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REVIEW ARTICLE

A NOVEL APPROACH TO PROMOTING AN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AMONG CHILDREN THROUGH RELIGIOUS GLOCALISM

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to promote an applied global ethic and adopts a religious posture that, instead of nurturing differences, teaches children to appreciate universal human principles. Based on examples of core religious values from various backgrounds and faith traditions, the paper suggests a paradigm different from one of mere religious diversity and maintains that a key strategy to heal the current division between different faith traditions and promote an inter-faith dialogue among children is not in diversifying books or designing new laws or policies to protect children's religious rights, but rather in vaccinating children with universal *glocal* values from infancy to early childhood.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper resists hegemonic approaches to educating children that promote religious difference or encourage children of one faith to ridicule other faith traditions. It aims to foster a theology of parenting where the family serves as a *domestic* mosque, church, or synagogue, where an appreciation of different faith traditions is imparted and where infants become religious *glocalists* through brief lessons, a short prayer, and singing lullabies from multiple religious backgrounds. It is worthy of note here that a glance at the etymology of the term *Glocalism* is deemed necessary. *Glocalism* is a portmanteau derived from the term *glocalization* as "the co-presence and interconnection of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies" (Robertson 1992). *Glocalization* originally derives from the Japanese word *dochakuka* (indigenization) and is a principle according to which the global is local and the local is global. In the West, the term was popularized in the English-speaking world by the British sociologist Roland Robertson in the 1990s, the Canadian sociologists Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman in the late 1990s, and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Proceeding from its Japanese roots, *glocalization* has also appeared in academic and religious dialogues. A myriad of approaches have emerged and a torrent of scholarship has discussed the

implications of *Glocalism*, its trends, and responses to it. Since postures to *Glocalism* are many and varied, key trajectories that have dominated the academic debate on *Glocalism* in the West and East Asia will be pinpointed. While the top-down Western framework of *Glocalism* imposes the pursuit of the hegemonic order, the bottom-up Asian paradigm of *Glocalism* is based on mutual understanding and regional arrangements.

Among the early voices of *Glocalism* in the West, we find Anthony Giddens (1990) who hypothesizes that the 'local' not only plays the role of the 'receiver' of global influences, but also that of a 'sender,' impacting the shape and form of global influences as they hit the 'local.'

Giddens' bottom-up framework is not solely confined to scholars in western countries. Malaysian views and arguments in favor of Islam's compatibility with religious *Glocalism* can be found in the writing of Ashaari Mohammad and Ahmed Badawi who believe that Islam enjoins pluralism and inter-faith dialogue in its authentic form.

Religious *Glocalism* as harbored by the present study is a bottom-up religious pluralism that maintains no one religion holds the sole and exclusive source of truth and promotes a harmonious co-existence and understanding between all faiths and their adherents. It is not only a conceptual framework but also an active inter-faith engagement rather than mere enumeration of difference between religions. In other words, it

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is a dynamic, performative, and applied ethic accommodating different religious beliefs and mores. It is the contention of this paper that religious traditions are not essentially resistant to comparison, given their cultural and linguistic differences and that religions are in essential agreement about basic ethical norms that derive from a single theological and metaphysical source. My central argument is that traditional theism and traditional dogmatic religious codes, propounded by authoritarian theologians, separate rather than unite people, do a disservice to God and religion, and fail to achieve an agreement among world religions or to meet children's pressing spiritual and religious needs.

This paper is based on a conviction that children in particular should possess a healthy religious literacy and be introduced to different spiritual and faith traditions. Thus, a novel strategy to redress the current division between different faiths and religious traditions should be developed in order to introduce children to a healthy religious literacy, offer an alternative that can satisfy children's present-day needs, and guide them toward a newly-wed faith that takes account of the world's religions, namely religious *Glocalism*.

The benefit of encouraging children to be reflective religious *Glocalists* is not only that it can minimize "religious tension, conflicts, and violence," but also that it allows us to focus on "the shared concerns for basic human dignity" found in the teachings of most world religions, thus allowing us to "live peacefully with whom one disagrees," and engage purposefully with "people and groups whose religious practices are fundamentally different from one's own" (Wuthnow 2005).

Adopting a positive and optimistic posture, the study denigrates all approaches that might lead to an ethical *cul de sac* and argues that religious education, or rather training, is not only the duty of the mosque, the church, or the synagogue. It is the responsibility of home and parents in the first place, a training that must begin in infancy. The basic concern is to create methods by which binding morals and spiritual ideals may be inculcated by, as it were, vaccinating children with healthy and universal spiritual values in infancy from the age of 1 to 3 years. These common spiritual values might then be consolidated in pre-school education with local personal faith and traditional religious practice in early childhood from 4 to 6 years.

A word of caution is in order. Although there is no miraculous recipe to overcome the conflict between the various faith traditions and theologians, the paper believes that seeking commonality across spiritual norms and ethical values in order to solve the problem of religious conflict is still possible.

Promoting an Inter-faith Dialogue Through Religious *Glocalism*

The possibility of an inter-faith dialogue or a glocal religion depends on a paradigm that merges both global ethical principles and local religious values, a novel approach coined as religious *Glocalism*. This kind of inter-religious dialogue refutes the monistic perception that grades religions hierarchically and claims that "every religion is intrinsically

and unconditionally valuable ... professing different and incompatible beliefs ... without the justification of one faith negating the other" (Sagi 1999, 94).

The *Glocalist* approach harbored by the present paper presumes that children must not be robbed of their agency nor be seen as "divine seeds that require nurturing by gardeners" (Westerhoff 2008, 356). Rather, they must be viewed as active agents and spiritual pilgrims who make meaning of the world around them and develop their own understanding of the myriad faith traditions around them in unique and personal ways.

Religious *Glocalism* is an inter-religious spirit, a common moral ground and an ethical basis of all world religions in which believers and nonbelievers, agnostics and atheists, adhere to universal and binding values, no matter whether we believe in the sayings of Confucius, the discourses of the Qur'an, the Bible, the Torah, or Buddha. The defense I am endorsing does not suggest that it is pointless to uphold a particular faith. It rather promotes both adhering to global religious principles and maintaining one's personal faith and religious tradition.

Religious *Glocalism* is a paradigm of inter-faith dialogue that involves two distinct yet overlapping phases. The first is a focus on spiritual development, global values, and religious ethics that are universal. It includes nurturing a healthy spirituality in infancy from both religious and secular perspectives. My main argument here is that this is the phase of spiritual readiness and human spirituality (Bradford, 1999), nurturing and vaccinating infants with fundamental binding human values such as love, peace, tolerance, and happiness. This phase paves the way for the next stage of personal local faith or more precisely "religious and devotional spirituality" (Bradford 1999, 292). The second phase involves teaching children about their personal faith tradition and consolidating global spiritual values with a focus on their own religion such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.

There is a widespread view among psychologists, in fact, that the religious development of a person should start in infancy because it is difficult to provide children with universal religious values or change their character after their teens. Children should therefore be nurtured and vaccinated with fundamental *glocal* ethics and principles in infancy.

The starting point for religious *Glocalism* should be with children's innate spirituality, which should then be supplemented with exposure to a humanist and secular type of spirituality, a kind of global religious atheism, within which all people are understood to be spiritual but not necessarily religious. Put more succinctly, this is spirituality from the inside, innate to all humans, something universal that arises from our deepest humanity. It is not concerned with wholeness, connectedness with God, or an ultimate truth. Rather, it is a "secular spirituality which seeks to find meaning and purpose in *universal* human experience rather than religious experience per se" (Meehan 2002, 292) and where religious believers, humanists, theists, agnostics, and atheists agree on shared values by which to live.

The second step in religious *Glocalism* includes an articulation of local moral codes, personal religious traditions, binding values, and common denominators between different world religions within the main systems of religion such as the Abrahamic one with its prophetic emphasis, the Indian with its mystical orientation, and the Asian with its concern for the cultivation of wisdom. In fact, myriad common values and many of what are proclaimed as God's commandments in the Qur'an, the New Testament, or the Hebrew Bible can also be found in the religions and philosophies of India and China. Some of these fundamental values and virtues, for instance, can be found in the writings of Patanjali, the founder of yoga, and in the Buddhist and major religious and non-religious traditions.

Rather than proceed tortuously, case by case, here are some of the most common principles of major world religions and binding values and commonality from difference that can be found between Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism. Hence the following (As cited in The Harmony Institute, 2014):

One God

The Lord is our God, The Lord is One (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

Allah is One (Holy Qur'an, 112:1)

The One is Lord of all the moves (Rig Veda III.54.8, Hinduism as cited in Bhagavad-Gita n. d)

There is only One God. (Chief Seattle)

Justice and Love of the Other

All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye so to them; for this is the law and the prophets. (Holy Bible, Matthew 7:1-Christianity)

What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. This is the entire law; all the rest is commentary. (Talmud, Shabbat 31d-Judaism)

No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself. (Sahih al-Bukhari, 2:13)

Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. (Udana-Varga 5,1 -Buddhism)

Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no resentment against you, either in the family or in the state. (Analects 12:2.- Confucianism)

This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others what you would not have them do unto you. Mahabharata 5, 1517. (Hinduism)

It is obvious from the examples of multi-faith core values discussed above that promoting an interfaith dialogue depends on the solid premises of religious *Glocalism*. Yet the contention here is not that identifying core and common values "can eclipse the unique and defining characteristics of each faith or promote a type of religious illiteracy in which ignorance of other religions is accepted as normal" (Moore 2007, as cited in Peyton and Jalongo 2008, 302).

The main claim, rather, is that teaching children about one's local religion and faith would be to challenge ourselves and create a new faith tradition that not only informs us about our own religion, but incorporates inter-faith tales on Christmas

Eve, Eid day, the Sabbath, Diwali celebrations, or other religious moments. An invaluable resource for enabling parents to teach children about religious and spiritual diversity, about both their own religion and others', including non-believers, exists through children's vaccination with both global values and local religious principles.

In brief, the religious *Glocalism* endorsed by the study should not be identified with a new global ideology nor with a universal world religion, and it is certainly not meant to replace the personal or particular ethics of the different religions. Religious *Glocalism* is no substitute for the Torah, the Sermon of the Mount, the Qur'an, the Bhagavadgita, the discourses of the Buddha or the sayings of Confucius, but is rather an inter-faith dialogue between binding values and irrevocable criteria by all religions, despite their dogmatic differences.

Instead of a Conclusion

The current discussion is based on the contention that many religions contain valid expressions of faith and shared values despite conflicting doctrinal beliefs on significant issues. Promoting a reflective and religious *Glocalist* spirit among children will not be achieved simply through children's books, school education, organizations, new laws, or a new global ethic. No doubt, children's books are useful for teaching children about religious tolerance and diversity. But it is essential to introduce these binding values in infancy through lullabies and daily encounter with their parents so that children feel prepared and confident when faced with religious intolerance in everyday life.

The paradigm of religious *Glocalism* harbored by the study is not a *new World Religion*, but a way of teaching *about* religions and inter-religious dialogue. It comprises the knowledge and tolerance of both religious and non-religious worldviews that can co-exist in harmony. In brief, it is a system that entails cooperation not competition, societal and theological change, rejecting any focus on immaterial difference and respecting all religions and beliefs held in common. Its aim is not to teach a tolerance that carries an obligatory compliance or acceptance of someone's beliefs at the expense of one's own. It means that one accepts people and their beliefs while still valuing and maintaining one's personal traditional faith.

Religious *Glocalism*, then, is not a final ointment for all religious hatred and tension, nor is it a blueprint for a global religion or a definitive recipe for inter-religious dialogue. It simply maps a morality shared by all co-existing religious traditions, a universal and binding morality and a global ethical standard.

A successful pursuit of *Glocalism* or an inter-faith dialogue requires parents, scholars, administrators, and politicians to work hand in hand and to be willing to find the best in those with whom we disagree and to look for a middle ground instead of encouraging difference and erecting moral barriers. It also requires working with parents to weave diversity into the fabric of children's everyday lives.

In brief, the *Glocal* or inter-religious dialogue to enable children to live in peace, love, tolerance, and happiness is an approach to religion that does not detract from a person's loyalty to his or her own religion; it is not "a dilution of belief or a slow movement toward a common faith." Rather, it is "a common democratic culture in which a diversity of citizens, each holding their own creed with passion and wisdom, respects other citizens who hold other creeds, or no creed, with equal passion and—it is hoped—equal wisdom" (Fraser 1999).

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