

Religious Communities as Good Neighbors in a Post-secular Global Society¹

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The religious communities of the Abrahamic traditions face several theological and ethical challenges as we try to become good neighbors in a global society that is, it seems, increasingly post-secular. Whereas a few decades ago many thought secularism would dominate the world through globalization, now secularism might be criticized as a tribal religion still found on universities in Europe and North America.

Globalization continues, whereas secularization seems to be in decline. In place of secularism, we find an astonishing array of religious activity, some of it profound and attractive, while some is terribly dysfunctional. Religious extremism is not the only example of dysfunctional religion, though it is highly visible and dangerous. This new situation imposes a newly perceived duty on responsible global religious communities, that of articulating the multi-religious moral foundations for common humane ways of life. This includes the relationships among different religious communities.

Among the most urgent ethical questions to be addressed are those closely related to religions, especially freedom of religion and religiously motivated violence. I will assume in this setting that it is well-known that economists and other social scientists have documented that practiced freedom of religion is one of the better indicators of the future societal health and economic growth in a country.

At least four themes should inform the public statements and actions of multi-religious bodies, such as AFI. Most are normative in character, while one is an historical observation.

1. Respect for human beings requires respect for their religions and religious symbols, without assuming agreement with particular religious beliefs or practices.

People are most fully human when they openly express their response to God or the mystery of the universe; their dignity is also extremely vulnerable in this response. People are most fully human when they openly express their response to God or the mystery of the universe; their dignity is also extremely vulnerable in this response. This includes protecting holy sites and religious art, but also protecting the practice of prayer and other rituals.

¹ This is a revised version of a speech given for the Abrahamic Faiths Initiative (AFI) on December 1, 2020, hosted online by the US State Department.

People must not be compelled to say or do things contrary to their ultimate beliefs, unless the practice of their beliefs will quickly lead to harm to themselves or others. (The analogy I have in mind is that freedom of speech does not allow one to shout “Fire!” in a crowded situation, unless there really is a fire.) Even when we profoundly disagree with the religion of others, this disagreement should be communicated in a thoughtful and respectful manner. This is respect for the humanness of the other, as seen in respecting the practice of their religion.

2. The onset of globalization, approximately during World War I (1914-1918), prompted a widespread reconsideration of religion/state relations, starting in the 1920s.

Poorly structured relationships between religious bodies and nation states were a crucial component that made that war so vicious. In the words of Philip Jenkins, “The First World War was a thoroughly religious event, in the sense that overwhelmingly Christian nations fought each other in what many viewed as a holy war, a spiritual conflict.”² The state authorities of all the primary nations on both sides in the war claimed that they were God’s warriors fighting against the enemies of God, while similar views were common among the soldiers.

In many battles, the soldiers on both sides could have used the same scriptures, prayers, and creeds in church, yet they killed each other because government propaganda convinced many they had to protect their Christian countries against Godless enemies.

After the war, within Christianity there was a widespread rejection of the idea of a religiously defined country, such that Protestant Germany stood over against Catholic France. A similar process can be observed in Muslim-majority Indonesia, with the founding of the Nahdlatul Ulama in the 1920s and the writing of an officially multi-religious constitution in the 1940s. This process is not complete; all religious communities face an historical necessity of engaging this process to establish themselves as mature participants in global society.

3. Though it may be a habit that takes tremendous effort to develop, we can distinguish ethical principles from religious belief and ritual, even though most religious believers see all legitimate ethical principles as ultimately God-given.

Within Christianity the idea of a religiously defined country was rapidly replaced by two ethical ideas or principles, primarily in the decades following 1920: the idea of universal human dignity with resulting human rights, and the idea of a universal or natural moral law which places all people under an ethical demand, regardless of religion or nation.

The process of accepting this transition was more formal in Catholicism than in Protestantism, given the different organizational structures of these two branches of Christianity. Nevertheless, this transition was equally real on both sides of Western Christianity.

At the core of this transition within Christianity was the realization that there is a real difference between religious beliefs, such as normal Christian beliefs about the Trinity or the Deity of Christ, and ethical principles, such as not committing murder or theft. Of course, Christians see rules against murder and theft as God-given, but people may come to accept the authority of those rules in a way that is markedly different from coming to believe in the Trinity.

Even if this process of distinguishing religious beliefs from ethical principles is not perfect or complete in Christianity, this process should be promoted, and not only within Christianity. If Jews and Muslims can make similar distinctions (perhaps even with representatives of other religions participating), it can become more standard to talk about global moral standards that are taught by all responsible religions.

4. Globalization means that people are converting among religions in all directions in every country. Their religious transitions merit the respect that all true religion deserves.

One of the more recent dimensions of globalization is the way in which people all over the world are converting between religions. Among my personal circle of friends and acquaintances, I know several people who grew up as Christians and who are now Muslims, as well as many who grew up as Muslims and who are now Christians. As recently as 40 years ago, this would, I believe, have been very uncommon. As I have listened to such people, this transition or conversion had little or nothing to do with loyalty to their country. They did not see this change as having much to do with national identity. These people were all looking for better answers to the big questions of existence; it was a truly religious quest.

One of my challenges as a Christian pastor has been how to relate to people who have converted away from Christianity. This can be awkward socially, but one must not respond with harshness. The unique humanness of the people was evidenced in their authentic response to the divine, in their search for answers to the big questions of life. This humanness demanded my respect and care, even if I disagreed sharply with the beliefs they embraced.

As difficult as it will be, mature religious communities simply must respond well, or they face the loss of their authenticity. This is truly a great test, to distinguish the claims of one's own religion and religious community from the claims of human dignity. Respect for human dignity means we must respect the person who chooses a system of belief other than our own.

Conclusion:

We have to become good neighbors, because our history is filled with conflicts that have included too many religious dimensions, even in those cases when religion may not have been a primary cause. Globalization and the decline of secularism require us to make new efforts toward a different future. We cannot expect our different religions to be separated by national borders; and we cannot expect secularism to be a kind of referee among religions. Our religious communities face an historical imperative to learn how to become good neighbors.

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