

Globalization and the shared community ethic of Islam and Christianity

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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. But it has also been accompanied by some unintended byproducts: 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. In this article I will seek to define globalization, and discuss the way in which these unintended byproducts have threatened to erode local time and space-bound human community and the cohesion of extended family systems. I will then look to Islam and Christianity for a set of shared values by which to evaluate these rapid changes and to provide 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 as far back as 6,000 BCE.

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 scholarly speculation that 3,000 year old artifacts of the Olmec people from Central America lend evidence to 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 also not intrinsically antithetical to religious values. The Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, 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 as some assume. 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. Under such circumstances, the logical site of scientific inquiry is the national society, not the local community.”

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 ingredients to sustain 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. In addition to forming identity, families and communities function to guide, correct and in some cases inhibit the behaviors of the individual.

What will function to form individual identity and provide social guidance 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: guiding, correcting and at times inhibiting social behavior. Studies of internet communication reveal significant sexual disinhibition in the early stages of an on-line relationship, as well as confrontational responses, extreme views and the lack of social graces in on-line communications.^{viii}

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.^{ix} This increased contact, however, is not likely to be in a single community of support and accountability, 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.^x 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’.”^{xi} 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 - mirroring, imagined community evaluation, and behavior inhibition - will be less available. When one community seeks to inhibit a socially unacceptable behavior, the individual will be free to simply drop out of one community and adhere instead to others.

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.”^{xii} 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.”^{xiii} 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.^{xiv} 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.

I would argue that 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.^{xv}

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.^{xvi} 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.”^{xvii}

Crime has been on the decline in the United States, yet global awareness of localized crimes, crimes that 20 years ago would have been known only to a small community, creates the impression that crime is more prevalent than it is. As a result, a culture of fear is emerging in America, and I would argue that this generalized fear could increase in any region of 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.”^{xviii} 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.”^{xix} 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 Holy 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; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” In the Gospel according to John, chapter 14, verse 27, Jesus, peace be upon him, comforted the disciples by saying, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give 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 Holy Quran, Surah 9, verse 40 when the Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, and Abu Bakr were in flight from Mecca to Al Medinah. The Prophet Mohammed said to his comrade, ‘Fear not, for Allah is with us.’ Then 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.”^{xx} The Islamic and Christian shared assurances to trust in God engender a feeling of peace and a freedom from fear, essential ingredients in 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 a 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. The identity of the Christian and the identity of the Muslim are not to be formed by the created desires of the market. There is nothing in the religious systems of Muslims and Christians that prohibits the consumption of necessary goods, 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 become idolized.^{xxi} In secular culture, even after the world economic crisis, the free market economy has become something of a god.

Much has been made of the commonality between Muslims and Christians as Abraham's descendants in a beautiful attempt to emphasize a common religious heritage. Another commonality, one that is symbolized in the life of Abraham, peace be upon him, and is most central to the shared theology of Christians and Muslims is the belief in and devotion to one God. Muslims and Christians share a central insistence in a primary identity as created beings, children of one God. The spiritual practice of the Christian and the Muslim is submission to the one God alone, creator of all that is seen and all that is unseen. God is the object of worship. A shared value is revealed in noticing what is not worshipped. No other created beings, ideologies or human systems are worthy of worship. Because allegiance is to the one God, a freedom ensues, a liberty to be critical of other systems of the world, systems which may become idols. The Abrahamic faiths engage in a shared prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power.

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 speaking truth, 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."^{xxii} The shared values of Islam and Christianity, communicated in partnership, can provide the ethical scrutiny and corrective voice that Traber speaks of.

Why speak with a shared voice? With approximately 1.5 billion Muslims in the world and 2 billion Christians, Muslims and Christians together make up over half of the world population. Muslims and Christians joining their voices around shared values can potentially influence emerging world culture in a substantial 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 advancements of global interconnection while remaining engaged in cohesive extended family systems and local time and space-bound primary communities. Globalization and its resultant 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 identity 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 Holy Quran is recorded in Arabic, the language of the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, Islam is not exclusive to Arabic people any more than Christianity is exclusive to speakers of Hebrew and Greek, the languages of the Holy Bible. From the beginning the Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, envisioned Islam as a global community of Muslims, the Ummah, the community of believers. Jesus, peace be upon him, 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.”^{xxiii}

In addition to being global in reach and inclusion, Christianity and Islam are lived out in the context of a cohesive extended family and a local community of worship and fellowship. The global religion of Islam is lived in relation to one’s family and one’s affiliation with a mosque. The global religion of Christianity is lived in relation to one’s family and 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, familial ties and direct human relationship at the center of their activity. Christians and Muslims can remain global citizens, participants in one inter-connected global economy and information highway, while maintaining their respective commitments to family and local community.

Muslims and Christians share more than they may realize. They share a willingness to make use of mass media as a tool within disciplined boundaries. They share a commitment to preserving extended family systems and local community. They share a desire to put trust in God alone, becoming freed from fear of earthly threats. They share an insistence that their religious identity is as God’s servants, not individual consumers to be served. The shared voice and case of Christians and Muslims, the parallel efforts and energies will be maximized through partnership.

There is a troubling alternative to inter-faith partnership in the face of globalization. I see the impulse at work among some of my own Christian brothers and sisters at times, and I see it at work among minorities of Muslims. This alternative to collaboration is seductive. It is a tendency toward isolationism, a religious fundamentalism that tends toward the reestablishment of boundaries in an attempt to insulate its members from the forces of globalization. It seeks to draw lines of theological purity and then to work only with insiders for insiders, to prevent the transformation of believers into individual consumers, to reverse the erosion of local community and cultural particularity, to limit access to pornographic imagery, all things which threaten core values. This fundamentalism can lead to the unfortunate rejection of fellow religious partners 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 Holy Quran, Surah 49:13 (13) we read, “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.”^{xxiv} 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.^{xxv}

The Wasat Party in Egypt is an example of an Islamic organization seeking to restore traditional values in general and a restoration of the Islamic community or Ummah in particular, a party which moved from a position of fundamentalist exclusivism to a position of ecumenical partnership. The Wasat Party was formed in 1996 after the group broke from the Muslim Brotherhood. The party defines its intent to “open an area of common ground between the (Muslims) and secular advocates of civil society and democracy, creating the potential for new forms of dialogue and cooperation.”^{xxvi} The Wasat party apparently includes the Coptic Christian community of Egypt in their understanding of the Ummah.^{xxvii} While they have not yet gained standing as a legitimate party in Egypt, they are finding greater success in collaboration than in isolation, in partnership with the Coptic Christians on shared agendas than in solitude.

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 a righteous 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 to be both globally connected and regionally engaged in family and community.

Imagine a future world where all regions and cultures including secular civic societies benefit from the wisdom of Muslims and Christians, who model for the world a way that makes use of the tools of globalization without worshipping its advancements, a way that critically evaluates and creatively collaborates to design a global system that both facilitates interdependence and fosters a need to be bound to other people in a primary community of nurture and support on a local scale.

In closing I will offer a passage which affirms the joy of community and inter-faith partnership from our shared Holy Scripture, Psalm 133: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity. It is like precious oil upon on the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!”^{xxviii}

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xv 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.

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