

Beyond Tolerance: Globalization, Freedom, and Religious Pluralism

Douglas W. Shrader¹

Distinguished Teaching Professor
& Chair of Philosophy
SUNY Oneonta
Oneonta, NY

Abstract: If “Globalization” is to mean something other than imposing a single set of uniform, unexamined, and unchallengeable ideas on the entire human race, we must find ways to incorporate concepts of difference, freedom, and religious pluralism. If we are to build a truly human and humane global community, we must rethink (i) human nature (especially as regards the age-old search for spiritual values and religious truths), (ii) the complex and often murky relationship between religion and culture, and (iii) competing, confusing, or ill-defined concepts of tolerance, diversity, and freedom.

Because Globalization is often driven by economic engines that are blind to these considerations and values, we stand at a unique turning point in human history. Unchecked and unguided, this powerful but sightless form of Globalization threatens to eliminate religious and cultural practices of “less developed” countries. A rich history that stretches hundreds or thousands of years into the past may be wiped out in a single generation. For some, it is already too late. To avoid further cultural erosion of this sort, we must guard against two natural human inclinations: (i) religious conversion (converting the residents of “less developed” countries to the religions of the rich and powerful), and (ii) reinterpreting traditional practices of one culture in terms of concepts and categories characteristic of a different (more familiar) religion/culture.

Acknowledging the need for principles of difference, freedom, and religious pluralism is the easy part. The hard part consists of two tasks: (i) deciding the specifics of those principles and (ii) formulating an effective plan that will lead to widespread adoption and practice without stifling difference and disagreement in the process. As a step in what I believe to be the right direction, this presentation proceeds from a series of reflections drawn from Classical Greece and Rome to an analysis and comparison of three very different models of religious tolerance and pluralism: those exemplified in India, Classical China, and the United States. Special consideration is given not only to the strengths and merits of the various models, but to their assumptions, liabilities, and drawbacks as well.

¹ The issues that form the core of this paper are complex and controversial; to some, they may even seem intractable. Because a truly lasting solution requires consideration and discussion in a wide variety of international venues, this paper – even in its published form – represents a work-in-progress. Earlier versions have been presented at the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations in St. Petersburg, Russia: “St. Petersburg in the Dialogue of Civilizations and Cultures of East and West” (September 2003), the East-West Center International Conference in Tokyo, Japan: “New Challenges For Building An Asia Pacific Community” (August 2004), and the Sixth World Congress of the International Society for Universal Dialogue in Helsinki, Finland: “Humanity At The Turning Point: Rethinking Nature, Culture, And Freedom” (July 2005). The author is grateful for the insights and perspectives offered by participants in each of those venues. Presentations in Russia and Japan were supported in part by a Faculty Development Award. Sincere appreciation is extended to SUNY Oneonta, especially Provost F. Daniel Larkin and Dean Michael Merilan.

Introduction: In the Shadow of Socrates

One of Plato's early dialogues recounts a conversation between Socrates and a religious authority of the time, a priest named "Euthyphro". Set in the days immediately preceding Socrates' trial, the encounter is presented as fortuitous, but ultimately frustrating and fruitless. Socrates has been charged with impiety and corrupting the youth. Claiming that he knows only that he knows nothing – that he himself is aware only of his own ignorance – Socrates seeks Euthyphro's advice concerning the nature of piety. Despite a pressing schedule and Socrates' reputation for being difficult, Euthyphro agrees to the exchange. After all: who better than a priest of the temple to provide instruction in such matters? If Socrates sincerely desires to learn about proper religious behavior, observance, and belief, he will be better prepared to defend himself against the charge of impiety or, as the case may be, to recognize the error of his ways and throw himself on the mercy of the court as a reformed sinner.

Euthyphro's first suggestion is a simple one: use me as a role model; do as I do. The recommendation is not without merit, for there is much to be learned by following the example of others (especially those whom we believe to be more knowledgeable than ourselves). At an immediate, practical level, the advice may even have sufficed to help Socrates beat the charges that had been leveled against him. Even so, he complains that Euthyphro will have at best provided some instances or examples of pious behavior, but no definition or universal description of piety itself.

Providing a satisfactory universal characterization of the proper religious attitude proves far more vexing than Euthyphro might initially have imagined. He sets forth and attempts to defend the fairly obvious idea that piety is a matter of pleasing the gods: of doing the things that they love and avoiding the things that they abhor. However, as Socrates is quick to observe, Greece was polytheistic. The society demanded allegiance to a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses with different personalities, different likes and dislikes, and different demands on the human race. What pleased one god was sure to displease another. The problem, for a philosopher such as Socrates, was not simply a pragmatic or practical matter of deciding which god was more powerful or which was more likely to grant him favor or cause him distress. Granting both of Euthyphro's premises (first, that piety is a matter of pleasing the gods and, second, that there are multiple gods who are not all of one mind) produces the unacceptable conclusion that some things may be both pious (because they please some gods) and impious (because they displease others). Given such a scenario, a charge of impiety becomes virtually unavoidable: no matter what one does, one is sure to lose.

Fast forward to the present day. The demands of the global community on its citizens are more complex, less clear, and arguably less reasonable than the ones with which Socrates struggled 2400 years ago. The gods and goddess of Mount Olympus were, in a very real sense, related to one another. They acknowledged one another's existence and accepted (even if somewhat begrudgingly) a recognizable distribution of power and authority. Compared to the often bloody and inflexible relationships between competing religions in our global community, they were an exceptionally cordial bunch.

If Socrates were to meet Euthyphro on the streets of a modern metropolis, what would the ensuing conversation look like? Would an ecclesiastic of the 21st century better understand the philosopher's search for universal answers? Would he (or she) be able to provide a more satisfactory definition or characterization of the holy? Finally, would the advice of a modern-day Euthyphro facilitate an effective response to charges of impiety and corrupting the youth: charges such as those brought against Socrates by Meletus, charges that are still leveled against those who dare to explore ideas contrary to established social and religious expectation?

If “Globalization” is to mean something other than imposing a single set of uniform, unexamined, and unchallengeable ideas on the entire human race, we must find ways to incorporate concepts of difference, freedom, and religious pluralism. If we are to build a truly human and humane global community, we must rethink (i) human nature (especially as regards the age-old search for spiritual values and religious truths), (ii) the complex and often murky relationship between religion and culture, and (iii) competing, confusing, or ill-defined concepts of tolerance, diversity, and freedom.

Because Globalization is often driven by economic engines that are blind to these considerations and values, we stand at a unique turning point in human history. Unchecked and unguided, this powerful but sightless form of Globalization threatens to eliminate religious and cultural practices of “less developed” countries. A rich history that stretches hundreds or thousands of years into the past may be wiped out in a single generation. For some, it is already too late. To avoid further cultural erosion of this sort, we must guard against two natural human inclinations: (i) religious conversion (converting the residents of “less developed” countries to the religions of the rich and powerful), and (ii) reinterpreting traditional practices of one culture in terms of concepts and categories characteristic of a different (more familiar) religion/culture.

Acknowledging the need for principles of tolerance and religious pluralism is the easy part. The hard part consists of two interconnected tasks. The first, which is the primary focus of this presentation, is to identify and clarify principles to help create a global community that is both inclusive and pluralistic. The second task, without which the first becomes a mere intellectual exercise, is to formulate an effective plan that will lead to widespread adoption and practice without stifling difference and disagreement in the process.

Although the history of organized religion is replete with examples of conflict, oppression, and forced conversion, it is also a history in which people have struggled honestly and openly with religious and cultural differences. In the process, they have created at least three different models of tolerance and pluralism. Despite obvious and sometimes profound differences between the three approaches, our best hope for a healthy and harmonious global community will be a set of policies and attitudes that draws liberally from each of the three models. Each has strengths as well as weaknesses, costs as well as benefits. If we can resist the temptation, characteristic of the Western Philosophical Tradition, to believe that we must choose one candidate over the others – if

we can cultivate a global dialogue in which proponents of all three models have a voice – then we will also stand a good chance of creating a global community in which adherents of different religious and spiritual traditions can live peacefully with one another, listening to and learning from people whose heritage, beliefs, and practices differ radically from their own.

Separation of Church and State

We begin with a candidate that is most clearly exemplified by the United States: namely, separation of church and state. The first amendment to the U.S. Constitution states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Partially because the language is so terse, the amendment has been interpreted in various and sundry ways. Although the vast majority of citizens are Christians, there is no official state religion. When the system works in the way in which it is envisioned by many of its proponents, people are free to worship as they please (or not): without having to meet in secrecy, without intrusive regulation or control, and without fear of repercussions or reprisals from the powers that be. By the same token, the first amendment is generally read in such a way as to prohibit governmental action or policy that would provide preferential treatment for individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of religious conviction or affiliation. In short, the amendment drives a legislative wedge between secular and sacred, between holy and profane, and between piety and politics.

Even in the United States, the principle is not without critics. Many belong to religious groups who regard the separation as not only impractical, but contrary to their fundamental religious precepts. In an intriguing application of first amendment principles, they argue that a forced separation between church and state violates their religious freedom. While most objections of this sort have come from right wing Christian groups, many religions would agree with the general structure of the argument, provided of course that one substitutes their teachings for those of Christianity. Confronted by the obvious impasse, looking down the barrel of an argument that threatened to undo the religious freedom principle on which it is based, most Americans have agreed to an uneasy truce. It is, to be sure, a form of religious tolerance, but tolerance of only the most base and basic kind: we agree to live and let live, not because we find value in alternative religious traditions or spiritual practices, but because we fear the imposition of other “foreign” traditions and practices more than we object to the fact that our own beliefs and values have not been adopted by the entire society.

A second group of critics charge that the American system is a sham and that the Christians who object to a supposed separation of church and state simply have not taken a cold, hard, honest look at the political and social realities. Our currency, while bearing the portraits of Washington, Lincoln, and other political leaders, is emblazoned with the phrase “In God we trust”. The words “one nation, under God” were added to the pledge of allegiance during the Cold War to distinguish the righteous citizens of America from

the godless infidels of Russia and China. Public school calendars incorporate Christian and sometimes Jewish holidays, but typically ignore those of Islam and other less prevalent traditions. In short, the critics charge, America is a Judeo-Christian nation in secular dress: the so-called principle of separation of church and state serves only to keep others out and enforce the monolithic thinking of those who already wield the power.

A third group of critics object that the first amendment leads to a society that lacks a unifying or common narrative. When religion is exorcised from the public schools, we raise generation after generation of citizens with no clear sense concerning the foundations of moral values, ethical behavior, or interpersonal conduct. As a result, many Americans struggle with issues of worth and identity, lacking a clear sense of either self or community.

Universal Truths

For our second model of religious tolerance, we turn from the United States to India. While many religions have adopted concepts, practices, and ritual observances from what were originally competitor traditions, none have done so as extensively, openly, or self-consciously as Hinduism. Ask three different scholars how many gods and goddesses there are in Hinduism and you are likely to get five to six different answers. Despite its obvious if apparently flexible polytheism, Hinduism differs radically from the polytheistic traditions of Classical Greece and Rome. Socrates' search for a universal characterization of the holy troubled his fellow Athenians, but would have delighted many Hindu sages and scholars. The same tradition that embraces a vast multitude of divine beings is also home to a philosophy that regards each and every one of them as a finite and limited manifestation of a universal reality that defies ordinary human comprehension. Our quest for global principles thus finds fertile ground in India: if all the religions of the world are trying to say the same things – if they are all pointing to the same cosmic truths – then there is no basis for bias, discrimination, or oppression.

As attractive as this option may seem to universally-minded individuals, there are causes for concern as well. At the first and perhaps most obvious level, many religions will resist being treated as one among many. A Muslim, for example, will have a hard time combining the precept “There is no god but Allah” with a pluralistic perspective that permits polytheism, atheism, and even alternative monotheistic traditions.

The same culture that gave us Socrates and his search for universal forms also gave us a cautionary tale about the dangers of trying to make everyone and everything fit into a single, pre-formed mold. Procrustes set up shop at a legendary crossroads in Ancient Greece. His hospitality was all-encompassing, but inflexible. Those who were too tall or wide for his infamous bed were “downsized” by cutting off whatever part happened to hang beyond the accepted boundaries. Those who were too short fared no better, for they had to be stretched (via the rack) to fill all available space. Critics of the universalization model remind us that the Procrustean trap is far more subtle and seductive than we might imagine, but no less deforming or destructive. Trying to fit all religions, spiritual practices, and wisdom traditions into a universal mold may lead us to focus on superficial

similarities while overlooking crucial differences. Rather than preserving the rich, vibrant traditions that have developed in different cultures, we may find ourselves heir to little more than a pile of mangled and distorted corpses.

Even if we manage to avoid bleeding all the life out of our spiritual traditions, reducing everything to the simplest common denominator would leave us with just that: the simplest common denominator. There is no way of calculating what extraordinary content or richness of detail we might lose in the process.

A second group of critics express concern that excess focus on common truths may lead to insensitivity toward different traditions (i.e. the exact opposite of what we might have hoped for in a model designed to promote religion pluralism). If I uncritically believe as a matter of doctrine that your god is an alternative manifestation of my god (or what amounts to much the same thing, that both are manifestations of a force that is beyond human comprehension), I may not be inclined to spend too much time trying to understand your systems of beliefs (since mine work just fine for me). In an ironic twist, I may adopt the same devil-may-care attitude if my religious tradition does *not* do much for me, reasoning that it is all the same stuff I have already tried in different dress (i.e. the same old wine or vinegar packaged in a different bottle). Nor, by the same token, will I be overly-concerned if economic and/or social pressures threaten the continued vitality of your religious tradition (since it is all just an alternative, idiosyncratic, and hopelessly limited expression of the same religious truths that are preserved in countless other traditions anyway). Metaphorically, if I believe that all houses serve basically the same function, then I may not worry that my neighbor's house is burning down – so long as the flames do not threaten the comfort of my own abode – especially if I also believe there are other houses into which the family may move. In fact, I may welcome the added breathing space of not having someone so strange (that is, different from me and mine) living in such close proximity.

Finally, the universalization model encounters some of the same problems of subjectivity, skepticism, and runaway relativism that we noted above concerning the separation of church and state. Since we can never really know THE truth, anything goes, nothing matters, and no one cares.

Complementarity

Our third and final model of religious tolerance comes from East Asia, most noticeably Classical China and Japan. Rather than insisting on a strict separation of secular from sacred on the one hand, or metaphysical reductionism on the other, these cultures somehow found a way to accept the coexistence of several spiritual traditions as multiple, noncompetitive resources for dealing with a complex set of personal and social requirements. In much the same way that we would not expect a single type of food to satisfy the appetites of all the peoples of the world, or even to meet all the dietary needs of a single individual, they did not expect a single spiritual tradition to fulfill all the needs of a sophisticated society. While matters concerning marriage and childbirth, for example, might be handled by a combination of Confucianism and Daoism in China – or

Shinto in Japan – both cultures turned heavily to Buddhism for rites and rituals concerning death (funeral preparation, etc.).

Proponents of religious pluralism find much to like in the complementarity model, but here too there are critics and concerns. To begin, neither China nor Japan can claim an unblemished history as a poster child for religious tolerance. At its best, the relationship between the traditions mentioned above (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Shinto) seems to have been one of genuine interdependence, rather than mandated but begrudging tolerance or benign uncaring indifference. But the relationship was not always at its best: even in East Asia alternative traditions struggled with/against one another, in sometimes pointed, violent, and bloody ways. “Foreign” traditions (e.g. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) have been subjected to systematic prejudice and persecution that would cause even the most ardent proponent of the model to blush with shame.

A second group of critics charge that actual practice falls far of genuine complementarity. Rather than developing a full understanding of the various religious traditions, and the complex ways in which a combination of those traditions might produce a synergistic result that surpasses what either can offer by itself, most people are prone to fall into what has been variously labeled “cafeteria religion”, “shopping cart spirituality”, and “pick-your-own piety”. The so-called “new age” movement that swept Europe and the United States during the latter part of the twentieth century troubled many scholars for exactly the same reason. While we were delighted to have students who expressed spiritual affinity for Asian or Native American traditions, we often found that those same students had absolutely no interest in learning anything beyond the basics concerning those traditions. Infatuated by the symmetry of a yin-yang diagram, they doodled on their books, bought tee shirts, and proclaimed themselves to be (at least part) Daoists. In the process of designing their own religion, most of these students simply picked whatever struck their fancy or happened to be in vogue at the time. Others hedged their bets in much the same way that Euthyphro might have offered sacrifices to more than one god, hoping to get on the good side of as many as possible. Without some way of deciding which portions to adopt from which religious traditions (and which not to adopt) – and without some way of deciding how to fit those pieces together into a coherent whole that can itself provide inspiration, guidance, and comfort in difficult times – the complementarity model threatens to disintegrate into an enormous Lego set without rules or boundaries. Playing the game may be a whole heck of a lot of fun, but will the gods we build satisfy our needs, answer our prayers, or provide a basis according to which we can meaningfully live and laugh – or cry and die?

Lessons

Clearly, each model has something to teach us, but none comes with a trouble-free guarantee. If we are to meet the spiritual needs of a complex global community, we will have to draw upon and learn lessons from each of the models I have described in the preceding pages, paying careful attention to weaknesses and vulnerabilities as well as strengths and insights.

From the United States we learn that politics and religion are poor bedfellows. There is no room in a global community for preferential treatment or consideration of one religion vs. others. This does not mean that a global community should be blind toward (or ignore) religion. In fact, quite to the contrary, it may take concerted effort to create a global environment in which all religions may flourish. Perhaps less intuitively obvious, and potentially more controversial, these same expectations must be applied to global economic relations. No culture, and by extension, no set of religious or spiritual practices, should be forced into extinction by economic practice or policy that places that culture at a *de facto* disadvantage.

As the history of the United States demonstrates, we will have to be on our guard to insure that the pluralism of a global community does not marginalize religious and spiritual values, that morality is not reduced to the lowest common economic denominator, and that people do not exchange their sense of self and community for the unquestioning silence of an inauthentic existence.

Fortunately, if I am right, there are lessons to be learned from India, China, and Japan that may serve to blunt the deadening effects/consequences to which a principle of separation of church and state, taken by itself, seems inevitably to lead.

From India: although I have advised against a dogmatic and uncritical acceptance of the idea that all religious practices are alternative, equally valid/legitimate expressions of a common undifferentiated spirituality, it also seems misguided to assume that there are NO commonalities between diverse traditions. In fact, open receptive study of another culture's beliefs, practices, and traditions is often an effective way of shining light into the shadow region of one's own. Even if it does not yield the perennial philosophy of unifying global spiritualism that some have dreamed of, identifying and exploring commonalities between different spiritual traditions holds considerable promise for the Herculean task of developing that larger sense of self and community that is required if we are to live harmoniously in an integrated, global culture.

From Classical China and Japan comes a valuable lesson of humility and a repeated reminder of the complexity of human experience, as well as an impassioned plea for tolerance of alternative practices and perspectives. Since the human is a complex organism, subject to change over time as we move and define ourselves within a perpetually shifting web of relationships with others both near and far, both alive and dead, we may have need of the services, insights, concepts, images or perspectives of more than one tradition.

According to an old adage, the carpenter whose only tool is a hammer sees (and treats) the whole world like a nail. Given the complexity of human life and the rich diversity of religious and cultural traditions that we have developed on this planet, it is hard to believe that any one tradition has found all the answers – or, to continue the metaphor, that it has developed an exhaustive set of all the best tools for dealing with all the complex facets of the human condition. Rather, we may suspect as did the Chinese and

Japanese of old, that some traditions have developed better tools than others for meeting certain human needs, and moreover that the value or appropriateness of a tool can shift radically with even an apparently minor change in conditions. A nail and a screw may look fairly similar, especially at a distance or to an untrained eye, but a screwdriver won't help much with a nail and a hammer is a pretty poor way to install a screw.

In short, we must learn to listen closely to one another, not simply because it is polite, but because it is just possible that we might learn something important about ourselves, become better human beings, and build a better global village in the process.