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SOCIAL ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE AGE OF GLOBALISATION

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation reshapes the terrains of community, authority, and meaning. It both shrinks and multiplies moral horizons. Religion has proven remarkably adaptive in this era. It is sometimes a force for cohesion, social service and global ethics; at other times it is a vector of exclusion, violence, or political influence that undermines plural democracy. This paper argues that the central social role of religion under globalisation is dialectical. It simultaneously consolidates identity and enables transnational solidarity and dialogical pluralism, and, in other instances, fuels sectarianism. Engaging secularization debates, communitarian and liberal theory, hermeneutics, and contemporary theology, this paper offers an analytical framework, cross-continental case studies, and policy proposals for harnessing religion's civic benefits while curbing its harms. Key recommendations include (1) institutional partnerships with faith-based organizations (FBOs) for crisis response, (2) strengthened interfaith civic education, (3) legal safeguards for religious minorities, and (4) digital literacy and counter-extremism initiatives. The paper situates arguments with evidence from 2020–2025 literature, reports, and events — including FBO humanitarian metrics, digital religion analyses from the pandemic, interfaith climate mobilization, and documented episodes of religious nationalism. It suggests a pragmatic ethics for religious actors and secular public navigating the age of globalisation.

Keywords: Globalisation, Religion, Partnership, Crisis response, Civic education, Pluralism.

I. Introduction — Problem, Stakes, Thesis

In 2023 and 2024, global faith networks convened thousands of religious leaders at the Parliament of the World's Religions and at COP-related interfaith forums; simultaneously, digital platforms broadcast extremist propaganda across borders and diasporic religious politics reshaped civic life in multiple democracies. These twin realities — the mobilizing power of religion for global public goods and its exploitation for exclusionary politics — frame the central puzzle of this paper.

Problem Statement

How should scholars, religious leaders, and policymakers conceptualize and respond to the social role of religion under globalisation so as to preserve religious liberty and social cohesion while mitigating conflict and exclusion?

Thesis (argumentative spine)

Religion's social role in the age of globalisation is dialectical and adaptive: it is a central resource for identity, ethical mobilisation, and humanitarian action; simultaneously it can amplify conflict, exclusion, and political domination. The appropriate response is neither blanket secularization nor abdication to religious actors, but a nuanced policy and ethical architecture that engages religious capacities for social good while constraining their dangers. This requires rethinking secular publicness, integrating religious actors into global governance where appropriate, and strengthening pluralist civic norms.

II. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

1. Defining key terms precisely

Religion: Institutional (churches, mosques, sanghas), personal (piety, practice), cultural (ritualized identity, heritage), and spiritual (existential meaning). The **both/and** approach is adopted: substantive (belief/ritual) and functional (community, ethics, social capital).

Globalisation: A multifaceted process—economic interdependence, transnational flows of people and information, cultural diffusion, political interlinkage and technological compression of space and time.

Social Role: Religion's effects on ethics, identity, social cohesion, humanitarian action, peacebuilding, conflict, and the global public sphere.

2. Theoretical lenses deployed

Secularization vs. Desecularization: Contemporary research indicates the global picture is heterogenous; in many contexts, globalisation produces renewed religious energies and transnational religious platforms rather than straightforward secularization (Szendro, 2025)

Communitarianism vs. Liberal Individualism: Religious communities assert moral enculturation and social norms that can clash with liberal universalism. This is evidenced in the intensified tensions in transnational contexts where different moral grammars meet. A recent case at hand is the clash in the socio-religious circumstance of Iran, where the agitations for more liberalism in governance and culture led the government to clamp down on the protesting young peoples, and many lives were lost. This is viewed as one of the immediate factors that precipitated the current war and unrest in the middle east. (*Politico*, 2026)

Critical Theory: Religious institutions are political actors that can reproduce or resist domination; their transnational capacities call for critique of power, inequality, and institutional capture. (Beyer, 2013)

Hermeneutics & Theological Anthropology: How traditions interpret sacred texts in light of global challenges shapes constructive or destructive outcomes (e.g., liberationist readings enabling social justice).

Network & Actor-Mapping: Treat religious actors as nodes in transnational networks (FBOs, diasporic communities, formal religious bodies) possessing soft power and mobilization capacity.

III. Religion as Social Cohesion and Identity Anchor

Argument

When local ties are disrupted by migration, urbanisation, and digital deteritorialization, religion frequently supplies durable identity frameworks, social capital, and community-based resources.

Case studies & evidence

1. **Diaspora Religious Institutions** — Nigerian and other African churches in the UK and USA:
    - These congregations serve as cultural anchors, provide mutual aid, mediate immigrant integration, and maintain ritual continuity (social capital, identity preservation). Empirical studies and field reports (2020–2024) document churches' role in welfare and civic orientation for migrants. (McKenna, 2024)

2. **Transnational Catholic & Muslim Networks**:
    - The global Catholic Church, through diocesan networks and CRS, mobilizes resources across borders for development and emergency relief (CRS annual reports show scale of outreach). (CRS Annual Report 2023, https://www.crs.org retrieved 12th January, 2026)
    - The transnational Muslim ummah and Sufi networks also create cross-border solidarities, informal remittance flows, and charity networks (Zakat funds, diasporic ties). (Szendro, 2013)

3. **Indigenous Religious Revivals**:
    - Examples: Māori spiritual resurgence in New Zealand fosters identity recovery and ecological stewardship (revitalization of customary spirituality linked with environmental policy). Globalisation often catalyzes reactive cultural reassertion rather than cultural erasure. (Szendro, 2013)

4. **New Hybrid Spiritualities & Wellness Commodification**:

Global flows of spiritual practices (yoga, mindfulness, New Age) produce hybrid forms of spirituality that meet the existential needs of cosmopolitan publics — raising questions about appropriation, commodification, and authenticity. Contemporary scholarship tracks these hybridizations and their social effects. (Piazza, 2022).

Philosophical analysis

From a communitarian perspective, religion supplies shared narratives and practices necessary for solidarity; from a liberal standpoint, the same shared structures may limit individual autonomy. The pragmatic resolution lies in enabling associative life while guarding individual rights — a pluralist social contract that recognizes religious associations as civic partners, not sovereign authorities.

IV. Religion as a Catalyst for Social Justice, Humanitarian Action, and Global Ethics

Argument

Religious traditions contain ethical vocabularies and mobilizational capacities that have been central to global humanitarianism and transnational moral advocacy — particularly in crises where secular actors cannot easily operate.

Case studies & evidence

1. **Catholic Relief Services (CRS) & Other Large FBOs**:
    - CRS's annual reports (2022–2024) document massive humanitarian outreach (hundreds of millions reached, health, education, disaster response). Such organizations often operate in contexts where state capacity is weak. (CRS Annual Report 2023, CRS)

2. **ACT Alliance & Interchurch Cooperation**:
    - Coalitions of churches and ecumenical actors coordinate humanitarian responses and climate resilience programming globally. These coalitions translate theological commitments to universal care into practical projects. (parliamentofreligions.org retrieved in 10th December, 2025)

3. **Faith-Based Climate Mobilisation — Faith For Our Planet (FFOP)**:
    - FFOP (launched 2022) exemplifies a new model: training faith leaders for climate action, engaging at COP negotiations, and building a religiously-informed climate constituency. FFOP's fellowship and workshops show faith actors reframing environmental stewardship as a theological imperative. (faithforourplanet.org)

4. **Local FBOs & Health Services**:
    - Missionary hospitals and faith clinics in Africa and Asia deliver primary care where state provision is uneven — their trust ties enable vaccine drives, maternal health projects, and community outreach. Data from FBO reports and academic studies (2020–2024) document these impacts. (CRS, CRS Annual Report 2023)

5. **Interfaith Advocacy & Parliament of the World's Religions**:
    - Interfaith assemblies produce ethical charters and issue advocacy on human rights, climate justice, and refugee protection. The Parliament's 2023 Chicago gathering included UN and civil society voices, representing a form of global moral diplomacy. (parliamentofreligions.org, Crary, 2023 in AP News)

Theological depth

Liberation theology and prophetic religious traditions provide moral frameworks that emphasize structural injustice and solidarity with the poor. When such theologies are activated transnationally, they can produce effective advocacy for systemic reform (e.g., climate justice, debt relief). Theologically grounded solidarity leverages both local moral credibility and global organizational reach.

V. Religion as a Source of Conflict, Exclusion, and Political Mobilisation

Argument

Religion's mobilizational power can be exploited for exclusionary and violent ends. Globalisation amplifies reach: extremist propaganda crosses borders; diasporic politics import homeland tensions; religious nationalism converts spiritual identities into state ideology.

Case studies & evidence

1. **Extremist Transnational Movements (ISIS, Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab)**:
    - Extremist groups use global communication networks for recruitment and fundraising. UN and security reports document how such actors exploit grievances, economic precarity, and transnational diasporic links. Recent security analysis highlights child recruitment and the role of certain social structures in radicalization (Papale & Castelli, 2025; https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ChildRecruitmentLake_Chad_Basin-1.pdf?.

2. **Religious Nationalism & Diasporic Politics**:
    - **Hindutva and the Indian Diaspora**: Elements of Hindu nationalist politics have spread into diaspora communities (UK, US), contributing to intercommunal tensions in places like Leicester (2022 unrest) and debates about diasporic political influence. Scholarship and news reports trace the communicative strategies of Hindutva transnational networks. (Dutta et al, 2024; Koshy, 2024)
    - **Buddhist Nationalism (Myanmar)**: Religious identity fused with ethno-nationalism has led to persecution of Rohingya and democratic backsliding; global flows of information and diaspora lobbying complicate international response. (Szendro, 2013; https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ChildRecruitmentLake_Chad_Basin-1.pdf?

3. **Politicized Religion in Democratic Polities (Brazil, Nigeria, USA)**:
    - Evangelical political movements in Brazil and parts of Latin America have reshaped electoral politics and policy. In Nigeria, religious cleavage interacts with ethnic and regional conflict dynamics. Recent studies highlight the effect of transnational religious networks in empowering local political actors. (Szendro, 2013)

4. **Proselytization, Conversion, and Cultural Imperialism**:
    - Aggressive proselytization can cause social rupture in plural societies, particularly when coupled with economic inducements or soft power initiatives. Tensions arise when conversion is perceived as resource-backed cultural imposition — a recurring theme in scholarship on religion and globalization.

Philosophical analysis

From critical theory, the instrumentalization of religion for political ends demonstrates the dangers of conflating spiritual authority with coercive power. Communitarian claims to cultural integrity sometimes mask domination; liberal safeguards for conscience and equal citizenship are necessary but not sufficient. Ethically, we must ask: how do religious narratives justify exclusivist politics, and how can public reason contest such claims without denying democratic freedoms?

VI. Religion in the Global Public Sphere: Diplomacy, Bioethics, and Digital Religion

1. Religious Diplomacy & Soft Power

- The Vatican's contemporary diplomatic role — mediation efforts in Colombia, ongoing humanitarian engagement in Ukraine, and periodic mediation efforts — illustrate religious soft power in international affairs. Commentators debate Vatican efficacy, but the institution's moral authority often opens negotiation channels not available to secular actors. (Kurbalija, 2025, in https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/can-the-vatican-mediate-peace-today, retrieved 11th January, 2026; aleteia.org, retrieved in 11th January, 2026)

2. Religion & Global Bioethics

- Religious perspectives influence international debates on reproductive rights, end-of-life ethics, genetic technologies, and pandemic response. Religious moral reasoning enters UN consultations and WHO discussions, shaping policy framing (e.g., the role of religious leaders in vaccine acceptance during COVID-19). (Madubuko, 2025; McKenna, 2024)

3. Digital Religion — Opportunities and Risks

- Pandemic years (2020–2022) accelerated migration of worship online: livestreamed liturgy, virtual pilgrimage, faith apps, and digital pastoral care expanded reach but also created echo chambers. Studies show both resilience (sustaining communities) and risk (propaganda amplification). Cases include small congregations that tripled virtual attendance, as reported by Wired and scholarly studies on online worship. (WIRED, tandfonline.com, surface.syr.edu).

VII. Counterarguments, Limits, and the Complexity of Secularization Claims

Counterargument 1: Globalisation necessarily leads to secularization

Empirical evidence undermines simplistic secularization claims: globalization often produces **plural outcomes** — desecularization in some regions and privatization in others. Comparative studies show religious resurgence or transformation rather than universal decline.

Counterargument 2: Religious actors are always regressive

While some religious movements resist liberal norms, many faith actors advance human rights, climate justice, and humanitarian relief. It is analytically lazy to conflate all religion with conservatism; nuance is required (e.g., interfaith climate coalitions, faith-led human rights campaigns). (faithforourplanet.org, parliamentofreligions.org)

Analytical nuance

Religion's social role must be treated as **plural, performative, and context-sensitive**. The same theological resources that justify exclusion may also inspire liberation; hence policy and scholarly responses must be finely calibrated.

VIII. Normative Framework: An Ethic for Public Engagement with Religion

I propose four normative principles to guide civic engagement with religion under globalisation:

1. **Pluralist Recognition** — Affirm religious associations as part of civil society, while preserving secular institutions' neutrality.

2. **Subsidiarity & Partnership** — Where FBOs deliver services efficiently and ethically, the state should partner with them under transparent standards. (CRS)
3. **Rights Protection** — Strengthen legal protections for religious minorities and conscience rights; ensure equality before law.
4. **Dialogical Responsibility** — Encourage hermeneutical openness and interfaith educational programs to counter exclusivism and radicalization.

IX. Policy Recommendations (Practical & Institutional)

A. For International Organizations & States

1. **Institutionalise FBO Partnerships**
   - Formalize emergency response integration (e.g., UN-FBO coordination platforms) with accountability standards. CRS and ACT Alliance models provide administrative lessons. (CRS Annual Report 2023, parliamentofreligions.org)

2. **Support Interfaith Climate Initiatives**
   - Provide seed funding and convening spaces for projects like Faith For Our Planet to translate religion-motivated mobilization into local climate resilience. (faithforourplanet.org)

3. **Digital Literacy & Counter-Extremism**
   - Invest in community digital literacy, counter-narrative programs, and partnerships with religious leaders to combat online radicalization. Pandemic studies show religion's online reach is powerful — both helpful and dangerous. (surface.syr.edu, WIRED)

4. **Protect Minority Rights**
   - Update legal frameworks to guard against religious nationalism undermining plural citizenship; strengthen anti-discrimination enforcement.

B. For Religious Institutions

1. **Ethical Review & Transparency**
   - Implement codes of conduct for political engagement; report funding sources and political activities in transnational networks.

2. **Interfaith Civic Education**
   - Develop curricula for congregations that combine theological integrity with civic pluralism. The Parliament of the World's Religions and other bodies can be models for content. (parliamentofreligions.org)

C. For Academics & Civil Society

1. **Interdisciplinary Research Hubs**
   - Fund centers studying religion & globalization (digital religion, transnational networks, climate ethics).

2. **Community Dialogues & Reparative Practices**
    - Support community-level restorative dialogues in post-conflict and ethnically mixed areas.

X. Illustrative Vignettes (micro-case studies)

1. **Leicester, UK (2022 unrest)** — diasporic tensions imported from homeland politics (Hindu-Muslim clashes) illustrate how transnational identities become locally combustible without mediating civic institutions. (The Guardian)

2. **Faith For Our Planet (FFOP)** — rapid formation (2022–2023) and COP engagement exemplify how faith leaders can be trained as climate actors, bridging theological motivation and policy advocacy. (faithforourplanet.org

3. **COVID-era digital adaptation** — small congregations scaled online attendance during lockdowns (Wired, academic studies), demonstrating resilience and new pastoral models but also challenges to sacramental theology and community discipline. (WIRED, tandfonline.com)

4. **Vatican engagement in Ukraine & wider diplomacy** — the Vatican's mediation role shows the unique soft power religious institutions can wield in peacemaking. Critics contest the effectiveness, but the Vatican remains a recognized interlocutor. (Diplo, aleteia.org)

5. **CRS & ACT Alliance in humanitarian crises** — their scale and reach show how religious ethics translate into practical care, especially where trust networks and local presence matter. (CRS Annual Report 2023, parliamentofreligions.org)

6. **Lake Chad region & Boko Haram** — UNIDIR reports document how socio-economic marginalization and certain educational structures (almajiri) have been implicated in child recruitment; religion is instrumentalized within broader structural dynamics. (UNIDIR → Building a more secure world.)

XI. Methodological note (for scholars converting this piece into an empirical study)

This position paper synthesizes:

- recent peer-reviewed literature (2020–2025),
- NGO and FBO annual reports,
- reputable journalism and policy reports (e.g., Diplo, AP, Guardian),
- case study documentation (UNIDIR, academic monographs). Future empirical research should combine network analysis of transnational religious actors, ethnographic fieldwork in key sites (diaspora congregations, FBO offices), and mixed-methods evaluation of program outcomes.

XII. Conclusion — Reframing the Question

Globalisation does not render religion irrelevant; it rather **reconfigures** religion's social role. The task is to craft an ethical and institutional architecture that harnesses religion's capacity for solidarity, care, and moral imagination, while constraining its capacity to exclude or to be instrumentalized for coercive politics and violent consequences. Pragmatically, this means

forming robust partnerships between secular and religious actors, investing in interfaith education, protecting minority rights, and addressing the digital battleground where much of religion's future public role will be contested. Religion, in the global age, especially from the use and/or abuse of its potentials, offers a paradoxical promise — it can be both balm and blade. The worthiness of a global civic order depends on whether we can encourage religious resources that heal and restrain those that harm. It is a task that all adherents are called to. The basic step remains allowing religion to be what it is, and refusing its instrumentalization.

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