Multifaith Movements in Ultramodernity

by

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Abstract:

Ultramodernity (Willaime 2006), following on from modernity, has been characterised as an era of fear, risk and uncertainty and paradoxically as a time of great hope and global interdependence (Baumann 2006; Beck 2006; Obama 2006). Following the events of September 11, 2001, the Bali and London bombings, a climate of fear has inspired a plethora of policies that have eroded civil liberties, jeopardising trust in state systems and thereby inadvertently elevating the risk of further violence, particularly in so-called Western societies. Conversely, ultramodern scholars, including Jürgen Habermass and Ulrich Beck, have advocated cosmopolitan solutions to more effectively and cooperatively counter global risks. These optimistic scenarios, while reaching populist proportions, have also received their fare share of criticism (Brassett 2008). Indeed, when we look toward the current state of the United Nations it is difficult not to lose hope. Where is the proof that Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitan condition is coming into being in the global arena beyond these sociological theories? I argue that the rise of multifaith movements in ultramodernity provides this much needed evidence.

Keywords: Multifaith, cosmopolitan, ultramodernity, peacebuilding, interdependence.

Introduction

The ultramodern era, following on from modernity, has been characterised as one of fear, risk and uncertainty and paradoxically as one of great hope and global interdependence (Baumann 2006; Beck 2006; Obama 2006). Following the events of September 11, 2001,
the Bali and London bombings, a climate of fear has inspired a plethora of policies that have eroded civil liberties, jeopardising trust in state systems and thereby inadvertently elevating the risk of further violence, particularly in so-called Western societies. Conversely, ultramodern scholars, including Jürgen Habermass and Ulrich Beck, have advocated cosmopolitan solutions to more effectively and cooperatively counter global risks. These optimistic scenarios, while reaching populist proportions, have also received their fare share of criticism (Brassett 2008). Indeed, when we look toward the current state of the United Nations it is difficult not to lose hope. Where is the proof that Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitan condition is coming into being in the global arena beyond these sociological theories? I argue that the rise of multifaith movements in ultramodernity provides this much needed evidence.

**Ultramodernity, fear and common security**

Ultramodernity, according to Jean-Paul Willaime (2006: 78), best describes our current era as “(a) we have not left modernity behind and (b) we are actually in a stage of radicalisation of modernity”. In this way Williame aligns his term ultramodernity with Marcel Gauchet’s (2002: xv) observation that we live in a time of “major discontinuity which is compatible with an underlying continuity”. The major discontinuity lies in a shift “from a logic of certainty to uncertainty” wherein the modernist belief in progress has come under considerable doubt and where “nothing escapes close critical examination” (Williame 2006: 78-79). A period of *radical reflexivity* thereby categorises the ultramodern era.
Zygmunt Bauman (2006: 2) labels this uncertainty “liquid fear”, where “Fear’ is the name we give to our uncertainty: to our ignorance of the threat and of what is to be done – what can and can’t be – to stop it in its tracks” (2). These “[p]anics come and go”, writes Baumann, as “[l]iquid life flows… from one challenge to another”. With regard to these threats, Bauman (2006: 20) states that as we have failed in understanding their causes, we lack the means of taking precautions to prevent them, and of conceiving the necessary skills and tools to address them adequately. Paradoxically, while the process of globalisation, “has brought home the awesome might … [of] the sphere of the unknown, incomprehensible, unmanageable” (Bauman 2006: 96) it has also accelerated the realisation of our interdependency and the imperative towards common security and common good.

On a globalised planet… security cannot be gained, let alone reliably assured, in one country or in a selected group of countries: not by their own means, and not independently of the state of affairs of the rest of the world (Bauman 2006: 97).

This ultramodern awareness of “planet-wide interdependence” (Baumann 2006: 100) thereby undermines the modern notion of the nation-state (Bauman 2006: 125) and calls for global co-operation rather than competition, in the face of crises.

Democracy and freedom can no longer be assured in just one country or even in one group of countries; their defence in a world saturated with injustice and inhabited by billions of human beings denied human dignity will inevitably corrupt
the values it is meant to protect. The future of democracy and freedom has to be made secure on a planetary scale – or not at all. (Baumann 2006: 128)

Similarly, Beck (1999, 2006: 80), states that in ‘world risk society’ everyone, including the wealthy and powerful, is vulnerable to global risks such as terrorism and global warming. Global risks know no borders and therefore national responses are inadequate. Global risks therefore give rise to the need for and importance of global polity to counter risks and build more equitable and sustainable futures (Beck 2006: 2).

Global risks throw humanity’s survival into doubt and thereby open up global opportunities for action… There is a growing realisation that we are living in a global context of responsibility from which no one can steal away (Beck 2005: 294).

Beck (2006:22.14) suggests that with growing awareness of global interdependencies and global risks there is a corresponding increase in the compulsion for cosmopolitan solutions at the individual, local and global levels. Diverse communities are united by global risks, by what they “struggle against, namely, the systemic violation of human dignity and new plagues of genocide and terrorist violence” (2006:119). An awareness of heightened global risks creates “an unavoidable pressure to cooperate” and a “source of new commonalities and interaction networks”.

I argue that it is precisely our ultramodern capacity for radical reflexivity, following the Kantian, critical theory tradition, that best provides the way through fear towards
common security. In particular, the realization of our interdependency, made evident to all due to the processes of globalisation, underpins the need to act with an ultracosmopolitan consciousness, a sense of global compassion toward humanity and all forms of life. This requires radical reflexivity, in order to critique one’s own actions, and those of multiple actors including states, religions, the media and market forces. I argue that religions have played and continue to play a significant role in advancing reflexive processes, including self-reflexivity and societal-reflexivity in the ultramodern public sphere. Indeed, Buck-Morris (2003) has recently examined the critical theory of Islamism, following a similar argument.

According to James A. Beckford, (2003: 127) modern and ultramodern sociological studies of religion have tended “to emphasise marginal, deviant or sensational aspects of religion and show relatively little interest in the ‘normal’ range of religious beliefs, actions and organizations”. In particular there has been a preoccupation with studies of fundamentalism and how these movements, while critical of the global spread of capitalism, have used conditions of globalisation, such as global communication systems, to their advantage (2003: 127,115). Thereby a challenge exits for sociologists of religion “to demonstrate that globalisation… is still associated with interesting aspects of religion other than fundamentalism” (2003: 136). Beckford (2003: 138, 109) offers the “steady growth and consolidation of inter-faith networks” as one such under-researched example, citing Richard H. Roberts’ (2002) mention of the 1993 World Parliament of Religions as evidence of religious organizations searching for “common-ground” as an alternative to
conflict, in response to “shared problems and threats” such as poverty, gender inequity, environmental and human rights issues.

Undertaking the challenge posed by Beckford, I argue that the emergence of multifaith and secular-religious peacebuilding networks in ultramodernity offers evidence of a missing narrative of religious responses to globalisation, which emphasises the interconnectedness of global risks and the need for increased collaboration across multiple systems in order to best address them. In ultramodernity, mainstream religious organizations, with a commitment toward peacebuilding, have cooperatively addressed global risks, such as poverty, terrorism and climate change and in doing so, have re-entered the public sphere, not as a deviant threat, as religion has so often been depicted, but as critics of and progressive partners with states in countering risks and advancing common security. The study of multifaith movements thereby can assist in building new models of activism and local and global governance, as outmoded oppositional and divisive frameworks of modernity are being replaced by cooperative, inclusive, ultracosmopolitan possibilities.

**Multifaith movements in ultramodernity**

Multifaith movements long predate the events of September 11, 2001. I use the ultramodern term multifaith to represent multiple faith and/or religious traditions, as opposed to inter-faith, a modern term, which has traditionally referred to activities between two or more religious groups, such as Jewish-Christian or Christian-Muslim dialogue. The first Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions was held in 1893
and the second in 1993, one hundred years later. Indeed, there was a dramatic rise in multifaith engagement in the 1990’s evidenced by the Parliament and an increasing number of activities, organizations and significant publications. Mark Gopin stated in 2000, “while the fractionating character of religious revivalism is more noticeable and sometimes more violent, there is a quiet revolution in integration taking place as well… never before in history, however, have so many leaders and adherents been inspired to work for a truly inclusive vision that is multicultural and multireligious”. Diane Eck (2005: 21-26) described initial fears that the events of September 11 would provide a “cataclysmic setback” to inter-faith relations, however it has had the opposite effect becoming a stimulus for multifaith engagement. There has also been a significant shift from inter-faith activity initiated by religious communities and inter-faith organizations to multifaith and secular-religious peacebuilding activities, often initiated and supported by states, particularly in Western multicultural and multifaith societies such as Australia, the UK and the US (Halafoff 2006a, 2006b, 2007, forthcoming; Bouma et al. 2007).

Religious peacebuilding efforts have, according to Cynthia Sampson’s (1997: 304) prediction, become “increasingly intentional and systematic” and following the events of September 11, incorporated a counter-terrorism/security agenda (Halafoff 2006a, 2006b, 2007; forthcoming).

Given that a major rise of multifaith activity occurred in the 1990s, multifaith movements share much in common with other social movements of that period, notably peace, environmental, indigenous and women’s movements. The late 1980s and early 1990s were a time of great hope and action where, due to the processes of globalisation, a new
global consciousness of interdependence was awakening. Interestingly, many of the issues, which preoccupied the public mind of the 1980’s and 1990’s, are re-emerging in the mid-2000s. I argue that the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s was a cosmopolitan moment in history and that we are currently entering another, following on from a highly regressive decade. The social movements that flourished in the 1980s and early 1990s, particularly the women’s movement and environmental movement, were largely silenced by a pendulum swing toward a more conservative agenda, as evidenced by the election of George Bush in the US and John Howard in Australia. With the collapse of Communism, the Bush government and its allies sought to preserve their position of global dominance and in the face of globalisation and growing global risks, acted to protect and promote their ‘way of life’ and to control the earth’s limited resources. The ‘culture wars’, the Clash of Civilisations and the ‘War on Terror’, exemplified this era, where privilege was explicitly divided across lines of culture and religion, in keeping with pre-modern and modern inequities. In recent years, the pendulum has swung again to a more progressive social agenda as evidenced in the campaign strategies of Kevin Rudd and Barack Obama. This was recently well illustrated in Obama’s (2008) Berlin address:

…In this new world, such dangerous currents have swept along faster than our efforts to contain them. That is why we cannot afford to be divided. No one nation, no matter how large or powerful, can defeat such challenges alone. None of us can deny these threats, or escape responsibility in meeting them.

…the burdens of global citizenship continue to bind us together. …
Interestingly the multifaith movement, which emerged at the end of the 21st Century was one of the few social movements that not only survived the ‘regressive decade’, it received a massive influx of support from states and foundations during this period, particularly following the events of September 11, 2001 (Halafoff 2006a, 2006b, 2007, forthcoming; Bouma et al. 2007). In addition, more recently as perceptions of risk have shifted away from terrorism to climate change, multifaith movements have continued to grow and gain public and state support as definitions of security encapsulate more common security imperatives, including not only human but environmental security (Halafoff forthcoming).

**Multifaith Peacebuilding**

Due to the roles religions play in perpetuating cultures of violence and cultures of peace, R. Scott Appleby (2000, 2003: 240) argues that an understanding of “lived religion” holds the key to countering religious extremism and enhancing tolerance and moderation.

There are several factors that predispose religions and religious leaders to peacebuilding and conflict prevention, amelioration and resolution: Religious communities have extensive networks for communication and action; injustice can give rise to conflicts and religions provide mandates for justice and for non-violent resistance to injustice; in situations where there is state corruption or collapse religious institutions and leaders provide moral authority and have the trust and respect of the people; processes of
reconciliation are often informed by religious concepts and religious actors are engaged with communities at the grass-roots level (Sampson 1997: 275; Little & Appleby 2004: 3). Religious actors who advocate non-violence and pluralism are present within all major religious traditions and are often contesting for leadership within their communities (Appleby 2003: 251).

Religious traditions also provide detailed methodologies for personal and collective peace realization. Religions advocate the importance of virtues and ethics and of cultivating one’s good qualities. This aspect of religion is highly reflexive. The ability to be self-critical of one’s actions and thoughts and to transform them towards virtuous acts and deeds requires an ever-watchful state and also the ability to admit and learn from mistakes and to cease committing them in the future. Many religions also advocate the need of transforming a self-centred, adversarial individualism or group dynamics into cooperative, compassionate mutuality and global responsibility (Knitter 1995: 71). It is this reflexive nature and the ability to take personal responsibility that lies at the foundation of religious peacebuilding and conflict transformation (Sampson 1997: 276). It is also an undervalued aspect of religion.

Conversely, alongside their peacebuilding qualities religious traditions are often hierarchical, patriarchal, didactic and have texts that legitimise discrimination and practices that are violent (Appleby 2003: 237). In 1986, Elise Boulding declared the “holy war” and the “peaceable kingdom” as representing two distinct and contrasting cultures within most religious traditions. All of the major religions proclaim peace as a
worthy pursuit and ultimate goal at both the individual and collective social level however between and within the major traditions are diverse and often contradictory theories of how this common goal is best achieved, as all concurrently justify violence and war when threatened (Schmidt-Leukel 2004: 3-4). Thereby, religion has always played an ambivalent role in perpetuating cultures of violence and cultures of peace (Appleby 2000, 2003; Juergensmeyer 2003; Conley-Tyler and Halafoff 2005).

It is at this juncture that the reflexive qualities of multifaith movements are critical to countering global risks, such as religiously inspired terrorism. Multifaith movements seek to affirm the peacebuilding potential of religions and to challenge cultures of violence. In so doing they support and affirm progressive actors within diverse faith traditions and seek to influence social change within as well as beyond their own traditions (Halafoff forthcoming).

It is important to realise that the notion of a cosmopolitan imperative, and cosmopolitan empathy in particular, did not arise only in Kant’s or our ultramodern era. The compunction toward altruism, the capacity to place others before oneself, is indeed a feature of all religious traditions, which continues to make them particularly relevant in times of crisis (HH Dalai Lama 2007). Similarly, the capacity for reflexivity, particularly self-reflexivity, to transcend one’s instinctual impulses in favour of acting out of a collective sense of responsibility, and commitment to common good, has always been an essential component of religious traditions. In addition, multifaith movements offer evidence that collaboration between religious actors from diverse traditions is possible,
however it hinges on a commitment to pluralism, and mutual understanding. Alliances of religious leaders built on ‘lower level’ commonalities such as prejudice, exclusive theology and violence can reinforce a politics of ignorance. Religious peacebuilders, due to their capacity to challenge ‘lower level’ commonalities and to assert ‘higher level’ commonalities in their place, offer evidence of an ultracosmopolitan commitment to collaboratively countering global risks and are thereby a much under-valued resource, particularly in the post 9-11 world.

Indeed Habermas (2006:1-4; 2007:10-11), argues that in the complex world of multiple modernities there is no longer any place for exclusive truth claims and politically imposed religious doctrines. The secular state with a commitment to pluralism guarantees religious freedom for all, as long as it is consistent with the law, and in so doing enables religion to self-reflexively “see itself through the eyes of others… thenceforth… renounce violence… and recourse to state power… to enforce their religious claims” (Habermas 2007: 10-11). In this way, “modern pluralistic societies are normatively compatible only with a strict universalism that demands equal respect” and with “deliberative” democracy, that provides a space for multiple religious voices in the public sphere (Habermas 2007: 10-11, 2006: 1-4). Religious persons cannot separate political views from their religious beliefs, given that particularly concepts of justice, are often “religiously grounded” (Habermas 2006: 8). Habermas (2006: 16, 20) proposes a new multi-dimensional concept of reason, that no longer excludes religion and whose success rests on the ability of both “secular and religious citizens” to “behave in a self-reflexive manner in the public sphere”.
Similarly, Appleby (2003: 255) describes the emergence of a new secular-religious model of diplomacy as a promising recent development and attributes “the building of strong secular and religious networks and coalitions” as the key to its continued success.

**Conclusion**

The 21st century heralds new opportunities for cooperation. The rise of multifaith movements and secular-religious networks offers evidence that fears and prejudices can be overcome not by hope or trust alone but by developing understanding of commonalities and differences, by countering ignorance, through communicative, collaborative, reflexive processes.

In ultramodernity, philosophy and theodicy, politics and religion need to look more toward one another for insights of how to respond to risks. It is incorrect to say that we do not know the answers and that we do not have the tools, we have multiple methods, many of which are theological, that we can draw upon. The difficulty is not so much in discovering the methods as in applying them, in transforming our self-centred, fear based frameworks, into “new possibilities of common sense” (Ranciere 2006) and common security. I argue that the study of multifaith movements in ultramodernity offers evidence of how this shift can be achieved.

**References**


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