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Globalization for the Common Good:
The Imperative of Soteriology for a Dynamic Global Ethic

Ruwan Palapathwala[1]

The cultural milieu that we witness today has emerged from antifoundationalist "movements" such as postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism. It is also an important stage in the intellectual history of the Western civilization during which it has come to appraise its turbulent experiences – the devastation both in the 20th century as a whole and in the present – to accommodate itself to a future that is being both occasioned and promulgated by advances in technology. To that extent, the prefix "post" in the terms that describe the mood of the present does not indicate a complete break from the past, but rather hints that we are in a process of ongoing transformation and change.

The present stage in the cultural history of the West can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, it has been occasioned as a sociopolitical and economic event, brought about mainly by the spread of mass industry. In this respect, globalization can be seen as the force behind these economic and political processes.[2] Globalization has created a crisis by integrating all scientific, cultural, political and economic activities of humanity into one worldwide network.

The fundamental challenges that these developments have presented to the West in particular, and to all humanity in general, have drawn academics engaged in all cultural domains (e.g. education, politics, technology, sociology, theology and so on) into the vortex of the present crisis.[3] Related to this process are technological transformations – cyber-technology, the miniaturization and commercialization of machines for instance – have already changed the ways in which knowledge is represented and learning is acquired, classified, made available and exploited.

On the other hand, the mood of the contemporary culture has come about as a result of significant changes in what we may call "cultural matter," that is, changes in the arts which have had a profound effect on the notions of meaning and reality. Noting the extent of changes in contemporary culture, it is correct to state that while the terms postmodernism and Postmodernity in the academic literature of the last three decades or so have been used in an attempt to describe precisely the deep structural changes in thought and cultural expressions, they have also become descriptive terms for all sorts of shifts and transformations in contemporary Western societies and cultures at large. Thus, among their various themes is their well-expressed pessimism about the way in which the "modernist" thought of the last three hundred years has fashioned Western society, and the undisputed faith it has caused to be placed in technological progress. The difficulties these shifts and transformations have caused vary from issues such as problems with reality, representation, language, personal identity, meaning, values, ethics and morals to promises of high-tech efficiency and complacency. Whether they are seen as positive or negative influences, one cannot deny that they all have a direct impact on the way in which the phenomenon of globalization is understood.[4] For these reasons, as one theorist defines it, globalization can be described as "a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding".[5]

Within an interfaith framework of inquiry and reference to the soteriology of religions, my main concern in this essay is to assess how the advancements in technology that have brought about globalization may be transformed for the common good. In particular, in this essay three specific areas of cultural life which are seen as being affected by globalization; namely, cultural identity, justice and peace are examined.

Within this defined framework, answers to three methodological questions are sought:

> What are the imperatives of a soteriological vision of a religion for understanding the quest for cultural identity and issues concerning justice and peace?
>
> In which respects are the forces of globalization seen as a threat to the identity of peoples and cultures and their sense of justice and peace?
>
> And, thirdly, in which ways may the converging themes within the soteriological visions of religions offer insights for a global ethic that could transform globalization for the common good?

To answer these three methodological questions, three major propositions are presented:

Firstly, formulation of an intervention to ensure that globalization works for the common good is a matter of utmost urgency. The urgency is due to the fact that this is what I would like to term the fourth – and possibly the last – chance humanity has to participate in what the late Arab thinker and educator, Constantine Zurayk, called a positive "venture for a common human civilization." Hans Küng has demonstrated that humanity has missed three previous crucial chances to inaugurate a new world order. The first chance was the formation of the "League of Nations" in 1919 after the First World War. The vision was to draw nations to arrive at a shared, peaceful and just control of world affairs. But Europe and the USA, in particular, and the world in general missed this first chance. The second chance was in 1945 with the formation of the United Nations organization that described itself as a "global association of governments facilitating co-operation in international law, international security, economic development, and social equity." This also has failed because of its internal totalitarianism and external hegemonism. Küng says that the third chance was what he calls the postmodern world order since 1989. Politically, it presupposed the democratic state, and economically a market economy with both a social and an ecological orientation. He warned that this postmodern world order was not to be confused with capitalism - which is neither social nor ecological. However, the deepening

crises in the world have clearly shown that this project also has fallen apart.[6]

Secondly, cross-cultural or interfaith insights are imperative for the transformation of globalization for the common good. This is particularly important because cross-cultural studies of religion liberate scholars of religion from culture-bound categories, perspectives and methods and enable them to utilize themes, motifs, symbols and concepts from one religion to illuminate, analyze and apply them to another religion in order to achieve an exhaustive understanding of the phenomenon of religion itself and its ability to enlighten the most fundamental facts which can give us a vision of a common humanity.[7] I employ this proposition to argue that, in the face of neutral supra cultural forces of globalization, interfaith insights assist us to develop a global ethic which is soteriological in every character.

The term Soteriology is derived from the Greek term *soteria*, which means "salvation". As George Newlands notes, "there has never been an 'authorized' version of soteriology." "The understanding of salvation has been and probably always will be", he says, "as diverse as the humanity to which it comes."[8] However, if the human puzzlement of being found in this world could be taken as the most fundamental experience of the human predicament, from a philosophical standpoint it could be said that one's experience of this world creates a kind of an ontological shock – the shock of being and non-being. Elsewhere I have described this human experience as one's quest concerning one's "where from" and "where to".[9] Our quest for the "where from", I have argued, is the most fundamental wonderment and *angst* we have in us for having been born in this world and knowing that old age and death are its natural end. Our quest for the "where to" is the fundamental search for answers to that experience so that we may overcome from that state of *angst* and fear of being.

Given the fact that each religion – primitive and advanced – provides an answer to the human wonderment about one's "where from" and "where to", a quest for salvation sets the framework for scriptures. While the descriptions of this quest may differ in many significant ways, when the human reality is examined the undeniable facts of life – birth, old age, disease and death – become obvious. If the human reality is such, the soteriological vision of religion is concerned with providing: firstly, an explanation of the condition, secondly, resources to live in spite of the condition, and thirdly, resources to overcome the condition. For me, these functions of a religion set the blueprint of a culture – a subconscious meaning structure by which cultural life is regulated.[10]

From this perspective, it could be said that the soteriology of a religion is the soul of a community through which its place on earth – that is, its sense of identity, justice, peace and happiness – is mediated through meaning-giving structures. This meaning-giving structure of a religion is culture which is an intricate multi-layered entity made up of different spheres of cultural life such as the arts, medicine, politics, administration, education and so on. From an idealist perspective, these spheres reflect – or should reflect – the way in which the soteriological vision of that culture is regulated to offer a holistic life for people while offering them deliverance in life – both here and hereafter. Furthermore, when examining religions closely we also discover that the soteriology of each religion is not only the blueprint of a culture and the civilization to which it has given rise, but also it provides the impetus for various regional, socioeconomic and ideological cultures outside the native soil of the religion. That is how, for instance, we have several "Buddhisms", "Christianities" and "Islams" in the Pacific region and across the globe. For these reasons I will present the thesis of this essay by making some brief references to the soteriologies of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. These religions have a global dimension within them in their universalisms, and their far-reaching networks in history attest to the fact that each said religion is a global phenomenon. In their soteriological teachings they have insights for a globalist vision of perfected and redeemed communities.[11]

Having noted the complexity and the diversity religions offer to various cultures and civilizations, the value of a global ethic which is soteriological in character is that it helps us to foster more common visions, ideals, values, aims and criteria which are drawn from the religious dimension of cultures which may be called the depth-dimension[12] – the *Divine* or the *Dhamma*.[13]

My third proposition – which is the central thesis of this essay – is that the soteriology of a religion is the key to transforming the forces of globalization as we know them for the common good.

Having presented the three main propositions of this essay it is now necessary to explain why I have chosen the category of the soteriology to establish my case for a global ethic. There are four main reasons:

Firstly, soteriology helps us to recognise the human yearning for deliverance from every kind of bondage whether is it seen in material or spiritual terms. Hence, to treat religions as closed systems inherently "unique" and remotely different from each other prevents us from a universal vision of freeing humanity from bondage. It also precludes enriching our understanding of our common humanity based on the rich perspectives each religion has to offer in understanding the nature of our spiritual bondage to the phenomenal world and our subjugation to many socio-economic and political systems within it.

Secondly, an understanding of the soteriology of a religion helps us to recognise the pivotal role it plays in establishing the basis for doctrinal authority in the life of a culture or civilization. A careful examination of the soteriology of a religion and its relationship to a cultural tradition explains how a religious tradition assumes a privileged position of doctrinal authority over every issue that arises in life throughout history. From that doctrinal authority standpoint it is held that only the religious tradition holds the "correct" or divinely revealed principles and methodology in providing responses which are consistent with the set of values, beliefs and models of action that are necessary to keep the faithful on the path leading to salvation in this life and beyond. This way, the religious tradition, – or its teaching – assumes dominance over all other disciplines, which must collaborate in the exercise of its control.[14]

Thirdly, the soteriology of a religion explains the ways in which a cultural tradition envisages an ideal community. The foundation for such an understanding is its knowledge of the original reception of the message of salvation. In many instances, this ideal human community has twofold mythic origins which are seen as either divine or supernatural initiatives: firstly, this ideal human community is related to the understanding of the origin of the phenomenal world or God's intention to create humans. Secondly, it is associated with an epiphany of a divine being like Jesus the Christ or the advent of an *avatar* or an enlightened being like Buddha Gotama, or a Prophet like Mohammad.

Therefore, the establishment of the *Ekklesia*, the *sasana,* and the *umma muhammadiyya* is directly related to an understanding of a community's cosmogony (how they came to be) and the ideal community of humans established by the divine master. Such ideal

communities become the templates for exemplary communities, agencies and models after which the organization of human communities is attempted. For the subsequent generations this mythic notion of ideal human community then becomes the ideal from which they draw their energy and cohesion to live in the present world. The mythical vision of the ideal community – which is soteriological in its essential character –is completed by postulating an ideal transmission of all the events, words and models known by the contemporaries of the guru or the divine master. It is in this process of transmitting the vision of the ideal community that the ethics, the morals, and the values of a religion are stitched into the tapestry of a culture in which a human being works out his or her place on earth and his or her salvation in this world and in the hereafter. It must be also said that the historical situation out of which the religion was born also has a bearing on how the soteriology of that religion is translated into the identity of a community.

These propositions and premises that I have presented lead us to briefly explore how the soteriological visions of the three great religions – Buddhism, Christianity and Islam – present unique tapestries in the formation of their respective cultures and place distinctive imprints on peoples' identities and their orientation towards the world.

The Four Noble Truths outline the essentials of Buddhist soteriology.[15] The human condition is seen as *dukkha* – ill – which can be cured by understanding its causes and by following the Eightfold Path. Liberation is seen as an end not only to suffering, but also to the cycle of birth and death and thus an end to ignorance. The means of achieving liberation are further developed in other Buddhist teachings.

At the outset, Christianity regards salvation as deliverance from the bondage of sin and from condemnation, resulting in eternal life with God. Of course, salvation is not just a negative deliverance from sin and its effects: God saves us not just from something, but for something. God's action is a positive liberation that raises human beings to eternal life on a higher plane than earthly life, to union in a single body with Christ, one of the three Persons of the Trinity, to the dignity of not only being called – but actually being adopted – children of God, to seeing God "as he is" (1 John 3:2) in communion of life and love with the Trinity and all the saints.[16]

In the *Quran* two forms of salvation are discussed, namely that which happens in one's life in this world and that which takes place in the world to come. The salvation in this world is concerned with deliverance from all that threatens or impairs life, such as oppression, injustice, calamity, troubles and distresses of every kind. Salvation in the hereafter is found in deliverance from misery or punishment and attainment of happiness or reward from God.[17] It is believed that God in His Judgment will be both merciful and just. Based on the verdict received during the Day of Judgment, each human will spend this stage of life either in the Garden or in Hell. However, those in Hell are eligible to go to the Garden after being purified by Hell-fire at a later time if they "had an atom's worth of faith in them".[18]

Since this essay is more methodologically oriented, what I am keen to establish here is that these visions of salvation are the blueprints of unique and diverse human cultures. As mentioned earlier, because they are the blueprints of cultures they provide meaning-giving structures in which people have their identities and destinies shaped in ways that are consistent with their soteriological vision.

On the contrary, globalization is seen as detrimental to every cultural meaning-giving structure because its technological and economic principles tend to purposely impose supra-techno-economic, value-free and global structure over and against them. This is why both Western and non-Western critics of globalization have been quick to react against the neoliberalist tendencies of globalization which de-emphasize or reject government intervention in the domestic economy. The focus on free-market methods, and the opening of foreign markets by political means, using economic pressure, diplomacy, and/or military intervention have proved destructive to local identities. Furthermore, multilateral political pressure exercised through international organizations or treaty devices such as the WTO and World Bank have reduced the role of national governments to a minimum. In every instance, success is measured by economic gain and thus the neo-liberalist motive is to reject or mitigate labor policies and oppose socialism, protectionism and environmentalism. With the Western discourse on globalization placing greater emphasis on economic and communications aspects, my view is that globalization has become a transcultural and transhistorical economic and political phenomenon. At best, it seems a culturally hegemonic techno-economical and imperialist-political quasireligious soteriology without deliverance.

If this is the case with globalization, then in this essay a global ethic – which is soteriological in character – is suggested as a strategy for transforming globalization for the common good. At any rate, this global ethic does not mean a universal quasi-religious ideology. Rather, it is a global ethic – dynamic ethic – in which the common soteriological features of the great religions that converge are reflected. For instance, such features may include the ethics of generosity, stewardship, nonattachment and a strong sense of justice which is expressed soteriologically through an understanding that the human predicament is not merely an interior reality, but is also a structural social and historical fact. Those converging insights highlight the radical nature and the totality of the salvific process which is based on the interconnectedness and the interdependence not only of humans but also of all causes and effects. Such principles curb and restrain egotism and selfishness. They alone have the power to rekindle the human spirit and compassion in globalization. Together these salvific virtues give human history its profound unity.

Why is such an ethic paramount? Because the features of such an ethic respond to the most fundamental human questions of "where from?" and "where to?" – the two fundamental questions which set the patterns for our common human destiny, moral and ethical awareness, search for happiness, identity, justice, peace, nonviolence, freedom, and ultimate deliverance from suffering. The divergences in each religion should account only for the particularities of each religion in its native contexts.

Is this a realistic project? In practical terms it is not a project as such that could be intellectualized and exported. It is not artificial globalization as opposed to the idea of regionality. It is neither a radical universalism which takes no note of the actual plurality of the world, nor is it a radical relativism, which does not contribute towards the common life of human communities. As Küng says, it is what Wolfgang Huber calls a "relative universality", which in spite of all cultural and religious differences recognizes some principles that transcend culture and religion. While there is much more to be done, some significant initiatives have been already taken to foster a global ethic, especially through the Four Irrevocable Directives of the 1993 World Parliament of Religions Declaration towards a Global Ethic. They read:

Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life.

Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order.

Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness.

Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.[19]

In my assessment, these are soteriological in their essential character, and they have the potential to foster a dynamic global ethic for the common good.

If that is to happen, then the globalization that could bring about common good cannot be either defined in terms of diplomatic offensives, humanitarian help and military interventions, or simply guided by international law. Neither could such globalization be value free. Goodness can be cultivated through globalization only if more common visions, ideals, values, aims and criteria for a heightened global responsibility on the part of all peoples and their governments could be fostered. In these ways the strong political, economic and financial global network of the economists and the world civilization of the sociologists will not be a single world culture in a socio-economic and political sense or a single world religion in a spiritual sense.

The greatest challenge before the human race that has stepped into the Third Millennium in the Western Calender is to recognise the common humanity which binds the human species and to work together to inaugurate a dynamic global ethic – a Soteriological one – to cultivate common good through globalization.

Endnotes

[1] Author lectures in the field of Religion and Culture at Trinity College, the University of Melbourne and in Buddhism and other Asian Religions in the United Faculty of Theology of the Melbourne College of Divinity. He is the Director of the Centre for Social Inquiry, Religion and Interfaith Dialogue (CSIRD), the General Secretary of the World Federation of Interfaith Students Movements and an Honorary Research Associate of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Theology at Monash University, Melbourne.

[2] See for example, Hugo Radice, "Taking Globalism Seriously," in *Global capitalism versus democracy: The social register 1999,* Leo Panich & Colin Leys (Eds.) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999) & Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its discontents: Essays on the new mobility of people and money* (New York: New Press, 1998) propagate an economic theory of globalization scholars such as Kenichi Ohmae propagates a political theory. See Ohmae, *The end of nation-state: The rise of regional economies (*New York: Free Press, 1995).

[3] In this respect, it is of interest to note that *futurism* was the first "modern" attempt to reorganise art and society around technology and the machine ethic and include poetry, literature, painting, graphics, typography, sculpture, product design, architecture, photography, cinema and the performing arts and focus on the dynamic, energetic and violent character of changing 20th century life, especially city life.

[4] See David Harvey, "From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Conditions of Postmodernity", *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures and Global Change,* Eds., Jon Bird *et at*, London, New York: Rutledge, 1993, pp.3-29.

[5] Malcolm Walters, *Globalization,* London & New York: Rutledge, 1995, p.3.

[6] Hans Küng, "World Peace – World Religions – World Ethic", *Islam: A Challenge for Christianity,* Eds., Hans Küng & Jügen Miltmann, London: SCM Press, 1994, pp. 127-134.

[7] Robert E Buswell, Jr., & Robert M. Gimello, *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought,* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992, p.1,

[8] *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology,* Eds., Alan Richardson & John Bowden, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1983, p546.

[9] Ruwan Palapathwala, (2005). *Myths of origin and end: pathways to interfaith dialogue.* Melbourne: CSIRID & Kerala, India: The Cosmic Community Centre & Dr. Alexander Mar Thoma Centre for Dialogue Kottarakara, 2005.

[10] My position on the relationship between religion and culture is based on idealist view of culture which is found in German idealism. Paul Tillich, a philosophical-theological proponent of this idealism, has particularly influenced my own development of a theory of religion and culture. Tillich's basic idea of theology and culture was expounded in his famous 1919 essay: "Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur." *Main Works . Hauptwerke 2: Writings in the Philosophy of Culture*. Edited by Michael Palmer, De Gunther. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter - Evangelisches Verlagswerk GmbH, 1990, pp. 69-85. See also Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*. Ed., Kimball, Robert C., New York: Oxford University Press, 1959. An impressive anthropological exposition of the relationship between religion and culture is given by Clifford Geertz in chapter four of his book: *The Interpretation of Cultures,* New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973, pp. 87-125.

[11] While an explicit soteriology may not be presented in religions which are not referred to as "world religions" the emphasis that is given to the question of immortality implicitly underlines the soteriology of those religions. For a detailed discussion of immortality see J.G. Frazer, *The Belief in Immortality,* London, Macmillan and Co Ltd., 1913. Furthermore, it is important to note that various non-cognitive theories of religious language can also assist us to explore the deeper dimensions of religious experience to which religious symbols point. For example, see R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricists View of the Nature of Religious Belief", Ed., John Hicks, *The Existence of God,* New York, Mcmillan, 1964.

[12] In his description of what he calls the "broader understanding of religion" Paul Tillich gives many expressions to religion. In one instance it is the awareness of our relationship to the Ground of Being (a). In his *The Courage to Be* religion is the "state of being grasped by the power of Being-Itself." Then, in a Bampton lecture, religion is defined as "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the questions of the meaning of our life." All these definitions indicate that religion is not a "special function" or a sphere in one's life, but rather "the dimension of depth in all of its functions." The word *depth* points to that which is ultimate, infinite and unconditional in one's spiritual life. Then, what concerns one ultimately is the "religious concern" and only the religious concern is ultimate. (a) Mackenzie Brown, Ed., *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue.* London: SCM Press Ltd., 1965, p. 13; (b) *The Courage to Be.* Glasgow: William Collins & Co., Ltd., 1986, p. 153; (c) *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions,* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, p.3; (d) Robert C Kimball, Ed., *Theology of Culture,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 5-6.

[13] The term *Dhamma* (*Pali*) literally means the "bearer", constitution of a thing. From this primary meaning the term connotes many other rich nuances in the Buddhist Cannon. It also means the liberation Law discovered and proclaimed by Lord Buddha which is summed up in the Four Noble Truths.

[14] For example see Binyamin Abrahamor, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationality,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988.

[15] *Samyutta Nikaya* LVI, 11.

[16] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1023-1025, 1243, 1265-1270, 2009.

[17] *Holy Quran*, 19:72; 61:10; 40:41.

[18] See Muhammad Abul Quasem, *Salvation of the Soul and Islamic Devotions,* London: Kegan Paul International, 1983, pp. 19-47.

[19] Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of World's Religions,* London, SCM, 1993, pp. 24-36.

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Return to Home | **Return to Table of Contents** | **Return to Top of Article**

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