

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN OR THE KINGDOM ON EARTH – RELIGION AND THE PROCESS OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract: *This paper explores the phenomena arising from the complex interplay and multifaceted relationships between religion and the process of globalization. In comparative - descriptive manner we examines the mutual impact and relational dynamics between religion and globalization, analyzing the accompanying societal challenges: syncretism, secularization, homogenization, "world religion", versus the genuine freedom of being, the spiritual aspiration toward Truth, and the authentic values that foster mutual human recognition of diversity, love, and cooperation. In doing so, the study offers insight into the position of religion, with the accent on Christian anthropology, within the process of globalization and how contemporary global trends influence the collective value system, shape traditional practices, form identity, and contribute to the emergence of current social anomalies and religious doctrines.*

Keywords: *syncretism, secularization, world religion, freedom, christian anthropology.*

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Introduction

In contemporary society, globalization has become one of the most influential processes shaping political, economic, cultural, and spiritual life. While it brings undeniable benefits such as technological development and interconnectedness, globalization also raises critical questions regarding identity, tradition, and religion. One of the most controversial dimensions of this process is the aspiration—sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit—to construct a unified “world religion” that would transcend particular traditions and establish a universal framework for human spirituality. Although presented as an effort toward reconciliation and unity, such a project risks undermining the very principle of human freedom.

Religion, when reduced to institutional and dogmatic structures, may easily serve as an instrument of ideological or political control (Onuoha & Odeke, 2020). In contemporary religious discourse, one can observe emerging trends of syncretism and homogenization, often accompanied by tendencies toward centralization and the formation of new, materially grounded centers of power. These developments reflect a broader socio-cultural dynamic in which religion risks being reduced to a functional instrument of ideology or institutional control.

Christian anthropology articulates a radically different vision—one that is theocentric in orientation and eschatological in purpose. It affirms God as the absolute center of existence, a truth that fundamentally distinguishes the Christian worldview from secularized forms of religiosity. The process of deification (theosis)—understood as the ultimate goal of human life—is not simply moral improvement but participation in the uncreated energies of God (Lossky, 1957). Through this transformative ascent, the Christian seeks union with the Holy Trinity and anticipates the fullness of eschatological reality in the Kingdom of Heaven.

1. Globalization, Religion and The Human Freedom

Globalization profoundly transforms not only economies and politics but also cultural and religious spheres (Kurth, 2009; Călina, 2018). The notion of a “global religion” has been widely debated in both theoretical and practical contexts. Some scholars argue that humanity requires a common spiritual foundation to foster peace and mutual understanding (Samajdar, 2015). Critics, however, caution that such unification may threaten religious diversity and, more importantly, the freedom of individual faith (Makridis, 2020; Yoo, 2022). In that way they can obstruct personal autonomy if they develop into extreme expressions that limit freedom and suppress individual identity and diversity (Bauman, 2001).

Religion, in its institutional form, provides structure, community, and continuity. Yet when institutionalized religion becomes detached from authentic inner experience, it may impose conformity and restrict personal freedom. Streib, Klein, Keller, and Hood (2020) emphasize that spirituality often expresses itself in subjective, personal experiences that transcend institutional boundaries, highlighting the relational and existential dimensions of faith.

From an anthropological and philosophical perspective, freedom is not merely the absence of external constraints. It is closely tied to the nature and purpose of the human person and is realized within social, moral, and spiritual contexts. Classical and contemporary philosophical traditions suggest that authentic freedom involves rational self-determination aligned with ethical principles, the pursuit of human flourishing, and active participation in meaningful relationships (MacIntyre, 1984; Taylor, 2007; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). Recent scholarship reinforces this view, linking human freedom to social responsibility, cultural identity, and ethical engagement in a globalized world (Ciocan, 2023; Rocha, 2024).

1.1. Christian Anthropology: The Theocentric Model

Christian anthropology further deepens this understanding. Human freedom is conceived not as independence from all constraints but as the capacity to align one's will with the Divine will, participating in communion with God and others (Lossky, 2002; Yannaras, 2007). The Cappadocian Fathers articulated this in their teaching on hypostasis, defining the person as existing through communion rather than in self-enclosed autonomy. This relational ontology underscores that freedom cannot be understood as mere independence or detachment; rather, it is realized in communion with God and others. Building on this patristic insight, Christos Yannaras (2007) develops a relational personalism that critiques modern notions of autonomy as insufficient for human flourishing. For Yannaras, true freedom emerges not from the assertion of the isolated self but from participation in divine life. Freedom, in this framework, is inseparable from love and relationality: the more one freely participates in authentic relationships—both divine and human—the more one realizes true liberty. External ideologies, whether social, political, or religious, distort freedom when they divert the person from this ontological vocation. Christ's call to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven indicates that true transformation cannot be the result of external systems or ideologies, but only of inner renewal through divine grace.

Globalization, with its emphasis on individualism, consumer choice, and standardized social norms, often promotes a superficial vision of freedom. Autonomy is framed as liberation from external authority rather than the fulfillment of human potential (Taylor, 2007; Makridis, 2020). Such freedom can result in internal alienation, as individuals lose touch with deeper relational and spiritual dimensions of life. Christianity critiques this model by asserting that genuine freedom requires inner integrity and communion, enabling the person to transcend self-interest and participate in a higher moral and spiritual order (Lossky, 2002; Yannaras, 2007; Ciocan, 2023).

This tension between globalization and religion is therefore not merely a question of doctrine or ritual. It is a fundamental confrontation over the meaning and realization of human freedom itself. Whereas globalization equates freedom with choice, flexibility, and independence, Christianity situates freedom within a broader anthropological and metaphysical horizon. Autonomy is balanced by relationality, and self-determination is guided by ethical and spiritual truths. Such a vision emphasizes that authentic freedom is inseparable from ethical responsibility, spiritual growth, and participation in communion with others, highlighting the transformative potential of religion in the modern world (Yoo, 2022; Rocha, 2024; Streib et al., 2020).

Thus, two opposing forces are in constant struggle: self-love, as an expression of an anthropocentric substitution of God, and the love of God, as the only path to genuine wholeness and harmony (Lossky, 1974). At the root of this ontological conflict lies the deep psychological need for belonging, along with the simultaneous striving for autonomy and freedom. Yet here arises the essential existential question: does true freedom exist apart from God, that is, outside of communion with Him?

1.2. The Secular Model: Fragmentation and Idolatry

The contrast between theocentrism and secular idolatry reveals two opposing paradigms of human existence. Christianity offers a path toward integration, communion, and eschatological hope through the process of theosis. The secular alternative, while promising autonomy and progress, ultimately fragments the human person and orients life toward transient and inadequate substitutes for the divine. In a global context of religious homogenization and institutional centralization, globalization creates the illusion of unity through economics, technology, and culture, yet it often neglects the inner transformation of the human person. It may secure external connectedness, but it cannot generate inner communion in love and truth.

The secular model of existence inclines toward idolatry, expressed in the exaltation of human imperfection and the cultivation of narcissistic self-worship. Within this framework, meaning is constructed horizontally—through social, political, and institutional structures—rather than vertically, in relation to the transcendent God (Yannaras, 1984). This horizontal orientation does not simply represent an alternative worldview; it entails a fundamental redefinition of personhood, reducing the human being to a functional unit within systems of power. Such a model inevitably fosters psycho-social and spiritual fragmentation. As individuals are absorbed into impersonal institutions, they are pressured to adopt standardized identities, defined by political affiliation, national belonging, or cultural conformity. In this way, the person neglects their authentic spiritual identity and instead identifies with external forms—what Ilievski & Ilievska (2021, p. 61) call the “three falls of Christians.” Such homogenization contrasts sharply with the Christian vision of relational ontology, which holds that personhood is grounded not in institutional affiliation but in communion—with God, others, and creation.

Paradoxically, the secular pursuit of autonomy, when severed from divine reference, does not yield genuine freedom. Instead, it engenders new forms of bondage. As St. Maximus the Confessor observes, when the will is detached from its proper orientation toward God, it becomes enslaved to passions and external necessities (Centuries on Love, I.1). St. Augustine likewise noted that the human heart remains restless until it finds its rest in God (Confessions, I.1). Modern analysis echoes these insights: Charles Taylor (2007) argues that secular modernity’s “immanent frame” produces fragile and fragmented selves, perpetually seeking fulfillment in inadequate substitutes.

1.3. Globalization and the Risk of Religious Standardization

Attempts to construct a unified global religion are not entirely new. Historical precedents can be traced back to the Roman Empire, which sought to impose religious uniformity as a means of political stability. Similarly, the ecumenical councils of early Christianity attempted to establish doctrinal consensus across diverse communities. In modern times, global movements such as ecumenism and interfaith dialogue pursue unity and cooperation, yet they also risk blurring essential differences when misapplied (Kurth, 2009).

Globalization intensifies these dynamics by creating a cultural environment in which plurality is both celebrated and constrained. On one hand, global communication facilitates interreligious dialogue and mutual enrichment. On the other hand, the same process fosters pressures to relativize particular traditions in favor of an artificial universalism (Onuoha & Odeke, 2020). Such tendencies may erode the integrity of specific faith communities and diminish the freedom of individuals to live according to their deeply held beliefs.

2. Results and Comparative Analysis

The main deficiencies and anomalies of globalization trends manifest in the construction of ideologies shaped by power, psychological deviance, and the absence of inner integrity—revealing a lack of spiritual maturity and depth, that is, a heart not yet purified from the passions (cf. Lossky, 2002).

Whereas Christianity and most religious denominations call for personal communion, diversity in unity, and spiritual transformation, on the other side globalization tends toward homogenization, individualism, consumerism resulting in several dynamics and phenomena. Within this analytical discourse we described the same as the following insights emerge:

- The pursuit of misguided material goals (Taylor, 2007);
- The creation of social and societal polarities (Bauman, 2000);

- The intensification of the inner ontological split and dualism (Yannaras, 2007);
- Identification with external and transient forms of human organization, such as political parties, nations, and states (Ilievski & Ilievska, 2021);
- Idolatry directed toward created, material constructs (Hart, 2003);
- Profound distortions that become sources of socio-pathological phenomena in human organization, such as nationalism, fascism, and totalitarianism, understood as extreme expressions of autocratic regimes (Arendt, 1973);

For the purposes of this study (Ilievski & Ilievska, 2025, pp. 8) we have developed a table presenting a comparative analysis of the differences between globalization and Christian anthropology across several key parameters: *anthropological foundation, unity and diversity, values and goals, freedom and belonging and identity* (see: Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative analysis

| Section | Globalization | Christian antropologie |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7.1 Anthropological Foundation | Views the human being as an autonomous individual valued by productivity, consumption, and participation in global systems. | Understands the human being as created in the image of God; personhood realized in communion with God and others. |
| 7.2 Unity and Diversity | Strives for uniformity, erasing cultural and spiritual particularities in favor of a market-driven, technological identity. | Affirms unity in diversity; the Church is universal yet preserves unique traditions, languages, and cultures. |
| 7.3 Values and Goals | Guided by economic growth, efficiency, technology, consumerism, and geopolitical integration. | Guided by salvation, theosis, love, humility, and service; progress as spiritual transformation. |
| 7.4 Freedom and Belonging | Defines freedom as autonomy—individual choice without external constraints. Belonging reduced to networks, markets, or politics. | Defines freedom as communion—capacity to love and give oneself to God and others; belonging realized in the Church. |
| 7.5 Identity | Fluid, negotiable, and consumer-driven identities shaped by global trends. | Grounds identity in Christ—unchangeable, eternal, and rooted in divine grace. |

Source: Ilievski & Ilievska, 2025, pp. 8

3. Conclusion

Ultimately, the question of whether globalization leads to a “Kingdom of Heaven” or a “Kingdom on Earth” is not merely theological—it is sociopolitical. It concerns whose voices are heard, whose traditions are preserved, and how spiritual values navigate the turbulent waters of a rapidly globalizing world.

The forced imposition of religion and mass ideologies does not lead to the genuine transformation of human nature; rather, it produces repression, which often amplifies inherent weaknesses and aggressive impulses. As Marcuse (1969) notes, environments shaped by coercive systems tend to inhibit authentic human development, fostering destructive tendencies within individuals. In turn, these untransformed individuals can destabilize and undermine the very social and institutional systems they helped establish, perpetuating cycles of conflict and dysfunction.

Secularization, then, does not abolish bondage; it redefines it. By substituting God with finite constructs—political ideologies, cultural narratives, or the autonomous self—it perpetuates fragmentation and dependency. Christianity, by contrast, offers an ontology of communion, wherein authentic identity - Christian identity (Naum, 2018, pp. 131-132) and freedom emerge not through external conformity but through belonging in divine love. In this vision, personhood is healed, meaning is restored, and idolatry is transcended.

Syncretism, or the blending of diverse religious and ideological beliefs, further complicates the pursuit of spiritual truth. While it may appear to promote tolerance, it often relativizes core doctrines and diminishes authentic spiritual identity (The Gospel Coalition, 2023). Research indicates that syncretistic tendencies are rising, with many individuals combining elements from multiple worldviews, which can lead to fragmentation of both personal belief systems and broader cultural cohesion (American Worldview Inventory, 2024).

The only viable path toward overcoming differences and fostering genuine cooperation lies in a framework grounded in love and freedom. Philosophical and theological traditions consistently emphasize that authentic human flourishing emerges where relational bonds are guided by voluntary commitment and mutual respect rather than coercion (Gitadaily, 2024). Thus, the cultivation of love and freedom is essential not only for spiritual development but also for sustaining social and institutional integrity.

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