

Globalization and the shared community ethic of Islam and Christianity

Published in *Al Tasamoh*

Saturday, January 23, 2010

By: Douglas R. Leonard

The rapid spread of globalization has brought numerous advancements to our world: free markets, access to diverse products, efficiency of production, intelligent record keeping systems, high speed global communications and a heightened awareness of world events, to name a few. These improvements have also come with some unintended consequences: porous national boundaries, increased internet and media usage which diverts time away from family and local community, increased exposure to violent imagery, and a trend toward individual consumerism. This article will seek to define globalization, and discuss the way in which these unintended consequences have threatened to erode local time and space-bound human community and the cohesion of extended family systems. Islam and Christianity provide a set of shared values by which to evaluate these rapid changes and to suggest a model for the preservation of communal connection and identity.

Globalization Defined

Globalization is a relatively recent term often used synonymously with global capitalism to describe a world wide web of commerce, the global exchange of resources, products and services. The term was coined in the mid-late 20th century but only gained widespread usage in the 1990's. Some political theorists correlate usage of the term with the fall of the Soviet Union, the decline of socialism and the global rise of capitalism.ⁱ While often used to describe this global trend toward capitalism, the term 'globalization' applies more broadly to the influence of modernization and the increasing inter-connectedness of global media and communications.

The world's global inter-connectedness is not a recent trend. Global markets and their contiguous exchange of information have existed for millennia. There is significant archaeological and historical evidence of an inter-continental exchange of livestock and products, an ancient web of global commerce that stretched from the farthest reaches of eastern Asia through the greater Middle East, the center of Africa and the northwestern boundaries of Europe. These networks of global trade date back thousands of years.

Prehistoric tribes in the Sahara desert were importing domestic animals from Asia between 6,000 and 4,000 BCE. Egyptians were purchasing goats and sheep from Southwest Asia in 6,000 BCE.ⁱⁱ Archaeological evidence dates Oman's participation in global markets to at least 3,000 BCE.ⁱⁱⁱ Oman's products can be traced to locations in the farthest reaches of Europe and China. There is even speculation that 3,000 year old artifacts of the Olmec people from Central America could be evidence of an early trade with Africa.^{iv} Our world has been connected in a web of global commerce for thousands of years.

International connection through commerce is not antithetical to religious values. Mohammed was himself a successful merchant along the ancient caravan route through the desert to Syria, a trade route that supplied goods to transnational markets.^v Participation in the benefits of globalization does not necessarily betray the deepest values of the Abrahamic faiths.

Globalization is not, then, a new phenomenon, nor is it an exclusively Western innovation. Globalization has, however, accelerated immensely in the last century, and exponentially in the past twenty years. Consequent to the growth of international trade has been the necessary development of a high speed global communication system that links the world through cell phones, internet connections, and the vast sharing of information through a mass media, accessible to billions at a time. This rapid acceleration of inter-connection has changed the world quickly and dramatically. Once clearly defined social boundaries - national, local, linguistic, cultural, religious, ethnic - have become permeable as never before.

Robyn Bateman Driskell and Larry Lyon of Baylor University in The Impact of Globalization on Local Communities suggest that local communities have been eclipsed in the United States by a “mass society”.

“A mass society is a standardized, homogeneous society devoid of major ethnic and class divisions and, most importantly for the community, devoid of substantial regional and local variation. Because of mass media, standardized public education, and residential mobility, the intercommunity variation in norms, values, and behavior has been reduced to a remarkable degree. The territorial community, then, is of little scientific importance in a mass society. Residents of New York...and New Deal, Texas (population 732) will be much more alike than they are different. They watch the same TV shows and movies, read the same magazines and syndicated columnists, study the same textbooks in the same grades, and travel from one city to the next with ease.”

The homogenization of local communities that has occurred in the United States is representative of a global phenomenon that has affected the way in which local communities function in nearly every region of the planet.

Ali Mohammadi, editor of International Communication and Globalization defines globalization as “the way in which...relations of power and communication are stretched across the globe, involving compressions of time and space and a re-composition of social relationships.”^{vi}

The full effects of this hyper inter-connectedness remain to be seen. What forms will human interaction take? Will there emerge a global “mass society”? What will become of locally-based relational communities?

The Importance of Locally-based Community and the Effects of Increased Mass Media

Christians and Muslims share a value for locally-based relational community and cohesion with an extended family. The Abrahamic faiths value local social networks of mutual aid and share the intrinsic values of reconciliation and hospitality, essential to sustaining community. Participation in a local community is essential to healthy human development.

Duncan Timms, a sociologist who has studied the effects of the internet on the formation of identity and local community noted that “individual identity derives largely from face to face human interaction through mirroring and relations with others and from one’s imagination of their community’s perceptions and evaluations.”^{vii} There may be no replacement for participation in an extended family system and a primary local community for identity formation.

What will function to form identity if local community and extended family systems continue to weaken in the emerging “mass society?” Some social scientists have asserted that community is shifting from time and space bound localities, to on-line communities. As an individual’s use of the internet increases, participation in on-line communities also increases. Though, an on-line community does not seem to be able to perform the essential functions of a locally-based primary community.

There is counter evidence which suggests that rather than weakening local community, those who use the internet are more likely to use it to connect with a network of local social groups. It could be that internet use actually increases face to face contact.^{viii} This increased contact, however, is not likely to be in a single community of support, but rather in several isolated and self-selected communities. Membership in a single place-based primary community is being replaced by membership in multiple communities, spread across space and time.^{ix} Sociologist B. Wellman calls this “networked individualism.” “Rather than fitting into the same group as those around them, each individual has his or her own ‘personal communities.’”^x While there are benefits to broadening one’s social networks in this way, it is probable that as people increasingly choose membership in several self-selected personal communities, the functions which are essential to identity formation will be less available.

Sociologist Michael Traber has studied the impact of television and internet use on families and local communities. Traber noted, “...a major impact of television on culture is the compulsive obsession to watch TV programmes, irrespective of quality. It becomes a part of the daily routine...It makes family members less communicative with each other.”^{xi} Television viewing and internet use intrude into the pattern of family life and increase the communication gap between the members of the family.

An increase in TV viewing and internet use in America has led to a measurable decline in American’s participation in local community. According to the *Nielsen Report on Television*, in

1998, the average American watched 4 hours of television each day, an increase of 11% per decade since television became available in nearly 100% of American homes in the 1960's. "(Today) husbands and wives spend four times as much time watching television together as they spend talking to each other, and six to seven times as much as they spend in community activities outside the home." ^{xii} The average internet user world-wide spends nearly two hours per day on-line. This is an increase of 45 minutes per day since the year 2000. ^{xiii} Time given to media usage in the home is time diverted from family and community activities. The evidence supports the conclusion that increased use of mass media leads to a weakening of local communities and extended family systems.

These emerging social problems related to media usage are not exclusive to North America, but are likely to be experienced in any region of the world where television and internet usage are on the rise. Internet access and usage has increased dramatically world-wide over the past decade with the greatest increase having occurred in the Middle East. ^{xiv}

Of course there are numerous benefits to our world's increased interconnectedness through the internet and mass media: instantaneous awareness of world events, instant access to a growing collective database of on line knowledge, efficiency of communication, connection to a vast network of friends, and organizational effectiveness in opening local movements to large constituents. ^{xv} These are wonderful advancements. And yet both Christianity and Islam have a mandate to analyze social trends, to respond to them, to speak prophetic witness to the world regarding them and to offer guidance about how to incorporate new trends into our lives in such a way that they harmonize with the wisdom and blessings of our traditions.

Media Exposure to Fear and its Effect on Community

Another unintended consequence of increased interconnection and media usage is a heightened awareness of crime and the fear which this awareness seems to generate. According to Jeremy H. Lipschultz and Michael L. Hilt of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, in their paper titled "Race and Local Television News Crime Coverage,"

"Public opinion polls consistently found during the 1990s that a majority of Americans worried that crime was getting worse (Gallup, 2000)...coverage of murders increased by about 600%, even though the national murder rate dropped by 20% in the period 1990–1998 (Westfeldt & Wicker, 1998) and the violent crime rate dropped by a record 10.4% in 1999 from the previous year (Associated Press, 2000). For more than 40 years, the Gallup Poll has found that Americans identify crime as either the first or second problem facing their local community." ^{xvi}

Crime has been on the decline in the United States, yet global awareness of localized crimes, crimes that would have been known only to a small community 20 years ago, creates the impression that crime is more prevalent than it is. As a result, a culture of fear is emerging in America and around the world where media usage is on the rise.

According to Wesley G. Skogan, Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University, “The fear of crime can have devastating long term effects for neighborhoods. Once fear of crime sets in...residents frequently withdraw from community life.”^{xvii} Mark Warr, Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin notes, “The most frequently reported precaution that people employ in protecting themselves against crime is called ‘spatial avoidance’, or avoiding places that are believed to be dangerous.”^{xviii} There is evidence to suggest a positive correlation between increased media consumption and the increase in fear which inhibits community.

Both Christianity and Islam share an antidote to fear: the belief in God’s sovereignty, and a command to trust in God’s providence. The command “do not be afraid” occurs 65 times in the Bible. Continually, the message of Christian scripture encourages believers to trust in God and to resist the impulse to fear. Psalm 27, verse 1 says, “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?” And Psalm 23, verse 4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” In the Gospel according to John, chapter 14, verse 27, Jesus comforted the disciples by saying, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give it to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” And there is the beautiful Surah in the Qur’an, Surah 9, verse 40 when Mohammad and Abu Bakr were in flight from Mecca to Al Medinah. Mohammed said to his comrade, ‘Fear not, for Allah is with us.’ Then it says that “Allah caused His peace of reassurance to descend upon him and supported him with hosts ye cannot see, and made the word of those who disbelieved the nethermost, while Allah’s word it was that became the uppermost. Allah is Mighty, Wise.”^{xix} The Islamic and Christian shared assurances to trust in God engender a feeling of peace and a freedom from fear, essential to the formation and fostering of human community.

Individualism, Consumerism and Their Effects on Community

Globalization is often associated with free market capitalism, its accompanying ethic of consumerism and the tendency in the current form to encourage individualistic behavior. Both trends, consumerism and individualism, threaten to erode the cohesion of mutual community and run counter to the shared communal ethics of Islam and Christianity. Christians and Muslims have an opportunity in this emerging global trend toward cultural hegemony to give voice to an alternative ethic, one that both embraces the advantages of globalization while countering individualism and consumerism with an ethic of local and global community. There is nothing in the religious systems of Muslims and Christians that prohibits participation in the market, but consumption is not what defines them. Free market capitalism can be a useful tool for the

exchange of goods and services, but for Muslims and Christians it should never be idolized.^{xx} In secular culture, even after the world economic crisis, the free market economy has become something of a god.

While globalization in general, and the values of individual consumerism as communicated through mass media in particular, are often portrayed as an unstoppable force, in truth globalization is no more prevalent a human construct than the political organizations of nation-states, entities to which the Abrahamic faiths have a wealth of experience in shaping, in influencing with a counter-cultural ethic. Michael Traber aptly reminds us, “Globalization is portrayed as some law of nature rather than a human construct of power in the service of economic and cultural hegemony. The mass media...are subject to both personal and corporate ethical scrutiny.”^{xxi} The shared values of Islam and Christianity can provide the ethical scrutiny and corrective voice that Traber speaks of. With approximately 1.5 billion Muslims in the world and 2 billion Christians, Muslims and Christians together make up over half of the world’s population. Muslims and Christians joining their voices around shared values can potentially influence emerging world culture in a substantial and positive way.

The Way Forward

Christianity and Islam, perhaps more than any other social organizations on earth, are in a position to model for the world a way to both embrace the advancement of global interconnection while remaining engaged in local time and space-bound primary communities. Globalization and cross-cultural interconnection are not new concepts for Islam and Christianity, religions that became global soon after their founding. Islam and Christianity are not based on ethnic, cultural or linguistic identity, but have at their core a concept of global communal membership that transcends national identity. Today Christians and Muslims co-exist in nearly every country of the world. Though the Qur’an is recorded in Arabic, the language of Mohammed, Islam is not exclusive to Arabic people any more than Christianity is exclusive to speakers of Hebrew and Greek, the languages of the Bible. From the beginning Mohammad envisioned Islam as a global community of Muslims, the Ummah, the community of believers. Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as a community of global inclusion, “and people will come from east and west, and from north and south and sit at the table in the Kingdom of God.”^{xxii}

In addition to being global in reach, Christianity and Islam are lived out in the context of a local community of worship and fellowship. The global religion of Islam is lived in relation to one’s affiliation with a mosque. The global religion of Christianity is lived in relation to one’s participation in a local church. Christianity and Islam are global and yet remain deeply committed to a version of globalization that places local community and direct human relationship at the center of their activity. Christians and Muslims can participate in one interconnected world while maintaining their respective commitments to a local community.

Muslims and Christians share a willingness to make use of mass media as a tool within disciplined boundaries, a commitment to preserving extended family systems and local community, a desire to trust in God alone, becoming freed from fear. These two Abrahamic faiths share a religious identity as God's servants, not individual consumers to be served.

There is a troubling alternative to inter-faith partnership in the face of globalization. The alternative to collaboration is a seductive tendency toward isolationism, a religious fundamentalism that tends toward the reestablishment of boundaries in an attempt to insulate its members from the forces of the other. It seeks to draw lines of theological purity and then to work only with insiders for insiders. This fundamentalism can lead to the unfortunate rejection of partners from other religions who share a desire to protest the very same negative aspects of globalization.

A far preferable and more effective way forward is to embrace an ecumenism that engages with other faiths as partners in a project of speaking prophetic witness to the intended and unintended negative forces of globalization. The Abrahamic faiths can collaborate creatively to suggest correctives to the aspects of globalization that threaten shared values.

God in divine infinite wisdom has formed us into many nations, and I believe that God intends for us to collaborate as friends and co-creators of healthy human systems. In the Qur'an, Surah 49:13 (13) says, "O ye people! We created you from a single pair of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know (recognize) each other. Not that ye may despise each other."^{xxiii} Quranic commentators Ali Abdullah Yusuf and Aatullah Agha both understand "many nations and tribes" in this passage to mean all people of the earth, Muslim and non-Muslim.^{xxiv}

The world will continue to grow ever more inter-connected in the coming decades. Access to information will accelerate and become available in the most remote regions of the planet. The emerging global society will continue to permeate and transcend national, linguistic and ethnic boundaries. Humanity will become increasingly aware of a growing economic, political, environmental and social inter-dependence. But God has created humans with both an ability to form partnerships across human boundaries, and a deep need to be nurtured in extended families and local communities. One need not be sacrificed for the other. The Abrahamic faiths are in a position to discern together as brothers and sisters to provide a model for the world that is both globally connected and regionally engaged in community.

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Dr. Abdulrahman Al Salimi of MERA, Dr. Charles Amjad-Ali, Director of Islamic Studies, Luther Seminary, Susan Bennett White, Sociology Librarian, Princeton University, Rev. Michael Bos, Minister of West End Collegiate Church, Rev. Melissa Boyer, Pastor, Trinity-Boscobel United Methodist Church, Professor Katherine Czepiel, Caleigh Boyer-Holt, editorial assistance.

-
- ⁱ Beyer, Peter. Religions in Global Society. London: Routledge, 2006, p.18.
- ⁱⁱ Wendorf, Fred, and Romuald Schild. "Late Neolithic megalithic structures at Nabta Playa (Sahara), southwestern Egypt." Journal of Anthropological Archaeology.17:97-123 (2000).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Al ubair, Mohammad, and Vincent McBrierty. Oman:Ancient Civilization: Modern Nation Towards a Knowledge and Service Economy. Dublin, Ireland: Trinity College Dublin Press, and Muscat, Oman: The Bait Al Zubair Foundation LLC, 2004, p.15.
- ^{iv} Melgar, Jose. "Antigüedades mexicanas, notable escultura antigua." Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística, época. 2, vol. 1.(1869): pp. 292–297.
- ^v Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. Islam: Religion, History and Civilization. New York: Harper One, 2001, p.49.
- ^{vi} Ali Mohammadi. ed. International Communication and Globalization, London: Sage, 1997, p.3.
- ^{vii} Timms, Duncan. "*Identity, local community and the internet*," Social Capital, Lifelong Learning and the Management of Place: An international perspective. Eds. Michael Osborne, Kate Sankey, and Bruce Wison. London: Routledge, 2007, p. 63.
- ^{viii} Wellman, B. , Boase, J. and Chen, W. "The networked nature of community: online and offline", *IT and Society* 1(1): 151-156.
- ^{ix} Timms p. 72.
- ^x Wellman, B. "Physical place and cyberplace: the rise of networked individualism." Community Informatics: Shaping Computer-mediated Social Relations. Eds. L.Keeble and B.D. Loader. London: Routledge, 2001, p.17.
- ^{xi} Traber, Michael. Globalization, Mass Media and Indian Cultural Values. Delhi, India: ISPCK, 2003, p.131.
- ^{xii} Putnam, Robert. Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000, pp. 223-224.
- ^{xiii} The World Internet Project: International Report. Research conducted by the Center for the Digital Future at the USC Annenberg School for Communication with 13 partner countries and regions in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Oceania. 2009. p.32.
- ^{xiv} The Middle East has seen an internet usage growth rate of 1,648.2 % since the year 2000. Africa has seen an internet growth rate of 1,392.4 % in the past decade. Asia's internet growth rate has been 545.9 %. Europe - 297.8 %, North America - 134%, Latin America/Caribbean - 890.8 %, Oceania / Australia - 175.2 %. (Internet World Statistics: Usage and Population Statistics, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>. data from Nielsen Online, by the International Telecommunications Union, by GfK, and local Regulators.) Included in the study's definition of 'The Middle East' is: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Israel, Kuwait, UAE, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Algeria and Tunisia.
- ^{xv} The internet transformed the Gülen movement from a modest community of Nursi followers to an international Islamic activist movement. The Gülen Movement was an Islamic movement inspired by the teachings of Turkish Sufi Scholar, Fethullah Gülen who argued in favor of the need for inter-faith dialogue, explored the relation of Islam to secularism, issues of gender equality, and suggested a framework for Islamic interaction with global commerce. (Aslandogan, Yuksel, and Robert Hunt. Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World: Contributions of the Gülen

Movement. Somerset, NJ: The Light, Inc., 2007, p.26). “The global reach of rapid communication has allowed charismatic Muslim leaders with new ideas about Islam to take those ideas from the margins to center stage with unprecedented speed.” (Aslandogan, p.2)

^{xvi} Lipschultz, Jeremy, and Michael Hilt. “Race and Local Television News Crime Coverage.” SIMILE: Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education. V3 #4. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, (November, 2003), p. 2.

^{xvii} Warr, Mark. “Fear of Crime in the United States: Avenues for Research and Policy.” Criminal Justice. V 4. (2000), pp. 451 – 483. Fear of Crime - Effects Of Fear.

^{xviii} Warr, Mark. "Fear of Crime." Encyclopedia of Crime and Justice. The Gale Group Inc. Encyclopedia.com. 2002.

^{xix} Pickthall, Mohammed Marmaduke. The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: An Explanatory Translation by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall. New York: New American Library, p. 149.

^{xx} Ameer, Ali. “Globalization and Greed: A Muslim Perspective.” Subverting Greed: Religious Perspectives on the Global Economy. Edt. Paul Knitter and Chandra Muzaffar. Boston: Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, 2002, p. 140.

^{xxi} Traber p. 191.

^{xxii} NRSV, The Gospel According to Luke, chapter 13, verse 29.

^{xxiii} Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an by Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. Maryland: Amana Publications, 2001.

^{xxiv} Agha, Aatullah., et al. The Holy Qur’an: text, translation and commentary. New York: Qur’an Inc., 2004.