

REVISTA MARACANAN

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Religion in a Global Context: the reframing of the concept during early modern globalization

Religião em um contexto global: a reformulação do conceito nos princípios da colonização moderna

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Abstract

In recent decades, many scholars have questioned the use of the term "religion" to describe non-Western cultures. Many espoused the idea that the word had no accurate translation or correspondence in these contexts, and hence, it had to be invented. However, even in the West, the concept went through significant transformations throughout History. This article discusses the transformations it underwent during the early modern period when global connections were forged due to European expansion initially led by the Iberian kingdoms. Building on debates raised by the scholarship that regards religion as an invented category artificially applied to non-Western settings, but also countering its conclusions, I argue that a new understanding of "religion" developed as a result of early modern globalization and Christianity's universal aspiration combined. Since the concept of "religion" incorporated and responded to non-European realities and traditions, it cannot be interpreted as an exclusively Western concept.

Keywords: Globalization. Religion. European Expansion. Hybridization.

Resumo

Nas últimas décadas, pesquisadores vêm questionando o uso do termo "religião" para descrever culturas não ocidentais. Muitos advogam que não há uma precisa tradução ou correspondência para o conceito nesses contextos e, portanto, precisou ser inventado. No entanto, mesmo no Ocidente o conceito passou por significativas transformações ao longo da História. Este artigo discute as transformações que o conceito sofreu durante a primeira modernidade, quando conexões em uma escala global foram forjadas devido à expansão europeia liderada inicialmente pelos reinos ibéricos. Partindo das propostas da historiografia que considera "religião" como uma categoria inventada e artificialmente aplicada a contextos não ocidentais, mas também me opondo à tal conclusão, proponho que um novo entendimento do conceito "religião" emergiu como resultado da combinação entre globalização Moderna e aspirações universalistas do cristianismo. Uma vez que o conceito de religião teve que incorporar e responder a realidades e tradições não-europeias, não pode ser interpretado como um conceito exclusivamente ocidental.

Palavras-chave: Globalização. Religião. Expansão Europeia. Híbridização.

Introduction

In our current hyper-interconnected world, historians have a growing and reasoned concern with situating their research within a global context. Such concern is evident in the recent proliferation of publications and conferences on global history, which is a methodological approach rather than an object of study (Douki; Minard, 2007; Subrahmanyam, 2013). As such, it can be used to investigate any epoch, regardless of the awareness or material conditions that make “global” a practical reality. According to S. Subrahmanyam (2013, p. 236), global history can either suit academic imperialism or go against it. To avoid the first approach, he argues, global history must neither be reduced to the European expansion and westernization of the “rest” of the world nor replace local histories but add to it. Indeed, one of the main challenges of global history is, as M. Berg asserts, “to convert Europe from a knowledge subject to an object of global history” (2013, p. 5).

Even though, as a methodological approach, global history does not require a globalized world unconditionally, their study has a lot to add to each other. The origins of modern globalization have been a topic of debate among scholars of different fields. Most scholars identify either the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century or the nineteenth century as globalization’s onset. In this article, I will make a brief overview of these debates, but my aim will be to analyse some of modern globalization’s consequences in its very beginning, which I argue occurred in the sixteenth century. I will focus on the transformation that the concept of religion underwent in the early modern period after the Iberians accomplished the circumnavigation of the world, settling in various places in America, Asia, and Africa, creating a global scale network. I argue that despite religion being neither the only nor the main driving force behind the Iberian explorations of this period, it was vital for igniting subjective globalization because it served both as an interpretation tool for the newly-encountered alterity and a legitimation ground for the Iberian continuous presence overseas. However, in this process, the old concept of religion had to be reframed in order to fit a global reality. I argue that the experience in the colonial spaces of the early modern period was fundamental for reframing this key concept.

The debate on the concept of religion among scholars of different fields has been prolific. Many scholars espouse the idea that the translation of the word “religion” in many non-Western cultures was an imposition from the West and that the concept had no accurate correspondence in many languages. O. Klautau (2014) elaborates on these ideas for nineteenth-century Japan, the period when Western powers forced their entry into the archipelago. The Japanese interpreters who translated the treaties and letters exchanged with Western countries employed a neologism to translate the word “religion”. This coined term, *shūkyō*, was later adopted by the Chinese, who also struggled to find a good translation for the word (*Idem*). J. Isomae notes that

the expression “Japanese religion” appeared in an academic context in 1907, in an English-language leaflet penned by Masaharu Anesaki (1873-1949). In an attempt to include Buddhist and *Shinto* beliefs as religions, he loosely defined the term as “psychological towardness to unlimited beings” (Isomae, 2005, p. 236). For the Indian context, some scholars claim that not only does the concept of religion have no correspondence in local languages, but the word itself is, even today, unfit to label local traditions such as Hinduism or Buddhism (Cf.: Nongbri, 2013; Balagangadhara, 1994). For W. Cavanaugh (2009, p. 88), “the use of the term religion has produced confusion and misdescription of the phenomena of Indian life”.

All these scholars problematize the use of the concept of religion to describe non-Western cultures. My position stands somewhere between the two extremes of, as phrased by S. Moyn and A. Sartori (2013, p. 11), “the absolute incommensurability of tongues and the perfect achievement of universal communicability”. However, my aim in this article is not to assess the suitability of the word “religion” to describe non-Western phenomena. Even if we agreed on the total failure of these translations, putting too much emphasis on the translation alone might result in a conflation between word and meaning. It is essential to consider the historicity of the concept’s forging. In the case of “religion”, its meaning underwent core transformations in the history of the West, where it was originally coined. As Cavanaugh (2009) points out, the Latin word *religio* of ancient Rome or medieval Europe did not simply morph into modern “religion”. In the second part of the article, I argue that our current understanding of religion developed as a product of early modern globalization and Christianity’s universal aspiration combined. Thus, it is accurate to state that the concept of religion is part of Christianity’s history. However, due to the nature of the Christian missions, the modern sense of religion had to incorporate and respond to non-European historical circumstances and traditions. Hence it cannot be interpreted as an exclusively Western concept.

Scholarly approaches to modern globalization’s origin

In 2008, D. Flynn and A. Giráldez published an article responding to the critics K. O’Rourke and J. G. Williamson had done of their proposed theory on the beginning of globalization (Flynn; Giráldez, 2008). The two pairs of authors had been debating for years on the topic. On the one hand, O’Rourke and Williamson (2002; 2004) argued that globalization was born in the nineteenth century when the commodities’ prices converged, whereas Flynn and Giráldez (2004; 2008) maintained that globalization began in the sixteenth century when all heavily populated landmasses initiated sustained interaction. For O’Rourke and Williamson, a crucial step for engaging in the debate of globalization’s historical origins is defining the term, which, according to them, “nobody else seems to do” (2004, p. 109). They define globalization as “the integration of markets across space” (*Idem*). According to them, the best way to gauge the historical process of market integration is to measure the extent to which prices of the same

commodities converge worldwide over time. They concede that there was an intercontinental trade boom following Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama's expeditions, but they did not lead to market integration which is validated by commodity price conversion.

Conversely, for Flynn and Giráldez, restricting the concept of globalization to the sphere of economics alone, as O'Rourke and Williamson do, is a mistake. In Flynn and Giráldez's view,

the most important factor to consider regarding the onset of globalization is not whether or not certain indices converged or diverged at a specific time, but whether or not people, products and events that originated in one part of the world generated permanent and systemic effects on societies around the globe (2008, p. 368).

However, their most convincing critique of O'Rourke and Williamson's theory relates to something J. de Vries (2010, p. 711) interprets as "a confusion attached to the term globalization", that is, viewing globalization either as a process or an outcome. As a process, it is invoked to explain the specific character and dynamism of modern society, and as an outcome, it measures the direct impact of a historical process. For Flynn and Giráldez (2004, p. 361), commodity price convergence represents a critical phase (or rather, an outcome), but it is not a seminal event in the history of globalization. The birth of an organism, they assert, is a prerequisite for its maturation. Globalization had first to be born to evolve into a stage where a phenomenon such as price convergence, albeit its importance, could occur.

Studies focusing on intercontinental trade reached no consensus on the applicability of the term globalization for the early modern period. W. A. Pettigrew and D. Veevers, in the introduction to their edited volume *The Corporation as a Protagonist in Global History*, argue that "the establishment of long-distance commercial networks created the 'first global age' in the fifteenth century" (2019, p. 5). The authors define globalization as an integrative process on a transoceanic scale. For them, the period between 1550 and 1750 was a critical time for intensifying cross-cultural relationships between European and non-European cultures. These cross-cultural relationships led to the formation of global networks which were connective and, more importantly, transformative. The volume intended to address the contribution of both European and non-European agents to processes of transoceanic integration by rethinking the role and nature of overseas corporations. These European trading companies were transformed by non-Europeans and became neither entirely local nor national but global (Pettigrew; Veevers, 2019, p. 9). As stated in the title of the volume, these corporations are viewed as protagonists in this global integration. This idea directly clashes with O'Rourke and Williamson's proposition since, for them, the exercise of monopoly by the European trading companies hindered market integration, the defining element of globalization.

Localizing globalization's onset in time is not merely a matter of academic over-zealousness but influences how one assesses globalization's effects throughout history. Flynn and Giráldez (2004) argue that the unique characteristics of globalization's birth during the sixteenth century shaped the events of the nineteenth century described by O'Rourke and Williamson and continue to influence the trajectory of global developments. Vries (2010) tries

to solve this debate by distinguishing between soft and hard globalization. For him, early modern globalization, characterized by him as “soft”, was indeed limited. After nearly three centuries of trade between Europe and Asia via the Cape route, the volume and value of this trade remained limited mainly because its transaction costs remained stubbornly high. However, early modern globalization was “soft and limited, but real” (Vries, 2010, p. 731).

O’Rourke and Williamson mention that while most economists think globalization happened only recently, most historians “point to globalisation in the distant past, citing famous dates like 1492” (2004, p. 109). They disagree with both propositions, but indeed most historians, especially those outside the economic field, identify the turn to the early modern period as the beginning of globalization. This is recognizable in the many recent-published volumes on the history of globalization. Some of these volumes refrain from using the term “globalization” in their titles (even though the contributors often employ it in their articles), resorting to alternative terms that, in my view, serve as synonyms. One example is the volume edited by Rila Mukherjee in 2011, *Networks in the First Global Age: 1400-1800*. According to the editor, during this period, the world saw unprecedented levels of trade both in scope and intensity and witnessed increased cooperation across different parts of the globe (Mukherjee, 2011, p. XV). In his contribution to the volume, J. B. Owens (2011, p. 5) defines the first global age as an open, complex, dynamic, nonlinear system.

It is interesting to note that the beginning of the global age is placed in 1400. Mukherjee justifies the choice by stating that even though it was not a global world yet, the fifteenth century was a crucial period for developing the system’s dynamics that would characterize the next four centuries. The same timeframe was used in the sixth volume of *The Cambridge World History* collection, titled *The Construction of a Global World, 1400-1800 CE*. In their articles for the volume, D. Hoerder and F. Trivellato refer to three unrelated macro-regional and political developments that took place in the mid-fifteenth century and had significant impacts on migration and power relations globally. Namely, the Chinese Imperial decree that ended the transoceanic outreach voyages, the support given by the Portuguese crown to the merchants who were venturing southward along Africa’s Atlantic coasts, and the insertion of the Ottoman empire between the Venetian and the Arab merchants after the conquest of Constantinople (Hoerder, 2015; Trivellato, 2015). By the end of this century, another crucial event that completely revolutionized Earth’s imagined shape took place: the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean and the reaching of another continent that was eventually named America by the Europeans. These events, Trivellato (2015, p. 160) states, swayed the pendulum of economic and military dominance over global trade progressively away from Asia and toward Europe.

Many other volumes exploring the effects of globalization in the early modern period were published in the last two decades. *The Jesuits and Globalization* (2016), *Iberian Empires and the Roots of Globalization* (2019) and *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions* (2008) are some among many examples that illustrate the broad use of the term globalization by historians that work with the early modern period. These books approach globalization in this

period from different perspectives, but they all share the assumption that it began in the early modern period and that Christianity played a pivotal role in the shaping of a globalized world.

What kind of globalization?

Indeed, for those who have in mind today's interconnected world, or the changes entailed by Industrial Revolution, the early modern world seems hardly globalized. Some scholars distinguish different globalizations or phases of globalization. Mukherjee (2011) refers to a second global age that came to replace the first due to the incapability of the latter to face the challenges brought by the former. J. Casanova and T. Banchoff mention a second and a third globalization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively. They also differentiate between subjective and objective processes of globalization. They explain:

Objective processes of globalization, mediated by changes in communications and transportation technology, involve the movement of people, ideas, goods, and capital across greater expanses of space. The subjective dimension of globalization refers to the growth in global consciousness – that is, to the increasing reflexive awareness of humanity as a species sharing the same history and the same planet (2016, p. 3).

It is possible to state that in its objective dimension, globalization's nature has considerably transformed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, in its subjective dimension, the nature of globalization remained roughly the same, only intensifying over time. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, technological advances shrank distances, lowered transaction costs, led to commodity price convergence, collapsed empires, among other consequences. However, the awareness that all human beings share the same planet and history did not fundamentally change after the events that connected the populations in the world on a global scale. Such awareness was built upon a Christian premise that was never put into question by leading promoters of early modern globalization, namely, the unity of humankind.

The authors of the volume *Iberian Empires and the Roots of Globalization* all address a central question: how did the concept of globalization become manifest in the Iberian empires? They work under the premise that "globalization did not emerge from Europe, but from the expansive early modern Iberian world" (Valle; More; O'toole, 2019, p. 5). Early modern Iberian empires are viewed as global institutions where an initial form of cultural and economic globalization became manifest. A similar approach to globalization had been previously adopted by S. Gruzinski in *Les Quatre Parties du Monde* (first edition 2004), where he refers to this early modern globalization as "Iberian mundialization".

The leading role of the Iberian empires in the process that led to globalization is already manifest in the second half of the fifteenth century, the first milestone being the Alcáçovas Treaty, signed in 1479 by the Catholic monarchs – Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile – and the king of Portugal. By this treaty, Portugal was ensured exclusive rights of navigation,

conquer and trade in the Atlantic Ocean south of the Canary Islands. T. Duve (2017) notes that because the demarcation line drawn in this treaty was latitudinal, it was much easier to measure. Furthermore, it established areas of influence whose existence was already known by the Iberians, as Fra Mauro's map, drawn about 1450, reveals. In this sense, the Tordesillas Treaty, signed in 1494, was completely different since its demarcation line (a longitudinal line) separated areas yet to be known. At that time, both the Castilian and Portuguese crowns assumed the world circumference to be much smaller than it is in fact and did not imagine that the demarcation line crossed an entire continent.

Thus, Tordesillas does not represent a sign of global awareness, which came only in the sixteenth century. The expedition voyages that followed Columbus's excursion in 1492 gave material to European cartographers to draw more accurate world maps and took the Iberians to the coastlines of the Americas, Asia, and Africa. A hallmark of the global awareness following these expeditions is the Zaragoza Treaty, signed in 1529. The treaty, signed once again between the two Iberian crowns, laid down the continuation of the demarcation line established at Tordesillas and illustrates the idea that the world could be divided in half like an orange.

With the widening of the geographical horizons, the world gained a new configuration. Flynn and Giráldez (2008) assert that the world maps and other visual aids (such as the armillary spheres) produced in the sixteenth century helped to promote a geographical awareness of the globe as a conceptual totality. Additionally, the manufacturing and circulation of these objects reflected a new ambition of the geographers and a new curiosity of the public, also recognizable in books whose titles often included words such as universal and world. Subrahmanyam (2015) also notes a substantial transformation in historiographical practice at the beginning of the early modern period, which came about due to the new material circumstances, notably changes in long-distance travel and imperial conquest patterns. The globe had become an object of analysis.

These facts do not imply that the world was entirely known. Even after Magellan and Elcano's expedition (1519-1521), Australia and most of the continents' hinterlands remained unknown to the Iberians. Some historians believe that such ignorance puts the idea of global awareness in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries into question (Cf.: Zuniga, 2007). Indeed, conceptions of the global changed over time, repeatedly reframing the horizons of universality. However, as Moyn and Sartori put it, "any *longue durée* history will ultimately have to confront the intensification of interconnectedness (global or otherwise) in the early modern and modern period" (2013, p. 23). "Global" in the early modern period refers rather to a suddenly expanded scale than to integral knowledge. In the following section, I will argue that the global awareness developed in the sixteenth century, albeit its limitedness, jolted long-established convictions that buttressed medieval Christendom thinking. Not only people, goods, and ideas travelled on a global scale, but the world became a stage for them. Consequently, ideas, theories, and concepts had to take this bigger stage into account to be considered universally valid, and universality was a fundamental claim of Christianity.

The effects of early modern globalization

The unexpected discovery of a vast portion of land between Asia and Europe that hosted massive empires and many populations who had never heard about Biblical subjects or events, demanded adjustments in the medieval Christian worldview. The magnitude of these discoveries was recognized by its contemporaries, as we can see from works of writers such as Francisco López de Gómara (1511-1566), who, in his *Historia General de las Indias*, began his dedication to Charles V stating that “the biggest deed after the creation of the world, except for the incarnation and death of the one who created it, is the discovery of the Indies, as they call the New World” (1999, p. 7). Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478-1557) – a Spanish settler who lived in the Caribbean islands – gives this credit to the circumnavigation of the globe (Cf.: Clossey, 2008). Whichever deed was chosen as the most important, such statements reflect the awareness of the magnitude of the events by the contemporaries.

The planetary scale of mobilization was not only a matter of arithmetic but also about adapting to new human experiences, which questioned old convictions and proved wrong long-established authorities. As J. P. Rubiés points out, “most of Ptolemy’s locations in the East were anachronistic or incorrect... and, of course, the New World had to be mapped *ex novo*, without the aid of any ancient models” (2017, p. 59). The Italian geographer Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485-1557) explicitly addressed the shortcomings of previous centuries’ knowledge. In his *Delle Navigationi et Viaggi*, he pointed out the faulty reasoning regarding the habitability of the Earth. For Ramusio, the fact that human beings could dwell in the far reaches of the north and well below the Equator line was the most fundamental discovery of their time (Cf.: Barnes, 2007). Authorities of the ancient world who had been fairly used so far, such as Ptolemy, were not discarded, but they increasingly lost their practical utility for drawing maps. The adaptations entailed by the great navigations were not restricted to Geography. Rubiés (2017, p. 56) also mentions Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540), who noted that interpreters of sacred Scripture had to adjust their interpretation of Psalm 18, which was understood to declare that the Christian message had reached the whole world. The Florentine historian argued that the biblical passage could no longer be understood that the Gospel of Christ had been heard everywhere.

Statements made by long-established ancient and religious authorities were put into question. The Jesuit José de Acosta, in his *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*, felt obliged to explain why religious authorities were wrong about the shape of the Earth. For Acosta (1590), the “saint doctors of the Church” should not be less respected for having reached erroneous conclusions concerning “natural science and philosophy” because they directed their studies to the knowledge and service of the creator. Knowledge derived from “natural science” relied on reason tested by experience rather than faith. For Acosta, experience served not only “natural science” but should also be used for missionary policy. In an earlier work, *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, he stated that notorious theologians in Spain often erred on topics about the Indies more than less-distinguished theologians who were able to “see things through their eyes

and touch them with their hands” (liv. IV-cap. 11). Experience was raised to the level of high authority, something that is also noticeable in the writings of Alessandro Valignano, the Jesuit Visitor of Eastern Indies. In his *Sumario de las Cosas de Japón* (1583), he argued that the personality and customs of the Japanese people were so different from those of the Europeans that it was hard for the authorities in Rome to make decisions for the Japanese Christian mission. Thus, he stated, they should rely on the missionaries who were working *in* Japan due to their experience living and preaching among those people (Valignano, 1956).

Religion and trade in early modern globalization

After the conquest of Ceuta, in 1415, Portugal gained access to the Sudanese gold trade and flanked its biggest rival, Castile. For A. Agnolin (2017), the event represents a hallmark of the Portuguese early expansion because, after that, the Roman Curia began to ratify the Portuguese conquests outside Europe as accomplishments of the Christian faith against Islam in the Holy War. Indeed, anti-Islamism played a vital role in the Iberian early expansion. Gruzinski (2010) notes that Columbus’ trip followed the *Reconquista*, and the Portuguese encroachment in North Africa also aimed to drive the Muslims off. João de Barros (1496-1570) in his work *Decades of Asia*, contextualized the Portuguese expansion against the backdrop of Islam’s advance (Subrahmanyam, 2017). Defeating the infidels and preaching to pagans were undoubtedly huge incentives for the “Iberian mundialization”. However, more than the war against Islam or the desire to spread the Christian faith, it was the hope to find wealth and make profits that drove most Europeans to risk their lives on the seas or unknown and faraway lands (Cf.: Gruzinski, 2010). Columbus’s motivation, as B. Hausberger (2019) points out, was primarily mercantile: his travels sought to establish access to the treasured goods of the Orient. The expectation for major profits relied on the commercial momentum of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which followed the consolidation of the Italian republics in the Mediterranean and the boom of the luxury trade of the Renaissance (Cf.: Agnolin, 2017; Gruzinski, 2010).

The thrust for profit and the plans to expand trade were recognized as the main driving forces and supporting factors for the Iberian (and later European) early modern expansion also by the contemporaries themselves. Rubiés (2019, p. 57) mentions Ramusio, who believed the Europeans had the task to bring together the different parts of the world under the umbrella of Christian civilization but acknowledged that they undertook long-range travels driven by commerce. Theologians and missionaries also recognized it. The Dominican Friar, Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639), wrote in his *Monarchia di Spagna* (1598) that to keep the New World “in the [Christian] faith”, it was necessary to build many vessels so that they can continually cross the oceans loaded with goods (Gruzinski, 2010, p. 51). This open recognition is also present in Acosta, even though he argued that it was all part of God’s plan. In his *Historia*, Acosta wrote that God had made rich those lands “inhabited by less political people” as a way

to encourage Christians to go there and, while seeking wealth, teach “the true God’s cult” (1590, p. 196-197). Another Jesuit, Antonio Vieira (1608-1697), reiterated the same idea in the following century in his unfinished work, *História do Futuro*, where he asks: if it was not for the merchants to go after treasures in Indies, who would take the preachers there? (Vieira, 1982).

Notwithstanding its vital role, I argue that trade and the search for wealth could not stand alone in the thrust and support of early modern globalization because its leading promoters, Latin Catholic Iberians, required a religious basis upon which legitimizing and universalizing claims could rest. Furthermore, religion served Latin Christendom as the primary tool employed to interpret alterity in the early modern age. Consequently, early modern globalization cannot be interpreted apart from its religious dimension.

Religion as a universalization and legitimation tool

The centrality of religion for early modern globalization rests in Christianity’s capacity to provide a legitimizing groundwork and a universalistic perspective for Latin Catholic Europe. The ideological ground was used in two ways: on the one hand, to justify the presence and sometimes the dominion of the Europeans over other populations’ lands, and on the other, as a form of regulating globalization. Regulation was made possible through the idea of international law, or law of nations, which was built upon theological interpretations of the law. The *ius gentium* (law of nations), which was supposed to regulate relations between all the nations in the world, was positioned by sixteenth-century Christian theologians – such as Francisco de Vitória, Luis de Molina, Francisco Suárez – somewhere within the old medieval scheme that ranked divine, natural, and positive laws. Regardless of the violence they could comprise, the relations between nations were made legitimate by being portrayed as regulated by a set of internationally recognized rules. Indeed, even the most violent forms of engaging with other peoples – slavery, wars, occupation of territories – followed some kind of regulation established by the Europeans, convinced that such rules were universal and not arbitrarily created by themselves. The universal recognition was based on the Christian conceptualization of natural law whereby it was accepted as universal, thus, cross-culturally valid.

On the other hand, the justification was made possible through the idea of mission, namely, evangelization of pagans. At the beginning of the Iberian expansion during the fifteenth century, the evangelization task was not clearly outlined yet (Cf.: Palomo; Maldavsky, 2018). A consistent missionary project began to be built after Columbus’s voyage to America. When he returned from his first trip, Pope Alexander VI issued five bulls – known as Alexandrine bulls – in which he granted to the Catholic monarchs (Isabel and Fernando) extensive rights over the territories and populations in those recently discovered lands. One of these bulls, *Piis Fidelium*, issued on 25 June 1493, recognized the right of the Spanish crown to take over the evangelization of the populations of the New World (Cf.: Duve, 2017). The Iberian expansion

towards populated lands was legitimized on the grounds that these crowns would support the Christian missions worldwide, creating the necessary conditions for the evangelization of pagans. Nonetheless, it is inaccurate to claim that there was an unchallenged connection between the missionary enterprise and the right of conquest and dominion over non-European lands and populations. During the sixteenth century, prominent theologians, such as Bartolomé de Las Casas and Francisco de Vitoria, questioned such connection accomplishing significant shifts in the theory of legitimate imperialism (Cf.: Ribiés, 2017). The specifics of these prolific discussions are out of the scope of this article, but they were an essential part of the ideological groundwork of the Iberian empires during the early modern age.

The universalistic perspective provided by Christianity to Iberians is vital to understand early modern globalization and assessing religion's role in this process. Universalism was always present in Christianity which in its beginning built its universalizing claim on an already existing principle of universality: the Roman *civitas*. After the triumph of Christianity in the Roman empire, *civitas* became coterminous with Christianity. On the one hand, both Christianity and *civitas* reinforced the sense of the difference between insiders and outsiders, but, on the other, they assumed a structural equality for all humankind. However, for centuries Christians were not able to proselytize far beyond Europe. Consequently, before the Iberian expansion overseas, Christianity's universality was considerably restricted. The early modern Catholic missions relocated this potentiality into a much broader setting. They worked on the principle that every human being is a potential and rightful Christian, sharing the same history (the Old Testament was regarded as the framework for the narrative of humanity's history) and the same fate, the Last Judgment. However, the missionaries had to reconcile the theological universalism of Christianity and the systematic peculiarities of everything that is anthropological (Cf.: Gasbarro, 2014). On top of that, they had to fit a new reality: that of a global world.

In this sense, N. M. Gasbarro (2006, p. 76) argues that the Christian missions built the first social and symbolic globalization of the modern age. Gasbarro does not discuss different kinds of globalization, but his idea of a symbolic and social one describes the early modern globalization addressed in this article better than the idea of a "soft globalization" proposed by de Vries. "Social and symbolic" emphasize that the effects of early modern globalization were not those O'Rourke and Williamson were looking for to determine globalization's onset, whilst it foregrounds the role of religion in this process in its early stages. The most sizable effects of early globalization can be found in the symbolic and social spheres, where religion played a fundamental role, rather than in the economy.

The lynchpin of early modern globalization is the global-spanning sustained interactions following the exploration voyages undertaken by the Iberian crowns. When interacting, the agents involved access some codes, either their own or borrowed from other cultures, to understand the new structures of meaning that emerge from these encounters. As P. Montero (2006) points out, it is necessary to figure out why, under these circumstances, some codes are

privileged over others. Religion was undoubtedly a privileged code in these early modern interactions.

Through their exploration voyages, the Iberians sought both wealth and aggrandizement of the Christian faith. However, to do that, they had to reframe the concept of religion itself so that it encompassed a global and “pagan” reality. Montero asserts that “religion” was one of the most generalizing concepts Western Europe devised in order to incorporate cultural alterity into their own communication system (2006, p. 61). In the following section, I will examine how religion was reframed at the beginning of the early modern period, discussing the way this process relates to two ideas: westernization and cultural hybridization.

Reframing religion: between westernization and hybridization

The history of the Latin word *religio*, origin for “religion” in English and neo-Latin languages, predates Christianity, but this article will not address its pre-Christian history. After the Roman Empire declared Christianity its official religion and its Western portion fell, the word *religio* was adopted by Christianity to define itself. Throughout the medieval period, the term was used mainly to refer to Christianity. For Augustine of Hippo (354-430), in his work *De vera Religione*, *religio* meant to worship, and Christianity was the only correct way to perform this worship (Cf.: Cavanaugh, 2009; Nongbri, 2013). This meaning persisted throughout the Middle Ages, but in the fifth century, *religio* began to be also used as a designation of monastic life (Nongbri, 2013, p. 31). According to W. Cavanaugh (2009, p. 64), “This meaning holds when the word passes into English around 1200; the earliest meaning of religion cited in the Oxford English Dictionary is ‘a state of life bound by monastic vows’”. After the thirteenth century, it was also employed to refer to nonmonastic orders. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) used the term in both ways in his writings. In his anthological work *Summa Theologiae*, he dedicates one question to religion, classifying it as a moral virtue and defining it as the act of paying homage to God (S.T., II-II Q81). He argued that “true religion” was the worship that pays homage to the one God, creator of the world (*Ibidem*, Q81a3). A precursor to Aquinas, the French poet and philosopher Peter Abelard (1079-1142) wrote in 1140 his *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Iudaeum et Christianum*, an imaginary dialogue in which a Pagan philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian engage in a debate. Abelard stated that the three subjects were from different *fidei secti*. The word *religio* was employed by Abelard in the sense of reverence for God, whereas reverence for people is called *observantia* (Abelard, 1831, p. 76-7).

At the beginning of early modern globalization, the word religion underwent a significant change in its meaning and use. By the mid-sixteenth century, some missionaries began to refer to extra-European phenomena as “religion”. The Italian Jesuit Nicolao Lancillotto (?-1558), rector of the college of São Paulo in Goa, wrote in 1548 a “Report on Japan”, where he mentioned having written all the information he gathered on Japan’s “religion and divine cult” (Medina,

1990, p. 71). Around the same time, Francisco López de Gómara (1511-1566), Hernán Cortez's chaplain, wrote his work about the fall of the Mexica Empire, *La Conquista de México*. He titled one of the chapters *La religión Acuçamil* (Gómara, 2007). These are just two among many examples of the word "religion" being used to refer to beliefs and practices unrelated to Judeo-Christian tradition.

For Gruzinski (2010), two concepts are deeply connected with the process of mundialization: "occidentalisation" (westernization) and "métissage" (hybridization). Iberian mundialization, he states, fostered all kinds of mixtures that can be found in languages, bodies, foods, and references. At the same time, it created new borders, new distinctions. Intellectual globalization, Gruzinski asserts, built a chasm between popular and erudite, occidental and oriental (*Idem*). Partly aligned with his proposal, I argue that the process of reframing the concept of religion is related to globalization, westernization, and hybridization. However, I submit that in this case, hybridization prevailed over westernization.

So far, I have argued that early modern globalization was legitimized and underpinned by religion and entailed the reframing of the medieval concept of religion. For the Europeans who ventured to interpret the recently discovered global world and its human community, religion could no longer be confined to Judeo-Christian tradition. Agnolin (2013; 2017) argues that the new concept of religion emerged in that context reflects the refusal of Western Europeans to label previously unknown cultural settings as incomprehensible. It provided the West with a principle that classified otherness by analogy, and hence non-European alterity was interpreted *sub specie religionis*. Latin Christendom assumed a universally shared theological order that established the belonging to humanity – whose unity was never questioned – and provided structural equality from which diversity could be grasped. This structural equality was translated into the concept of religion through the idea of natural law. In this scheme, no matter how ignorant some populations were about Jesus Christ or Old Testament's events and characters, they all had a religion.

According to sixteenth-century theologians, religion stemmed from a natural urge to know if there is a creator of this world and if this creator cares about human affairs. In the catechism Valignano wrote for the Japanese, he states that all populations in the world, even the most barbaric, agree that there is a "supreme and primary principle of all things" (1586). God implanted this urge in human beings' hearts. Hence, religion came to be understood as natural and universal within human societies.

Coining a new word is not the only way to describe a category unforeseen by a language. Words also acquire new connotations throughout history. Meanings are created but can be later redirected or subverted. As T. Asad (1993, p. 42) notes, "from being a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge, religion has come to be abstracted and universalized". This reframing arose from a Christian need to create a communication code between civilizations on a global scale so that everyone could be evangelized. Religion's early modern understanding was simultaneously a dictate from the Christian West – it responded to

historical conditions and challenges faced by the West, being transplanted to other social realities – and an adaptation to non-European and non-Christian cultural settings. In this sense, it is both the result of westernization and hybridization.

Is religion a European concept?

In this article, I tried to lay out how the understanding of religion as something unbounded to the Judeo-Christian tradition came about in early modern globalization. The new and disruptive information that inundated Europe following the great navigations supported by the Iberian crowns forced a reframing of the concept of religion, which had already been reframed centuries before by Christianity. In the missionary contexts, religion came to be understood both as a genus that can be divided into different species in which different religions can fit and be compared and as a universal and natural phenomenon within human societies. Such an understanding had no precedent and reflected what G. Stroumsa (2010) calls “an intellectual revolution”. It allowed for the formation of a new kind of “intellectual *curiositas*” and the establishment of a comparative approach to religions, which was further developed in academic milieus (*Idem*).

For a long time, even after entering the field of scholarship and becoming a topic of scientific inquiry, religion was still regarded a universal and natural phenomenon within human societies. Academic essentialist approaches to religion regarded it as a neutral descriptor of reality, a transcultural and transhistorical component of social life (Cf.: Cavanaugh, 2009). However, scholars began to criticize such approaches in the last decades, pointing to the absence of this concept in many non-Western cultures. Religion’s ubiquitousness in human societies began to be questioned, after all, as S. N. Balagangadhara (1994) reminds us, such a conclusion was never the result of empirical research but only theoretical. Critics underscore that religion is not a theological but an anthropological category that describes human action and thinking (Cf.: Smith, 1998). As such, it has no autonomous essence and cannot be conceived in history without society (Cf.: Greyez, 2007).

The acknowledgement that “religion” is a constructed category formulated by Western Christian intellectuals and missionaries led many scholars to talk about an “invention of religion”. To name a few examples, J. A. Josephson (2012) calls into question the expression “Japanese religions” and argues that, in Japan, religion had to be invented in the nineteenth century. G. Wilde (2016) describes how the adaptation practices adopted by the Jesuits in Brazil led to the circumscription of a religious field (in opposition to a secular field) in the indigenous cultures, a process he calls the “invention of indigenous religion”. Focusing on the importance of power relations in the definition of religion, Cavanaugh (2009) states that religion was not found but invented. Stroumsa criticizes the “invention approach”, claiming that:

It would be deeply misleading, as has become fashionable, to speak about the 'invention' of religion. Religion had always been there, in highly different societies, since antiquity. As we know from Herodotus as well as from the Hebrew Bible, the ancients clearly knew how to recognize a religion when they saw one... The new insights about religion from the sixteenth century were now developed as new categories, permitting the understanding of different religions as aspects of a universal phenomenon (2015, p. 316).

Despite the harsh criticism, Stroumsa recognizes the transformation of the concept of religion in the early modern period, which he calls "new insights". The redefinition of the term was mainly due, in his own words, "to the dramatic change of scale in the contacts between cultures and civilizations" (Stroumsa, 2015, p. 314-5). Global encounters were the propelling factor for this redefinition, but the subjects that undertook it were mainly European Catholic intellectuals. Nonetheless, I argue that "religion" is not exclusively a European concept because hybridization prevailed over westernization in this process. In this last section, I will elaborate on the idea of religion as a non-exclusively European concept, building on some insights provided by postcolonial studies.

At this point, it is already clear that our current understanding of religion – which carries essential traits of the understanding developed in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries – is part of the history of Christianity and, as such, was shaped by demands and challenges faced by it. My proposal here was to present an emic approach to the understanding of religion; consequently, I did not attempt to define religion myself. However, my analysis was carried out under the assumption that such definition is in itself, as Asad states, "the historical product of discursive processes" (1993, p. 29). The discourses on religion were formulated mainly by Europeans but are not a product of Europeans alone due to the nature of the Christian missions.

The early modern Christian missions rendered Christianity's universal aspirations global. Initially, the missionary ideal was to form a global Christian republic with a considerable degree of cultural unity. However, they soon realized that such uniformity was impossible, even for the conquered territories where the Iberian kingdoms politically ruled. Hence, the Catholic missionaries were compelled to devise strategies to work within an unexpected degree of cultural diversity. The missionary labour proved to be a constant exercise of reconciling differences, and in many cases, adaptation to local customs was the missionaries' choice. After the sixteenth century, Christians were much more diverse, and Christianity acquired a much more multifarious character. In this sense, the missions were structures that transformed all the subjects involved, including Christianity (Cf.: Montero, 2006).

"Religion" indeed belongs to the history of Christianity, but Christianity itself was constantly transformed by the surrounding cultural and religious landscape. In this sense, I strongly disagree with J. Smith's statement that the colonizer alone is responsible for the content of the term religion (1998). It is true that religion's early modern sense was the result of Christianity's generalization on a global scale. To become Christians, all the populations in the world "needed" a religion. However, Christianity was profoundly transformed by global encounters. Its universalizing expectations may have been projected over non-Europeans, but to some extent, they had to fit reality, entailing a recasting of such expectations. The non-

Europeans targeted in these missions were also responsible for shaping these expectations and the concepts that were coined to be applied universally.

Some scholars argue that the exchanges that occurred due to the imperialistic thrust of the Iberian empires were doomed to failure. Gruzinski (2015) concludes that the “intellectual globalization” developed under the aegis of Western Europe was unable to overcome barriers of thought and, hence, Western thinking failed to integrate into its own intellectual framework other ways of thinking. He employs the metaphor of a crystal sphere which allowed Europeans to see what was outside but thwarted proper communication and exchange. Different logics, understandings, or bits of knowledge were grasped by Europeans as deviations. The missionaries who endeavoured to sever these imaginary borders – such as Bernardino de Sahagún, Diego Durán, Roberto de Nobili – were nothing but exceptions, and even they managed only to navigate through the routes previously drawn by European frameworks of thought (Gruzinski, 2010).

This analysis somewhat rehashes without problematizing the discourse of sixteenth-century European intellectuals who believed they were the pinnacle of civilization and had little to nothing to learn from “barbarian” peoples who had been left unaware of the means to their own salvation for so long. Most European missionaries, settlers, and intellectuals believed they were interacting with peoples who, even when enslaved, had a lot to gain from the Europeans. Even in the places where the local society was regarded as “civilized”, such as China or Japan, these populations were considered essentially flawed for not knowing the path to their own salvation and having been deceived for so long by “devil’s ministers”.

Initially, missionaries believed they would simply teach ignorant peoples about their own past and future – as described in the Bible – assuring them salvation. However, as the encounters unfolded and the missionary labour progressed, the missionaries realized they could no longer work under the *tabula rasa* premise as if the hitherto non-Christian populations would convert to Christianity and become Christians just like the Europeans. Christian preachers were compelled to acknowledge that not only did the “gentiles” not easily convert to Christianity, but even the “converts” demanded some adjustments in what they considered Christianity to be. The missionaries themselves could not behave the way they behaved in their motherlands. Pedro Gomez (1535-1600), Japan’s vice-provincial from 1590 to 1600, expressed such realization in a letter he wrote in 1582:

I am now turning 50 years old and must confess to V.P. that I am learning things as if I was born again. I learned how to eat, drink, sit, lay down, get dressed, put my shoes on, receive guests, and be received. I learned good manners, language’s ABC ... As I understand it, those who go to Japan must waive their own customs and garments brought from Europe and dress in the new clothes and customs from Japan, in a way that we do not change things that are natural to the Japanese, but we change our things according to the Japanese so that we can bring them to our spirit and holy faith.

At that point, Gomez had never been to Japan, having spent just one year in Macao. In this letter, he was probably rehashing the recommendations he had learned from fellow Jesuits.

European ways, he acknowledged, were pointless in Japan if the missionaries aimed to evangelize the Japanese.

I do not intend to deny that globalization developed under unequal power relations, a situation that only intensified in the following centuries. Asymmetric relations notwithstanding, assimilation is never a one-way street. As K. H. Chen (2010) insightfully points out, it is not like the colonized learned to become like the colonized, as if the empire's own subjects had nothing to do with the colony, and the colonial machine did not need to adjust to new situations resulting from the incorporation of the conquered territories. The empire's identity is also shaped by its relationship with the colony, particularly when the universal assumption of this empire is grounded on the religious dimension, which posits the unity of humankind. In Chen's words: "Colonialism has transformed the inner structure of the cultural imaginary in both the colony and the imperial center" (2010, p. 108).

Imperialistic centres endeavoured to believe and make others believe that they developed authentic ideas, whereas colonial spaces were influenced by them. However, we saw that the concept of religion not only had to be reframed in the early modern era, but it was reframed in a way that encompassed other religious traditions. These traditions may have been monolithically referred to as "paganism", but the missionaries soon realized the need to understand the peculiarities of each tradition. Acosta (1999), for instance, warned the missionaries in the Americas about the need to be fully aware of the diversity of rites and customs of the inhabitants of the "New World" when devising effective evangelization plans. He stated: "We must not set the same rules for all Indian nations if we do not want to err severely" (*Ibidem*, liv.I-proemio). In Japan, few years after arriving in the archipelago, the Jesuits compiled all the information they had gathered about the "Japanese sects" in a work describing each one of the different religious beliefs and practices in Japan (Medina, 1990, p. 655–671). The uniqueness of each belief and practice was studied and considered.

All in all, I believe the concept of religion evolved as part of Christianity's history, but this history features many other religions due to its universal aspirations and its global implementation after the sixteenth century. Christian missions worldwide developed under and were mediated by European colonialism. Consequently, they often relied on violence and imposition. Nonetheless, the missionaries could never ignore pre-existing conditions wherever they went. E. Said (1994, p. 336) has argued that "imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental". In fact, such terms can only be adopted if we acknowledge that they are mutually constructed and construed.

Nonetheless, Gruzinski's interpretation of early modern globalization's failure to integrate different thought structures is well-grounded. He does not ignore hybridization – in fact, he is well-known for his theories on *métissage* – but his conclusion emphasizes the insurmountable boundaries between systems of thought. Indeed, even the most "open-minded" missionaries

classified the religious beliefs and practices that did not belong to the Judeo-Christian tradition as "idolatry". The term was defined by Valignano as "the crime through which one transfers the honour and worship due to God, supreme lord of things, to the images and simulacra of deceased men, demons or other things" (1586, fol. 45). This crime was the most dramatic of all sins and, like everything prohibited by Christian law, was an offence "against right reason". Las Casas, in his *Apologética Historia Sumaria* (ca. 1551), defined idolatry in a similar fashion, sustaining that in the absence of grace and doctrine to lead men's minds, errors arise, and people may end up wrongfully directing their natural urge to worship God to idols (1909). Idolatry for these missionaries entered the sphere of religion but was a deviation.

The missionaries were not ethnologists in the modern sense. As Clossey points out, despite their success in various endeavours (such as mathematics, medicine, and linguistics), they were first and foremost missionaries. The missionary purpose always stood behind their ethnography (2008). Wherever they were, they aimed to save souls, including their own, and this aim guided their actions. As historians, we cannot ignore the central point of the mission, but this does not mean that missionaries did not open routes to what we consider today as ethnography and anthropology. I. Strenski (2004, p. 637) states that the "efforts at understanding New World cultures mark the beginnings of our own modern comparative ethnographic social and cultural sciences". These efforts emerged along with an intellectual curiosity that developed far beyond the salvific aims of early modern Catholicism and, eventually, overtook polemical *animus* (Cf.: Stroumsa, 2010).

Most missionaries were profoundly attached to a Scholastic framework, but, as Gruzinski concedes, no intellectual paradigm can remain oblivious to facts for too long (Gruzinski; Bernard, 1992). I have argued elsewhere that despite grounding his evangelization scheme for Japan on Aquinas's structure of the twofold mode of truth presented at *Summa contra gentiles*, Valignano relied much more on reason than his predecessor (2021). The authors of the Second Scholasticism were not merely rehashing Medieval Scholastic ideas. The challenges they aimed to overcome were utterly different from those faced by Medieval intellectuals and hence were their solutions. In the sixteenth century, they were confronted with the issue of explaining how Christian ethics could be considered universally valid in the face of non-Christian peoples they were then encountering (Cf.: Honnefelder, 2014).

Gruzinski argues that Scholasticism and Aristotelianism, the main frameworks of European thought, were renewed only to obey internal criticisms. He mentions Giovanni Paoli's preface to Alonso de la Vera Cruz's *Dialectica resolutio*, where Paoli asserted that "ideas coming from America" were not added to his book (2010, p. 374). As already pointed out, this conclusion rehashes a European ideal of purity and self-reliance. Furthermore, it does not consider the lack of control and awareness these historical agents had over the results of their own actions. Their interpretations jolted long-established convictions which they never intended to undermine.

Ultimately, early modern missionaries were not seeking to reframe their paradigms or integrate new structures of thought into their own. They firmly believed they were in possession

of *the* truth which allowed for no alternatives. They saw their worldview as absolute, not an interpretation alongside others. Their aim was to teach the truth to populations that had hitherto remained ignorant of it and save as many souls as possible. However, as W. Paden importantly remarks: "The capacity to see one's view of the world as a view is a mark of contemporary thinking" (2003, chap. 1). Such capacity allowed us to interpret different worldviews in a more thorough and less judgmental way. Concurrently, it enabled us to see our own worldview with a rather pliable attitude, rendering adjustments more feasible and less traumatic. However, we cannot expect from early modern authors an intellectual stance that marks our own time. Furthermore, our current approach was only made possible through the developments of early modern globalization. To quote Paden once again, "the increasing awareness of global cultures has also helped create consciousness of the positioned nature of our own views" (2003, chap. 1).

History had a lot to gain from the contemporary approach that renounced absoluteness and allowed for the realization that the interpretative lenses determine not only how we see things but also what we see. Importantly, interpretative lenses are not fixed. What and how people see change over time. Religion served as an interpretative lens that helped Christian Europeans create datasets in an emerging global world, but the data itself also recreated religion as a concept.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented an overview of some discussions on modern globalization's beginning in a recent scholarship. Williamson and O'Rourke present some interesting points concerning the definition of globalization and its measurable effects on the economy, but, as Hausberger asserts, by locating globalization's onset only in the nineteenth century, we lose sight of how the landscape and people's lives were transformed by their insertion into a multitude of global relations (2019). I argued in favour of the vital role of religion in the formation of a global world. Despite not being the main driving force for the European expansion overseas initially led by the Iberian crowns, it provided a legitimizing groundwork, reaffirmed humanity's unity, and served as the primary tool to interpret alterity for Latin Christendom in the early modern age. Finally, I analysed how the concept of religion was reframed during this early modern globalization and argued that due to such reframing, religion could no longer be understood as an exclusively European concept, even though it is part of the history of Christianity.

Many authors have convincingly shown that religion is not a native term in various non-Western traditions. My aim, however, was not to assess translation processes but, by focusing on the transformation of the concept of religion within the West, I tried to show how Latin Christendom maintained Christianity's universalizing claims after the sixteenth century. Due to

such claims, religion could no longer be confined to Judeo-Christian tradition but had to encompass hitherto unknown non-Western traditions.

Religion is not a Western concept alone, but it would be needlessly controversial to label it simply as a transcultural concept for at least two reasons. First because, as Zuniga (2007) notes, the very nature of culture is the continual recasting by adding, eliminating, and adapting. There is no such thing as an entirely separate and stable cultural system and, in Said's words: "every cultural form is radically, quintessentially hybrid" (Said, 1994, p. 58). Second, it invites misunderstandings by not explicitly recognizing the unequal distribution of power. Chen (2010) holds that the West has been able to generate real impacts in other geographical spaces without experiencing the same type or intensity of impacts from the outside. It is hard to measure the impacts a culture or society has over another, but I believe that if Western impact in other societies is more evident than the contrary, it also has to do with the effort at erasing non-Western origins or contributions to many cultural phenomena.

I do not intend to dismiss the importance of cultural gaps or the possibility of misunderstandings, especially in these early encounters. However, I aimed to highlight the two-way transfer of knowledge and, in this way, show that, precisely because Europe played an essential role in the history of most places in the world after the early modern period, it was also shaped by these various places.

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