined publication, to want to draw out the “specter” of religion is even more astonishing when we read, under the signature of Marcel Gauchet, that a historical “*turning point*” is now in the process of “*finishing to liquidate the vestiges of religious organization, which remained with us*”.¹

Ruins, remnants, discredit, decline...The most severe words are chosen to evoke a dying Christianity, the threats of fanaticism, the return of the “sacred” in the secular world. Has everything been said then? We in “*Faith and Development*” do not think so. And it is in terms of “*challenges*” that Felix Wilfred, a researcher in India, considers religion in its face to face with globalization.

Actually, the challenges apply, first of all, to the religions themselves, in their mutual relations and in their role within civil society. Rather than fostering chauvinism that could be detrimental to their own reputation, they are called upon here, together and each one according to its charisma, to “*get involved in the practice of justice*”. Since there is no justice nor social peace without the respect for cultural pluralism, religions must play a role in giving all minorities the right to participate in the national community.

Globalization must never mean cultural, spiritual or religious homogenization. Nevertheless, in the light of new developments, religions cannot refuse to realize deep internal changes. No one, in any case, can claim the right to supplant, subjugate or marginalize others ... unless one is ready to risk the explosion of violence. God forbid!

¹*Recherches*, Journal of MAUSS, no.22, second semester 2003, p. 312. Ed. La Découverte – MAUSS, Paris.

* Felix Wilfred is professor at the School of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Chennai (formerly Madras) in India.

The globalizing world is a world of knowledge and information, available abundantly and instantaneously. Technological know-how to manipulate the power of nature (bio-technology, for example) has reached new heights in our present world. With all the fund of knowledge at its disposal, humanity needs to ask some basic questions about the very role and purpose of knowledge. For, what has happened in the modern world is a transition from the role of knowledge as a means of freedom to one of power.

I think it is at this juncture that religious traditions are called upon to play a new and challenging role. They can help to redeem knowledge and help orientate it towards the holistic liberation, specially in favour of the victims of our present world.

Dehumanizing Purposes

The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, placed high hopes on scientific knowledge when he said in 1960: "*It is science alone that can solve the problem of hunger and poverty, of insanitation and illiteracy, of superstition and deadening custom and tradition, of vast resources running to waste, of a rich country inhabited by starving people*".¹

What is implied in these words is the expectation of an emancipative vision of scientific knowledge. But unfortunately, much of science and its application (technology) are employed for dehumanizing purposes, as amply testified by the global situation today. One reason why this has happened is that the system of knowledge — which is science — has lost its connection with freedom.

Unfortunately, this has come to mean in the course of time, a dissociation of knowledge from the project of emancipation. Albert Einstein could see the consequences of this philosophy in the field of education. That is why he underlined the social responsibility which should accompany the acquisition of knowledge: "*The education of the individual, in addition to promoting his [sic] own innate abilities, should attempt to develop in him a sense of responsibility for his fellow men in place of the glorification of power and successes in our present society*".²

The altruistic and service-oriented character of knowledge stems from a world-wide tradition which connects knowledge not with power, but with freedom. And whatever power there will

be, is the result of freedom. Unredeemed power, as is often used in modern science and technology, leads to domination, violence and destruction. On the other hand, a power redeemed through freedom leads to creative transformation. This is true both of the inner world and the outer world, of the microcosm as much as the macrocosm, both of which are so very much intertwined.

In the Hindu classical tradition, it is knowledge or realization of truth (*gnana*) that leads to *moksha*, and in Buddhist tradition it is illumination or enlightenment (knowledge) which leads us to *Nirvana* — the state of total freedom. In Christian tradition, there is the famous axiom of Jesus: "The truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32).

Management, the buzz-word

Globalization has also imperceptibly brought about a different mode of governance. It suits the general agenda of the vested interests that the world at all levels be administered by those who have knowledge and power. The decisions are progressively confined to an ever smaller group of people. What it does to people is to make them simply objects divesting them of their subjecthood and agency. The signs of this change are visible everywhere. "Management" is the buzz-word most dear to the ideologues and advocates of globalization.

The hard-won battles for democracy, political participation and rights are relegated to the past and are viewed as of no consequence for the present order of a globalizing world.

This amounts to a process of de-politicization with ever less participation of the people. The existent inequalities and injustices are covered up under the cloak of management. Political struggles, protests and contestations against the prevailing order have become anathema. In this way, the hard-won battles for democracy, political participation and rights are relegated to the past and are viewed as of no consequence for the present order of a globalizing world.

To cite an example, we know that since the advent of the industrial revolution, humanity has passed through an arduous journey to claim and establish the basic rights of workers and their security. But these achievements are let go, and what we see in Asia, for example, is not a movement towards greater security for workers, but the progressive

casualization of labour. The workers are, as we know, under constant threat of retrenchment with the loss of their livelihood.³

Against this background we realize the importance of new forces which would uphold the dignity and rights of the human person and struggle for his/her participation in shaping the world in the political, economic, cultural and other spheres. Could the religions be one such force? I think, in principle, no religion would go against the dignity of the human person. The important issue is to translate the theory into practice. The dignity of the human person is affirmed in practice when conditions are created for the flourishing and expression of his/her inherent capabilities.

The mode of governance should be such that it allows room for individual and collective self-determination. Democratic forms of governance would approximate this goal, provided democracy is not formal but *substantive*. But the mode of governance globalization calls for is one which erodes all forms of self-determination. In other words, globalization goes against the practice of democracy, self-determination and true human freedom, contrary to the *façade* it presents.

I think religions could play an important role by positively contributing to the building up of civil society as an important means for a participative governance. Civil society is the space where people interact and exchange views and opinions on a number of issues affecting society.⁴ In the age of manipulation, we see how even civil society is being exploited and co-opted by global capitalism for its own ends. This needs to be kept in mind, and we need to be on guard, so that civil society functions in true freedom, unencumbered by the vested interests of the market.

Homogenization or Pluralism

Plurality has been the hallmark of Asian life, and without it Asia loses all hope for its future. On the contrary, the forms and modes globalization creates are homogeneous in character. This is observable in the strikingly common patterns of production, distribution (marketing) and consumption of goods and services all over the world. Underlying the homogenizing trend of globalization are two processes: *commodification* and *monetization*. By converting everything into objects of commerce for the market, and by ascribing to everything a monetary

value, the grand project of homogenization is carried on by globalization.

Under the aegis of globalization, homogenization has been extrapolated also to the realm of nature. Monoculture plantations (“ecological fascism”) and cash crops are but a reflection of the efforts to homogenize society and culture. Further, globalization steamrolls all identities and differences. These have a place at most as folkloristic and as a residue from a past which, according to the ideologues of globalization, the world needs to outgrow.

If we translate all this in terms of power, it means that those who wield power and control society are distinctly on the side of homogenization, whereas the victims are on the side of pluralism. Pluralism is a call for decentralization and participation, whereas homogenization is a process of accumulating power. Pluralism expresses itself in different ways and at different levels. For the marginalized peoples and groups, one important way of challenging globalization and its ideology is to affirm their plural and different identities. The “*difference*” in the self - perception of the marginalized is the source of energy and dynamism to assert their identity and claim their rightful place.

They seek to distinguish themselves from others, particularly when assimilationist policies are imposed on them as a solution to their problems. In this situation, the affirmation of difference is a weapon against facile integration. Difference also becomes the entitlement, especially when this difference is the result of a history of discrimination and disadvantages. More importantly, the assertion of difference is the way through which the marginal peoples come consciously to perceive and acknowledge their collective selves. In other words, the difference is crucial for the construction of their subjecthood as the principal agent of their emancipation.

The difference which the various identities and suppressed groups represent is something willed by God who also willed the bio - diversity in our world. Therefore, no religion could subscribe to a vision of reality that tends to abolish differences under the pretext of a pseudo -unity. Just as the difference between woman and man is precisely the basis for their intimate union and celebration of life, the differences in the human community becomes the basis for the true unity of the human.

For the religions, the fostering of difference and pluralism entails also the obligation to involve themselves in the

practice of justice, understood as caring for and being in solidarity with the weaker ones. Pluralism, I think, ultimately is a question of justice. Justice demands that we respect the other (individual and collective) in his/her/their “otherness”. This is the foundation for any theory and praxis of justice. Denial of pluralism kills justice before destroying unity. It is by affirming their difference that the poor have a chance to reclaim their very selves. Pluralism is a defence of the poor and hope of the poor in a homogenizing global world.

The challenge for religions is to give expression to this understanding of justice in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies by being one with the suppressed and marginalized identities. In sum, religions should not shy away from the thorny issues of ethnic, linguistic and regional identities, but should involve themselves in the issue of difference and everywhere give unambiguous support to any political, legal or social measure in favour of battered identities.

Commercialized Education

Globalization is propelled by the swift movement of capital (not always labour) across nations and continents. This economic process needs to be understood also in its philosophical and ethical presuppositions and implications. It is here that we begin to realize the important role religions are called upon to play. Underlying globalization is the philosophy of neo-liberalism which places the individual and his/her autonomy over *the good* and welfare of all — specially the weaker ones.

Let me illustrate the point with reference to the present scenario of education. Education, like knowledge is a noble act. No wonder that in our Asian cultures, teachers or masters have been held in high esteem. There is something deeply spiritual and transforming in education. On the contrary, today, education is so commercialized and monetized that it has become more a means of enhancing the capacity of the individual to earn and to maximize profit.

Globalization by its process and its underlying philosophy creates an environment wherein the self-seeking or centripetal movement pervades. The winds of liberal capitalism by which globalization moves is but institutionalized greed. This is in keeping with the central tenet of liberalism for which everything will fall into place if everyone seeks his or her own interest. But this radically limits the capacity of human beings to love, serve and hope with and for others.

When everything is enacted in the world in a centripetal movement, we naturally create a world of egoists.

Christian tradition is a radical orientation to the other portrayed as the *neighbour*. Buddhism, the pan-Asian religious tradition underlines the importance of *prajna* (wisdom) and *karuna* (compassion) for the suffering of others. Hinduism speaks of *lokasamgraha* (the welfare of all) as something to be constantly pursued. We find similar orientations in other Asian religious traditions. Here is a centrifugal movement that is elevating, ennobling and saving the world. This is the antidote to the death-dealing centripetal movement. With such rich resources at their disposal, the religions are in a position to challenge the centripetal movement in the present-day globalization and contribute to create a culture and environment in which the centrifugal movement may flourish and blossom.

Social Darwinism

A danger lurks behind the neo-liberal economy and market, the motors of globalization. This is an ideology which has its roots in the biological Darwinism of the last century. According to Darwin, there is a process of natural selection by which out of innumerable species, plants and other living things, only some survive, while others perish. It is a question of the survival of the fittest; this is the order of nature. Such an ideology, when transferred to inter-human relationships, is known as *social Darwinism*. According to it, in the interaction in economy and market, a natural selection takes place resulting from competition. Those who are capable will survive; others will be left behind to perish.

Thus, the evolutionary ideology of natural selection in the present global, market and trade economy forecloses humanistic prospects, and that is why it spells catastrophe to the overwhelming majority of the poor on our globe. The ideology espoused by globalization is heading in this direction. That is why we witness increasing violation of human rights through globalization.

There is something very dogmatic about the way globalization is presented by its ardent advocates. These advocates are, in the first place, the neo-liberal economists. The claim is that there is no other way than globalization. All peoples, nations and cultures have to be brought into its orbit. The future of the world and humanity is already irreversibly determined by globalization. The impression is evoked that we are in the final stage of

human history⁵ and we have the definite trajectory for the future of humanity. The inevitability thesis is the undertone of the statement, for example, by Peter Martin when he argues there is the possibility “to opt out of globalization, but the price that is paid is not merely an economic one. It is also a political one, because the desire to repress globalization leads to an inevitable extension of the powers of the State and a loss of individual freedom”.

A Collective Fatalism

Any such view of human history and its future is very deterministic. We have here, so to say, a *collective fatalism*. What globalization attempts to do in this way is to deprive people of the precious gift of freedom and stunt their capacity for imagining alternatives. I think it is here that the religions could play another important role. Oftentimes the religions, like in other areas, tend to accommodate themselves to globalization, quite unaware of its implications for the future of humanity. Instead of succumbing to the pressures of globalization, the religions need to

keep utopias alive. Utopias are visions about the future. They give hope to the victims of globalization that things could and will be different. Through the projection of utopias religions would reaffirm and vindicate the capacity inherent in humanity to seek new avenues and trajectories for human fulfillment. If globalization and economic liberalism are restrictive ideologies that enclose people within the narrow space of self-interest, utopias make us forward-looking by instilling confidence in the unexplored possibilities lurking behind the present.

Precisely because utopias envision a different order of things, they are critical of the present. Utopias may appear vague and undefined, and may not have the contours of an ideology. However, they help us to transcend the limitations of ideologies and systems — in our case globalization — and lead us to new and uncharted terrains with new possibilities.

There is no claim that religions could answer all the structural issues of globalization. Global society is made up of

many functional sub-systems.

The various sub-systems attend to the different aspects of life. The difficulty with religion is precisely that it does not represent any one particular sub-system performing a specific function. By its very nature religion is holistic, and religions address issues at a more comprehensive level. That is a disadvantage of course; but in another sense it is an advantage because religions can direct themselves to some basic issues which the various sub-systems fail to address. In this way, religions are able to take a distance from globalization and raise many critical questions about its underlying presuppositions and its mode of functioning.

What is presented as possible avenues for an effective role for religions also challenges the religions *vis-à-vis* globalization. This will be clear if we look at the present state of religions. They all require a profound internal transformation and a new hermeneutic to be able to come to terms with the challenges posed by globalization.

¹ Report of the National Institute of Sciences, in India, 27 (1960), p..564.

² Quoted by Vijay Prashad in *To Get Einstein*, in *Frontline*, June 21, 2002, p.73.

³ Cf. John R. Batter – Daniel A. Bell (eds), *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

⁴ Cf. Neera Chandhoke, *State and Civil Society. Explorations in Political Theory*, Sage Publications, Delhi 1995.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London, 1992.

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