

Globalization, 'African Renaissance' and Contested Identities

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This paper was given at the Fifth International Philosophical Conference on Civilizations in Conflict: East and West, People's Friendship University of Russia, Moscow, April 2001.

Using the concept of (multiple) identities as constructed by (shifting, porous) boundaries, the paper explores how these philosophical notions play themselves out in Africa under condition of globalization. It begins with the idea of an African Renaissance, given special currency in South Africa and more widely by our current President, Thabo Mbeki. It is his sense of Africanness that I probe, and its relation to identity under globalizing conditions. Second, I read globalization itself as a way of orienting the notion of identity within a broader field of terms—social, political and economic. Third, I treat what seems either to be truncated or seen as derivative forces of money (or economy) and power (or politics) in some theories, namely, culture—more precisely, religion, the one thing that seems most derivative to creatures of the Enlightenment. I seek to redraw boundaries, to read globalization from another place, to link it to the place of Europe and to relocate it in an African worldview, which is not an African worldview alone, and thus to decentre it.

(1) Identity, when we speak of human beings, is a multiplicity of things, in fact, a multiplicity in itself. It is as much a mystery as it is a subject of philosophical investigation and psychological analysis. Both points are crucial—that of mystery, prefigured (but not captured) in the signifying of the *mythos*; and that of analysis, figured (but not exhausted) in the work of the *logos*.

That identity is mysterious is not a way of saying we cannot fathom it, grasp it or recognize it; rather, it is a way of saying that is something like the complementarity theory of light—at once one thing (a particle) and another (a wave), neither of which can be grasped simultaneously. In this sense, identity is indeterminate; and it is related to the other, to that which it is not. In this way, it deconstructs itself from within even as it identifies itself. It rests, to borrow an insight from Derrida, in a place which has no place, a *khôra*, a category from Plato's *Timaeus* which Derrida reads as a mark of that which deconstructs (but does not destroy)¹ at the heart of all systems, essentialisms and positive claims, that which opens up space for the other, the *tout autre*.

This is a first point to be developed, in its meaning under globalization.

¹ The common image of deconstruction as intrinsically destructive is countered by Derrida himself as a misunderstanding, and defended by Caputo, one of his major interpreters, as a (mischievous?) misreading. A good discussion along these lines may be found in John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Derrida*, NY: Fordham University Press, 1997, which contains a helpful summary, if one can summarize, of Derrida's fundamental claims and aims, in his verbatim interaction, through carefully constructed questions, with philosophers at Villanova University.

(2) The second point is this: From any perspective, identity is at least about a boundary, a limit, a border, something to transgress and be transgressed, a point of crossing with a welcome sign, a no entry shield, or a cry of “who goes there!”

The boundary of identity we now know, if we did not before, is porous, flexible, malleable, shifting in space and time.² And there is more than one boundary to any one identity, or better:—a multiplicity of actual and possible identities in any one person and a moving set of boundaries. Some boundaries seem beyond a particular person/culture, as Foucault suggests in his description of the taxonomy of animals in a Chinese encyclopaedia as read by Jorge Luis Borges, where he encounters a way of categorizing, a manner of looking at reality, which is wholly alien, which he cannot comprehend, in which comprehension he is faced with his own limits.³

(3) Perhaps there are no quantum leaps across boundaries/borders in human experience, though there are certainly leaps of faith. Perhaps, in fact, faith is at the core of identity—as both Derrida and Ricoeur, relying on Heidegger, suggest in their respective analyses of testimony and attestation, of promise and anticipation. What Gadamer calls the fusion of horizons, by which identities with a particular horizon may encounter something rather than nothing that is not the same, probably also rests on faith in this sense (for why should fusion occur and not just clash or rejection?). This is a third point to which we will return.

(4) But each of these points must necessarily be located concretely, beyond mere abstraction, if we are to give any meaning to identity as it is for actual human beings. Indeed, abstraction and its rooting in technologies of abstraction are a fourth point at issue, as we will see. That point will be made in relation to globalization seen as a trope of abstraction in two senses: at the level of language; and at the level of knowledge—in a way, both ontologically and epistemologically.

The route we will follow to unpack these four points is circuitous, in the sense that each point will circle back upon the other. The mapping of that route, however, goes by way of certain landmarks that I take to be useful in demonstrating what is stake in speaking of globalization and identity. Useful, because they reflect my particularity, the space/place/time of my particularity, in a country undergoing rapid transition in the face of newly globalizing forces since the walls of apartheid have come down; and because the broader context of that particularity is Africa, a continent which experiences (and has experienced) globalization in its starkest forms while, in some senses at least, being marginal to it. And yet not; and that is the final point I wish to develop.

What then is this mapping? It takes as its first identifying beacon the notion of an African Renaissance. This term has been given special currency, in South Africa and more widely, by our current President, Thabo Mbeki. It is his sense of Africanness that I wish to probe, from which certain conclusions about identity under globalizing conditions will flow.

Second, the contours of the map will be framed by the term globalization itself, as a way of orienting the notion of identity within a broader field of terms—social, political and economic. This will require paying some attention to the notion of globalization itself.

² Perhaps a non-porous boundary is present in autism and certain pathologies such as acute paranoia, at least to some extent and under some circumstances. Similarly, in certain pathologies, such as schizophrenia, we might speak of fractured boundaries, or in multiple personality disorder of fissured boundaries, rather than merely malleable ones.

³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, NY: Random, 1970, p. xv.

The third and final mark is culture, precisely that which seems either to be truncated in most discussions of globalization or seen as derivative of other forces—of money (or economy) and power (or politics) in particular. Indeed, we will venture into what I will call the heart of culture—here gainsaying any merely derivative approach—into religion, into the one thing that seems most derivative to creatures of the Enlightenment. This part of the map, then, seeks to redraw the boundaries, to read globalization from another place one may say, to link it to the place of Europe and to relocate it in an African worldview, which is not an African worldview alone, and thus to decentre it.

Bordering on Africa

There is no essential African, no essence to being African, no ‘one thing’ by which we may say she or he is African or not. Except geography and history perhaps. Among the most salient aspects of that geography or history is its construction from the European point of view. If there is one identity to Africa, it is the one given by the colonial powers. If there are clear borders in Africa, they are those drawn by these same powers.⁴

Borders identify Africa to others, both internally and externally, even as they tear identities apart, sometimes quite literally (e.g., in the way individual tribes were split by colonial calculus and inscribed lines, etched on a map and on bodies who filled the spaces marked by the map). Borders then, are made, unmade and remade, by human beings, with implications for human beings, frequently violent implications as the law of the border gathers force and exerts force in its inscription.

These are political borders of which we speak, but the same dynamic applies to the human experience of borders, to the psyche of the body affected by them. “The border,” says Ryszard Kapuscinski, “is stress—fear, even (significantly more rarely: liberation).”⁵ At the borderline, where an encounter with otherness and the Other or with the absence of the Other and of death is likely, tension arises and emotions heighten. “People,” notes Kapuscinski, “are not made to live in borderline situations; they avoid them or try to flee from them as quickly as possible.”⁶ Or, I would add, they rise up to contest the actual or implied threat to their boundaries.

So it is with globalization which, if nothing else, has to do with an unprecedentedly complex encounter of human beings across previously marked and unmarked boundaries of space, place, body and time. Globalization heightens the sense of boundaries, of borders, even as it threatens them, reconstructs them, or builds new ones with which we are still unfamiliar. It also erases borders, compresses space, undoes any fixed sense of place, not only through the communication technologies which have revolutionized production, distribution and consumption patterns, but also through the mobility of people—tourists, sportspeople, business folk, above all, refugees and migrants who stream across traditional borders in all directions. A movement of both the rich and the poor, albeit for different reasons and under vastly differing conditions.

⁴ Most notably, through the Berlin Conference of 1884-5 at which the various European leaders met to decide on how the partition, between themselves, of Africa, a partition already under way, should be governed, giving rise to the so-called doctrine of “spheres of influence.” Cf. A. Adu Boahen (ed.), *Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935*, vol. VII of the UNESCO General History of Africa, California: James Currey, 1990 (abridged edition), p. 15ff.

⁵ Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Imperium*, New York: Vintage International, 1994, p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

If identity has to do with borders and boundaries, then globalizing forces will impact upon identities, even as identities of one kind or another respond to these forces. Assimilation, alteration, resistance and rebellion are at least four possible ways in which identities will react to the challenges posed by globalization. For globalization, however ambiguous, imprecise or contested a concept it may be, carries with it a demand to reshape identities to meet new material and ideological interests. This is true whether one sees globalization as a relatively recent, late twentieth century phenomenon driven by large-scale technological changes on a world scale, or whether one sees it as a much longer process rooted in earlier technological developments which enabled the conquest and colonization of much of the world by European powers.⁷

In either case, we may echo once more the sentiments of Kapuscinski: “How many victims, how much blood and suffering, are connected with this business of borders! There is no end to the cemeteries of those who have been killed the world over in the defense of borders. Equally boundless are the cemeteries of the audacious who attempted to expand their borders.”⁸

Here Africa can speak most eloquently of the business of borders. One response to the colonial construction of borders and its legacies comes in the form of an attempt to redefine these borders, made as they were along the lines of the philosophy and theory of the nation-state. I mean here the call for an African Renaissance by current South African president, Thabo Mbeki.

The context of this call is a heightened awareness of globalization, understood as “the fact that no person is an island, sufficient unto himself or herself,” because “all humanity is an independent whole in which none can be truly free unless all are free”⁹ Africa is riven with conflicts born of its pains and history, riddled with disease of both the physiological and the political kind, and wracked by poverty and economic marginalization.¹⁰ This must come to an end in the rebirth of Africa by which an end is also brought to “a centuries-old past which sought to perpetuate the notion of an Africa condemned to remain a curiosity slowly grinding to a halt on the periphery of the world.”¹¹ Which curiosity has become, in the words of Manthia Diawara, “a globalized information network that characterizes Africa as a continent sitting on top of infectious diseases, strangled by corruption and tribal vengeance, and populated by people with mouths and hands open to receive international aid,” a unified imaginary we may call “Afro-pessimism.”¹²

The rebirth for which Mbeki calls is not a new idea, but echoes themes in Pan-African thought which arose in earlier decolonization processes in Africa, as for example in the contributions of Joshua Nkrumah and Leopold Senghor among others. Mbeki, in a number of key speeches,¹³ re-

⁷ As Edward Said has noted in *Orientalism*, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978, some 85% of the territories of the world were colonized over time by Europeans.

⁸ Kapuscinski, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁹ Thabo Mbeki, “The African Renaissance, South Africa and the World,” speech given at the United Nations University, 9 April 1998, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/1998/sp980409.html>.

¹⁰ On the latter point, Africa is variously estimated to “enjoy” something between 2% and 6% of the world’s trade, despite having a much larger part of the world’s population, one indicator of the level of its marginality in the global economy.

¹¹ Mbeki, *op. cit.*

¹² Manthia Diawara, “Toward a Regional Imaginary in Africa,” in Frederick Jameson & Masao Miyoshi (eds), *The Cultures of Globalization*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1998, p. 103.

¹³ Cf., among others, Thabo Mbeki, “The African Renaissance, South Africa and the World” (*op. cit.*); “The African Renaissance Statement,” 13 August 1998, Johannesburg, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/1998/tm0813.htm>; “Statement at the African Renaissance Conference,” 28 September 1998, Johannes-

casts the theme in a contemporary context, and understands it to refer, *inter alia*, to political imperatives (action for democracy against one-party states, for accountability against corruption, for good governance against self-enrichment and self-aggrandisement, for human rights against militarism, despotism and dictatorships), economic imperatives (the elimination of poverty, achieving health for all, cancellation of foreign debt, establishment of modern multi-sector economies, growth in world share of economic activity, improvement in the terms of trade, transfer of technology, increase in domestic and foreign investment, sustainable development, and the acquisition of surpluses of the world economy in the form of expanded development assistance), and cultural imperatives (rebellion against Afro-pessimism and the European imaginary of Africa, rediscovery of African history and identity, extended education and the development of human capital, enhanced intellectual creativity by Africans in Africa out of African contexts for African situations).

It is not difficult to see how all of these imperatives impact in one way or another on the question of identity under conditions of globalization. Indeed, the question of identity is quite central to many of Mbeki's speeches, though it carries with a particular character. What is this character? It has, first, to do with the place of Africa and Africans in world history. Mbeki recalls, for example, that Timbuktu was as learned a centre as any in Europe at the time when the European Renaissance burst forth. But he wants to assert something more than an epistemological equivalence, or an aesthetic inheritance.¹⁴ Hence he regularly relates the origins of the human race itself in Africa, the "glorious past of the emergence of *homo sapiens* on the African continent,"¹⁵ an ontological rooting for humanity. In this mix, he finds space to refer to African contributions, through the centuries, to the evolution of religious thought, including particularly that of Islam and Christianity. "When I survey all this and much more besides," Mbeki says, "I find nothing to sustain the long-held dogma of African exceptionalism"¹⁶

In an odd way, therefore, we may say that Mbeki incorporates both identity and difference into his understanding of what is African, sameness or unity (we are all human) as much as otherness or multiplicity (we have unique contributions and capacities). His target is that "long-held dogma" about Africans which, in its historically determined political and economic effects, has so debilitated initiative, creativity, individuality and entrepreneurship among so many Africans, "like the ton of lead that the African slave carries on her own shoulders."

His audience is not in the first place non-Africans, but Africans themselves. Thus he claims that "unless we are able to answer the question 'who are we?' we will not be able to answer the question 'what shall we be?'"¹⁷ This includes both the negative as well as the positive history of Africa: By "acting to banish the shame [of the past, including the awful record of many leaders and governments in Africa¹⁸], [we] remake ourselves as the midwives of the African Renaissance."¹⁹

burg, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/1998/tm0928.htm>; "Address as Chairperson of the Non-Aligned Movement at the Opening of the South Summit," 12 April 2000, Havana, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/2000/tm0412.html>.

¹⁴ One finds many references in the African Renaissance speeches to African art, music, performance and writing in the past and the present.

¹⁵ Thabo Mbeki, "The African Renaissance, South Africa and the World" (op. cit.), p. 2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁸ In his manner of addressing the abuse of political power, particularly in forms of conspicuous consumption and the personal use of national assets, Mbeki echoes Franz Fanon's ongoing critique of the ambitions of the new national black bourgeoisie, though inevitably his critique is more muted given his political dependence upon many of its cast.

Why is this all important to Mbeki? Precisely because, as a long-standing exile leader in the African National Congress (ANC) during the years of Apartheid who also functioned as the ANC's foreign minister in exile for many years, he is fully aware of and immersed in what some have called the global village. His advanced training in economics at Sussex University (and before that in Russia) means that he is intensely conscious of globalization and its relation to the 'triumph' of the 'free-market' in our time.

In the African context, as an African leader, it is impossible for him to foresee an even moderately healthy future for the continent, including his own country, if a concerted and wide-ranging response to globalization is not undertaken, one which recognizes Africa's faults and draws on its strengths, one which refuses to accept the present inequitable terms upon which Africa is drawn into the global polity and economy.²⁰

Among the strengths is what he frequently refers to as a 'spirit' of humanity, a 'soul' which embraces the other (and thus justice) while fighting against its corruption (and hence injustice). This extends to the way in which African nations, institutions and peoples are seen and treated globally. It also includes a theological moment, in terminology at least, in Mbeki's passionate description of the dominant notion of the market as "the modern God, a supernatural phenomenon to whose dictates everything human must bow in a spirit of powerlessness." The critique of ideology inaugurated in Marx's *The German Ideology* here comes full circle.

Against this modern God is ranged "the high ideals of African solidarity,"²¹ itself the necessary basis for resurrecting the process of Pan-African action which has been found weak, wanting and failing in the Organization of African Unity.²² It is this which gives impetus, for example, to the Millennium African Renaissance Programme (MAP), an initiative currently achieving some success in getting European and other support, driven primarily by Mbeki, Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo and Algeria's Abdelaziz Bouteflika, initiated at last year's G8 summit chaired by Japan, and launched at the World Economic Forum in Davos recently.²³

So much for the character of the African who must be reborn. Where are its lacunae, its gaps and absences, its limits and contradictions? What kind of identity is affirmed and which lost or mis-

¹⁹ Thabo Mbeki, "The African Renaissance Statement" (op. cit.), p. 1.

²⁰ So, for example, Mbeki notes in response to questions to his speech at the United Nations University in Japan that the question of sovereignty must be revisited: "The weaker, the smaller you are, the more decisive that impact of globalization is on this matter of sovereignty. ... And we believe that one of the correct responses to that process of globalization is to make sure that the smaller countries of the world therefore have a proper place in the decision-making processes of these institutions [i.e. the World Bank, the IMF, etc.] which take decisions which have a universal impact"; cf. Thabo Mbeki, "The African Renaissance, South Africa and the World" (op. cit.), p. 11. This is one of the reasons for Mbeki's many excursions into the wider world to mobilize and develop forums and alliances which might give some weight to these ambitions, though it brings him criticism within in his own country for a perceived lack of attention to pressing internal problems.

²¹ Thabo Mbeki, "Toast Proposed at the Official Banquet for President Alpha Omar Konare of Mali," 31 March 2000, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/2000/tm0331.html>.

²² This has become a practical goal more recently in the current process, now close to completion, of forging a "Union of African Nations," modelled more along the lines of the European Union than that of the OAU which may be compared better to the UN. Among the proposals for such a Union which are likely to be finalized in the near future are the establishment of a continental court of justice and an African development and capital-financing bank. Ecological concerns and matters such as property rights (e.g. on natural products which are patentable) are also in view.

²³ Interestingly, the acronym MAP reflects, perhaps consciously, the attempt of the African Renaissance to redraw the way in which the borders of Africa are considered, a re-MAPping.

placed? What are the identities hidden within or underneath the ostensive one? Without attempting to exhaust the potential moments of deconstruction within the notion of the African Renaissance (always keeping in mind that deconstruction is not destruction, not an attack on an institution as such but the task of holding the institution to its own promise),²⁴ let me point to three exemplary instances.

(1) The first is telling and it comes from a woman, Sisonke Msimang, who suggests that “... Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance offers a vast, numbing silence when it comes to analyses of gender oppression.” She analyses this as “the selective memory of patriarchal nationalism” bolstered by “affirming tales about African men and their historical roles in building African civilizations,” itself the “discursive corollary of the government’s economic empowerment policies for black business.”²⁵

Msimang does not argue against the spirit of an African Renaissance as such, nor against the need to recover or reconstruct African identity in ways of which one may be proud and self-confident. It has more to do with the particularity of the identity projected by the rhetoric of African Renaissance, specifically, with its recognition of multiplicity or difference at the level of nation-states, language and culture: This multiplicity or difference fails to recognize the major significance of gender even as it focuses on race and class or economic position (the latter in limited fashion).

Is this merely an intellectual judgement? No. To back her argument Msimang analyses the founding, “historic” conference called to launch the African Renaissance theme formally.²⁶ The make up of presenters and attendees, she notes, if one can read this as a signifier of the mindset of the organizers, suggest that the African Renaissance is a project of academics “driven by the ideals of capitalism and the pocketbooks of South African corporations like Denel [the South African arms manufacturer with state share-holding], Engen [a major oil company] and Standard Bank.”²⁷ Further, “Not a single grassroots development practitioner presented a paper. no one representing any category of marginalized people—women, poor people, old people, homosexuals, young people, rural people, the physically disabled—was given a formal platform from which to speak.” One published paper by a woman (Micere Githae Mugo) refers to the “silencing of women” who are a “clear numerical majority on the African continent,” and the consequent need for “the kind of participation that places women at the centre of transforming action and discourse.”²⁸

²⁴ As Derrida puts it, “What is called ‘deconstruction’ ... has never, never opposed institutions as such, philosophy as such, discipline as such. [it] is affirmative in a way that is not simply positive, not simply conservative, not simply a way of repeating the given institution. I think that the life of an institution implies that we are able to criticize, to transform, to open the institution to its own future.”; cf. Caputo, *op. cit.*, p. 5-6.

²⁵ Sisonke Msimang, “African Renaissance: Where are the Women?,” *Agenda*, no. 44, 2000, p. 69-70.

²⁶ Held in Johannesburg in September 1998, the conference consisted of 470 members of the “African intelligentsia” who were tasked to “talk about the future of Africa.”

²⁷ Msimang further notes that, in the book produced out of the conference (M. Makgoba (ed.), *African Renaissance*, Cape Town: Mafube Press, 1999), 15 pages of promotional space is given to these three sponsoring companies; cf. Msimang, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

²⁸ Micere Githae Mugo, “African Culture for Sustainable Development,” in Makgoba, *op. cit.*, p. 271; cited by Msimang, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

The import of Msimang's analysis, for our purposes, is the "unitary conception of the 'African condition'"²⁹ which pervades the rhetoric of African Renaissance, in this case ignoring the heterogeneity of identity cast in the form of gender differences. This aporia (of gender) thus becomes an absence (of gendered experience) in the defining of African identities. It plays itself out within Africa, and in relation to globalization. To pay attention to it is to deconstruct both.

(2) The second instance of deconstruction is less direct. I derive it from an analysis by Manthia Diawara of West African markets, not the global kind but the regional ones normally described as part of the 'informal sector.'³⁰ Here, he argues, cultural workers (including intellectuals, presumably), elites of the nation-state and "gossips in the marketplaces" are united in the view of globalization as a recolonization of Africa, particularly by international financial institutions. The first part of his argument focuses on currency devaluations, as required by structural adjustment programmes whose conditions are largely set externally, as a major factor in impoverishment and disempowerment of Africans. The latter half of the essay interests us more here. It concerns the contemporary place of traditional markets.

In these markets, goods of all kinds, from all over the world, in branded and unbranded forms, are available. What is significant about them, however, is that "the flow of goods, currency exchange rates, and the net worth of the markets" stay outside of the control of nation-states or national and international corporations. All sorts of currencies are viable in these markets, traded informally; all sorts of languages—African and European mainly—provide for exchange; merchandise is assembled in mobile stalls and apparently chaotic in its distribution patterns and display; even the geography of these markets is more confusing than ordered with curvilinear paths wandering in and out of the area; and human interaction of all kinds (not just entrepreneurial) goes on in these markets, which have a "soul" and a rhythm of their own. Finally, it is to these markets, with their own unofficial rules, including bribery and patronage, that many people, even elites (politicians in need of a favour or some emergency cash, for example), turn at times of crisis.

Diawara links these phenomena, in themselves large enough to threaten even such as institutions as the World Bank in the carrying out of local and regional policy, to the tradition of African markets: "... West African markets have been structuring economic fields of power and social spaces in the cities and provinces that engaged the colonial system in a competition for the reproduction of public spheres."³¹ Even various forms of corrupt practice, working outside of the norms of the nation-state and the corporate enterprises, may be understood as interventions which seek to destabilize the hegemony of the formal markets, hence of global capital in turn: "By producing disorder through pricing, pirating, smuggling, and counterfeiting, they participate in the resistance to multinational control of the national economy and culture."³² Here, in these markets, one encounters forms of "symbolic capital" (Pierre Bourdieu) which link the merchants to "recognizable and accepted practices of the family, kinship and the [traditional] market."³³ These merchants, moreover, are not isolated in global terms—on the contrary, they

²⁹ K. Tomaselli & A Shepperson, "Media Studies and Practice Reborn: Recovering African Experiences," in Makgoba, op. cit.; cited by Msimang, op. cit., p. 80.

³⁰ Manthia Diawara, "Toward a Regional Imaginary in Africa," op. cit., pp. 103-124.

³¹ Ibid., p. 117.

³² Ibid., p. 121.

³³ Ibid., p. 118.

travel widely, bringing back goods (and stories?) which are often seen for the first time in their hands, even before they reach the formal markets in department stores and the like. And there is a centuries-long history to these practices.

In short, Diawara sees in these modern forms of the traditional market a phenomenon which offers “the only places where Africans of all ethnic origins and classes, from the country and the city meet and assert their humanity and historicity through consumption.”³⁴ For him they provide the occasion to critique globalization and the nation-state simultaneously, and to call for “a regional imaginary” which breeches the boundaries and borders of the nation-state and embraces the heterogeneity of languages, cultures, economic status, and geography, and which thereby provides for and promotes “the circulation of goods and cultures that are [otherwise] fragmented”

Hybridity, heterogeneity, otherness, difference—these boundaries of identity as the same or the similar—are hereby affirmed *as African*, as an existing alternative, and as the basis for a different political and economic practice than that which is dictated by global economic forces. Clearly, with this in view, the notion of an African Renaissance must take on a different character than one that sees linkage to the global economy as primary and technological equivalence as a *sine qua non* for such a linkage. It introduces into the idea of an African Renaissance something more than ‘catching up’ with modernity, proposing that alongside any such moves must come attention to the way in which Africans do actually construct alternative practices, behaviours and identities without recourse to any primitive (in the strict technical sense) or romantic African past.

(3) The third instance for a deconstruction of the call for an African Renaissance is even more indirect, bringing us close the character of Derrida’s *khôra* as the place which has no place, and it concerns the idea of the fetish, as analysed by Ioan Davies in a more general essay on “negotiating African culture.”³⁵

The fetish is an irrational, extravagant, magical object of superstition in normal parlance, drawing on the Latin word for the artificial—that which falsely represents reality. It is also a European concept applied to a construction of African religiosity, if it was even regarded as worthy of being regarded as cultured enough to be regarded as religious. Its use in Africa apparently began with the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, as a way of defining the “importance placed by African traders on objects in their contact with colonials.”³⁶

But for Africans, in a sensitive analysis by Hecht and Simone,³⁷ the fetish became the name for individuality in the face of domination, combining a serious intentionality with a playful moment, akin to that of the trickster, or the court jester who really believes his sanctioned satire of power. In this view, the fetish is not, as with Marx and Freud, symptomatic of something else,

³⁴ Ibid., p. 121.

³⁵ Ioan Davies, “Negotiating African Culture: Toward a Decolonization of the Fetish,” in Frederick Jameson & Masao Miyoshi (eds), *The Cultures of Globalization*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1998, pp. 125-145.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

³⁷ Cited by Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 137ff. The original work is David Hecht and Maliqalim Simone, *Invisible Governance: The Art of African Micropolitics*, NY: Brooklyn, 1994. The book’s theoretical thrust is not dissimilar to James Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, or for that matter Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

but something in itself, “renewable and discardable, [that which] is the bearer of stories but itself tells no stories”

One significant example of the fetish in contemporary form discussed by Davies is what he calls “the curious cult” of the Mami Wata (Mother Water). This cult, originating in Africa or perhaps Minoan Crete, is found across Central, East and West Africa, but also exists in Brazil and the Caribbean. Even more interestingly, various forms of the figure of Mami Wata, often depicted as a mermaid, are found in stores, companies, galleries and so on in the West. She is everywhere, multicultural, international, independent of the objects (fetishes in a more restricted sense) made of her; she is “the ultimate international fetish.”³⁸

She is not the thing itself, but the space upon which is inscribed something that transcends boundaries, lies behind means of exchange. “She is the floating signifier,” says Davies. She can “operate as a map, a means of engagement with, and deconstruction of the West,”³⁹ a place which inserts ambiguity into the midst of hegemony and which does so both through image and act.

What Davies is ultimately pointing to here is what Achille Mbembe, perhaps echoing Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the banality of evil, has called “the banality of power.” For regimes of domination, the fetish functions to legitimize violent practices, with power as the ultimate fetish. Here we see the point of Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism, for example, mystified in the means of exchange we call money and recapitulated now in consumerism. And here we intersect with at least one powerful characteristic of globalization. But for marginalized people, the fetish, even though drawn from the dominant *epistémé*, introduces and activates “... practices of ‘disorder’ and indiscipline, desertion, disguise, duplication and ‘improvisation’.”⁴⁰ Now fetish is not a name for that which is fake, but for double meanings, for linguistic, discursive and finally practical slippage of space and place “within which the individual and nature are united ... where stories of hopes and despairs can coexist” and new possibilities be imagined for living within the constraints of domination without surrendering to its power, at least in the sense of keeping open the space for emergence of counter-powers and alternative worlds.

Read large, the fetish stands against the aim of globalization discourse, in many of manifestations, to naturalize itself, to make itself the only visible reality, to insert itself into all of life, to colonize lifeworlds (in the language of Habermas), to define globalization as that to which ‘there is no alternative.’ Read within the context of the African Renaissance, the fetish goes against the grain of Pan-African politics in order to point to all those Africa possibilities that escape the nation-state and the global corporation, but which give force to those myriad, diverse, borderless, boundary-crossing, interstitial realities of everyday African life. Perhaps this is why religion continues to play such a powerful role, in its massively heterogeneous and repeatedly multiplying forms, in Africa—and this reality has not been politically or economically tapped by the African Renaissance in any form to date. Or it signals identities which embrace a Renaissance of a different kind, not yet recognized, not yet understood.

³⁸ Davies, op. cit., p. 138.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 140, quoting Mbembe.

Contours of the Global

Throughout, the image of the global, the concept of globalization, has accompanied our analysis. But, as we all know by now, there is nothing transparent about the meaning of this image and concept. Let us first consider some general statements about globalization. Thereafter I shall return to the question of an African Renaissance in the context of globalizing forces.

What exactly constitutes “globalization,” if anything at all other than an ideological construct fitted to the aims of transnational capital, is a highly tendentious question. Enough has now been written, however, to make some provisional judgements, as follows.

(a) I am in agreement with those who argue that something qualitatively different is with us in the scope and speed of international or transnational political, economic and social interactions and interventions—a mark of the compression of time and space which give rise to “novel forms of planetary integration.”⁴¹

(b) I believe this qualitative difference does not imply that we are dealing with a wholly new order of reality, but one whose roots lie primarily in European expansion since its Renaissance, and whose prior expressions may be found in the scale of the European slave trade and even more so in the colonization by Europe of almost the entire world (at least in terms of territory) by the end of the nineteenth century.⁴²

(c) I am persuaded that these developments had a high point at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, when many of the processes of industrialization, modernization, capital accumulation and international trade with which we are familiar today were entrenched—but not that what we now see is *merely* more of the same.

(d) At the same time, there is a continuity here, and it gives rise to another common view of globalization as the ‘triumph’ of neo-liberal economics, which I accept as a necessary element of the whole, but not as a sufficient account of it.⁴³

(e) To be sure, one may see in the effects of globalization a “growing economic interdependence ... [an] increasing volume and variety of cross-border transactions in goods and services of international capital flows, and ... [a] widespread diffusion of technology.”⁴⁴ But this is neither undifferentiated nor free of serious imbalances in who bears the costs and who benefits from these arrangements.

⁴¹ Jean & John Comaroff, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony,” *American Ethnologist*, vol. 26, 1998, pp. 279-301.

⁴² Cf. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, NY: The Free Press, 1990, for an argument which helps situate this claim philosophically.

⁴³ Cf., *inter alia*, Roger Burbach, Orlando Núñez & Boris Kagarlitsky, *Globalization and its Discontents: The Rise of Post-modern Socialism*, London: Pluto Press, 1996; Jean & John Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” *Public Culture*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2000, pp. 351-374; Richard Falk, *Predatory Globalization: A Critique*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999; Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Globalization North and South: Representations of Uneven Development and the Interaction of Modernities,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 17, no. 1, February 2000, pp. 129-137; Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2000, and also “Towards a Critical Theory of Globalization,” in Eleonore Kofman & Gillian Youngs, (eds), *Globalization: Theory and Practice*, NY: Pinter, 1966.

⁴⁴ These statements are the kernel of the IMF definition of globalization, cited by Francis Wilson, “Globalization: A View from the South,” 2000, in press.

(f) Thus I find good arguments to suggest that economic globalization is not a unitary process, nor necessarily immune to the influence of nation-states and their civic or transnational political corollaries (e.g. the *People's Millennium Forum* at the UN, May 2000, which brought together representatives of over one thousand international NGOs).⁴⁵ This is clear if one analyses the difference between trade, multinational production, and international finance—only the latter being significantly out of the hands of nation-states and even then facing its own fundamental instabilities.⁴⁶

(g) Going further, globalization is not only 'not a unitary process,' but in agreement with Fernando Coronil, I would say that "global phenomena are unintelligible when the local forces that sustain them are not accounted for."⁴⁷

Finally,

(h) I am inclined to accept that the processes of globalization are uneven, inequitable and must be contested, but not that it is possible to delink from the global political economy.

The impact of globalization grows as South Africa opens its borders and re-enters the world economy more directly after the demise of Apartheid. As debates about macro-economic policy and regional political stability deepen in South Africa, so too the issue of globalization grows in prominence. The transition that the 1990s has brought to South Africa parallels that of the countries which made up the former Soviet Union in many ways, even if within different human, moral and cultural parameters and historical contexts.

In South Africa, at least, the transition process includes the question of how people define their identity in a new pluralistic democracy after Apartheid, itself a system which was predicated upon the notion of separate identities. A second aspect of this transition is that is not simply a parochial experience, but it is directly linked to regional and international developments in politics and economics, not least through such channels as bilateral negotiations, intergovernmental commissions, participation in international institutions and financial instruments, trade, scientific and technological exchange, communications, and travel. As anyone living in South Africa well knows (and I dare say one may claim the same for other countries in analogous situations), these processes are not merely instrumental or systemic—they deeply affect personal and communal lifeworlds,⁴⁸ as is obvious when one dissects the nature of xenophobia,⁴⁹ domestic violence, or crime, to name three examples.

The way in which globalization is experienced in local contexts, therefore, raises broader questions of identity, subjecthood, citizenship, autonomy and alterity. In this respect, 'trans-locality'—practices and transactions that go beyond the local particular to link with other local

⁴⁵ Cf. <http://www.millenniumforum.org/html/papers/mfd26May.htm>.

⁴⁶ Cf. Geoffrey Garrett, "The Causes of Globalization," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 33, nos. 6-7, August/September 2000, pp. 941-989.

⁴⁷ Fernando Coronil, "Toward a Critique of Globalcentrism: Speculation on Capitalism's Nature," *Public Culture*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2000, pp. 370.

⁴⁸ A theme I have pursued in James R. Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999; and in "The Making and Unmaking of Public Life," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, vol. 100, pp. 86-103.

⁴⁹ Cf. an attempt to approach this issue in the South African context in James R. Cochrane, "Close Encounters of the Foreign Kind: Aliens and Others," *Scriptura*, no. 67, pp. 405-418.

particulars elsewhere without obliterating their particularity—becomes an important strategic issue and intellectual question in any consideration of globalization.

The argument to this point has focused on Africa in the global context, via the idea of an African Renaissance. In the process, certain hints of a way of understanding the global have been given. In order to establish more clearly the counterpart that globalization plays to the African Renaissance, we now turn to a fuller explication of those hints.

The three deconstructive instances (gender, traditional markets, the fetish) we have explored, in order to problematize and destabilize the idea of an African Renaissance—so that it might be rescued from its own traps—, emphasize difference, heterogeneity, diversity, particularity and counter-hegemony. Translated into political language, this might seem to suggest that the foundations for a response to globalization lie in that which it is not: local politics versus global politics, civil society versus the international political economy, a bricolage of micropolitical actions which often do not speak in their own name against the demands of a unified macropolitical strategy which speaks all too often in the name of the global. Here, even the nation-state, supposedly surpassed by globalization, appears to be at best an irrelevance, at worst a companion to globalization.

To offer such a politics would be to locate our response to globalization outside of the systemic manifestations of power and money in the modern world.⁵⁰ The crucial point against such a supposition is made by Frederic Jameson in a comment on what is happening to the Americanization (in this case equivalent to globalization) of the film industry, both at the economic and the cultural (popular) levels. An emphasis on diversity, difference, and heterogeneity leads to a celebration of globalization, at least in the post-modern sense of an appreciation of the kaleidoscope of new vistas, opportunities, voices and so on which it makes possible. But an analysis of the film industry, one of the USA's two or three largest export industries, as a case study of globalization, shows that we are dealing with “a zero-sum game in which my freedom results in the destruction of other people's national culture industries.”

This cannot be addressed by celebrating or promoting difference as if there is no need to recognize the asymmetry of power in the world, extrapolated at every level, in which the dominant forces in the globalizing process systematically aim at securing their advantage and destroying that of their competitors/enemies. Against such a view, Jameson berates those “who think the politics of socialism is dead—those of you now inveterately prejudiced against the intervention of the state, and fantasizing about the possibilities of non-governmental organization (NGOs)—
....”⁵¹

Similarly, in a comment on the conception of culture as hybridization—a favourite term in the post-modern and postcolonial corpus—Jameson suggests that those who deal in this kind of language game give ammunition “to the most vital utopian visions of our own time, of an immense global urban intercultural festival without a center or even any longer a dominant cultural mode.” This, he says pointedly, “needs a little economic specificity” and does not correspond suffi-

⁵⁰ The terms ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’ as used here are derived from Jürgen Habermas and should be read in the light of his theory of communicative action and analysis of advanced capitalism.

⁵¹ Frederic Jameson, “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” in Jameson & Miyoshi, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

ciently with “the quality and impoverishment of what has to be called corporate culture on a global scale,” whose greatest monument is consumerism as such.⁵²

Consumerism, in this view, is the “linchpin of our economic system” and “the mode of daily life in which all our mass culture and entertainment industries train us ceaselessly” Perhaps more precisely, Jürgen Habermas suggests that it is a form of market system whose logic is signified in the way in which “money has become an anonymous medium of societal integration operating above the participants’ heads,” a process of “*system integration* [which] competes with the form of integration mediated by actors’ consciousness ... through values, norms, and mutual understanding.”⁵³

Against post-modern visions of power, or perhaps one should say, in a turn back to the modern as a balance to the post-modern naivetés, we need to recover a conception of “a unified political power or collective project rather than a dispersal into democratic multiplicities and identity positions.”⁵⁴ Here it is not national state power that is the enemy of difference, but the transnational, global system. In this view, the nation state is not something whose end must be welcomed, for that would in effect be to cede major power to those nations and transnational agencies whose destiny they strongly determine rather than contest their existing power. At the same time, the way in which nation states are conceived must change.

Here we are back with Mbeki’s view of the African Renaissance, this time with a positive assessment: He (and his government in South Africa) give evidence of being acutely aware of the need to operate in solidarity with nations in a similar or worse situation with respect to global power;⁵⁵ and from this point of view, the key support of South Africa for the Union of African Nations may be understood as an attempt to harness the power of solidarity on the most marginalized continent of them all. This would be a solidarity that does not erase the nation-state and its link to citizenship and identity, but one which draws such identities into the formation of a political will at a higher level (which could only happen procedurally, not normatively, given the heterogeneity of norms marking Africa, even if certain norms, such as a consensus on human rights and national obligations, may gradually be transferred to the higher level).

In effect, the politics of identity in relation to globalization are then bound up with the politics of difference, containing in that relation both possibilities and contradictions which can only be determined in particular contexts, spaces and historical conjunctures. Globalization cannot be, and is not, contested merely at the level of the local, in the interstices of dominant, hegemonic powers or ideas; nor can it be, or is it, merely a matter of the nations against a triumphalist neo-liberal global political economy; nor will it be possible for civil society, in its (dispersed and

⁵² Ibid., p. 66. Several essays which move along lines that Jameson is criticizing here may be found in Rob Wilson & Wimal Dissanayake (eds), *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1996. The editors, in their introduction to the volume, specifically oppose the global to local, the latter seen as sites of “local communities, tactics, and symbolic strategies ... that confront and challenge [global forces]”; cf. p. 1.

⁵³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998, p. 501; the statement is part of an essay on “Citizenship and National Identity” originally published in 1990.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

⁵⁵ The strong commitment demonstrated to include concerns of South African Development Community (SADC) nations in South Africa’s bilateral trade agreement negotiations with the European Community, who are the elephant in a deal with the mouse, is one example of this.

fractured) aggregate or in its movements and solidarities, to adequately counteract the dominant global political economy on its own. It is, and it has to be, a matter of simultaneous leverage at all levels, and in as much as this leverage may be strategically co-ordinated and tactically applied, there is no reason to bow down to the god of globalization as if “there is no alternative.”

In sum, we arrive at a position which suggests that an adequate response to the negative and deleterious effects of globalization is a contingent relation of identity and difference, analysed against the backdrop of that which unsettles both even as it is their possibility—the place which is no place, the fetish which mocks the worship of the object even as it expresses the subjectivity of the mocking worshipper. In short, it is a human judgement that must be made: of justice; of the self who dispenses or suffers injustice; of the other who is not seen, not heard, not counted, not acknowledged, as the measure of justice; and of the relationality that is the only reliable basis for the struggle for justice.⁵⁶

Religion from Another Place

We arrive at a place where it seems necessary to consider one final aspect of identity and difference under global conditions which marks the end of the twentieth century, contrary to the sociology of secularism which ruled the day earlier on—the place of religion. As José Casanova has firmly established in his analysis of the public role of religions in the modern world,⁵⁷ the secularization thesis which undergirded a wide range of sociological assumptions about modern society may be differentiated into three strands, only one of which holds: that religion, under modern conditions, will be separated out from the state and cease to determine its form.

What does not hold is the idea, at the root of both classical liberal and Marxist analyses, that religion will wither away. What only partially holds, is the tendency of religions to become privatized. Once this is understood, then it should not surprise us to find what many have seen as the revival of, or return to religion in our time. At the same time, as is true of the political and economic dimensions of our contemporary historical conjuncture, religion under conditions of globalization is in important respects not the same thing it was.

(1) One characteristic of globalization that we may begin with in reflecting on contemporary religious sensibility is *virtuality*, a displacement of space, a relocation of place, the realm of virtual reality. The globalization of capital, in its media forms (particularly, but not only entertainment)⁵⁸ and in advertising and marketing, assumes what Mitshuhiro Yoshimoto defines as a “world-space of decontextualized representations, no longer constrained by location: ‘images

⁵⁶ This formulation depends upon texts external to the present argument, in particular, the philosophical ethics of Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, and the work of Levinas on “the face.” The former represents more clearly than Levinas an ethic which closely approximates the African understanding of self, community and justice measured across space and through time as captured in the Nguni languages in the concept of *ubuntu*.

⁵⁷ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

⁵⁸ Many recent commentators, for example, analyse the way “news” is presented today, particularly through television, as representing a high level of abstraction from its concrete sources. This occurs not only through the traditional mechanisms of selection and retransmission but also in its very forms (“sound bites,” for example) which are themselves transformed through secondary technologies with the help of computers, to generate “productions” in the same sense as the theatrical. Thus one may regard the Gulf War, for example, as something that happened for most of us in the virtual spaces created by CNN, which spaces we cannot interrogate; instead they “create” the war for us, as Baudrillard has provocatively suggested.

without end’.” The effect of such representations, repeatedly thrust into our field of vision and hearing, is “not only to commodify but to *simulate* life-world and body”⁵⁹

Key to such simulation is the digital form which, unlike the analogue image (where there is a homologous relationship between the original and the copy), abstracts the image by converting its formal features into numbers. The process is unlike an analogical transcription in that it is fully reversible, manipulable and hence synthetic, so that “the idea of the original is in the end irrelevant.”⁶⁰ The dissociation of space from place is easy in this medium. So is the dissociation of body from place. The image becomes available as a commodity par excellence; it may even be “the basic commodity in the global economy”⁶¹; and it partakes of commodity fetishism.⁶²

What is at stake here is human imagination itself, that which mediates reality to reflection. Religious thinkers have expressed alarm at the way in which digital reality become virtual reality impacts upon our imagination, commodifying us at the same time as it instrumentalizes life-worlds in the search for ever more evocative images. Yet religious groups and movements have also been quick to capitalize (in both senses of the term, economic and strategic) on the power of the digital image, especially those which are more conservative or fundamentalist, using the power of computers and electronic media generally to project their ambitions, aims and aesthetics at new clients or markets, to propagate and defend the identities they hold to be true⁶³; indeed, to invent identities on the way, not only *de novo* but also by recasting—pouring into a new cast, or equally, putting a new cast on stage—the themes of established religions (Christianity being perhaps the best example).⁶⁴

(2) Implied in this discussion of the virtual image is also the *distributive power* of high-tech communications which are not only increasingly ubiquitous (by one estimate, for example, about are approximately one billion TVs currently in circulation), but increasingly inexpensive (the cost in real terms of telephone calls, for example, has dropped dramatically throughout the twentieth century, transatlantic calls decreasing by as much as 90% since 1960).⁶⁵

As this distributive power grows, in combination with digital technology, so too an ideational shift occurs—from a sense of time to a sense of speed.⁶⁶ Delivery and ‘deliverables’ replace duration and recollection as governing metaphors for both economic and cultural practice as the projected fulfilment of desire—as soon as possible, please!—substitutes for the retrospective

⁵⁹ Noted in Wilson & Dissanayake, op. cit., p. 10, my emphasis. The essay to which this refers is Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, “Real Virtuality,” in the same work.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 110-111.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 115.

⁶² A penetrating religious analysis of which remains economist and theologian Franz Hinkelammert’s *The Ideological Weapons of Death: A Theological Critique of Capitalism*, NY: Orbis Books, 1986.

⁶³ A stunning picture of this process may be obtained simply by searching the World Wide Web, to see what strange and familiar, naive and cunning, global presences of religion are available, at least to those who can access this medium. But the pattern is repeated in other, more popular media as well.

⁶⁴ The Christian tradition is perhaps most open to such moves in part because it sits so deeply at the root of modernization, in part because it is fractured and dissipated already in so many ways, in part because it has an inherently hermeneutic character from its inception, not only allowing for, but actively encouraging new interpretations all the time (even if its authorities are continually trying to control them).

⁶⁵ Data taken from Scholte, op. cit., p. 58 and Francis Wilson, op. cit., using figures from the UNDP Human Development Report, 1999, p. 30.

⁶⁶ Yoshimoto, op. cit., p. 115.

valuation of memory (and memory itself is increasingly represented as erasable digital storage spaces). What this does to religious traditions is unclear, but it must surely alter the relationship of the believer to them, or induce a powerful reaction from within traditions against that which threatens to dismantle them even as it communicates them anew. A third alternative would be to negotiate the space between projected fulfilment and retrospective valuation, as many established religions now attempt to do. A fourth alternative might be to collapse the distance between these two things in millennial enthusiasm and fury.

(3) One further category of the religious in a globalizing world to which I would like to draw attention is *mobility*. Again, here religion appears not as a contradiction to modernity but as its companion. Yet it does so in double fashion. First, as that which takes itself everywhere: Missionaries who once accompanied the traders, soldiers and magistrates of colonial powers under relatively homogeneous conditions, now travel in planes, trains, boats, buses and cars in the company of corporate executives, diplomatic missions, international agents of all kinds in completely heterogeneous fashion. Moreover, where they were once travelling from the West ‘outwards,’ now they travel from and to any location, establishing even single representatives of their beliefs and practices without any sense of isolation or demand for linguistic conformity, often preferring the ‘global language’ English instead of their own.⁶⁷

The second feature of mobility is less sanguine. It resides in the effects of those large-scale population movements which characterize modernity and which have accelerated under contemporary globalizing conditions. Families are separated, familiar neighbourhoods altered or undone, and ecological niches eroded as modernization bites. Migrations are no longer confined by national boundaries as the “shifting demands of global markets for particular kinds of goods and labor make for rapid and bewildering changes in relative status of many groups in a particular society.”⁶⁸ Vast internal migrations from rural areas to overcrowded, urban shanty towns and slums, even if they are the result of a hopeful search for livelihood in the face of the threat of certain deprivation elsewhere, undo traditional cultural norms, strengthen one’s guard against strangers, and generate “a state of permanent psychic mobilization and heightened nervous arousal.”⁶⁹

To these psycho-social effects of globalization, Sudhir Kakar, in his detailed and profound analysis of the recent tensions and violent conflicts between Muslims and Hindus in India, adds further elements: feelings of bereavement and states of withdrawal, increasing and rapid obsolescence of traditional roles and skills, dented self-esteem, loss of confidence in the stability of an order and a world previously taken for granted, depletion of old ideas and values, a retrospective idealization of the past, feelings of humiliation or “secret wounds” that result from all of this, and the consciousness of being a second class citizen in the global order.

⁶⁷ Thus, as Mikael Rothstein (“Patterns of Diffusion and Religious Globalization,” *Temenos*, vol. 32, 1996, pp. 195-220) records, “Members of The Family will quote the Bible in English, even if they are Danes talking to Danes French or Swedish members of Transcendental Meditation (TM) ... will quote in English, andISKCON devotees will—if they do not use Sanskrit—quote in English.” As Rothstein notes in his conclusion to his survey of a variety of ‘new religions,’ “The internationalization and globalization of non-traditional religions today therefore appears to be possible only due to the continuous exchange of information among believers diffused to almost every part of the globe. Travelling as well as the potential imbedded in the information technology of the modern world thereby become constituent features of these religions.”

⁶⁸ Sudhir Kakar, *The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 145.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

A common consequence of this state of affairs, increasingly the reality for large numbers of people across the globe, and in part a ground for the apparent ‘turn to religion,’ is that “The required energy and redemption to restore *agens*, that inner state of being which sanctions initiative and encourages purposeful activity in the outer world, is most often sought through increasing, restoring, or constructing a sense of cultural identity,”⁷⁰ a social identity which can shore up the crumbling self.

In each of the three aspects mentioned above—virtuality, distributive power and mobility—religious sensibilities, concretized in movements and groups, are being reinscribed, and with this reinscription the identity of believers also changes. It is not hard, in fact, to see this or to document it, even if the latter task is far from complete. Yet behind, underneath, such considerations lies a philosophical conundrum: What do we mean by religion? Is there such a thing in and of itself? Can it be said in the singular at all, if there is? These questions and similar ones we might ask reflect back upon all claims about religion made heretofore, and thus drive us to examine the very category itself. The approach to this familiar task I wish to adopt, however, picks up on the “question about the question of religion” rather than on any attempt to establish and defend a definition of religion.

Here I turn to the fascinating discussion on religion which took place fairly recently, on the island of Capri, between a small group of leading philosophers, among whom was Jacques Derrida.⁷¹ Certain clues that he offers prompt our reconsideration of the theme of religion.

The occasion for the seminar was a consensus of a kind that religion, contrary perhaps to the expectations of the Enlightenment, had once again come to mark the “spirit of the times.” How odd, how counter-intuitive for theoreticians of modernity of all kinds? And what does one mean by the rise of religion anyway? Here Derrida immediately demonstrates his characteristic standpoint, by questioning any common sense of the term religion, by asking whether it is possible to believe in the minimal trustworthiness of this term.⁷² “To think ‘religion,’” he declares, “is to think the ‘Roman.’” The appellation is first of all Latin, European, which should alert us to its highly ambiguous, even dangerous history.⁷³ At the level of language, therefore, we should speak not of globalization but of “*globalatinization* (this strange alliance of Christianity, as the experience of the death of God, and tele-technoscientific capitalism)...”⁷⁴

Taking our departure from this realization, we would have to recognize that the very idea of ‘religion’ is a signifier of identity (a Latin-European identity) and of that which is different from that identity (all those other identities that are reinscribed in terms of this one identity). “There

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 146.

⁷¹ Cf. Jacques Derrida & Gianni Vattimo (eds), *Religion*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998. A more recent, extensive discussion which directly explores the themes that arose from this seminar is Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

⁷² The title of the lead-in essay by Jacques Derrida, which deliberately combines two classical works by Hegel and Kant respectively, is “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” *ibid.*, pp. 1-78.

⁷³ So, for example, as David Chidester shows in his *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), Europeans arriving in southern Africa came not only with a religion, but with a concept of religion whose content they could not observe in the indigenous people they met, whom they then defined as ‘having no religion.’ This history is not trivial, for it entered, in less crude forms perhaps, into the history of anthropology as a social scientific discipline, through the influence upon Friedrich Max Müller, supposed ‘father’ of comparative religion, of studies among the Zulu carried out by missionary commentators.

⁷⁴ Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

has not always been, therefore,” says Derrida, “nor is there always and everywhere, nor will there always and everywhere ... be *something*, a thing that is *one and identifiable*, identical with itself, which, whether religious or irreligious, all agree to call ‘religion’.”⁷⁵

Here then is a foundational warning against religion, a heterogeneity within itself which acts against its tendency to closure, to a stance which shuts out the other, the different, and in so doing, sets the conditions not only for belonging but also for alienation and, hence, potentially at least, for violence. Though, of course, history is replete with the actualization of religious violence as well. And indeed, it was precisely religiously inspired violence that occasioned the Enlightenment’s trenchant critique of religion and its search for a sounder basis for judgement and action in Reason.

So the ‘rise of religion’ in our time brings with it an anticipation of violence. And those who anticipate it are not disappointed. They might hear echoes of their fear in Derrida’s sense that it is not the question of religion itself which is at stake, but the question of that question: “What is going on there? What is happening and so badly? What is happening under this old name?”⁷⁶ Derrida’s own response to this question is haunting. It begins by suggesting, in the form of a rhetorical question, that the ‘return of the religious’ is related to the return of certain phenomena of radical evil;⁷⁷ and that radical evil both destroys and institutes the possibility of religion which, after all, has to do with salvation, with immunity from evil, with the sanctuary, the safe and sound, the unscathed or indemnified.

What is this evil today then, for it must be identified? The “evil of abstraction” or, more precisely, “those sites of abstraction that are the machine, technics, technoscience and above all the transcendence of tele-technology.” In this light, Derrida risks the hypothesis that “with respect to all these forces of abstraction and of dissociation ... ‘religion’ is *at the same time* involved in reacting antagonistically and reaffirmatively outbidding itself”⁷⁸ in respect of what we must now call globalization.

The dual relationship of religion to globalization is crucial to understand. We cannot here go into Derrida’s complex analysis, which ranges over a number of connected themes, but it needs to be made clear that the implication of this analysis, as prefigured in his hypothesis, is that the question of religion today must be determined in terms of two tendencies which oppose each other only on the basis of a common foundation: the alliance of religion with globalization, indeed the fact that “It is, *on the one hand*, globalization” (exploiting all the means of globalization for good and evil); and its simultaneous reaction, even declaration of war against that which gives it its new global reach and power. It replicates itself in its multiplicity across the globe even as it seeks to protect itself, make itself immune, from the effects of this very process.⁷⁹

Thus an astonishing variety of religions propagate themselves across borders which previously contained them, reaching corners that could never have been imagined previously, functioning

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 38.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷⁹ One fairly recent attempt to document this variety and spread is Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, London: Sage Publications, 1994.

through communication channels that connect even single families across continents, breaching—aggressively or intrusively—old hegemonies, offering new identities to anyone who cares to seek them, hybridizing in the process, and generating organizations that parallel those of the globalizing secular world (and replicate the historical tendency of these movements to originate or locate their centres in Europe or North America).⁸⁰

What we witness is what Richard Falk has fittingly named the “cosmo-drama” of our time, embodied in “tensions among contending sources of authority and power.”⁸¹ Confronted with this reality the old, established religious hegemonies seek, often arthritically and sometimes through the same methods, to defend themselves, to counteract the insinuation of the heterogeneous into their midst, to redeem their sanctuary, to reassert their particularities and snatch back their identities. Or they take “a reactive and negative recourse ... against an expropriatory and delocalizing tele-technoscience, identified with the globality of the market, with military-capitalistic hegemony, with the globalatinization of the European democratic model, in its double form: secular and religious.” Then we are likely once again to see a radicalization of religious violence, a violence inherent in the assertion of identity against heterogeneity, a violence which claims “to rediscover its roots, its place, its body and its idiom intact” even as “it spreads death and unleashes self-destruction in a desperate (auto-immune) gesture”⁸²

Where religion has pertinence—and that is surely in a great many more places than one would suppose from older theories of secularization which saw its withering away—it is likely to increase rather than dampen the temperature of conflicts. This, one may say, is because it “brings to conflict between groups an emotional intensity and a deeper motivational thrust than language, region, or other markers of ethnic identity,” because it is central to the “‘meaning-making’ function of human life,” because it “excites strong emotions,” and because it “incorporates some of our noblest sentiments and aspirations.”⁸³

For the very same reasons, religion not infrequently also enters into violence and its preconditions from the opposite side—with capacities to heal, to open up new possibilities, to enhance emancipation. And indeed, that is not a trivial basis for the appeal of religious experience and religious faith to so many people in our time as they struggle with the world we live in or seek to understand and reflect upon it in ways that promise to overcome that which threatens to defeat them. Under conditions of globalization, as at other times in human history, the ambiguities of religion come home to roost. What is bred in the process offers profound clues to contemporary existence.

Conclusion

As Hent de Vries notes, Derrida’s essay on “Faith and Knowledge” offers “a provocative analysis of how the concept and the politics of self-determination and the collective and subjective

⁸⁰ For example, the World Council of Churches, the Lausanne Covenant of Evangelical Churches, the Pontifical Commission on Interreligious Dialogue, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and the Parliament of the World’s Religions. The latter originates with a conference held in Chicago in 1893, where a strong Hindu presence was evident, which was recalled as the basis for a new contemporary initiative held again in Chicago in 1993, with a second Assembly in Cape Town in 1999.

⁸¹ Richard Falk, *op. cit.*, p. 24 & 187 fn. 23.

⁸² Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁸³ Sudhir Kakar, *op. cit.*, p. 192-3.

identities it presupposes and produces are fissured and fractured at their very origin.”⁸⁴ The question of religion opens up these issues as well as any other, perhaps more so.

Moreover, a focus on the ongoing pertinence of religion in our world, in particular, on its deep anthropological grounding in an ontology of the human spirit (or what Derrida prefers to call the necessary structures of messianic anticipation, the gift, and hospitality, themselves signifiers of the foundational place of faith in all knowledge and action),⁸⁵ allows us to propose a direction, a heading, a commitment, a capacity for judgement and hence for ethical action, which is not mired in relativism.

We cannot perhaps return to a metaphysics of the meta-narrative, to totalizing theories or foundationalism, but we can recognize the crucial, irrevocable role in human affairs of what Henry Giroux has called “formative narratives.” Such narratives, and their associated practices, embrace the aporia of local and the global without succumbing to servitude to either “the notion that truth precedes the notion of representation” or a monocausal view of reality. Through a formative narrative, which is something less than a master narrative but greater than a merely particularist narrative, it remains possible to define “some common project,” to give to a politics of difference some capability of “analyzing difference within rather than against unity.”⁸⁶

Here, one may argue with good grounds, religion offers many people just such a formative narrative, which would explain the critical or what some call the ‘prophetic’ capacity of religion, to challenge the politics of abstraction which globalization so often represents in the name of concrete lifeworlds of ordinary people. This is true whether or not the strategy adopted in confronting the threat is assimilation, projection, rejection or resistance.

Religion, in this sense, is a lens on our contemporary globalized reality. And it is so in a double sense, for we should never forget the intrinsic violence of religion, already figured in the notion of sacrifice and echoed in punishment of sinners, exorcism, the killing of witches and apostates, in ascetic violence against the self, and in the Holy War.⁸⁷ This is a violence inherent in the very affirmation of identity and community, both of which offer sufficient grounds to differentiate between oneself and another, to exclude or excommunicate the other, and finally, to war against the other in the name of the one, of the same, of the undifferentiated, perhaps we may say, of God.

What is true of religion is true of other forms of identity and difference in human society. If, then, there is to be an African Renaissance, or a long-term alternative to the current forms of globalization (not to the sense and experience of the global as such), then it will be found, if at all, in the resolution of the antimony presented by religion. I dare say, such a resolution will lie—and here I do think Derrida has understood something very important—in a politics of the human which, even as it necessarily institutes things, keeps open always and everywhere, at the centre

⁸⁴ Hent de Vries, op. cit., p. 21.

⁸⁵ It is important to keep in mind that Derrida’s meaning for these terms is not religious per se, that is, dependent on the concrete claims of any particular religion.

⁸⁶ Cited in Arif Dirlik, “The Global in the Local,” in Wilson & Dissanayake, op. cit, pp. 41-2. Henry Giroux’s original work is *Border Crossings: Cultural Works and the Politics of Education*, NY: Routledge, 1992.

⁸⁷ Cf. Sudhir Kakar, op. cit., p. 192.

of our need for belonging and identity, of our search for security and salvation (sanctuary), the possibility of the new, of something other—of the Other as such.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ In my view, we are not far here also, especially if we take into account Derrida's deep analysis of justice-still-to-come, from the understanding of the self and the other reached by Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*, op. cit., which produces the philosophical ethics he so simply yet profoundly captures in the phrase: "living well together in just institutions."