

Globalization

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Introduction: Globalization and Religious Diversity

All of the world's major religions have been formed by globalization—a process by which regional economies, societies, and cultures become increasingly integrated through communication, transportation, and trade, and through which local cults are submerged or subsumed by world religions—each claiming to be the whole faith for the whole world. Samuel Huntington, famously, argued that the most important conflicts of the future will occur along cultural fault lines that track religious differences. He writes:

CIVILIZATION IDENTITY will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and, possibly African civilization. The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another. Why will this be the case? First, differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition, and, most important, religion. (Huntington 1993: 25)

Globalization sets the stage for increased contact amongst members of diverse religious traditions—and, if Huntington is correct, for a clash of civilizations defined in large part by religious differences. People of good will hope that by making the case that religious differences are superficial or illusory they can put an end to religious bigotry and oppression, holy wars, inquisitions, and crusades. I argue however that our legitimate interest in promoting religious tolerance does not require us to ignore or repudiate genuine religious differences. In the sections that follow, I discuss the prospects for peaceful religious coexistence in a world transformed by globalization.

Why is Religious Disagreement a Problem?

Every intellectual enterprise and academic discipline is rife with disagreement. In mathematics and the empirical sciences we expect that eventually disagreements will be resolved: scientific hypotheses will be confirmed or disconfirmed by observation and experiment; mathematical conjectures will be proved or shown to be false. We recognize however that even where solutions are forthcoming, they will likely pose new problems and further controversies. In philosophy and other humanities disciplines, we rarely even expect conclusive solutions; like history, all of these academic enterprises involve “argument without end.”

We do not worry about these disagreements—indeed we thrive on them: they promote scientific progress and keep philosophers in business. But many view religious disagreement differently—as problematic, threatening, and in any case undesirable. Why is theology different?

One reason is perhaps because adherents of most religious traditions do not believe that religion progresses—or, indeed, that it should. Christians, for one, have traditionally held that the true faith was revealed to the primitive Church and that disagreement only arose later, when the original message was corrupted. Most religious believers do not see theological disagreement as a spur to religious progress; they hope for a time when arguments will cease and theological discussion will come to an end. Their response to disagreement has been, if conservative, to cast out heretics in the interests of achieving doctrinal purity or, if liberal, to fudge on differences and insist that they are either illusory or pertain to things indifferent.

Perhaps more importantly, most religious believers and religious studies scholars assume that religious belief is *important* for the development of our character, the shaping of our lives and the ordering of human societies and that, if true, should be held with the highest possible degree of conviction. Theology is therefore different from other academic disciplines.

First, most religious believers and religious studies scholars regard religion as important because they hold that religion by its nature is *salvific*—either in its effect on individual believers or on the social order or both. Arriving at truths in mathematics or the empirical sciences, in philosophy or in other academic disciplines, may be a good thing but we can live without it. When it comes to religion however, most serious religious believers hold that getting it right doctrinally and behaving according to the rules of conduct embodied in their religious tradition is necessary for the well-being of individuals and for the social good. Even if they do not expect God to punish heretics or visit famine, plague, and military defeat on communities that harbor them, most assume

that religious belief changes lives for the better, answers to some deep-seated human need or, at the very least, keeps people from running amok.

Secondly, serious adherents of world religions believe that their religions—or, minimally, religion as such—are of universal interest. Many assume that even if their preferred great world religions are not for everyone, there is nevertheless a core of generic doctrine that everyone should believe or, at the very least, a need in everyone for “spirituality” of some sort—a God-hole that wants to be filled, or a list of Big Questions crying for answers. Religion, both religious believers and theologians assume, is not just a hobby, or a taste that some people have but some do not.

Finally, it is generally assumed that religious believers should hold religious beliefs with the highest degree of conviction. Unlike other metaphysical theses which no reasonable person would bet on, religious doctrines are supposed to be at once hard to swallow and deserving of intense, unwavering commitment. While doubt might be understandable and forgivable, it is certainly not desirable; commitment is a virtue and the bigger the leap of faith the more meritorious.

Globalization undermines all of these assumptions. Plato accepted the existence of the gods a matter of common opinion. We recognize that there is no common opinion about the nature or existence of God or gods because we know that, globally, there is widespread theological disagreement. Where theological matters are not backed by common opinion and where there is no consensus, either about theological details or even the most fundamental claims about the existence and nature of God, it is difficult and, indeed, unreasonable to maintain religious belief with any serious degree of conviction.

Globalization also puts pressure on the assumption that religion is of universal interest. In addition to revealing the diversity of religious beliefs and practices, it exposes religious believers to secularists, who do not hold religious beliefs of any kind or participate in any religious practices but who seem none the worse for it. Religious believers are forced to confront the fact that most of the happy, morally decent, law-abiding citizens of affluent countries are not religious believers and, for the most part, have no interest in the “big questions” that are supposed to motivate the religious quest.

This undermines the claim that religion is salvific even in the most latitudinarian sense. A great many people seem to do perfectly well without it and the world’s most secular societies, in Western Europe and Japan, are doing very well indeed. Globally, religion flourishes where people are badly off, where religious groups promise the benefits that citizens of affluent countries get from modern medicine and other technologies, and where churches are the only institutions that stand with ordinary people against corrupt governments and tin-pot dictators. With exceptions to prove the rule, when people’s material needs are satisfied by secular means most lose interest in religion.

It is therefore no longer plausible to hold that religious belief and participation in religious ceremonies are important for the welfare of individuals or the social order, that religion is of universal interest or that religious beliefs can, or should, be maintained with a high degree of conviction.

There are two responses available to religious believers, who have traditionally held that religion is important, of universal interest and deserving of the highest degree of conviction. We can revise our understanding of the *content* of religion in order to

identify it with a body of practices or beliefs that *are* important to the well-being of individuals and the social order, that *are* of universal interest and that *can* (and should) be maintained with a high degree of conviction. Or we can keep the content fixed but reject traditional claims about the *significance* of religion, granting that it is a minority taste, which cannot be expected to engage most people, that it has little practical import for individuals or their communities, and that no reasonable person should hold religious beliefs with any high degree of conviction.

Friends of religion have traditionally taken the first course, attempting to persuade an increasingly skeptical public that religion was *really* ethics or *really* therapy or *really* a social improvement program—*really* something that was salvific and of universal interest—and, in any case, that all religions were *really* one. “At least since the first petals of the counterculture bloomed,” writes Stephen Prothero, “[i]t has been fashionable to affirm that all religions are beautiful and all are true.” Arguing that “God is not one,” Prothero notes the peculiarity of the contrary claim:

No one argues that different economic systems or political regimes are one and the same.... Yet scholars continue to claim that religious rivals such as Hinduism and Islam, Judaism and Christianity are, by some miracle of the imagination, essentially the same, and this view resounds in the echo chamber of popular culture. (Prothero 2010: 1)

This is indeed puzzling until we recognize that religious studies scholars are attempting to detoxify religion—to eliminate its potential for promoting conflict—by

making it out to be something that most religious believers would scarcely recognize. I suggest that we take the second more radical course and reject traditional claims about the *significance* of religion instead. That is the tack I shall take, providing first a descriptive account of religion and then arguing that even those world religions that are theistic are not all concerned with the same supernatural beings or states of affairs.

God is not one. But that should not be a cause for concern. Since, I suggest, religious differences are not the fundamental cause of violence or geo-political conflict. Crusades, jihads and inquisitions are spurred by economic interests, tribal loyalties, and secular politics. Religion is epiphenomenal. Crusaders pushed east to capture territory, whether it was under the control of Muslims or Orthodox Christians. Muslims pushed west to capture territory and we might conjecture that, as Graham Fuller argues, a world without Islam would not be much different from the one we currently occupy (Fuller 2010). Arabs would have swept out of the Arabian Peninsula and Turkic tribes would have pushed into Anatolia regardless of their religious convictions or affiliations.

If this is correct then well-meaning attempts to establish that all religions are really one because ultimately they all worship the same entity are pointless: religious diversity does not motivate violence, oppression, or imperialism and eliminating it, or making the case that it is illusory, will not make the world a safer, happier or more peaceful place. If that is so we can afford to address the question of what religion is honestly without feeling obliged to show that all religions are one in the interests of promoting tolerance.

Religion

Any descriptive account of what religion is should include criteria which all clear cases of religions satisfy and which all clear cases of non-religion fail. It should also explain why borderline cases are borderline.

Hoping to show that religion was credible, of universal interest, and vital to well-being, religious studies scholars and other writers sympathetic to religion have produced a variety of definitions of the phenomenon, none of which would be recognized by most religious believers, that do not provide such criteria:

Alfred North Whitehead: “what the individual does with his own solitariness.”

(Cited in Hexham 1993: 186–7)

George Hegel: “the knowledge possessed by the finite mind of its nature as absolute mind.” (Cited in *ibid*)

Paul Tillich: “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.” (Cited in Webb 2010: 42)

Robert Bellah: “a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence.” (Bellah 1991: 21)

Keith Yandell’s account is perhaps more representative of views in current philosophy of religion:

A religion proposes a diagnosis (an account of what it takes the basic problem facing human beings to be) and a cure (a way of permanently and desirably solving that problem): one basic problem shared by every human person and one fundamental solution that...is essentially the

same across the board...Different religions offer differing diagnoses and cures. Given that criterion, there are a good many religions. The diagnosis that a particular religion articulates asserts that every human person has a basic non-physical illness so deep that, unless it is cured, one's potential is unfulfilled and one's nature cripplingly flawed. Then a cure is proffered. (Yandell 1999, 23)

This account assumes that there is a problem endemic to the human condition which is so “deep” that if we fail to address it our lives will be significantly poorer and our nature will be seriously flawed. It is however questionable whether many humans are concerned about such matters, or should be. As Bonhoeffer notes, “[t]he ordinary man who spends his everyday life at work, and with his family, and of course with all kinds of hobbies and other interests too” pays no attention to “the existentialist philosophers and the psychotherapists, who demonstrate to secure, contented, happy mankind that it is really unhappy and desperate, and merely unwilling to realize that it is in severe straits it knows nothing at all about, from which only they can rescue it.” (Bonhoeffer 1960, 146-147)

Moreover, like the other highfalutin revisionary definitions of religion, Yandell’s fits ill with ordinary religious believers’ understanding of what religion is.

First, Yandell’s definition does not provide a necessary condition for religion as the folk understand it. It seems likely that most individuals whom the folk would recognize as religious believers do not think they suffer from any deep non-physical illness or look to religion for a cure. We think of Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims, who believe in the existence of the supernatural beings and states of affairs posited by

Christian theology and who clearly count as religious believers by folk standards. For most, including ecclesiastical employees like the Sumner, the Pardoner, and the Prioress, religion makes little difference in their lives. Like Bonhoeffer's "ordinary man" they are not troubled by existential angst. In secular cultures, religious believers are self-selected and so may take their commitments more seriously, but at most times, in most places, religious belief and practice have been part of the world-taken-for-granted as they were for Chaucer's religious tourists. For most religious people, supernatural beings are just more authorities to be petitioned, wheedled, and placated, and religious ceremonies are merely part of the business of life.

Secondly, Yandell's account does not provide a sufficient condition for religion as the folk understand it: it fails to capture the common view that religion is essentially supernaturalistic—involving, if not belief in a God or gods, at the very least beliefs concerning minor supernatural entities or supernatural states of affairs, such as post-mortem survival or the transmigration of souls. There are numerous self-help programs and therapies that promise to improve one's character and release untapped human potential, which we would not call "religions" without benefit of scare quotes because they do not involve any supernaturalistic elements.

There are also "philosophies of life" and bodies of wisdom literature that claim to diagnose and cure deep non-physical illnesses endemic to the human condition by providing worldviews, values, and moral visions that shape their adherents' lives. Given the folk understanding of religion however such "philosophies" are neither religions nor essential features of religions. Some religions, notably Christianity and Buddhism, have developed around deified teachers of wisdom, and so include "wisdom" and "values"

components. But not all teachers of wisdom have been deified. Neither Socrates nor later Hellenistic philosophers who dispensed advice about how to live became the focus of cultic practice. In the ordinary way of thinking, neither Socrates' reflections on virtue, nor Stoicism, nor any of the other "philosophies" that flourished during the period, however elevated and edifying, count as religious insofar they have no cultic expression. On the other hand, it seems likely that the folk would understand cultic practices that have no ethical or "philosophical" import, for example the activities of voodooists and shamans, as religious.

On the account suggested here, therefore, supernaturalistic beliefs and ritual are essential to religion as ordinarily understood—ethics, values, "wisdom," conjectures about the "meaning of life," reflections on the human condition, and accounts of our place in the universe are not. Moreover, even when it comes to the religions of deified teachers of wisdom, which institutionalize moral codes and accounts of our place in the grand scheme of things as official doctrine, many adherents—perhaps even most—have no serious interest in either the ethics or the "philosophy" associated with their religious commitments. Most of us, I suspect, would nevertheless count them as *religious* insofar as they hold beliefs about the supernatural and participate in cultic activities, particularly those organized by the religious institutions with which they are affiliated.

In general, current academic definitions of religion seem to be covertly normative. On the one hand they ask too much. So, for example, Charles Taliaferro requires that the teachings and practices a religion embodies be about an "ultimate" reality and guide adherents into a "saving, illuminating, and emancipatory relationship with that reality." (Taliaferro 2010, chapter one) Presumably religions that are merely

concerned with wheedling and placating crudely anthropomorphic minor spirits in the interests of obtaining material benefits are primitive or defective—if, indeed, they are religions at all. Academic accounts valorize “the great world religions,” which Taliaferro notes “have advanced philosophies of the sacred” (Taliaferro 2010, chapter one) as models of what religion *should* be.

On the other hand these accounts ask too little. They do not require either supernaturalism or ritual. And this seems at odds with the way the folk understand what it is to be religious—namely to believe that there is some being or state of affairs beyond the material universe and to participate in what are commonly understood as religious rituals.

If this is correct then I suggest we understand religion as:

- (1) A body of doctrine concerning supernatural beings, phenomena or states of affairs;
- (2) associated with ceremonies, typically involving cult objects and other special equipment;
- (3) embodied in an institution.

Any social phenomenon that meets all three conditions is a clear case of a religion. If you see a group of people engaging in ceremonial acts under the auspices of an institution that maintains cultic centers, supplies equipment, and organizes ritual events, and if, when asked, they say that they are participating in this ceremony to honor

or propitiate supernatural beings—gods, ancestors or spirits of some sort—that will likely convince you that what you are observing is religion.

All clear cases of religion meet all three conditions; no religion fails all three; and social practices that satisfy two of the conditions are borderline cases of religion. State Marxism and other ideological/patriotic cults are borderline cases of religion to the extent that they satisfy (2) and (3). They are not central cases because their constitutive doctrines do not concern supernatural beings, phenomena or states of affairs. Freelance New Ageism is a borderline case of religion because, although it satisfies (1) and (2), insofar as it involves beliefs about the supernatural, ceremonies, and cult objects, it is not institutionalized. “Philosophies” concerning supernatural beings, phenomena or states of affairs that are not associated with rituals or institutionally embodied are clearly not religions.

On this account, a religion at its core consists of ritual practices, that is, actions that are neither arbitrarily chosen by their performers nor dictated purely by logic, chance, necessity or pragmatic purposes naturalistically understood. Myths and theologies make sense of the rituals; religious institutions provide infrastructure and organize them.

Moral codes and “philosophies” are not essential to religion. Some religions, including shamanism and Shinto, do perfectly well without them. It is not even clear that those religious traditions that are associated with moral codes share common ethical principles in any interesting sense. The Golden Rule, which according to popular opinion, all religions teach, is not peculiarly religious. Mill held that it expressed “the complete spirit of the ethics of utility” (Mill 1987: 228). Virtually everyone, including

individuals who have no use for religion, pays lip service to it. But, short of the Golden Rule, even those religions that include moral codes disagree. If we seek to find the commonality of all religious traditions in some shared, distinctively religious system of “values” then we shall have to fudge on the differences, and either regard Shinto and shamanism as defective religions at best or exclude them altogether.

The interesting similarities and differences amongst religions are those that concern *essential* features: the nature of supernatural beliefs and the character of the individual and corporate rituals they embody. Ascertaining whether different religious traditions embody the same essential supernaturalistic beliefs is however problematic for a variety of reasons, among them the difficulty of determining the conditions under which the names and other referring expressions they use purport to refer to the same supernatural beings. There is however no reason to assume *a priori* that expressions within different theological traditions that purport to refer to supernatural beings all refer to the same Being and there is, indeed, reason to believe that some purport to refer to the same being while others do not.

The Problem of Reference

Father of all! in every age,

In every clime adored,

By saint, by savage, and by sage,

Jehovah, Jove, or Lord! (Alexander Pope in Rogers 1955)

Do “Jehovah,” “Jove,” and “Lord” and all the rest in fact refer to the same (possibly fictitious) individual? Did “Demeter,” “Cybele,” “Gaia” and “Isis” refer to the same mother goddess? Were the cultic activities devoted to Zeus or Artemis, under different descriptions, in different places, directed to the same god or goddess?

Peter Byrne is typical of religious pluralists in arguing that “all major religious traditions refer to a common sacred, transcendent reality” (Byrne 1995: 31). He explains:

There can be but one unique referent for the religions if there is any referent at all. If the names of the sacred in a religion do not name the transcendent ultimate postulated by so much philosophy, East and West, we may be unable to assign them any reference whatsoever. Hence we have a powerful motive, resting upon the demands of intellectual economy and charity, to assign all traditions the same referent. (Ibid: 52)

On this account, the “major religious traditions” stand or fall together. Byrne’s take on religion is, however, questionable.

First, Byrne selects a special class of religions, the “major religious traditions,” to which the thesis is applicable without providing any clear, non-question-begging criteria for the selection. Are these traditions on the shortlist because they have more adherents than minor, local or tribal religious traditions, because they represent religion in its paradigmatic or most evolved form, or because they support the pluralist thesis?

Secondly, Byrne dismisses “confessional” interpretations of religion, the doctrinal peculiarities of distinct religious traditions. “The differences between

traditions,” he claims, “do not matter when it comes to considering whether such traditions make reference to a common sacred reality and offer means of orienting human beings lives toward that reality” (ibid: 26). But unless we can make the case that, however ignorant or mistaken ordinary religious believers have been, the object of their devotion is *really* the “transcendent ground of reality,” this move just adds another god to the pantheon: Jews worship Yahweh, Christians the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; Muslims pray to Allah and Hindus, depending on their particular sect, venerate Vishnu, Shiva or the Goddess through their various avatars. But the enlightened of every religious tradition, along with individuals who are spiritual but not religious, direct their attention to yet another being, viz. “the transcendent ultimate.”

Moreover, we may question whether talk about a “transcendent ground of reality” is even intelligible. In what does “grounding” consist? And how are we to understand “reality” in this context? Does it include its “ground”? If so, then that ground is not transcendent. If not, then it is not real. Greek myths, even if literally false, are intelligible and so is orthodox Christian theology—whether true or false. But this revisionary theology, intended to appeal to cultured despisers who take it for granted that Greek mythology and orthodox Christian theology are equally implausible, evacuates theology of all intelligible content.

Restricting consideration to “major religious traditions,” each stripped of its confessional peculiarities and understood as an account of a “transcendent ground of reality which is the sum and source of value,” (ibid: 33) assuming this is intelligible, the pluralist thesis that all religions refer to the same being, may be plausible. But this elevated, stripped down religion is not to most people’s taste. Even on the most

charitable interpretation, most religious believers have never had the slightest interest in a “transcendent ground of reality.” Most take themselves to be doing business with a powerful, if not omnipotent, incorporeal agent who is the subject of psychological states. Whatever the “ground of reality” is supposed to be, if it cannot be said to be conscious, to know, will, and act, it is not what most religious believers understand as God.

The community of religious studies scholars can, of course, stipulate that “God” is to refer to the “transcendent ground of reality” and, in their capacity as theological experts, recommend that the general public adopt this usage. But that is not to say that the general public, or religious believers in particular, are *really* referring to this being, however mistaken they may be about its character, when they articulate their religious beliefs.

Byrne’s argument for “assigning all traditions the same referent” is in any case obscure, so admittedly the following exegesis is speculative. Byrne’s thought seems to be first, that since there are no beings that have the characteristics assigned to them by the distinct “confessional” interpretations of different religions, the “names of the sacred” in these religions fail to refer. Secondly, he seems to assume that if such names fail to refer, identity questions must be unanswerable.

The first claim, if this is indeed what Byrne intends, is simply false. We can succeed in referring even if we are largely ignorant and even grossly mistaken about the character of the referents. We can, indeed, as Donnellan noted long ago, pick out individuals by descriptions that are not true of them (Donnellan 1966). Even if the theology of a religious group is largely mistaken, adherents may still succeed in

referring; even if members' different religious traditions disagree about theological details they may still refer to the same God.

The second claim is more contentious. There is indeed a worry about identity statements concerning non-entities, including mere *possibilia*. No entity without identity. Nevertheless, identifying and individuating fictional characters and other non-entities does not seem to be as hopeless a task as Quine imagined. We do it all the time. Superman is certainly identical to Clark Kent—and not to Jimmy Olson. Moreover, even from the outside, as critics, we can meaningfully ask questions about the identities of characters across literary works. Emmaline Lucas, “Lucia,” appears in six of E. F. Benson's novels. The same character appears in two sequels written over half a century later by Tom Holt.

We can answer questions about the identity of non-entities because the question of how the reference of a term is transmitted from speaker to speaker is distinct from the question of how its reference is fixed. Even where we are talking about non-entities or leave it as an open question whether we are, we can still ask, and answer, questions about whether we mean to talk about the same thing. And even if we suspend judgment about the existence of God or gods, we can still address the question of whether adherents of different religious traditions mean to talk about the same god or not. There is no reason to hold that unless speakers refer to the one “transcendent ground of reality” we cannot reasonably conclude they mean to talk about the same god—or to different gods.

Leaving it an open question whether the god in question exists or not, we can ask: When do religious believers mean to “talk about” the same god? It seems plausible

to suggest that they do so when they have inherited their religious terminology from a common source, when they intend to refer to the same god and when descriptions of their respective gods are not too far out of whack. Sometimes godtalk purports to refer to the same deity; sometimes it does not.

It is worth considering an example. Shortly after 9/11 evangelist Franklin Graham informed the American public that: “The god of Islam is not the same God of the Christian or the Judeo-Christian faith. It is a different god...” (see <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week616/cover.html>).

Graham was wrong: on any reasonable account of reference “God” and “Allah” purport to refer to the same being. Christian Arabs address God as “Allah.” The name comes down a causal chain from the milieu in which the writers of the Old Testament flourished. The Biblical “Elohim” is a plural form of the Hebrew cognate of “Allah,” which is a contraction of the definite article “al-” and “ilah” meaning “deity.” So “Allah” has sense, if not reference, and means “the [sole] deity, God” (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allah>). It is not a straightforward proper name, like “Apollo” or “Thor,” and insofar as it has descriptive content it means just what “God” means in English. Moreover, historically, Islam drew from Judaism and Christianity. Like the Book of Mormon, the Koran is a Biblical knock-off and, indeed, initially Christians regarded Islam as a Christian heresy rather than a non-Christian religion. Finally, it is clear that in talking about Allah, Mohammad and his followers intended to refer to the same being whom Jesus called “Father”: Mohammad claimed to be a prophet of the same God as Adam, Abraham, and Jesus.

Muslims and Christians hold different beliefs about the nature of this being, but we can refer to the same individual even if we hold different views about what that individual is like. Granted, at some point our views about what the individual in question is like may diverge so radically that we shall be forced to conclude that we are not referring to the same individual. Still, among Christians, Jews, and Muslims there is substantial theological agreement. Muslims do not of course recognize a Trinity of Persons in God, but neither do Jews, whom Christians recognize as fellow believers in the same God in spite of their mistaken ideas about what this God is like. If Jews count as believing in the same God as Christians then so do Muslims: the God of Islam is very clearly the same God as the God of Graham's "Judeo-Christian faith."

Whether we can say the same of the deities of Hinduism or other theistic traditions which, unlike Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, did not develop from within the same cultural milieu is another matter—particularly since the theology in which they are embedded is radically different from the theology of the Abrahamic religions. Do Hindu devotees of Vishnu, Shiva or the Goddess believe in the same God as Jews, Christians, and Muslims? Closer to home we can ask whether Jove, or even more interestingly, Sol Invictus, a favorite of monotheistically inclined Greco-Roman pagans, was the same deity as the God of Christians.

We can however leave these as open questions noting only that there is no reason to believe that all religions, or even all "major" or "world" religions, really purport to refer to the same individual, much less to a being who is the "transcendent ground of reality." Some do and some don't.

Religion is Not the Problem...Or the Solution

Now suppose we determine that some religions direct their attention to our preferred god, while others do not. Why should we care? If, on the global stage, religion is epiphenomenal as I have suggested, even if we discover that we do not all worship the same god it will not make any significant difference and so, arguably, there is no reason why we should care.

Most of us Americans, at least, are “lay liberals” who believe that “it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you live right.” We have no stomach for holy wars or even for proselytizing. “Evangelism and mission outreach,” Luidens, Hoge and Johnson note in their study of religion among the Baby Boomer generation, “are condoned by lay liberals to the extent that they involve education or service to the less fortunate” but not if they promote proselytization:

“Go teach” and “go heal” are acceptable battle cries. But lay liberals are resistant to “go preach”; evangelism and mission programs are not acceptable if they involve efforts to persuade others that their faiths are inadequate. Many Boomers...say that they would be content if their children adopted non-Western religions “as long as they are happy” and as long as they are moral citizens. (Luidens, Hoge and Johnson 1994)

Most of us do not believe that Christianity, or any other religion is “necessary to salvation” and have no interest in promoting theological conformity:

[R]elativism and privatism are embedded in lay liberalism.... One's personal beliefs are only appropriate relative to one's own life and social context and should not be binding on others. This produces a strongly privatized faith.... For lay liberals, therefore, one denomination is almost as good as another—when and if it is needed.... While a sizeable majority of the unchurched are lay liberals, this perspective is also widely held among those who are churched.... We estimate that well over half of our Baby Boomers could be classified as lay liberals. (Ibid)

Of course that's *us*. Critics will suggest that elsewhere, particularly within the Islamic world, lay liberals are scarce. Nevertheless there is little support for Europeans' worry that Muslims aim to take over the West and impose Shari'a. As the rhetoric of Osama bin Laden and his followers suggests, even radical Islamicists are not interested in establishing Eurabia: their aim is to oppose Western neo-colonialism. Like other third world anti-colonialists who, in the past, adopted Marxism as a protest against Westernization, formerly colonized peoples in the Middle East and elsewhere oppose Westernization—now in the name of Islam. If there is a “clash of civilizations” is not between cultures defined by their religious affiliations but between affluent cosmopolitans in societies formed by the Enlightenment and members of the traditional societies of the Global South, who have been colonized, exploited and humiliated, many of whom have turned to radical Islam as an expression of their anti-Western sentiments.

Religious disputes merely signal tribal and ethnic clashes, power plays, territorial disputes, and other mundane, political differences, which often enough have played out in the absence of religious disagreement. From the Fourth Crusade to the world wars of the 20th century, Christians have waged war against fellow Christians. Muslims have made war on fellow Muslims since the Abbasid dynasty overthrew the Umayyad caliphs in the 8th century; currently Sudanese Muslims are conducting a slow-motion genocide on their fellow Muslims in Darfur. Religious agreement is not sufficient for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence, and it is not necessary either. In the US, evangelical Christians happily work alongside Mormons and atheistic libertarians to promote conservative policies.

Globalization has unleashed a variety of political and economic forces that have resulted in violence, warfare, and terrorism. I have suggested however that religious differences are not responsible for these evils, and so that ecumenical efforts will not fix them. On the world stage, religion as such is not important. There is no reason, therefore, to look for theological common ground amongst world religions or, with Byrne, to reject distinct “confessional interpretations” in order to make out that there is a common essence to all religious beliefs and practices.

Globalization is not a novelty: Alexander the Great started it. The Hellenistic world was the first experiment in multiculturalism and the Roman Empire expanded and perfected it. The Mediterranean world of the period was a “world full of gods” where innumerable cults and mystery religions were in operation. But Greco-Roman paganism was syncretic, and was, as Ramsey McMullen put it, “a spongy mass of tolerance” (MacMullen 1997: 2).

That should not be surprising since amongst pagans the cults of the various gods were not thought to be either universal or exclusive, and there was some sense that each god should get his due. However even when it came to Jews and Christians, the theologically indigestible monotheists in that mix of Hellenistic mystery religions, Oriental imports, and decaying cults of the city gods, toleration became the norm. And for their part, some Christians were willing to hedge their theological bets. Most notable amongst them was Constantine who, together with his colleague Licinius, issued the Edict of Milan in 313 establishing a policy of religious toleration:

When I, Constantine Augustus, as well as I Licinius Augustus fortunately met near Mediolanurn (Milan), and were considering everything that pertained to the public welfare and security, we thought -, among other things which we saw would be for the good of many, those regulations pertaining to the reverence of the Divinity ought certainly to be made first, so that we might grant to the Christians and others full authority to observe that religion which each preferred; *whence any Divinity whatsoever in the seat of the heavens may be propitious and kindly disposed to us and all who are placed under our rule.* (Edict of Milan available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/edict-milan.html>)
[Emphasis added].

Though representing only approximately 10% of the Empire by the early 4th century, Christians were ubiquitous. As Tertullian, writing almost a century earlier

noted: Christians were friends and neighbors; they were in the professions, in the military, and in every trade. And they were also relatives: Christians were married—and buried—with non-Christians. Diocletian's Great Persecution was an expensive failure because it had little popular support. By the time of Diocletian, Christians had become everyone's friends, neighbors, and relatives—and no one wanted to persecute members of his own family or tribe. Constantine, whatever his personal views on the matter, confirmed popular opinion.

Like the Romans of the period, we Americans are also at once very religious and very tolerant. Robert Putnam suggests that this is a consequence of the Aunt Susan Principle. Aunt Susan is a pagan, a lesbian, a Mormon, an atheist—something that we are not—but we know that she is a good person and will surely go to heaven, if there is a heaven (Putnam and Campbell 2010). So we reject the idea that outside of our church, whichever church it is, there is no salvation. We are as syncretic as those religiously promiscuous Romans, and may as well enjoy it.

Religion is not important, I have argued, either as a universal prerequisite for the good life or as a driver of world affairs. But the best things in life are not important or universally appealing—including literature, music, art, and everything else that makes civilized life worthwhile. We can agree to disagree on theological matters precisely because religion is not important. And because it is not important, instead of ignoring or eliminating differences between religious traditions we can recognize, affirm and enjoy them.

Related Topics

Chapter 30: Civil Society; Chapter 31: Human Rights; Chapter 33: War; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 42: Literature

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Further Reading

Banchoff, T. (ed.), (2008). *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press. A useful collection of recent essays on religious pluralism in a global context with a comprehensive overview in the editor's introduction.

Hick, J. (1989) *An Interpretation of Religion*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. The classic work on religious pluralism by its most prominent exponent.

Huntington, S. P. (1998) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster. Huntington argues that differences amongst cultures based on religious traditions has led to a clash of civilizations which carries with it the threat of global violence.

Putnam, R. D., and D. E. Campbell (2010) *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, New York: Simon & Schuster. An accessible and very readable discussion of religious diversity in contemporary America based on two of the most comprehensive surveys ever conducted on religion and public life in the US.

Singer, P. (2002) *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, New Haven: Yale University Press. One of today's most prominent ethicists and most controversial public intellectuals discusses the most significant moral and political issues arising from globalization broadly construed.