CHAPTER TEN

GLOBALIZATION AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION IN AMERICA: SOME REPRESENTATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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The concept of globalization evokes a number of themes and problems. A list would include the origin of the term and its referential domains, popular and scholarly uses of the term, opportunities and challenges for received theory, measurement strategies that provide reliable indicators of trends and an empirical purchase for the constructs of globalization narratives, and the understanding and amelioration of problems deemed to be of global scope: AIDS, pandemic disease, eradicable disease, violence against women, climate and environment, the distribution of wealth, nuclear weapons, widening the scope of human rights, violations of human rights, wars, and security. The list would also include religion as a source of individual and collective identity and conflict within the global field of action.

The popular, widespread use—one might say the globalized use—of the term almost always refers to the phenomenon of market-based production and exchange (Klein 2000). In this usage globalization is the unlimited circulation of goods, services, capital, and labor everywhere throughout the world on a cost (price) basis determined by supply and demand. To the extent that globalization is thought to be the installation everywhere of exactly the same economic form (capitalism) without remainder or supplement—a usage that has a palpable presence in anti-globalization discourse and journalism—globalization is an imagined phenomenon. Markets are embedded in culturally variant banking practices, pricing systems, and modes of allocation that compromise the transcendental purity of the code term “globalization.” This is easily seen where the charge of corruption (in many instances simply the way capitalism works locally) is brought to bear, but it applies as well to the imputation of exploitation in an across-the-board manner.

Rightist or leftist misattributions notwithstanding, globalization in the narrow and ubiquitous sense (the penetration of price-driven markets everywhere, but in “conversation” with local culture) is an undeniable
fact. In some cases markets may only operate at the boundary of a society, as in Cuba, but they operate nonetheless.

The narrowly specified, popular use of the term globalization rests on a descriptively accurate base. But it also betrays and hides the origin of the neologism and its deployment in a variety of perspectives and theoretical approaches that stretch far beyond popular usage in the search for an understanding of the world now made into the vastness of difference in one place (Held and McGrew 2002; Lechner and Boli 2005). In broad usage the term is a poly-referent encompassing continuities and disruptive events, continuities that stretch back to the early modern age and events that brought about a new world in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

As an adventure in the “history of the present,” this chapter summarizes some of the perspectives that have emerged in the past twenty-five years or so in the sociology of religion in America where the phenomenon of globalization has been addressed. In some cases these are “home grown” developments arising from within the field of the sociology of religion and finding resonance and possibilities for fruitful embellishment in conversation with sister disciplines. In other cases, especially with regard to left (Marxist) or right (choice) “economisms,” there has been an edgy accommodation at best between the development of perspectives on globalization and the discourses of the sociology of religion. Reductive asymmetry whether underwritten by the viewpoint of linear secularization, simple materialism, or some hard rock fundamentalism is pretty much absent from representative work in the sociology of religion and globalization.

American Exceptionalism and Sensitizing Events

In keeping with the theme of this book the manifest provenance of the texts that will be discussed below is North American. But no sociological perspective, theory, theme or method stands alone and apart from the cross-national flow of observation, critique and the development of analysis. That having been said, there is an indelible American presence in the sociology of religion and globalization literature (Robertson and White 2002).

Size matters—but so does position. The head count of sociologists of religion in America outweighs the frequencies found in other national jurisdictions. That is more than a feature attributable simply