Scientific Research

Globalization, Cultural Change and Religion: The Case of Pentecostalism

Alberto da Silva Moreira

Advanced Studies Group on Religion and Globalization, Pontifical Catholic University of Goiás, Goiânia, Brazil
Email: alberto-moreira@uol.com.br

Abstract

The challenges faced by this paper are two folds: to understanding how cultural changes brought about by globalization can influence religions and, conversely, how religions can influence broader cultural change. Globalization has spread powerful cultural forms, such as international popular consumer culture, media culture and the culture of the individual. These cultural forms or horizons interact with and transform local cultures which are often intertwined with traditional religions. Throughout this process, traditional religion can weaken its potential to express local cultures, but can also become a vehicle used to express strategies of identity affirmation. Many modalities of globalization-compatible religion, like Pentecostalism, are also consistently penetrated by consumer culture, media culture and individualism. When they interact with traditional religion, they often function as a critical dissolving factor. Therefore, Pentecostalism and similar religions have themselves become active factors in (global) cultural change processes.

Keywords

Globalization; Cultural Change; Religion; Pentecostalism; Consumer Culture

1. Introduction

In dealing with cultural and religious transformations, we are taking for granted that religion is part of culture, even though it is not the same thing. Durham describes culture as a "process by which humans organize and give meaning to their actions through symbolic manipulations which are the basic attributes of all human endeavour" [1]. The affinity between religion and culture is reinforced when we consider that religion, in the words of Prandi, "provides a worldview, changes people's habits, internalizes values and generally provides guidelines for behaviour" [2].

In this article, I focus on three supposedly consensual cultural forms spread by globalization and relate them

to the role played by religion, especially by Neo-Pentecostalism[1]. Three major cultural forces or forms interact with religion in the fluid environments of everyday life: the ubiquitous presence of consumer culture, the pervasive action of media culture and the all encompassing culture of individualism.

2. The Ubiquity of Consumer Culture

If cultural globalization reveals itself through everyday life, it may be said that a radical shift has occurred in the everyday life of peoples and cultures through the global diffusion of international consumer culture. According to Ortiz, consumer culture is *international* and *popular*, in the sense that, while not being "native" to any country in particular, it exists in all societies and reaches all social segments in different intensities [3]. Consumer culture interacts with and impacts from the outside, the inside and beyond local cultures and religions in a subtle, intensive, or even scandalous way—like a new veil fashion especially designed for Muslim countries. Its influence is everlasting. Consumer culture does not refer to the traditional habits of buying and selling or to the social need for consumer goods. In the consumer culture, goods are sought not only for their material use, but first and foremost for the *symbolic value* which is aggregated to them.

Consumer culture "encourages consumers to 'want' more than they need" [4]. Created by marketing and the simulation effects of advertising, consumer culture is of fundamental importance for an understanding of how the commodity world and its principles influence culture and experience in contemporary society. For Featherstone, the expression "consumer culture" has two aspects: on the one hand, it reveals the cultural dimension of economics—the symbolization, the use of material goods as "communicators" and bearers of a "message". On the other hand, it reveals the economy of cultural goods—how market principles (supply, demand, accumulation, competition, monopoly) work *within* culture and lifestyles. In following, I examine some possible interactions between international consumer culture and religion [5].

In order to establish itself worldwide, consumer culture needs above all to teach the masses its symbolic codes. In connection with this large-scale pedagogical cultural task, I'd like to mention a few of these aspects. With people being socialized by their local cultures as well as by the international consumer culture, everyday life happens in double or multiple symbolic codes. Alongside with their traditional cultural symbols, people also learn to decode the symbols, logos and rituals of the international consumer culture. Food, dress, pictures, movies and imaginary worlds are good examples of this "bilingual" or "trilingual" culture. Something similar occurs with the religious habits brought about by globalization. After experimenting with religious offers which are different from the traditional ones such as the New Age Movement for example, people switch between alternative symbolic realms or may even opt for belonging to multiple symbolic universes. Such multi-belonging religious sentiments have been empirically identified by Siqueira in cities like Brasilia [6].

People learn how to shift from one symbolic system to another according to their needs, while simultaneously being forced to interpret multiple tasks such as choosing, validating and setting priorities. Assuming their internal satisfaction with the products as validation criteria for quality, consumer culture is internalized by buyers and sellers in everyday life as normal and natural. We can speak of a massive, permanent, though not direct or lineal, education of subjectivities, which will also impact the religious experience. The identity-building process is affected and the same occurs with the authoritative performance of traditional religion. The symbolic power of consumer culture leads to a crisis in traditional culture and religion, or at least to a non-self-guided transformation process of these cultures and religions. This very often implies a *folklorisation* of traditional religion. Its performative input in everyday life tends to be neutralized or exhausted. As *folklore*, religion degenerates into administered *cultural resource*, business matter [7]. At the same time, international popular consumer culture cultivates individual consumer habits and individual preferences. It reinforces the individualization process through the education of *taste* and *choice*. Preferences must be argumentatively justified in personal interaction and the traditional sense of belonging to cultural heritage will inevitably be questioned. All this creates new conditions for individuality politics. As Lehmann points out, religious belonging is increasingly based on personal options of belief rather than on tradition or cultural heritage [8] [9].

Another aspect of how consumer culture impacts traditional culture and religions has to do with *experimentation*. Without experimenting nobody becomes a consumer. Experimenting new products or new versions be-

---

[1]As characterizing features of Neo-Pentecostalism in comparison with the classical Pentecostal churches researchers mention: the theology of holy war against the devil, the theology of prosperity or wealth-gospel, the abandonment of rigid Calvinist ethics and doctrines (Mariano, 1999), the adoption of rationalized administration techniques and the theology of taking possession of goods (Gomes, 1994).

comes a constitutive part of everyday consumer life. Experimenting practices are linked to a set of expected performances, aesthetics and pragmatic results. Products are submitted to a pragmatic calculation of their expected results in relation to the amount of money necessary for their acquisition. Such automatic everyday practices impact on religious bonds. Pre-existing or new religious offers tend to be experimented and judged according to whether or not they benefit people's spiritual lives. This pragmatic attitude has also been confirmed by empirical research on non-conventional religiosities in Brasilia. It does not negate *gift* and *charisma*, but it confronts the non-economical organizational logic of such religious experiences [10].

The new form of Pentecostalism (which in Brazil is called Neo-Pentecostalism) includes prosperity and holy war theology and the liberalizing of Calvinist ascetics. It can be said that Neo-Pentecostalism has assumed the principles of the organizational logic of late capitalism: calculability, predictability and control can be seen in many of its practices. Bishops and Pastors are expected to sustain high productivity goals and must attend refresher courses, specific amounts of money must be collected, religious service is monitored and evil spirits must be controlled. There is a rational use of magic, attendance is submitted to forms of surveillance and the church regularly uses strategic planning and centralized administration like all other big companies [11] [12].

Through consumer culture the market imposes a symbolic demarcation on people, places and objects, singling the *different* out as being the exclusive elite with vast purchasing power. All qualitative *difference* is reduced to the variation between *brands*, which are affordable by means of certain quantities of *money*. This symbolic *exclusivist* demarcation of consumer culture infects and contaminates the *inclusivist* logic of religion, based on the creation of emotional communities of *solidarity*. Neo-Pentecostal religion (and also *multi-level marketing* companies like Herbalife) furthers the creation of groups and minorities, who feel blessed by God because of their "election" by the market (when they become rich). This symbolic demarcation created by consumer culture is assumed and sacralized through Neo-Pentecostal religious practices and discourses and goes back into circulation within the "secular" sphere. One could question if religion should actually continue to be considered religion as it was in the past.

A complementary aspect of this process has to do with *cult*. Consumer culture is based on the assignment of symbolic (metaphysical) qualities to commodities, not only to the concrete goods themselves but above all to their *brands*. Brands make them into icons or totems and the cult of brands assumes a quasi-liturgical importance within consumer culture. The consequences of such blatant Neo-paganism can easily be seen in the 2001 annual report of World Marketing Agencies: Brands are acclaimed as the ultimate religion[2].

The interaction process between Pentecostalism and consumer culture continues. Consumer culture remains symbolically strong and its institutions are economically and politically powerful. In most Christian churches, reaction against consumer culture seems to be a thing of the past, with the exception of liberation theology circles. In the case of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which claims to have a presence in 176 countries, the strategy adopted was not one single adaptation, but rather a theological and pastoral recreation of consumer culture. Its round-the-clock religious services, striking resemblance to a religious supermarket, gospel of wealth in which money has the structural function of a sacrament of blessing or even as the mediator of grace, its wide variety of tailor-made cults and its attempts to adapt to spectator preferences are all proof of a structural kinship between Neo-Pentecostal churches and consumer culture. These churches, like the Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God not only reflect, but are themselves forceful agents of cultural globalization and consumer culture in African, Asian and Latin-American countries.

3. The Pervasive Action of Media Culture

A second significant cultural form spread by globalization and which brings about profound, long-lasting consequences on local cultures and religion, is media culture. J. Thompson understands the *mediation of culture* (or mediatization, as I prefer), as the historical process of rapid growth and proliferation of institutions and mass-communications media [13] [14]. This process has made commodified symbolic forms accessible to ever-increasing audiences. Today, the large media conglomerates, which include Cinema, the Internet, the Press and the Music Industry are responsible for the creation and diffusion of taste, ideas, values, lifestyles, behavior, fiction, world views, feelings of belonging and personal identification, amongst other things. In other words, the production and transmission of symbolic forms is increasingly mediated by media conglomerates and their technological apparatus. Culture frequently "happens" when it goes through and is disseminated by the media.

---

[2]"Brands, the last temptation of capitalism", *Financial Times*, 02/02/2001.

This implies that cultural and religious manifestations are increasingly recognized as such when they come through the media. On the other hand, it also implies that the creations, personalities, figures, stories, accounts, tales, games and images themselves produced by the media become cultural goods of broad social acceptance. Both of these levels interact making it such that media simultaneously becomes the production, the vehicle of dissemination and the very content of cultural and religious happenings [15].

Media products, with their impressive levels of iconicity, rhythm, seduction, action, adventure, pleasure and fantasy, also possess an incomparable advantage over traditional religions and their strategies of production of symbols and meaning. While these religions present themselves to very restricted audiences, in very short spaces and time units, media culture can potentially reach almost the whole of humanity, in real time, all the time, many times over. In order to counterbalance this disadvantage and make use of such facilities, many religious institutions invest heavily either in buying or building their own media. However, the objective and subjective basis for electronically mediated religious experiences seems to be diverse; moreover, the media language imposes its grammar on religious discourse, and economic requirements may limit the range and efficiency of its message.

Nevertheless, Neo-Pentecostal churches are very efficient in adapting to and bringing about media culture. Many other churches, such as the Catholic Church, have done the same. But Neo-Pentecostal churches, both in the US, Brazil and around the world, seem to have developed their own highly efficient media know-how for communicating their message to large audiences: gospel music, cult-shows, talk-shows, exorcisms and online "real-time" prayer. In Brazil, the second largest media-holding belongs to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and almost all Neo-Pentecostal churches have consistent and well-organized media strategies [16]. The most significant feature of this "mediation of religion" seems to be the transfiguration process to which some Neo-Pentecostal churches are submitting themselves, assuming the logic of show, spectacle [17]. The religious experience is to be turned into a show for mass consumption; an aesthetic experience within the broader-reaching mass-media Cult spectacle. In so far as such the churches´ use of and investment in media-oriented evangelization strategies, confronting and demonizing traditional and native religions in Africa, Asia and Latin-America, they are constantly reinforcing their roles as powerful agents of cultural globalization.

4. The Religion of the Individual

Few cultural changes have had such a profound influence on social life as the individualization process. Western culture and modern capitalist societies are seen as being essentially centered on the individual. According to Boli, "It seems clear that individuation is a key cultural consequence of most major globalization processes" [18]. Health systems, democratic systems, formal and many other cultural institutions have highly individualizing consequences. Daily monetary exchanges, for example, stimulate the formation of individual interests, individually calculated thinking, individual transaction rituals, individual property, private accumulation of capital, amongst other things. For Boli, professional education and quality certifying procedures require the use of control, systematization and instrumental efficiency logic. This logic is so widespread, that he sees it as the main vector of the emerging global culture.

On the other hand, the basic condition for participation in this new order requires that the individual becomes a *consumer*, a *client*, a *user*. Therefore, becoming *individual* does not mean that the person has a political *citizenship* in the globalized society. An individual is not yet a political autonomous *subject*. On the contrary, as Bauman says, "the other side of individualization seems to be the gradual disintegration of citizenship" [19].

In any case, the individualization process brought about by globalization is not reduced to a simple changing of mental habits. On the contrary, it implies a re-education of world perception which begins in childhood. Therefore, the main institution responsible for instigating this shift in world perception is the *school*:

> Schooling emphasizes individual learning, individual achievement, individual capacities and individual limitations…. Thus, a strongly individuating institution—more individuating in some places than others, more discordant with local culture in some places than others—has become the prime locus of childhood socialization [20].

In the context of acquiring a new world perception of learning and practicing a new view of reality, religion, like schooling and monetary transactions, can also play a fundamental role in the individualization process. Some religions, mainly local and traditional, were badly affected by the globalization process, but others flourished within it or were reinforced by it. This is precisely the case of Neo-Pentecostalism, which was favored by

globalization and works itself as a tool to further propagate globalization. A basic condition for assuming a new perception, new practices and values, compatible with globalized market conditions, with world media and consumer culture, implies that people, who live immersed in traditional collective religious identities, must become individuals. In other words, individuals must first be created by becoming freed from the authoritative bonds of traditional religion and culture [21] [22].

Pentecostalism, as well as other aggressive religious and symbolic offers, assumes the role of a dissolving-middle. In this process individuals submit the exclusive character of traditional culture and religion to a sometimes radical questioning. In this sense, Neo-Pentecostal churches are probably undertaking the task of de-traditionalizing afro-Brazilian and Indigenous population groups in Latin-America—*aymaras*, *quéchuas* [23], *quaranís*—as well as traditional-native peoples in Africa (Angola, Mozambique, Congo, Nigeria), Asia (India, Vietnam, The Philippines) and Oceania (Australia). Let us precise this point. Pentecostalism, in many of its forms, acts on the one hand as a "solvent", when it attacks Afro-Brazilian or indigenous deities in Latin-America, claiming they are demonic; the same can be seen in Congo, when Pentecostals persuade young men that they should no longer play the traditional ritual drums because these house evil spirits and serve to worship "demonic" spirits. New Pentecostal churches using as a basis the existing authority of the Bible (brought by earlier missionaries) and an aggressive theology of holy war, disqualify and exorcise traditional forms of belief in spirits, ghosts, magical practices, ancestral souls and local, traditional deities.

By demonizing these local spirits and their magical practices, while at the same time reinforcing the same belief in transcendent forces, new Pentecostal churches introduce their own Christian (often magical) practices, which are then typically reinforced by prosperity theology. New Pentecostal churches have shown an extraordinary capacity to adapt to local cultures, even to the typical psychological dispositions of local people, such as in Argentina, where belief in deities and ghosts was not so significant [24].

Conversely, the same individual and welfare-oriented prosperity theology furthers the expansion of Pentecostalism among poor castes in India. As Rebecca Shah refers,

> The number of Pentecostals in India is growing rapidly. We have discovered that in addition to the large American-style Pentecostal churches that cater to the growing middle class in the cities, there are a vast number of what we call "storefront Pentecostal churches" that have sprung up in the shanty towns and slums of large cities in India… Pentecostal clients save more money, purchase more consumer durables, and invest more in their business and family lives. Our research also showed that Pentecostalism… did more than just create a culture of self-restraint—of "inner-worldly asceticism"; it gave the poor Pentecostal entrepreneur an opportunity to actively name and claim a better economic future as a deliberate goal…[3]

Like all symbolic transforming processes, we witness the learning and adapting capacity of (global) Pentecostalism. The doctrine of New Pentecostal churches emphasizes Prosperity Theology and Holy War Theology against evil spirits. It produces an active conquest-winner spiritual disposition and constant emulation by the believers. This feature along with the training and pragmatic use of native personnel, the culture and language education and the adoption of media and marketing *raisonnement* have brought about necessary strategic changes in the new geographic regions or in the old environments.

5. Conclusions

Every religion, like culture itself, is structured on a dynamic which, on one hand, involves memory and conservation and on the other hand, novelty and recreation [25]. The transformation processes of culture and religion are complex and multifaceted. In effect, a forced interaction exists between the cultural forms of globalization and local religions and cultures, but its intensity varies as do the "exogenous" elements which are locally appropriated and reformatted. The forms in which this interaction can assume range from extreme acceptance and *merging*, to fundamentalist armed resistance. Religions and churches will not remain the same. They are already adapting and undergoing internal transformations which can, at times, be to the point of non-recognition.

New Brazilian, Caribbean and African Pentecostal churches play a very important role in the globalized context as agents of individualization, critics of traditional culture and positive forces for globalization. We are able to see the three-fold function of Pentecostal churches: a) to disembed people from their traditional belongings by

---

[3]The citation was taken from a correspondence addressed to our comparative research project on Global Pentecostalism, under the coordination of Giuseppe L. Trombetta (University of Bologna).

weakening their ties to the same; b) to push the process of individualization forward through personal empo-werment, and lastly, c) to offer globally disembedded individuals in situations of diaspora and migration re-embedding options through their social support networks, as well as identity rearticulating strategies [26]. In fact, the same Pentecostal church may offer shelter to people in immigrant, marginalised or endangered condi-tions—which are permanent today—and offer them religious-symbolic skills and material tools to exorcize their fears, fight for their place, identity, and belonging in highly competitive, formal, productivity oriented capitalist societies.

Through many aforementioned aspects, New Pentecostalism is proving to be a powerful religious and cultural agent of globalization [27]. More than a mere agent of change, one might say that at this historical landmark, Pentecostalism is a catalyst for global capitalism. One might question whether Weber wasn't incorrect in his claim that capitalism today no longer relies upon the support of religion for establishing itself as hegemonic ra-tionality in the world.

References

[1]   Durham, E.R. (2004) A Dinâmica da Cultura. Cosac Naify, São Paulo, 231.

[2]   Prandi, R. (2008) Religions and Cultures: Religious Dynamics in Latin America. *Social Compass*, **55**, 264-274.

[3]   Ortiz, R. (1994) Mundialização e Cultura. 2 Edition, Brasiliense, São Paulo, 8.

[4]   Waters, M. (1995) Globalization. Routledge, London, 140.

[5]   Featherstone, M. (1991) Consumer Culture & Postmodernism. Sage, London, 84.

[6]   Siqueira, D. (2008) Novos Movimentos Religiosos Como Desafio à Sociologia da Religião na Atualidade. *Caminhos*, **6**, 33-43.

[7]   Hutnyk, J. (2006) Culture. *Theory, Culture & Society*, **23**, 351-355. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0263276406062700

[8]   Lehman, D. (2009) Religion and Globalization, In: Woodhead, L., *et al*. *Religions in the Modern World*, Taylor & Francis, London, 407-428.

[9]   Gomes, W. (1994) Teologia da Posse. In: Antoniazzi, A., Ed., *Nem Anjos Nem Demônios*, Vozes, Petrópolis, 225-270.

[10] Pace, E. (2006) Salvation Goods, the Gift Economy and Charismatic Concern. *Social Compass*, **53**, 49-64. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0037768606061577

[11] Mariano, R. (1999) Neopentecostais. Sociologia do novo Pentecostalismo no Brasil. Loyola, São Paulo.

[12] Mariano, R. (2004) Expansão Pentecostal No Brasil: o caso da Igreja Universal. *Estudos Avançados*, **18**, 121-138. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0103-40142004000300010

[13] Thompson, J. B. (1995) Ideologia e Cultura Moderna—Teoria Social Crítica na era dos Meios de Comunicação de Massa. Vozes, Petrópolis.

[14] Thompson, J.B. (1998) A Mídia e a Modernidade—Uma Teoria Social da Mídia. Vozes, Petrópolis.

[15] Moreira, A. da S. (2003) Cultura Midiática e Educação Infantil. *Educação & Sociedade*, **24**, 1203-1236. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0101-73302003000400006

[16] Fonseca, A.B. (1998) Evangélicos e Mídia No Brasil. Edusf, Bragança Paulista.

[17] Debord, G. (1997) A Sociedade do Espetáculo. Contraponto, São Paulo.

[18] Boli, J. (2005) Contemporary Developments in World Culture. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, **46**, 390.

[19] Bauman, Z. (2001) Modernidade Líquida. Zahar, Rio de Janeiro, 46.

[20] Boli, J. (2005) Contemporary Developments in World Culture. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, **46**, 389.

[21] Pierucci, A.F. (2006) Religião Como Solvente—Uma Aula. *Novos Estudos CEBRAP*, **75**, 111-127. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0101-33002006000200008

[22] Giddens, A. (1991) As Conseqüências da Modernidade. Ed. UNESP, São Paulo.

[23] Gumucio, C.P. (2008) Interculturality, Conflicts and Religion: Theoretical Perspectives. *Social Compass*, **55**, 316-329. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0037768608093694

[24] Oro, A.P. (2004) A Presença Religiosa Brasileira No Exterior: o Caso da Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus. *Estudos Avançados*, **18**, 139-155. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0103-40142004000300011

[25] Hervieu-léger, D. (2007) O Peregrino e o Convertido. Vozes, Petrópolis.

[26] Moreira, A. Da S. (2010) The Global Expansion of Brazilian Pentecostalism. Anais do 34˚ Encontro Anual da Anpocs. http://www.anpocs.org.br/portal/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=90

[27] Freston, P. (2007) Latin America: The Other Christendom, Pluralism and Globalization. In: Beyer, P. and Beaman. L., Eds., *Globalization*, *Religion and Culture*, Brill, Leiden, 577-599.