

THE ROLE OF MISSIONARY RELIGIONS IN GLOBAL ETHICS

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1. Introduction

Religious statistics in Africa and the world show that more than three-quarters of the world population is religious in one way or another.¹ Most of the religions in the world are missionary oriented. Missionary religions are those religions that go beyond their traditional areas of origin and following to seek converts, by whatever means. In this chapter, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Bahá'í Faith are treated as missionary religions that have made and are making efforts to have a strong presence in Africa and in the world. Missionary religions rejoice in the increase of adherents. Often, missionary religions do not ponder the process of conversion for the people whom they are to evangelize. People who are evangelized by the missionary religions have specific needs that push or pull them to be associated with a given religion, to the point of moving from an adherent to a convert. However, the two sides of the story do not dialogue in the conversion experience. This means, therefore, that the missionary religions will celebrate the increase in numbers and the new adherents will celebrate being in a religion for different reasons. Nevertheless, the point is that a majority of people in the world are religious, save for different reasons.

Throughout human history, religion has played a prominent role in the regulation of human behaviour and interactions among humans and between human beings and the universe. For instance, the ancestral shrines in many traditional African religious setups enhanced the conservation of the environment in a special way. It is worth noting

that almost every religious tradition discriminates between acceptable and unacceptable conduct, sometimes capturing the essentials of conduct in a short, easily-remembered list, such as the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule.² Ninian Smart attests to the fact that the critical place for ethics in religion needs constant evaluation:

The test of ethics is general happiness.... Often religion shoots our joys into another world – a heaven, a Pure land, a happy hunting ground. Such projection can seem to be merely an escape from sadness down here. Yet a main cause of continued interest in religions lies in their capacity to reorder our world and give security and a sense of insight into the relationships around the triangle (God, others and I). This is the primary magnetism of religion and no doubt we have become dissatisfied with kinds of Christianity that centre everything on ethical conduct.³

Missionary religions have their highest ideals of creed which adherents should live up to. However, the reality is that religion has the potential for both good and harm. Therefore, in “globethics” there are opportunities and challenges that beacon the discussion. In the practice of the religious ideals, I propose a convergence point where ethical values shared across religions are practiced consciously and in a coordinated way from the local to the global context. In the convergence, politics, the economy, the law, science, the education of individuals and society need a moral framework.⁴ The global moral framework is what this chapter identifies as “globethics”. Globethics entails fundamental values, irrevocable standards, and personal attitudes that should adorn globalization. In this discussion, the ideal of each missionary religion is discussed, followed by the unique and general opportunities and challenges that cut across in the practice of globethics.

Throughout the history of religion and human civilization, harmony, progress and development in a society entail an understanding and praxis of basic and even complex moral values. Across the missionary religions, basic moral truths exist, regardless of the plurality of moral beliefs. The moral values have evolutionary benefits. Each religion will recognize the need to take care of the needy and the responsibility of the well to do in the society.⁵ Virtues such as benevolence or friendliness, compassion, joy, equanimity coupled with faith, hope, and love

adorn the progress of religion. At its best, religious leadership will foster seemly character among adherents. However, the negative force of vices such as anger, greed, selfishness, individualism, insincerity and sin pull and push individuals and humanity away from the ideal to the extent that, throughout the fall and rise of civilizations, moral reformers (William Wilberforce, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King) have had to withstand the cultural and religious tide and recognize and campaign for the dignity and rights of all human beings. In the local and global contexts, missionary religions should actively and progressively influence human relations for better.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, progress in technology and knowledge has meant that time, distance and space have acquired new dimensions. Communication, transport, and hence human interactions have taken a quantum leap. The entire process helps humanity to talk and act in a global context – the “global village”. Globalization as a process is defined in very many terms. In this chapter, we take the working definition to be the global movement of goods, people, technology and services from and to any part of the world, with innumerable ramifications.⁶

Kofi Annan, the former United Nations Secretary General, noted in his “Global Ethic Lecture” that universal values are more acutely needed in this age of globalization than ever before. Anan continues to observe that every society needs to be bound together by common values, so that its members know what to expect of each other, and have some shared principles, by which to manage their differences without resorting to violence.⁷ Hans Küng notes that, for the sake of peace among humankind at a local level (in countless “multi-cultural” and “multi-religious” cities) and a global level (in global communication, the global economy, global ecology and global politics), reflection on an ethic common to all human beings is more than ever necessary.⁸ A better social order, both nationally and internationally, cannot be achieved by laws, prescriptions and conventions such as the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, good constitutions and governance institutions only, but also by a globethic.⁹ It is my submission in this chapter that missionary religions have a great role to play in the embodiment and performance of globethics.