RELIGION AS IDENTITY AND CONTESTATION

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Introduction

In the last quarter of the 20th century sociologists wrote about the world as a single economic, political, and social place. This work differed from that of economists in the field of international trade and development, or political scientists specializing in international relations. It emphasized the totality of the world rather than sets of relations between its parts. And it eschewed unelaborated references to the world as a ‘global village’.

- The world was seen as an economic system where the rules of capitalism brought about and sustained differences in wealth and power not only within societies but especially between nation-states. (Wallerstein 1974–1989).
- Nation-states were seen as societal units having legitimate authority associated with a global set of expectations and rules, formal and informal, which described and mandated the ways in which a nation-state should act in order to serve its citizenry and the world in humane ways (Meyer, 1980; Meyer et al., 1987; 1997).
- The sociality of the world was viewed in terms of a universal press for comparisons between and among the acting units of the world: nations, nation-states, and selves (individuals). The flow of comparisons constructed an identity for each unit, an identity that was reflexive, projected onto the world’s stage, and revised where necessary to take into account events and changes (Robertson and Chirico, 1985; Robertson, 1992). Socially, the world was a much more complex place than the image of a ‘global village’ suggested.

These ways of seeing the world sociologically defined an approach to the world that was covered by the descriptor ‘globalization’ (Simpson forthcoming). And each way stated or implied a position on the role of religion in a globalized world.
• Religion is an epiphenomenon or a correlate of action, especially economic action, with no independent effects of its own on contemporary world history (Wallerstein).
• Secularized Western (Judeo-Christian) values point to the desiderata of a world-polity that is the normative framework for the behavior of nation-states (Meyer).
• Religion is a solution for the endemic identity crises of the world’s acting units—nations, nation-states, selves—crises induced by the world having become one place where comparisons cannot be avoided (Robertson).

At about the same time that sociologists began to think globally in the ways laid out above, the German theorist, Niklas Luhmann, was developing his description of modern society (1982). Luhmann was concerned with how modern society could think of itself in a way that adequately described how the differentiated institutions of a modern society—the economy, politics, science, law, education, art, religion—worked and formed a unity. Luhmann was not content with simply recognizing the presence in modern societies of an elaborate division of labor presumptively tied together by national solidarity, common values, economic necessity or political hegemony. He wanted to know how each institution operated and whether there was commonality across the autonomous institutions of a modern society in the absence of substantive similarities in the operational logics of those institutions. The economy was not science, education was not law, etc.

Luhmann (1995) proposed that the institutions in a modern society are self-constructed by communication using binary codes. Each institution has its own code: ownership/no ownership (the economy), true/false (science), legal/not legal (the law), etc. Each institution is a social system, an operationally closed process that only exists because there is something that it is not: its environment.

Luhmann’s analysis leads to the conclusion that the unity of modern societies is found in the sameness of process within its social systems: self-construction using distinctions (binary codes). The differences between social systems are found in the differences in the codes each system uses to construct itself. The legal system’s code (legal/not legal) is not the same as the political system’s code (in power/out of power), etc.

Luhmann’s theory is a theory of modernity. As such it poses interesting possibilities for the understanding of globalization and, especially, religion in a globalized world. It is not difficult to see globalization