

Title: Global cities, modern religions and people's lives

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Abstract

This essay will highlight the opportunities religions may have in global cities if they face the challenges posed by modern culture. As I write from Latin America, I keep in mind Latino global cities and also Latino expressions of universal religions. I address the secularization process inspired by Charles Taylor's writings. As I understand his work, secularism means pluralism and disengagement; transcendence is a challenge to open our fixed identity, and modernity is a new culture with its own set of values. At the top of the scale, the 'hypergood' of modern culture is the enhancement of ordinary life. From that point of view, Latin American Catholicism may not only accept the innovations global modernity poses to religion, but also goes further remembering modernity about its original claims. In doing that, Latin Catholicism may foster the birth of a new democratic ethos in Latin American global cities and help individuals to find new responses transforming their religious traditions in order to improve ordinary people's lives.

Introduction

This essay tries to state the place Christianity may have in modern Latin America's global cities. As I think global cities are the place where modernity is produced, I will focus on Charles Taylor's idea of modernity as a culture with certain values, which has modified all human dimensions, including religion.

My thesis is that Catholicism can play an important role in socio-cultural integration and community building; but first it should engage in a dialogue with modernity.

Modernity, global cities and religion

I do not want to discuss if modernity had shaped global cities or if urban growth gave birth to modern culture. I think modernity is the cultural framework of global cities. For that reason, we may use modernity theories to grasp the relationship of religions and cities. According to Taylor modernity is not the result either good or bad of the struggle of the ancient world against the darkness of religious powers. It is a new and different culture, with specific values and a new background, with its own "language and a set of practices, which defines specific understandings of personhood, social relations, states of mind and soul, goods and bads, virtues and vices" (Taylor, 1992a:88). Modernity is the affirmation of ordinary life: an amalgam of new practices, institutional forms and ways of living centered in the enhancement of human life (Taylor, 2002:175,181; 2004:1).

Western religions have been modified by modernity. Important changes that religions and churches had suffered during the transition towards modernity may be misunderstood as something perennial, when they were actually novelties of those times (Taylor, 1992a:90-93; 1992b:209,214).

While in many ways Western modernity has been inhospitable to religious beliefs, at the same time modern culture has done much more work for Gospel's values in the realm of human rights than Christendom did. The affirmation of universal human rights as radically unconditional was due to the breakdown with the structures of Christendom (Taylor, 1996a:11,20). Not every outcome of Western modernity is 'against' religion. Since modernity had been inspired by some Christian ideas, and religion had been modified by modern culture, there are chances for positive interaction and mutual enhancement between them. This interaction takes place in urban context where existing identities (including religious ones) are challenged constantly.

Secular cities, secular religions

Secularism is, in Taylor's thought, not only the institutional church-state separation but a new moral ground (Lombo and Leeuwen:79). It is an unavoidable modern value that any religion inside modernity is called to recognize. Secularism is a value in the sense of 'pluralism' and also 'disengagement'.

Many people turn to religion when they have to face some question of the meaning of life or need some language to mark crucial moments in life, such as birth, marriage and death. However, in their daily life, these people function as atheists and religion is made a 'commodity' (Casanova:63). The modern religious approach follows the commercial pattern, whether churches like it or not. Global cities empowered this process. However, religion does not necessarily decline when churches do; the weakness of churches is not unbelief. On the contrary, global cities are witnesses of a 'multi-believes' phenomenon. Churches should accept this fact in order to be able to talk to people's ordinary experience. Churches should recognize that as people believe in a different way than

before, so they live religion in a new way. Many people in global cities mark their lives with religious ceremonies, they believe in some faith, but do not necessarily share the entire 'dogmatic package'¹. This kind of religious plurality asks for shift in the formulation of faith. For believers, a religion cannot be further defined in terms of denying other believes. In a certain way, the ecumenical movement is reforming Christianity in this direction. After 'Christendom' or 'National Churches' solutions, ecumenism might be the religious expression of post-secular cities. A religion that accepts pluralism is able to make sense of urban people's life.

Secularism, as Taylor addresses it, also means the disengagement of the community from the sacred times of origins. In the ancient world, the past was the 'main' time. That has changed. In our culture, future is the 'main' time. Faith involves relation to the past and openness to be reconfigured from the future. If religion accepts secularity, the 'profanation' of the past will help religions to keep the future 'secular'. If secularism freed communities from any tie to mythical 'time of origins', time should also be freed from any promises of 'mythical future' beyond communitarian agency. Secularism may mean disengagement of the future from any external power from mutual-agreement communities. The future is an undefined dimension not only for religion, but it is also open from any economic or political dogma. Nobody can promise heaven on earth.

If a religion in a global city needs to be 'tolerant' in order to make sense of *de facto* life, religions have a role in keeping open the chances of future. Indeed, religion should keep the chances of the future open in order to be a 'religion'.

Challenged on identities, cautious on concepts

However, asking for the role of religion in global cities, we may end in a radical reduction of religion to a social function. Without any room for claims of transcendence, modernity may manipulate religious feelings in order to create the indispensable social consensus that liberal democratic ethos need. However, I reject the reduction of religion to a dependent variable of politics.

According to Taylor, religion needs to be explained as something related to a reality beyond us (1997:xv). What most people today define as 'spirituality' is a concern with enhancing and empowering ordinary life. Modern 'secular' spirituality affirms this earthly life, instead of emphasizing something beyond life. In Taylor's view, transcendence is something beyond our personal life, a suggestion that the point of things is not exhausted by our lives. This point of view challenges us to go beyond ourselves. However, transcendence is not any idea beyond life. It is a call to challenge our identity, an invitation to a radical decentring of the self. This call challenges the conceptions of identity as something fixed and stable (1996b; 1996a:16-17).

Transcendence may also mean that any understanding about God is inadequate, but we have no other way of connecting with him than these 'embodied' and inadequate tools, such as words and concepts (Lombo and Leeuwen:84). In the social realm this implies that we should keep open the space for debates over fundamental matters, without flying into warring factions, or asking for a definitive solution (1990:113). Our account of reality is always provisional (Morello:632). In this sense, transcendent religions may fight fundamentalism.

¹ In Argentina's cities, 90% of the population believes in Jesus, but 40% also believes in shamanism, 30% in horoscope, 26% in astrology and 25% in tarot practices (CEIL-PIETTE, 2008).

A personal experience

With the modern stress on inwardness and commitment, my belief not only should be respected by others but must say something to me; it must make sense in terms of my spiritual history and the way I understand it. The logic of modern subjectification stressed the genuineness of feelings rather than the nature of their object. The doctrinal issues are not as important as the fact that I connect with God mostly through passion.

This 'expressivist outlook' stresses the 'ethic of authenticity'. Authenticity is a manner, my way of orientation with my true nature. It does not mean that the content must be self-referential. I can find fulfillment in God, business or politics, as far as these options became my true election and personal commitment. This manner is unavoidable in modern culture and shapes our religion. What is valuable is the spiritual insight; each one should follow his or her own path of spiritual inspiration. For many people to set aside their own path in order to conform to some external authority is not comprehensible as a true form of spiritual life. People make what they can of their religious experience, without much concern for any institutional agents².

Religions in Modernity

Churches have many problems in dealing with modernity in Western world. However, religious belief of the majority of Latino American citizens continues to play an important role in people's ordinary life and in the public sphere. A religion that has been shaped by modernity should foster different social practices according to its new role in the secular public sphere.

A religion that keeps alive its claims of transcendence may help to create new civilizing arrangements and foster democratic ethos. If Christianity accepts secularity as the disembedding of the political community from the sacred as well as the plurality of religious forms and beliefs, the role of churches in Latin America will stress the openness of the future and the worth of ordinary life.

A religion that has gone through modernity should remember that any religious form has been shaped by a certain cultural framework. These words and practices are unavoidable in order to transmit religious dogmas (there is not such a thing as a 'neutral' way of doing that), but at the same time they are not the unique version of religion. Different modernities may imply different religious expressions. If Latin America had gone through a modernity process other than Europe or the States, it is possible that we find different forms of Christianity. I think popular religiosity and Liberation Theology are expressions of this sort. Religion in modernity has also passed through the experience of 'authenticity'. It has been interiorized by an election and a personal commitment process. There is no truly 'religious experience' in modernity without a certain degree of personal commitment. But, in the same way, a 'modern' religion should have some sort of communitarian mediation, which just by being common allows us to experience something we would miss individually. Some rituals have been emptied but believers still need some social expression of their faith. Christianity should look for new ones. These rituals should respect our modern stresses on personal and free experience of faith; but also be a narration of our history together in multicultural cities.

Religions provide people with words for expressing their personal or communitarian suffering and struggle, words that people usually do not get in other realms. Keeping the

² In Argentina's cities, 90% of the population is baptized Christian, but only 73% of them would get married in any church; 60% of believers related with God without any institutional mediation; just 23% of Christians goes to church, but only 17% of the faithful agrees with their religious leaders in topics such as abortion or use of condoms (CEIL-PIETTE, 2008).

transcendence in concepts, religion should help to avoid fanaticism or manipulations: our words are both unavoidable and imperfect. God is beyond our words. A modern religion that accepts tolerance will be able to cope with the secularization of theological concepts and to keep the reality of God beyond them.

The power of religion in Latin American cities

May religions play a positive role in Latin American global cities? If they advocate for a “universal secularism”, they will.

Keeping the modern distinction between church and state, Latin American Christianity should advocate for a true secularism that allows free expression for Latin American citizens in issues such as the political and economical organization of their countries. Since modernity pretends to be secular, religions have a point in reminding modernity of its disengagement with any time ‘beyond history’. In a secular community nobody has definitive answers. Any commitment with something beyond the free and historic assent of the individuals should be “secularized”.

As we know, secularism told churches that they are not the state; a religion that accepts secularism will be able to tell the state it is not a church or religion. Politics cannot be a quasi-religion that divides the world between ‘saints and sinners’, ‘fellows and traitors’. Finally, humanity is not a reality out of time. It is a fact here and now. The concern about ordinary life should be a criterion for modernity’s future steps. Christianity may help modernity by reminding the value of *each* ordinary life. The defense of all human life, the claim for fair conditions of human development available for every one, is a key-point for Latin America if we want to build a Latin modernity. If the state and its institutions in Latin America had been built following the European ‘Enlightenment package’ without criticism, it means that our institutions have been shaped as answers to ‘non-Latino American’ questions. Our norms and institutions, for example, presuppose that all citizens are private owners. States tend to address poverty as if it were a ‘marginal’ problem, through some social programs. However, most of the Latino American population lives in poverty, without any property, lacking the basic life conditions which would grant them their right to ‘ordinary life’.

Fixing the institutional problem is not a religious problem. But a religion that stands for the worth of every human life might be a source of spiritual insight for its faithful. Religion can help inhabitants of global cities to keep in mind modernity original promises, emphasizing and stressing the affirmation of ordinary human life. Life is worthy in itself. When ideologies, in the name of modernity, attempt to ‘sacrifice’ a generation or a group of people, when Western modernity imposes its culture over other groups, or when economic development threatens the future of life in our world, Christians may be a reminder of the modern concern with ordinary life.

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