



## DOING RESEARCH IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE: ASSESSING PRESENT REALITIES AND FUTURE TRAJECTORIES

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*Globalization is a defining feature of the modern world, both in terms of how practices are produced and enacted (culture) and how resources and power are allocated (politics). In the context of studies on religion, globalization offers a number of issues that scholars from different traditions ought to look more attentively. This paper offers an account of how globalization has conditioned profound changes in the ways by which individual and institutions have made sense of religious beliefs, experiences and practices. It highlights new ways by which scholars of religion from the social sciences and theology may appropriate transnational flows, pluralizing and fundamentalist responses to increasing diversity and the need for new approaches in fostering religious literacy. The paper concludes with a reflection on how the 'new normal' in religious living and believing may be taken as starting points for crafting more relevant approaches in social science and theological research.*

**T**he shifts experienced by individuals living in the global era have made questions pertaining to personal and collective meaning more appealing and necessary than ever. The 'global' proportions of discourse formation and sharing have yielded to an explosive mix of available options for personal wellbeing, while at the same time the concentration of resources to identifiable centers of the present world order. It is this nuanced interplay of centrifugal and centripetal social forces that displaced calls for the total takeover of rational-scientific logic and a growing appreciation of aesthetic and intersubjective domains of life. Hence, the global era is marked by increasing pluralism and diversity with regard to perspectives and modes of action.



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It is in this context that religious knowledge, claims and practices have emerged as an important topic for discussion in emerging globally-oriented discourses. Traditionally identified with communal interests and values, religion is again assuming an important role in the task of understanding the nature and extent of modern transitions that has altered our ways of doing things. The questions asked, however, have shifted away from common values toward individual religious expressions and their social implications. The inquiry about 'being religious' in the context of our times has particularly strong personal undertones, focusing on the ways by which individuals utilize resources afforded by modern technology. Concomitantly, religious organizations are regarded more as platforms for experimentation rather than agents of social control.

Premised on this growing importance of religion in the global order, this paper provides an initial sketch of common themes for consideration by the social sciences and theology. Coming from a social scientific (particularly sociological) perspective, this paper articulates a view of globalization that engages attempts by theologians to craft the relevance of theological discourse in the Philippine context. It focuses primarily on the transnationalization of religion because of resources afforded by the global conditions. The discussion also accompanies possible theological reflections on modern religious lives and the imperative for new forms of social justice to combat new forms of oppression. Lastly, the paper advocates for the necessity of religious literacy, which predisposes theological reflections on the importance of interfaith dialogue and collaboration in our time.

### **THE IDEA OF THE 'GLOBAL VILLAGE'**

At first hearing, the term "global village" sounds paradoxical: the "village" is a small, self-sufficient productive and residential unit that is bounded vis-à-vis other (usually nearby) villages. The "global", however, implies that such boundaries are superfluous, because by its very nature it transcends the specificity of the 'local'. Combining the two terms, therefore, connotes the expansion of the 'local' by shrinking relative distance vis-à-vis other co-actors. Marshall McLuhan

and his colleagues first introduced the concept of ‘global village’: it was the outcome of the modern mass media, which resulted to drastic changes in the way people communicated with each other.<sup>1</sup> Scholars agree that McLuhan’s predictions of the advent of the global village proved to be accurate, with the rise of the internet, the virtual world and crowdsourcing.

The global village concept is premised on *globalization*, which harbors certain political, economic and social characteristics. Globalization is the phenomenon behind the collapse of borders (local and national), thus leading to the increased mobility of capital, ideas and people. Globalization experts have relied on sociological literature to expound on the appendage of ‘subnational scalings’ (which are commonly referred to as ‘local’) into transplanetary and suprateritorial connectivities.<sup>2</sup> This porosity of borders of all types and the increasing movement that accompanies it make everything literally within one’s reach, hence the notion of a village of global proportions. This has profound implications on the character of modern economy and politics, but also (and more so) on the character of present-day social arrangements and selves.

Insofar as religion is imbedded into economic and political forces and figures prominently in subjectivities and selves, it is opportune to ask how the study of religious identities, ideas and organizations may be updated to account for emerging issues brought about by living in the ‘global village’. Lester Kurtz locates religious life in modern society in the paradoxical movement toward multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, on one hand, and the increase of religiously-inspired boundary-maintenance and violence, on the other hand.<sup>3</sup> Scholars

<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Random House, 1967), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Sociological literature relies heavily on the works of Saskia Sassen, particularly her book *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Sassen explains the rise of global cities as centers of the global world order, where there is perceivable concentration of labor, capital and resources. For a discussion of the impacts of globalization in local community, see Diana Brydon and William D. Coleman (eds.). *Renegotiating Community: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Global Contexts*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Lester Kurtz, *Gods in the Global Village: The World’s Religions in Global Perspective*. Third Edition. (London: Sage, 2012), 5.



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are thus tasked with the role of clarifying conditions that give rise to new forms of religious belief, practices and institutions. Researches along these lines have, for instance, found cases of ‘religious worlding’ by churches and organizations, which is quite apparent in the case of the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) in the Philippines. The inauguration of the Philippine Arena in Bulacan, far from being understood merely as an architectural success, is reckoned by members as a testament to the success of the INC in amassing influence in public life that reaches global proportions.<sup>4</sup>

It must be emphasized also that the ‘global village’ we live in has also given rise to new forms of marginalization and new groups being victimized by its centralizing logic. This is where religious traditions (especially those that have a strong social justice discourse) have found a niche in calling for a sober rethinking of global trends and flows. Sociologist Peter Beyer argued that the globalization of environmental issues has triggered responses from religious actors and institutions, thus giving rise to faith-based global discourses on climate change and care for the environment.<sup>5</sup> These discourses, rather than being at the periphery of the global order, are directly engaging the ethical implications of ‘modern’ and scientific environmental paradigms. The same may be said with religious responses to specifically global problems like human trafficking and transnational crimes that know no national borders. The task of examining religious logics is thus more useful than ever, because globalization has counterintuitively exposed the power structures behind ‘global interests’ that push some concerns and groups to the background.

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<sup>4</sup>The Philippine Arena in Bulacan, the Philippines, considered as the largest stadium in the world, is owned and operated by the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC). For a discussion about the religious dimensions of its inauguration, see Jayeel S. Cornelio, “INC, Philippine Arena, and Religious Worlding”, *Rappler* (2014, July27). Retrieved February 5, 2015 (<http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/academe/64485-inc-philippine-arena-religiousworlding>) .

<sup>5</sup>Peter Beyer, “The Global Environment as a Religious Issue: A Sociological Analysis”, *Religion* vol. 22 no. 1 (1992): 1-19.

## GLOBALIZATION AND THE SHIFTING NATURE OF THE 'FIELD'

Doing research in the field is the lifeblood of most social science disciplines. Sociology and anthropology have particularly embraced field research as the defining character of their disciplines, as it allows scholars to understand the activities of people in their 'natural' setting.<sup>6</sup> The attention given to the field has allowed researchers to bracket received perspectives from their disciplines and see how certain understandings of identity and sociality are carried out in everyday life. Sociologists doing research on religion have contributed much in understanding institutions and organizations, spending significant amount of time in church and temple communities to 'blend in' seamlessly with believers as much as possible.

The tradition of community studies in sociology and anthropology initially posited self-sufficient and bounded communities that clearly defined what was inside (*loob*) and outside (*labas*). This was reflected in the experience of anthropologists who had to leave the comforts of familiar surroundings and enter an 'alien' and 'exotic' culture. In the field of religious studies, researchers posited that religious organizations have boundary-maintaining capacities, insofar as these organizations craft ways to structurally differentiate themselves from other domains of social life. In early anthropology this resonated strongly with studies on the religious systems of tribal communities, which was identifiably different from other elements of the over-all culture and thus are structured in specific ways.

The dynamics of globalization necessitate a rethinking of these received categories because, in a number of ways, boundaries have increasingly become porous. This means that, while boundaries are present, they are always in a state of flux because people who compose

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<sup>6</sup> Buford H Junker, *Field Work: An Introduction to the Social Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 2.



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these organizations are moving. The starting point of inquiry, therefore, is not boundary but movement. Arjun Appadurai introduced the notion of *scapes* in order to displace the overemphasis on stability and boundedness in anthropological research.<sup>7</sup> In studies on religion, this means that one has to go beyond physical structure, determined functions, norms, roles and values. While these are indeed important, it must be emphasized that religious organizations ‘expand’ and ‘contract’ all the time, depending on the movement of people who belong to them.

In the context of popular religion, studies have noted the flexible character of devotional practices, especially when agents bring these to a new soil. In the case of Filipino popular religion this is perceivable in the transplantation of the Perpetual Help, Santo Niño or Jesus Nazareno and similar devotions to other parts of the world as Filipinos bring their icons and novena pamphlets with them when they migrate. Closer to home, the growth of Baclaran district is partly attributed to the Perpetual Help Devotion as a form of translocal popular religion involving a divine non-specialist.<sup>8</sup> What is seen in Baclaran district today is a spillover of devotional practice onto economic activities and forms of political organization around it. This is starkly opposite to the shrine enclosed by high walls; in reality the walls are always breached and ‘residues’ of religious activity spill over to the streets, the shops and the marketplace.

This ‘border issue’ is also salient in the ways by which religious devotees establish connections with local shrines through the use of modern Internet technologies. These devotees, despite the lack of actual physical contact with local shrines, have managed to forge enduring links with the shrine through online letters and use of websites. These efforts challenge physical distance through epistolary agency,

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<sup>7</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 48.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of “divine non-specialist” was introduced by William Christian in *Local Religion in Sixteenth-century Spain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981). He noted that devotional practices in sixteenth-century Spain shifted from local saints, which tended to be specific to certain petitions, toward Christ and the Virgin Mary because of the latter’s ‘universality’ and all-encompassing countenance to all devotees regardless of locality.

which is affirmed by the use of the Internet, as devotees submit letters online, like Facebook posts and perform novenas through livestream or through sound recordings.

In these instances, it makes sense to treat shrines as not merely the locus, but nodes, of devotional practice. By becoming nodes shrines and religious spaces enable and foster religious practice outside its perceivable borders. This brings to mind Appadurai's earlier point about *scapes*, and how shrines are 'religioscapes' in their own right. Insofar as research is concerned, this calls for an expanded notion of shrines and sacred spaces as the 'field site'. This view posits that the 'field' has to be understood in more nuanced ways that accounts for text, movement and virtual spaces alongside physical space. This has profound implications for theology and religious studies because religion has mostly been associated with stabilizing forces like ritual and 'worldview'. But perhaps we need to recognize that the sources and contexts of religious action have changed. Scholars, whenever applicable, ought to let go of well-entrenched preferences for studying static categories, routines and cycles that emphasize certain notions of *order* as stasis or equilibrium.

## THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

If the nature of belief and worship is changing because of the effects of globalization on our notions of what is familiar, there is a need to rethink how religious individuals are depicted in our modern and globalized society. The meeting of different cultures due to increased connectivity has proved that religion has not faded from modern society: on the contrary, there is a seeming vibrancy of new forms of religious commitments and values. Sociological accounts in various parts of the world have shown that globalization has yielded two opposing tendencies in terms of religious believing: it has enabled a New-Age type of syncretism, on one hand, and fundamentalism, on the other hand, with many variations in between. The eclecticism and individualism of New Age-like religion is a product of the turn to the self that Emile Durkheim's 'cult of the



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individual' anticipated at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> This serves as an elementary depiction of nature of the 'modern religious self' in the globalized world. Religious individuals think in terms of two prevailing *logics* that guide action: the logic of *bricolage* and the logic of the reduction of complexity. The logic of *bricolage* was discussed by Claude Levi-Strauss in his attempt to understand primitive thought. He explains:

The 'bricoleur' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions... It is to be defined only by its potential use or, putting this another way and in the language of the 'bricoleur' himself, because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that 'they may always come in handy'.<sup>10</sup>

With the increasing use of mass media and the Internet, modern individuals are unrelentingly bombarded by influences coming from other parts of the world. The *bricoleur* keeps a stock of a whole set of tools, thinking that it may come in handy at some point. This tendency accounts for 'border-crossings' among religious individuals, like Christians who are acquainted with Buddhist meditation, or Muslims who read Kabbalah and Rumi mysticism, or seculars who

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<sup>9</sup>Michael Hill, "The New Age: A Sociological Assessment". In James R. Lewis (ed.), *The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of New Age Religions* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), 384.

<sup>10</sup>Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La Pensée Sauvage)*. (London: Wedenfeld and Nicholson, 1966 [1962]), 17-18.

resort to prayer beads and Hindu-style vegan diets. The Philippines is a fertile ground for such types of ‘border-crossings’: being a country with a majority Roman Catholic population, it is becoming commonplace seeing major branches of Buddhism and Hinduism, LGBTQ churches, New Age groups and Theosophical societies in key cities throughout the archipelago. Families encounter Islam not from Mindanao, but from fathers or siblings who convert to the religion during their stint in Saudi Arabia, Dubai or Malaysia. Middle class Filipinos do not hear of Buddhism in local Chinese temples, but by listening to the Dalai Lama’s talks on Youtube.

Paradoxically, this almost unbridled possibilities for innovation and change also feed insecurities that are resolved through religious radicalism and fundamentalism. Sociologists purport that that fundamentalism is exacerbated by the threat of being swallowed by secular Western values.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the above, the fundamentalist option, which is based on the logic of reducing complexity, is baffling and disconcerting to scholars and persons on the street alike. This is compounded with media reports associating religious radicalism and fundamentalism with beheadings, bombings and wars. But it must be noted that fundamentalism may be regarded as a *typical* response to the inequalities that are heightened in the present global order. The influx of information and the dismantling of borders has bombarded local communities with information from outside at a staggering rate as compared to previous centuries. While in certain cases this has led to greater openness and willingness to engage in new realities, in some others it has led to feelings of insecurity and wariness because it is perceived as outside intrusion to cherished values. The weight of the pressure is acutely felt by individuals, who then respond to a perceived threat through collective self-preservation strategies.

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<sup>11</sup>Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, both sociologists, edited a major work in three volumes on religious fundamentalism in *Secularization and Fundamentalism Reconsidered: Religion and the Political order* (New York: Paragon House, 1998). The research project provides a general theoretical approach to religious fundamentalism in the context of modern societies and looks at particular cases throughout the world.



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Besides these feelings of being threatened, a notable feature of globalization is also the diffusion and formation of new types of inequality. This fact has not escaped the attention of religious figures: the social encyclicals of contemporary Popes have called attention to the dangers such inequalities pose for the future of humanity. Pope Francis strongly emphasized this message in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, wherein he called attention to inequality, “the root of all social ills” (par. 202).<sup>12</sup> This strong admonition indirectly alludes to the ways by which capitalism has significantly changed in the context of globalization. If left unchecked, Pope Francis points out, we can see the worsening of injustice as inequality itself reaches global proportions and commands no respect from national boundaries anymore. This resonates with the view of Immanuel Wallerstein, who conceived of the present global order as a world system of core and peripheral nations organized by an unequal access to resources.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in this digital age connectivity afforded by Internet technologies produced new ways of victimizing people (e.g. cyber-bullying, identity theft, blackmailing). In the context of convivial arrangements, it can be seen how global flows erect new fortresses that deny others the use of resources and space. Religious fundamentalism in this regard is a manifestation of a broad rejection of the ‘otherness’ imposed by global powers on the margins. Basically it is ‘us-versus-them’ dynamics carried to global proportions, but are enacted and replicated in local conditions.

This leads the reflection on the ways by which scholars can approach religious minorities that feel threatened by the modern world. One example is the rise of traditionalist organizations like the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX). In approaching such groups, social scientists would need to ‘bracket’ prevalent views that speak of its

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<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*“, The Holy See website, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html#The\\_economy\\_and\\_the\\_distribution\\_of\\_income](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#The_economy_and_the_distribution_of_income) (accessed 7 February 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 11-12.

members as ‘schismatic’, ‘excommunicated’ and ‘right-wing’. In listening to life stories and testimonials of priests, lay workers and churchgoers who attended the ‘immemorial’ Tridentine Rite, it can be established that their resistance is psychological and sociological as much as it is doctrinal. Looking into doctrinal claims closely is not superfluous; in fact, it may be argued that doctrinal stances are related to the *linguistic competence* of members, which in turn is conditioned by educational background and social class. It is through this ability to exert pressure using interpretations of doctrine that groups like the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) localize Traditionalist dissent, which is worldwide in scope.<sup>14</sup> Members of traditionalist religious movements, therefore, are not people who retreat from the modern world and engage in nostalgia of the past; rather, they engage with it and in the process they reject modernity’s ontological base.

It is imperative for research, social scientific or theological, on religious identities to catch up with these trends. Right in the doorstep of our communities, there is also reason to suppose that subjectivities and patterns of relationships have been altered by inequalities of global proportions. One area where this trend is quite apparent is the mediatization of religious devotion. Devotional practices at the Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help in Baclaran have, in recent years, ventured into ‘online religion’, wherein notions of the sacred are transposed onto virtual space. Data suggests that a dynamic interplay of Internet technologies and culturally-sensitive notions of *loob* (innermost self) and *kapwa* (shared identity) is necessary in the maintenance of devotional practice.<sup>15</sup> Seminal research has been done in cases of ‘dual belonging’, that is, of individuals who profess to be

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<sup>14</sup> Manuel Victor J. Sapitula, “The Formation and Maintenance of Catholic Traditionalism: A Preliminary Sociological Appraisal”, *Philippine Social Sciences Review* vol. 62 no. 2 (July-December 2010): 71-99.

<sup>15</sup> Manuel Victor J. Sapitula and Cheryll Ruth R. Soriano “My Letter to Heaven via Email: Translocal Piety and Mediated Selves in Urban Marian Piety in the Philippines”, In Sun Sun Lim and Cheryll Ruth R. Soriano (eds.) *Asian Perspectives on Digital Culture: Emerging Phenomena, Enduring Concepts*, Routledge Internationalising Media Studies Series (London: Routledge, 2015 [forthcoming]).



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members of two religious traditions.<sup>16</sup> An example would be Filipinos claiming a certain attachment to Buddhist meditation while retaining their Catholic/Christian identification. More than religious rituals and official creeds, ‘transcendent experiences’ gained from meditation are quite decisive in forming an individual’s sense of the sacred/divine.

Conversely, serious attention also needs to be given to new forms of ‘othering’ outsiders and reasserting traditional privileges in the midst of change. As an example, migrant Muslims in Metro Manila and elsewhere in Luzon and Visayas live in a state of ‘hierarchized conviviality’ with majority Christian residents.<sup>17</sup> While there are already documented accounts of internal migration of Muslims to traditionally Christian areas in the country, this trend has been exacerbated by the conflict in Mindanao during the last forty years. We now find a considerable number of Muslim ‘secondary communities’ in Metro Manila, the rest of Luzon and Visayas, which are traditional strongholds of Christian populations.<sup>18</sup> Despite greater encounters between Muslims and Christians because of internal migration and settling to new jurisdictions, there has been a slow change of perceptions from both sides because of mutual distrust and discrimination. It is thus usual for that the two groups, despite living side-by-side in various neighborhoods, are not really ‘living together’.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Amy Frykholm documented cases of Christians embracing other religions while retaining their identification with Christianity in *Double belonging: one person, two faiths*, published in *Christian Century* vol. 128 no.2 (January 25): 20-23. For a theological appraisal of dual or multiple religious belonging from a Catholic perspective, see Peter C Phan, “Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church”, *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 495-519. Social scientific studies have also been dealt with this topic, in particular Rose Drew’s *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> See *2005 Philippine Human Development Report: Peace, Human Security and Human Development in the Philippines*, 2nd edition by the Human Development Network (Quezon City: HDN Secretariat, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Akiko Watanabe, “The Formation of Migrant Muslim Communities in Metro Manila”, *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* vol. 22 no. 2 (2007): 68–96.

<sup>19</sup> Manuel Victor J. Sapitula, “Overcoming ‘hierarchized conviviality’ in the Manila metropolis: religious pluralism and urbanization in the Philippines”, In Chiara Formichi (ed.) *Religious Pluralism, State and Society in Asia*. Routledge Religion in Contemporary Asia Series (London: Routledge, 2014), 138-152.

## THEOLOGY, RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND RELIGIOUS LITERACY

As religious beliefs and practices are increasingly covered by the ambit of globalization, there are increased chances that different religious traditions will find themselves in common spaces and thus craft ways to live amicably with each other. Closer interaction among different traditions offer possibilities for greater understanding, but it may also foment anxiety, distrust and worst, violence, unless there is a workable system of reducing these tendencies. On the level of formal education, *religious literacy* assures that a baseline level of knowledge and communication competencies is in place among students. Religious literacy is defined by the American Academy of Religion as “the ability to discern and analyze the intersections of religion with social, political, and cultural life”.<sup>20</sup> The aim of religious literacy, it is surmised, is to decrease, if not totally eliminate, prejudice and the violence that results from it.

While countries like the United States have gone far in articulating an integrated vision and approach for religious literacy in the school system, such efforts are still emerging in the Philippines. As of this writing, there is no clear policy guidelines yet regarding the encouragement of religious literacy in basic education. A Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS) order (no. 108, series of 1987) affirmed that the provision of religious education is consistent with the 1987 Constitution. Such religious education should not incur any additional cost to government and the teachers are designated by religious authorities. This policy remained fundamentally unchanged and was reaffirmed in the Department of Education (DepEd) order no. 49, series of 2009. These directives speak of religious instruction provided by religious authorities; while it offers a basic framework for religion, this type is denomination-specific in approach. In 2011, the DepEd moved for a more religiously-neutral

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<sup>20</sup> American Academy of Religion, *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States* (Atlanta, GA: AAR Religion in the Schools Task Force, 2010), 4.



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approached advocated by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation Initiative's *Face to Faith*, a modular program that trains students in conflict-prone areas to assume a more open-minded approach to religious issues.<sup>21</sup> There is also a promising push for religious literacy in the proposed *Introduction to World Religions and Belief Systems* as a specialized subject in Senior High School under the K-12 basic education program that was signed into law in 2013. Taken together, these two initiatives orient Filipino students to the complexities surrounding religious claims and identities and propose a broad-minded mindset to understand these complexities without sidestepping real differences where they exist.

This direction carries with it a hope and a challenge for researchers, educators and community builders. The direction toward religious literacy is a recognition of 'unavoidable pluralism' that characterizes the modern global era. While religiously monolithic societies still exist,<sup>22</sup> it is quite impossible in today's mediatized world to bypass the experiences of people from minority religions. In terms of research, religious literacy has to be corroborated with greater interest in the experiences of religions other than the one professed by the majority. For social science research in particular, this means more resources allocated for establishing baseline and specialized knowledge about Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, as well as indigenous belief systems. Theologians and religious scholars also have a distinct role in facilitating this movement by crafting spaces of engagement between their and others' respective religious traditions and theologies. These voices of engagement hopefully reach communities where believers of different faiths encounter themselves in everyday encounters.

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<sup>21</sup> For more information on the Face to Faith program, see <http://www.facetofaithonline.org/>, sponsored by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation Initiative. The Philippines, through the Department of Education, is one of twenty (20) countries supporting this approach.

<sup>22</sup> The Philippines may be considered as an example of a religiously monolithic society, with roughly 90% of its population identifying with Christianity. This is quite similar to the experience of other Southeast Asian countries that have significant Buddhist (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) or Muslim (Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia) populations.

## PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

To conclude this reflection, it is relevant to once again revisit the question of how scholars can creatively engage with emerging notions of 'being religious' today. Globalization has significantly altered our social and individual lives, and changes have posed challenges on religious belief and practice. Individuals dabble with multiple religious identities and alternative spaces like the Internet in practicing their faith commitments. Transformations in understanding 'the field' allow for an accounting of the dynamism of transnational flows. There is a perceived need for relevant set of research skills that understand the promises and perils of living in radically different social environments. These as the ingredients of 'the new normal' in the context of our globalized world.

The experiences of countries like the Philippines with regard to globalization highlight the continued relevance of religion even in the midst of significant modern transitions. These experiences have to be seriously considered and utilized as starting points for research and reflection in the social sciences, as well as in theology and religious studies. Innovation and change has been achieved within religion itself, but it has also been actualized more so *through* religion acting on non-religious domains of life. Much can still be done to understand the dynamics involved in this process. The social sciences, being in the forefront of individual, cultural and social realities that people find themselves in, will have to invest theoretical perspectives and research tools in making sense of these transitions. Theology and religious studies may well benefit from insights from social scientific research as points of departure for reflection and further analysis. While the goals of theology and religious studies may differ from the social sciences, theological research can always look to the empirical contributions of the social sciences to ground its claims.

In the face of this increasingly complex scenario, research has an important role to play in fostering a climate of dialogue and mutual understanding. It is reasonable to assume that the global trends will continue, and the effects of globalization will be more felt in all domains of life. This calls for nuanced responses in our local



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communities, which will have to confront the instabilities and opportunities of the global order. Research endeavors help in this regard by mapping uncertain terrains through rigorous ‘fact-finding’ and the crafting of alternative frameworks. Personal bonds and communities are still crafted; what changes, in the context of globalization, are the ways and means by which individuals craft them. It is thus imperative that the people of our time be provided with necessary linguistic and technical competencies to imagine new forms of togetherness and distill powerful modes of social hope and collective responsibility.

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