Transnational religion:
Hindu and Muslim movements

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Abstract In this article I deal with transnational Hindu and Muslim movements. I reject the common assertion that migrant communities are conservative in religious and social matters by arguing that ‘traditionalism’ requires considerable ideological creativity and that this significantly transforms previous practices and discourses. I suggest that religious movements, active among migrants, develop cosmopolitan projects that can be viewed as alternatives to the cosmopolitanism of the European Enlightenment. This raises a number of challenges concerning citizenship, integration and political loyalty for governmentality in the nation-states in which these cosmopolitan projects are carried out. I suggest that rather than looking at religious migrants as at best conservative and at worst terrorist one should perhaps pay some attention to the creative moments in human responses to new challenges and new environments.

Religion is a conceptual category, which, like similar categories such as ‘culture’, ‘ritual’ and ‘society’, has had organized and novel understandings of social practices since the beginning of the nineteenth century (Asad 1993; van der Veer 2001). As a modern category it emerges together with nationalism as an ideology in discourses that oppose the ‘modern’ to the ‘traditional’. Theories that emphasize the transhistorical universality of ‘religion’ and the particular historicity of the nation underestimate the extent to which the nation form is universalized in modern history and determines the location of religion. Societies assume the nation form in the historical transformation we refer to as ‘modernity’ and it is this form that determines what is understood as the religious or the secular. This assertion is not a rephrasing of the secularization thesis, for there is not much evidence of the disappearance of religion or its marginality in public life in most societies. Rather, it emphasizes the importance of the nation-state for the location and nature of religion. Furthermore, theories that argue that religion is replaced by nationalism, such as those of Durkheim or of recent authors like Gellner and Anderson, neglect the continuing importance of nationalized religion in modern identity (Anderson 1991; Bellah 1973; Gellner 1983). In western Europe, at least, denominational differences are not completely obliterated in the process of national unification, but they are often hierarchically ‘encompassed’ (to use Louis Dumont’s term) as forms of national identity (Dumont 1980). This encompassment is expressed in many plural societies in well-worn slogans such as ‘unity in diversity’. In the modern nation-state religious difference does not immediately have to lead to questions of loyalty to the nation, although, as we shall see, this
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continues to be a delicate issue in relation to immigrant minorities that practise religions that seem difficult to assimilate.

Nation and transnation belong together in a more intimate way than is often realized (van der Veer 1995). Processes of globalization have been intrinsic to processes of state formation in both colonizing and colonized societies. This is not taken sufficiently into account in theories of globalization that posit the dissolution of the nation-state today as a consequence of the development of transnational governance and the global economy. In fact, since the nineteenth century nations have been formed as a consequence of transformations in the world system. The fundamental changes that we have seen over the past few decades undeniably have important consequences for the political and economic capacities of nation-states, but they certainly do not imply the dissolving of this societal form. It is important to remain aware of the great variation of state formation in the world and the variable effects of global capitalist transformations on the nation-state system. At the same time there can be little doubt that human interaction networks increasingly operate on a global scale (Mann 1999). One of the most important transformations we can point to is often called ‘the death of distance’, the idea being that communications in the broad sense (including telecommunications and transport) have brought everyone closer together. Migrant communities at the end of the twentieth century were thus different from those at the end of the nineteenth century because telephones, the Internet, television and aeroplanes bring them closer not only to home but also to members of the community in other places. Instead of forming singular migrant communities that try to keep in touch with home, they become diasporic networks with a multiplicity of nodes. Moreover, there is a global production of the imagination of ‘home’ in media like television and cinema, which affects both migrants and those who stay behind. The cultural distance from the traditions of ‘home’ can therefore not be conceptualized in the same ways as before. The notion of ‘culture’ itself has become increasingly problematic because it is hard to localize in discrete communities within bounded territories (van der Veer 1997).

The general observations that I have made here are meant to be introductory to the issues I want to address in this article. The first issue is that of the relationship between nation-states, nationalism and migrant religious communities. The second is that of the so-called religious conservatism of migrant communities. The final is that of alternative cosmopolitanisms. These issues are related in the perspective presented here, but can be disentangled for analytical purposes. My examples concern mainly transnational Muslim and Hindu communities.

Nation, migration and religion

An important issue often raised in relation to migrant religious communities is that of political loyalty either to the nation-state of immigration or to the nation-state of origin. Before the rise of the nation-state in Europe, this issue was raised not in relation to migration but to religious minorities. The European wars of religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were fought around the question of political loyalty. Can one be loyal to the state when one is not following the religion of the state? As Hobbes and other political thinkers realized, it was the nature of the state that was at issue here. One outcome of the political revolutions in America and France
of the late eighteenth century was that political loyalty could rest on citizenship instead of membership in the state church. This development led ultimately, for example in nineteenth-century Britain, to the ‘secular’ idea of the enfranchisement of the Roman Catholics and of dissenting minorities. Therefore, the definition of citizenship, and its connection not only to rights and obligations but also to cultural notions and practices of belonging and community, become crucial (Turner 1993).

One of the central elements in the debate in Europe about the integration of migrant communities, and especially Muslims, in society is the question of political loyalty. Whereas in the nineteenth century Roman Catholics in Protestant countries like Britain or Holland were often accused of being loyal to ‘the Pope in Rome’, Muslims today are either accused of being loyal to Mecca (and receive money from the Saudis) or to their nation-states of origin. In the Netherlands, where around 700,000 Muslims (less than 3 per cent of the population) live, a recent report of the Internal Security Agency (BVD) argues that mosques that are supported from ‘outside’ are forces that work against the integration of Muslims in Dutch society. Suspicions that Muslim migrants have their loyalties elsewhere has, obviously, been strongly reinforced by the terrorist assault on the USA on 11 September 2001. The fact that there are terrorist networks of radical Muslims operating in many Western societies is justifiably seen as a threat to the security of these nation-states. Moreover, the enthusiasm some Muslim youngsters have shown for Bin Laden’s actions has been highly publicized, discussed as unacceptable provocation to the nation-state and thrown doubt on their loyalty. In the Netherlands, the decision of some Moroccan newspaper sellers in November 2001 to stop distributing a newspaper that carried a Koranic quotation in Arabic on its cover threw further doubt on Muslim participation in what the Dutch perceive to be an open society. In debates about religious points of view Muslim citizens are regularly requested to show their allegiance to Dutch norms and values, and to the laws of the land. Some of this is simply a juridical demand connected with citizenship, but it does single out Muslims. There is discernible moral panic that transcends the language of rights and obligations. The political philosopher Charles Taylor (1998) expresses the general idea behind this anxiety when he argues that ‘secularism in some form is necessary for the democratic life of religiously diverse societies.’ Starting with John Stuart Mill (1993) liberal thinkers have felt that religion is likely to be a threat to freedom and democracy. Muslims in particular have often been portrayed as fanatically pursuing the imposition of Islamic values on non-Muslims. In Western Europe, the burning of copies of Salman Rushdie’s Satanic verses did more than anything else to reinforce the image of intolerant Islam and to highlight the conflict between liberal conceptions of citizenship and religious conceptions of collective action in the public sphere (Asad 1993).

Besides this general, secularist unease with the role of public religion in the nation-state there is the problem of dual citizenship and the role of religion in transnational linkages. Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands are often still citizens of their nation-states of origin. For both Turkey and Morocco the loyalty of their transnational communities continues to be of crucial economic and political importance. These states make concerted efforts to control the appointment of religious officials such as imams in the migrant communities because it is religion that ties these migrants to the nation (Salih 2001). Moreover, these states have a
vested interest in controlling the education of such officials. One could speak of tran-
national state policies not only in economic and political matters but also in religious
ones. Migrant communities, therefore, have to negotiate the religious policies of both
the nation of immigration and the nation of origin.

Questions of multiple citizenship and religion have gained priority on the Euro-
pean political agenda. Hyphenated identities, which have become of great importance
in identity politics in the USA, are now also increasingly important in Europe and
Asia. To illustrate this development and to demonstrate that transnational religious
movements are crucial in it, I want to examine the case of India.

India has seen the emergence of a special kind of hyphenated identity: the non-
resident Indian (NRI). The Foreign Exchange Regulations Act of 1973 includes in this
category; (1) citizens of India living abroad for the purpose of carrying on a business
or career but declaring their intention to stay in India for an indefinite period; (2)
persons of Indian origin holding a passport of another country – one is of Indian
origin if one has held an Indian passport or if either of one’s parents or grandparents
was Indian. The wife of a person of Indian origin is held to be of Indian origin too.
Thus, neither citizenship nor residence is a criterion for deciding who belongs to this
category, but instead ‘origin’ is used. In this sense it has much in common with the
German genealogical definition according to which migrant communities in eastern
Europe belong to the German nation and have the right to return to Germany. One
reason for the Indian state to create this category is to raise foreign exchange, for
NRIs are allowed to deposit money in Indian banks with competitive, guaranteed rates
of interest. However, I would suggest that the main reason is not economic but
political. It is striking that the primary targets of this policy are not the lower-class
migrant labourers in the Gulf region, although they are among the migrants and by far
the most important economic actors in terms of remittances and other effects on the
Indian economy. Nor do the older migrant communities of indentured labourers and
their descendants, or even the older merchant communities, form the target of this
policy. Rather, it is the new Hindu middle-class professional and entrepreneurial
migrant, especially in the USA, that forms an important focus for Indian politics. In
1998 the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) proposed further changes,
such as the introduction of a PIO (person of Indian origin) card with a number of
benefits attached to it. In 2001 the Indian government, led by the BJP, announced the
appointment of an ambassador at large for NRIs and PIOs in the embassy in
Washington. It is ironic that a party that derives so much of its political gain from a
campaign that stigmatizes the indigenous Muslim community as ‘foreign’ is so
interested in Indians who actually live in foreign lands. Such Indians are primarily
perceived as Hindus and Hindu nationalism mobilizes large groups of Hindu migrants
all over the world. ‘Achievements’ like the nuclear explosions of 1998, for example,
enhanced enthusiasm among non-resident Indians in the USA. The announcement of
international sanctions against India led to successful fundraising by the Indian gov-
ernment among these American NRIs in the USA. Transnational investment, global
politics and the cultural capital of ‘belonging’ go hand in hand here (Kurien 1999 and
2001).

In his impressive work on the network society and the power of identity, Manuel
Castells (1997) argues that while the legitimizing identities of the state are declining
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in the information age, resistance identities and project identities (aiming at total societal transformation) are on the rise. In his view, social movements that react against three fundamental threats produce these identities. These are:

- globalization, which dissolves the autonomy of institutions, organizations and communication systems where people live. Reaction against networking and flexibility, which blur the boundaries of membership and involvement, individualize social relationships of production, and induce the structural instability of work, space, and time. And reaction against the crisis of the patriarchal family at the roots of the transformation of mechanisms of security building, socialization, sexuality, and therefore of personality systems. When the world becomes too large to be controlled, social actors aim at shrinking it back to their size and reach.

(Castells 1997: 66)

Castells’s observations are useful but, at the same time, things look somewhat different when one examines Indian social movements with a global reach. I want to look at two of them, one Hindu, the other Muslim, but both originating in India.

The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), founded in 1964 by leaders of the militant Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Hindu guru Swami Chinmayanand, is a Hindu revivalist movement that simultaneously tries to reach out globally to all Hindus in the world and to mobilize Hindus in India for anti-Muslim politics (van der Veer 1994). The most important action of the VHP between 1984 and 1992 was to mobilize Hindus for the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, a mosque allegedly built on a Hindu site. Not only has this action reached its target of destroying the sixteenth-century mosque but it has also made the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a political party allied to both the VHP and RSS, the largest party in India. The issue of building a temple for the god Rama on the site of the destroyed temple continues to be raised by the VHP, especially during major elections.

What concerns us here are the contradictory faces of the Vishva Hindu Parishad. On the one hand, the VHP is clearly a movement that promotes Hindu nationalism with an anti-secular and anti-Muslim slant and, as such, it continues much of the religious nationalist rhetoric and many of the methods that such movements have been employing since the late nineteenth century. It resists Westernization and globalization in so far as they are portrayed as ‘foreign’ threats to the basic Hindu values of the Indian nation. Muslims as a community signify the ‘foreign’ as ‘the enemy within’. Ideologically, they are portrayed as ‘converts’, having their allegiance outside India. The VHP argues that these people do not belong to India, but to Pakistan or Arabia, and thus have to be either religiously purified by reconversion to Hinduism or ethnically cleansed by forced emigration.

On the other hand, the VHP is a movement that is very active globally and one of the prime agents of the globalization of Hinduism. In the USA it has been active since 1974, following sizeable immigration from India. The anti-Muslim politics central to its activities in India makes little sense in the USA. Anti-globalization rhetoric, which emphasizes restrictions on foreign capital flowing into Indian companies, is con-
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spiciously absent from the VHP propaganda in the USA and rightly so because its supporters there are strongly in favour of the liberalization and globalization of the economy. As NRIs they also have direct personal advantage in the free flow of capital. The focus of the VHP in the United States is, as with many religious movements globally, on the family. The great fear of Indian immigrants to the USA is perhaps not so much the threat to the patriarchal nature of the Hindu family, for many of these migrants are well-educated professionals and both men and women are income earners, as the struggle to reproduce Hindu culture in a foreign environment in order to socialize their children into the hybridity of Indian-Americans. The fear is often that the children will lose all touch with the culture of their parents and thus, in some sense, be lost to them. Both Internet chat groups and youth camps are organized by the VHP to keep Hinduism alive among young Indians in the USA. As Arvind Rajagopal justifiably observes, to be able to recruit members the VHP needs different tactics and different objectives in different places. In India it is a nationalist movement, but in the USA it is a global religious movement (Rajagopal 1997). Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) work on globalization consistently has reminded us of how important it is to keep in view these disjunctions and differences in global flows.

The VHP benefited from the great success of the serialization of the religious epic Ramayana between 1987 and 1988 on Durdharshan, Indian national television. It not only became the most popular programme ever seen on Indian television but also turned out to be a social and political event of great significance. The estimated daily viewing figures were 40 to 60 million, while between 80 and 100 million people watched the most popular episodes. Newspaper reports say that Indian life ground to a standstill at the time of the broadcast. Hindus all over the country watched with a religious attitude, having in fact a darshan, a vision of the sacred, on Durdharshan television. Put on 26 videocassettes it became available for worldwide sale. The VHP not only benefited from this, but also actively used the media, such as videocassettes, for purposes of propaganda. The Hindu nationalist movement uses a combination of media strategies to promote their views both in India and abroad among the NRIs (Gillespie 1995; Rajagopal 2001).

In the context of current essentialist thinking about Islamic politics it is interesting to contrast the VHP, a highly political Hindu religious movement, with a Muslim movement originating in India that is explicitly apolitical. This is the Tablighi Jama’at, a Muslim revivalist movement founded in Delhi in the 1920s, but spread around the world, especially in areas of Indo-Pakistani migration, such as Britain, the USA, Canada, France, Belgium, Germany, South Africa and Morocco (Masud 2000). This is now the largest transnational Islamic movement, comparable to Christian Pentecostalism in scale and scope. Marc Gaborieau describes its modus operandi succinctly:

the invitation (tabligh) to Islam is not the affair of religious specialists, but the responsibility of all Muslims who must devote their time and money to it; one should not wait for people to come to hear the preaching, but rather preachers should travel to reach the people; preaching is done by self-financing itinerant groups; the mingling of all social classes is obligatory within these groups; the primary objective is to deepen the faith of those who are already Muslims,
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Proselytism toward non-Muslims being marginal; and the promotion of the unity of Muslims being a primary objective, theological as well as political controversies are prohibited inside the movement. (Gaborieau 1999: 21)

The tablighis, then, resemble some of the Christian evangelical movements that summon their fellow believers to wake up and be faithful.

The tablighis are professedly apolitical and this is a very deliberate stance. In that sense they do not resist any particular state or political formation. Instead, they have a ‘project’ in the way Manuel Castells defines it, an objective of total transformation of society not by the state but by social actors without political mediation. For the social scientist it makes no sense to call this apolitical, since it clearly has political effects. Rather, it is anti-statist and not involved in democratic politics. In that sense, it is obviously crucial for the tablighis to state that they are interested in neither the state nor politics. This enables them to work in a great variety of states, both Islamic and non-Islamic, without coming into open conflict with them. The aim of total transformation, however, conflicts in an indirect way with state policies of assimilation and multiculturalism, for they promote religious enclaves of correct beliefs and behaviour.

It is fascinating to see that this truly global movement, which can only be understood in terms of global labour migration, is opposed to modern communication media like television, cassettes, videos and the Internet, media that are used by almost all other global movements of this kind. This resistance to globalization and to information and communication technologies is quite exceptional among transnational Islamic movements. In fact, according to a recent argument by Eickelman and Anderson (1999), a transnational Muslim public sphere is being opened up through the use of information and communication technologies. The tablighis do not conform to this trend. The method of communication is oral and the expansion of the movement works through face-to-face encounters and the movement of groups who preach. Despite the first impression of an extremely loosely organized network of groups, there is in fact a clear hierarchy of command, centring on Delhi, but the apex of it is hardly penetrable for outsiders.

Both these movements, the VHP and the Tablighi Jama’at, operate globally but have different strategies, aims and objectives in different locales simultaneously. The VHP, however, continues to emphasize the intermediate, national level, while this level has an ideologically reduced significance for tablighis who stress the transnational unity of Muslims (‘umma). They have interesting and contradictory stances towards globalization, but it is clear that their transnational politics has an impact on the projects of a number of states to create civil societies.

Religious conservatism in migrant communities

It is often asserted and sometimes demonstrated that migrant communities become conservative in religious and social matters. They supposedly do so to retain their identity under the pressures of assimilation. Moreover, since they are often challenged in a multicultural environment to explain their beliefs and practices they tend to become more aware of them. Such awareness can lead to receptivity towards ideological reifications that take cultural and religious elements out of the daily flow of life.
and make them into markers of identity in a plural society. This kind of conservatism or reactionary traditionalism has been observed in a number of migrant groups, such as the Dutch Reformed Church migrants in Michigan (USA), Canada and Australia. In debates about Muslims in western Europe it is often remarked that they tend to be more religiously conservative than their kin who have stayed in the countries of origin. The observation that migrant groups have to become more aware of their religion and culture due to their constant interpellation by ‘established’ communities is undoubtedly correct. It is also valid to assume that an ideological apologetics, based on a conscious awareness of one’s ‘culture’ in order to be able to defend one’s practices, may follow from this. However, such observations should not be interpreted as the ‘freezing’ of an otherwise fluid tradition. In fact, ‘traditionalism’ requires immense ideological work that substantially transforms previous discursive practices. Studies of arguments about Islam in high school discussions in western Europe describe in detail how Muslim students acquire skills to defend their religion and culture in ways appropriate to the discursive styles in the nation-states of immigration (Schiffauer et al. 2002). More broadly, migrant groups are often required to translate their discursive traditions into the dominant language of the nation of immigration in order to educate the generations born into these new societies (Pocock 1976). This act of translation is crucial in the transformation of religious tradition. When Hindus and Muslims in the Netherlands begin to speak about their religious specialists and their religious services by using a Protestant Christian vocabulary they are already in a process of transformation, in which pundits and imams provide guidance in spiritual matters and become not-yet secularized social workers.

In a recent contribution, Olivier Roy (2000) distinguishes several responses to the migrant situation by Muslims. The first is the so-called *salafist* that stresses the return to an original and authentic Islam, but in doing so goes against the ethnicization of Islam. Mosques in Europe tend to be ‘Moroccan’, ‘Turkish’, ‘Algerian’, ‘Bangladeshi’ or otherwise ethnically specific, but this tendency of ethnic division has been rejected as *fitna* in Islamic thought and the *salafists* or ‘new fundamentalists’ make use of this to preach a global Islam transcending ethnic and national divisions. The second is a process of individualization in which individual belief instead of social conformism is the basis of Islamic behaviour. To be a ‘true’ Muslim is more a personal choice and a matter of internal conversion than the result of social pressure. It is here that we can understand the success of such movements as the Tablighi Jama`at, for they produce a kind of ‘born-again’ Muslim. Third, there is the expansion of websites on which self-appointed experts on Islamic thought and behaviour teach their versions. This creates a new sphere of Muslim communication and debate in which the traditional interpreters of the tradition, the *ulama*, play a diminished role. In this debate, however, it is not the ‘liberal Islam’ promoted by such thinkers as the Algerian Muhammad Arkoun that is prevalent. Rather, it is the more literalist or even fundamentalist arguments that are dominant. Again, these developments do not show conservatism but quite significant transformations that bring ‘born-again’ Muslims, so to say, in direct conflict with their own fellow Muslims who try to continue some of their ethnic-religious practices in a new environment.

The shaping of the public sphere and the deployment of Islamic arguments is crucial in this process. An interesting illustration of what may happen in the liberal
public sphere is a recent incident in mid-2001 in the Netherlands. An important news programme on Dutch television carried an item on violence against homosexuals by Moroccan youth gangs. A Moroccan imam in Rotterdam invited to comment on the programme was asked what he thought of homosexuality. He stated clearly on television that homosexuality was seen as a terrible aberration in Islam and that it was a disease that would ultimately threaten Dutch society. He indicated in the interview that violence against homosexuals was forbidden and that homosexuals should be regarded with pity and treated, but this part of the interview was not broadcast. Within a few days the media were incessantly reporting on the illiberal and unenlightened nature of Islam and members of parliament started arguing that this imam should be brought to justice and possibly extradited. The Dutch prime minister made a very strong statement that Muslim immigrants should conform to the norms and values of Dutch society. In the media, a demand was voiced from different sides for state intervention in the education of imams, forgetting for a moment the secular separation of state and church. The rapid transition from a concern about violence to a concern about religion was striking in the Dutch debate. In this context the Dutch media and public opinion appoint imams as spokespersons for their religious community and the understanding of Islam in both Muslim and non-Muslim public spheres has to be articulated.

Imams who state publicly that Islam is against homosexual practice are portrayed as conservative in the liberal public sphere. Moreover, since Morocco is a country that for at least a century has been known in the partly Orientalist imagination as a haven for homosexual and pederast practice there is a further notion that what is accepted in Morocco is suddenly no longer acceptable in the Netherlands because of the growing conservatism of migrant Muslims. This precisely shows the difference in the understanding of ‘the public’ in Morocco and the Netherlands. In Holland, identity groups like the gay movement have made great progress since the 1960s in gaining public recognition. This recently culminated in the provision of civil marriage for homosexuals. In Morocco there may be substantial gay activity, but there is neither public recognition nor debate about it. Gay people should be ‘in the closet’ in Moroccan society (as in fact in most societies) but in Holland this is no longer possible: positions have to be publicly stated and are immediately connected to religion. Everything becomes a subject for public debate and the invitation to that debate is given under special conditions and can hardly be refused. In the Netherlands, the minister of urban policy summoned leaders of Muslim communities to explain their views on homosexuality in a meeting at his department. The nature of the liberal public sphere is such that the media can prime and frame religious points of view as more conservative than in the countries of origin and deeply offensive to liberal sensibilities. In such an atmosphere religious leaders can be turned into ethnic spokespersons.

Alternative cosmopolitanisms

Instead of regarding religious migrants as at best conservatives and at worst terrorists one should perhaps pay some attention to the positive and creative moments in human responses to new challenges and new environments. Transnational religious movements are hardly ever seen as instances of cosmopolitanism, since cosmopolitanism is very positively valued in social thought. Secularity is a characteristic of the
nineteenth-century trope of cosmopolitanism and it continues to be so in current discussions. Religious allegiances are understood as condemning the believer to parochialism, absolutism and a lack of tolerance (Gellner 1983 and 1992). Given the importance attributed to the notion of cosmopolitanism in current discussions of transnationalism and globalization, I want to complicate this perspective (Pheng Cheah and Robbins 1998). As I have argued elsewhere, cosmopolitanism as a concept and an ethical ideal is not a view from nowhere (van der Veer 2002). It has a clear genealogy in the European Enlightenment and in its development into a liberal, progressive ideal in the nineteenth century it connects nationalism with imperialism (van der Veer and Lehmann 1999). In my view, in nineteenth-century Europe it was always complemented by a Christian cosmopolitanism of both the Catholic and the Protestant kind. Missionary movements in nineteenth-century Britain, for example, created a public awareness of a larger world beyond Britain and of an imperial duty towards the rest of the world. Liberal cosmopolitanism and evangelical cosmopolitanism developed side by side in the colonial era. Their commonality was well expressed in the phrase ‘the white man’s burden’, which is still behind global charitable and developmental activism. If openness and a willingness to engage are characteristic of cosmopolitanism one has to recognize a number of different projects of engagement with the world (Thomas 2001).

In the contemporary phase of globalization, non-Western kinds of cosmopolitan engagements with very different genealogies have appeared. There are new perceptions of ‘home and the world’ at play in a number of migrations. The postcolonial cities of today show a massive ‘deprovincialization’ of the world or, as I would argue, a new cosmopolitanism. Clifford Geertz (1995: 169) expresses this with his usual rhetorical flourish:

> As the entanglements of everybody with everybody else have grown in recent times to the point where everyone is tripping over everyone’s feet and everyone is in everyone’s face, its disruptive power, its capacity to induce doubts in those who think they have things figured out, taped, under control, rapidly increases. We live in a bazaar, not a cathedral; a whirl, not a diagram, and this makes it difficult for anyone any more to be wholly at ease with his or her own ideas, no matter how official, no matter how cherished, no matter how plated with certainty.

There are a variety of responses to this situation. One of them is indeed non-interference or even indifference. Ulf Hannerz (1996) argues correctly that this attitude is not cosmopolitanism, since it is the attitude of sticking to one’s own. Genuine cosmopolitanism in his view is a willingness to engage with the Other. The question, however, is what are the conditions and terms of engagement in today’s global cities. In an essay on the cultural role of world cities, Hannerz (1996: 127) uses a quotation from V. S. Naipaul as his motto:

> Cities like London were to change. They were to cease being more or less national cities; they were to become cities of the world, modern-day Romes, establishing the pattern of what great cities should be, in the eyes of islanders...
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like myself and people even more remote in language and culture. They were
to be cities visited for learning and elegant goods and manners and freedom by
all the barbarian peoples of the globe, people of forest and desert, Arabs,
Africans, Malays.

This is in fact a nineteenth-century British view in which the cultural engagement is
perceived of as an attempt to uplift the ‘great unwashed’, now constituted by groups
of very different cultural backgrounds. Naipaul is, of course, one of the great
believers in a universal civilization, rooted in the Enlightenment, and not at all sympa-
thetic to the persistence of ‘backward’ cultures, predominantly of what he perceives
as an antirational religious kind. He is a representative of liberal cosmopolitanism.
But is this the only possibility of engagement in the global city?

We see in global cities predominantly a cultural engagement within the context of
a politics of immigration (Holston and Appadurai 1999; Sassen 1998). These cities
are a product of the increased mobility of capital and labour and they are the sites of
new notions of citizenship and solidarity, but also violence (Hansen 2001). Particu-
larly interesting are the new social movements that mobilize outsiders to gain access
to housing, property, sanitation, health services, education, childcare, employment
and protection. The established residents respond to these claims by developing more
and more elaborate security measures, creating walled enclaves in the city. Ghettos,
ethnic neighbourhoods and enclaves are the conditions of engagement in the global
city. Gendered and communal identities are newly constructed in the encounter with
the Other, which is often anonymous and indifferent but sometimes violent when
spatial markings of identity are violated. Nothing is fixed and settled in the urban
space; outsiders today are the established of tomorrow and the demands of the global-
ized network society prevent a reflexive life planning for most people except a tiny
elite (Castells 1997).

Much cultural engagement in the world’s global cities is a reaction to the enor-
mous dislocations of modern flexible capital and labour. People try to build enclaves
of communal identity and to stake their claims to ownership of the city, sometimes
violently. Their engagement with the Other is not necessarily pleasant. Nevertheless, I
believe that it is in these urban arenas that new sources of the self – in religious,
gender and political terms – develop. For migrants, a vision of a better life is one of
the most important elements in their migration. That vision is partly economic, but it
is also culturally embedded. The urban space of a mega-city is already invested with a
lot of dream work, to use the Freudian terminology. The imagination of possibility, of
dynamism, of mobility is fed by cinematic productions that imbue the real spaces of
migrant labour with an aura of virtuality. It is interesting to see how religious visions
try to claim these spaces and are confronted with other imaginative claims both from
within and outside the community. In the case of South Asians, elements of popular
culture, such as cricket and Bollywood, have become as global as religious culture.
Religious movements have to come to terms with this popular culture of media and
sports, of ‘fun’ and leisure, in the urban context. They have to confront the cosmo-
politanism claimed in cricket and in some films. Phina Werbner cites the famous
Indian Muslim actor Dilip Kumar at a fund raising event held in Britain for a cancer
hospital in Lahore, set up by the popular cricketer Imran Khan in 1987:
It is an irony, when the world is growing towards not just internationalism but towards universalness, that we are speaking about nationalities, we are talking about ethnic identities: we, the people and some leaders of human society talk about religion, practising irreligiousness. … Yes, we’ve had too much of this religion. There is but one religion that is preached by all the gospels, by all the sacred books, and that is the decency of man towards fellow human beings. And I stand here with that stamp of Indian nationality to support the cause of my brother [Imran Khan] in this exercise in humanism, universal humanism. (Werbner 1996: 70)

Werbner rightly argues that this is not anti-Islamic, but in fact a plea for a certain kind of cosmopolitan religion. Such a plea runs counter to other cosmopolitan projects that are carried by religious movements.

Therefore, if we are looking for a postmodern cosmopolitanism we have to examine the global city. I, for one, do not want to be restricted by Jean Baudrillard’s description of postmodern culture as immediate and bland, transparent and fast-moving or a blip on the screen, impelled by commercialism, without depth, without place. In fact, locality is produced by global forces and the global city is a very real domain in which cosmopolitanism as a pattern of inclusion and exclusion in the public sphere emerges. In particular, transnational movements that help migrants to cope with the conditions of migration and labour flexibility as well as the vicissitudes of the world economy, such as the Tablighi Jama’at in Islam and the Visva Hindu Parishad in Hinduism, do, to some extent, build religious enclaves or safe havens of the self. But at the same time they are creatively developing new religious understandings of their predicament, entailing an encounter with the multiplicity of Others and with global conditions on their own terms. Both the Tablighi Jama’at and the VHP have strong connections with Gujarati communities that have longstanding transnational ties with East Africa, Britain and the USA. For Gujaratis, there is a close affinity between trading and business networks and the networking that is central to these religious movements. That kind of affinity is even stronger in the case of sectarian business communities like the Jains or the Daudi Bohras (Banks 1992; Blank 2001). But not only do religious movements link up with globalized social configurations, but also religious worldviews engage global issues in an innovative manner. To mention only one example, if the development of the financial markets is one of the main elements of globalization, affecting patterns of migration substantially, it is illuminating to look at the speculation on Islamic financial alternatives in Muslim circles. Islamic interpretations of interest (riba) in the context of discussions of derivatives cut to the heart of global finance and are, as such, engagements with the world from another discursive tradition (Maurer 2001). It is impossible simply to label such arguments and the movements that carry them as closed, confined and confining, provincial as against cosmopolitan. They are cosmopolitan projects, but emerge from very different histories than that of the European Enlightenment.

Global cities are located everywhere from Hong Kong to Rio de Janeiro, from Mumbai to Los Angeles; they are no longer the metropolises of colonial empires. The global imageries at play in them are just as multi-centred. I met a Pakistani taxi driver in New York who was saving money to study Islamic science in Teheran and I
regularly travel in aeroplanes with Hindu grandmothers who are located both in India and the USA and connect their grandchildren with a religion that is constantly negotiated in New York and San Francisco. The nineteenth-century Western bourgeois project of cosmopolitanism is not anymore possible in the global cities of today, since the differences are too substantial, and the diasporic communications too frequent. And this does not only concern elites. As Pnina Werbner (1999) recently argued about working-class Pakistani cosmopolitans, labour migration forges global pathways, routes along which Islamic and familial transnational worlds are constituted. One does not know what the postmodern, postcolonial cosmopolitanism will look like, but it will be a beast of a different kind, whether we like it or not.

Conclusion

Especially after the assault on New York and Washington on 11 September, the tendency to see Islam as a threat to Western societies has been reinforced in the United States and in western Europe. The fact that many immigrants in Western society have a religious identity and that transnational religious movements are active among these immigrants, however, is not specific to Islam. Under conditions of globalization people, ideas and images are no longer spatially confined in any way, but are increasingly spread across the globe. Transnational religious movements can be found among Hindus, Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims, and they share certain general features in their responses to the governmentality of Western societies, the ordering of the public sphere and of civil society. In principle, they carry out alternative, utopian projects through which they want to engage the changing world that confronts them. By no means are these projects always aggressive, intolerant and ‘backward-looking’, although some religious movements do give specific extremist answers to Western hegemony in certain regions of the world. It continues to be important to analyse how transnational religious projects that are embedded in specific colonial and postcolonial histories offer migrants complex understandings and answers to the often contradictory demands of nation-states of origin as well as of immigration.

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Note

1. This is similar to the Dutch understanding of the Turkish demand to wear headscarves in schools. Because this is forbidden in Turkish schools, the Dutch see this demand as a sign of growing conservatism. There is a serious neglect of the political context of Turkey in which a radical secularist government tries to get rid of public Islam but seems to be losing that battle.

References


Transnational religion: Hindu and Muslim movements