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A Post-Religious Perspective on the Globalization Crisis

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The basis of the new world order after World War II, if there was any, was the balance and competition between two largely antagonistic systems: on the one side, the liberal, nominally democratic capitalist system of the West championed by the US, France, and the United Kingdom; on the other side, the centralized, meritocratic communist system of the East, represented by the Soviet Union and China. These two systems were not just ways of organizing economies but also styles of authority and decision making. They were first and foremost secular types of engineering paradises,[1] competitors in producing human flourishing on a grand scale. In this sense they can be considered as secularized religions.[2,3]

Since the communist model broke down in 1991 and left China as a kind of bastard of collective-communist and individualist-capitalist traits, balances of power have shifted and many hopes have been shattered. Neither the fall of communism nor the injection of capitalist and Western economic ideas into China have led to the anticipated happiness, freedom, and welfare for majorities of people nor made these systems more predictable, humane, or politically reliable. On the contrary, they seem to have fueled phantasies of grandeur and power on a large scale among geopolitical rivals.

It seems to me that a new system must be developed, and it cannot be based on dilapidating foundations. The old system's cornerstones were quasi-religious in secular garments[4]: the hope that concerted activity in commerce and trade would produce the welfare on earth that was a sign of God's blessing in heaven. Of course, this heavenly part has slowly dwindled over the past two centuries while the earthly part—profit-making—remained,[5,6] if with a significant shift of emphasis such that worldly riches became ends in themselves. On its side, the quasi-religious aspect of

the communist narrative told instead of a New Man and a solely material paradise on earth that would be both the origin and result of a new world order.

Both approaches have proven to be wrong, as we know. The welfare for all that is the foundation of the capitalist myth is only a cover story to keep the majority of people in a state of pending hope and busy activity, lulled by an entertainment industry that prevents them from critically questioning the narrative and the fact that it really only serves a minority who live comfortably at the expense of the majority. Increasingly demonstrative public outcry against extreme levels of inequality makes evident the erosion of faith in this myth.

As a result, we have arrived in a world where the proto-religious character of secular narratives has vanished, since nobody believes in them anymore. New foundations for the age of "re-globalization," as Benedikter and Kofler rightly brand it, will have to recur more consciously to the basically spiritual roots of all grand narratives. But in a "maturely" globalized world that unites peoples of different religions and creeds it cannot be any single dominant religion, but rather a secularized type of spirituality that acknowledges both humanity's spiritual nature and the structure of transcendent hope that is at the root of each and every myth—even the capitalist myth of a consumer paradise that will arise once liberal or even libertarian globalization is perfected.

A new, more explicit spiritual foundation for re-globalization could be the acknowledgment and understanding that there is a basic unity and community among all humans, an interrelatedness that can neither be avoided nor ignored, except at one's own peril, and that each and every attempt to create benefits for oneself—either as an individual, or as a nation, a group or a company—at the expense of others will ultimately damage the one perpetrating such egotism.[7,8] Political globalization is, in the last instance, an expression of the spiritual nature of humanity. There cannot be a benefit for only single groups or individuals as long as a large part of humanity is suffering deprivation.

This spirituality grows out of a basic insight or experience that is probably common to all religions and is itself a sign of humankind's spiritual nature: the notion of the unity and community of all beings, human and natural. Different religions frame it with different symbolic representations. In the Judeo-Christian tradition it is the core insight that creation is one and is good, and that the transcendent reality is

benevolently related to all beings. The same can be said for Islam. The Buddhist notion of the oneness of being and the illusion of separation is another way of putting it. In the Vedanta tradition, the basic teaching is that everything is Brahman. And the diverse traditions of natural religions and nature worship of aboriginal peoples all testify to this fundamental insight. Leaving aside doctrinal differences, there seems to be this generic experience of oneness and recognition of interrelatedness that comprises the foundation and spiritual core of all religions. This minimal common denominator is an option even for humanists and atheists.[9,10]

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It will be important that an ethics for the age of re-globalization uncovers this core while leaving aside the doctrinal differences. Every religion tends to emphasize its own reading of how unity and interrelatedness should be made concrete. Hence a new, truly re-globalized ethic cannot be founded on any singular religion. Neither will it work to emphasize a revisionist program that would claim that simply reverting to “the original” religious creeds will make all well. Implicit religious rivalries would again come to the fore and, importantly, the secular humanism prominent in Western societies (and likely to become ever more important elsewhere) would protest. Hence, the foundation for a truly global ethic that at the same time honors the spiritual nature of humankind can only be secular.

What would this ethic principally consist in?

Practical ethical injunctions are part of all world religions. The most common and basic, found nearly everywhere, is what is known as the Golden (or in a weaker form as the silver) Rule: Do (not) upon others as you wish others should (not) do upon you. If it were enacted, this rule would preclude lopsided trade treaties, willfully flawed and mendacious communication in diplomatic and economic negotiations, lying and fake news production in public communication and media activities, supremacist and nationalist political stances, as well as hopelessly idealist or self-sacrificing policies. It would automatically engender some safeguards against manipulating the weaker, less fortunate nations and generate some outlawing mechanism against members of the international community that cheat in ways harmful to general prosperity.

Uttarakhand, India.

This might be a good idea theoretically, analyzable and arguable philosophically. But how would it be imposed or even enforced in the case of those unwilling to accept it? Often bold ideas have to be made public first, agreed upon by some leaders and thinkers and then acted upon. It could take many decades, if not centuries, until they become commonplace.

So, one option to generate an ethics for re-globalization over a longer period of time might be to make such a stance the basis of a type of declaration that becomes the blueprint for a global form of governance which is concerned with specific frameworks, such as trade treaties and legal issues such as the international criminal court, pollutant emissions, and so on. In contradistinction to current practices, this kind of governance structure would have to be independent of national interests and enjoy some form of executive power. This would, by necessity, entail that single nations agree to desist in certain areas from the absolute sovereignty principle that is currently governing the world order and which leads by default to a stronger influence of the most powerful nations. It would amount to a reform of the United Nations, which might become a more unified and also more effective governing body, once certain parts of governance that are by definition transnational and global have been delegated to a reformed UN. It might also need

some independent financing which could come from transnational taxing of air traffic, capital transactions, and the like. Re-globalization could be “reforming” and “reframing” in exactly this sense: by using practical issues to “re-ethicize” international relations by the means of an applied “secular spirituality.”

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The COVID-19 crisis has shown again that national responses and reactions are insufficient to cope with global problems. And the climate and ecological crisis demonstrate how local decisions and actions can have global consequences that in the end fall back on local decision makers, for instance when catastrophes like droughts, floods, and storms devastate harvests or challenge national economies, again forcing them to call for global assistance. Rather than just locally mending what global problems produce in specific locales, it is preferable to engage proactively and recognize both the challenge and the danger of wanting the benefits but not the responsibilities intrinsic to a globalized world. A central feature of such recognition involves acknowledging the basically spiritual nature and underlying unity of humankind and all beings as foundational to any program of re-globalization.

Notes

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