

Globalizing Catholicism and the Return to a "Universal" Church

José Casanova

As a religious regime, Catholicism preceded and is likely to outlast the modern world system of nation-states. The transnational character of Catholicism can almost be taken for granted, but historically the nature and manifestations of that transnationalism have changed radically along with changes in the worldly regimes in which Catholicism has been embedded. The very attribute *transnational* only makes sense in relation to the system of sovereign nation-states that emerged in early modernity and eventually replaced the system of medieval Christendom, a system that had been centered on the conflictive interdependent relation between the Roman papacy, or "the political system of the popes," and the Holy Roman Empire. The dynamic synergy of the new world system of sovereign states was such that one after another all the emerging national churches fell under the control of caesaro-papist rulers and the Roman papacy itself became just another, rather marginal and insecure, sovereign territorial state. It is precisely at the point when the Papal States were incorporated into the Kingdom of Italy and the papacy was finally forced to renounce its claims to territorial sovereignty, that the papacy could be reconstituted as the core of a transnational religious regime, this time on a truly Catholic, that is, ecumenical basis.

Ongoing processes of globalization offer a transnational religious regime like Catholicism, which never felt fully at home in a system of sovereign territorial nation-states, unique opportunities to expand, to adapt rapidly to the newly

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emerging global system, and perhaps even to assume a proactive role in shaping some aspects of the new system. Conversely, an analysis of the contemporary transformation of Catholicism may offer some clues as to the direction of contemporary processes of globalization.

Progressively, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present, one can trace the reconstruction, reemergence, or reinforcement of all those transnational characteristics of medieval Christendom that had nearly disappeared or been significantly weakened in the early modern era: papal supremacy and the centralization and internationalization of the Church's government; the convocation of ecumenical councils; transnational religious cadres; missionary activity; transnational schools, centers of learning, and intellectual networks; shrines as centers of pilgrimage and international encounters; transnational religious movements. [...]

The definitive assumption by the Church during the papacy of John XXIII of the modern doctrine of universal human rights has altered radically the traditional dynamic of Church-state relations and the role of the Church both nationally and transnationally. It has opened the way for a realignment in the relations between religious and worldly regimes. The cornerstone of the process is the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*. Significantly, the most eloquent voices in the crucial debate at the floor during the Council came from opposite blocs: from the American bishops, who unanimously defended religious freedom not only on grounds of practical expediency but also on theological grounds provided to them by their *peritus*, the great American theologian John Courtney Murray, and from Cardinal Karol Wojtyła from Kraków, who had learned from the experience of trying to defend the freedom of the Church under communism that the best line of defense, both theoretically and practically, was the defense of the inalienable right of the human person to freedom of conscience. Theologically, this entailed the transference of the principle of *libertas ecclesiae* that the Church had guarded so zealously through the ages to the individual human person – to *libertas personae*.

From now on, the most effective way for the papacy to protect the freedom of the Church worldwide would no longer be to enter into concordats with individual states trying to extract from both friendly and unfriendly regimes the most favorable conditions possible for Catholic subjects but rather to proclaim *urbi et orbi* the sacred right of each and every person to freedom of religion and to remind every government not through discreet diplomatic channels but publicly of their duty to protect this sacred human right. In the process, the pope could be transformed from being the Holy Father of all Catholics to becoming the common father of God's children and the self-appointed spokesman of humanity, the *defensor hominis*. At long last, the papacy could free itself from the postmedieval trappings of territorial sovereignty that historically had hampered so much its freedom of movement. What the papacy and the national churches needed to carry out their spiritual mission was not the protective rule of political overlords who always ended up restricting the Church's freedom of movement but rather a free global civil society.

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Naturally, the pope's voice could only have its effect if three conditions were met: if the voice could infiltrate and cross state boundaries and be heard everywhere; if the papacy could use its transnational resources and the local churches to amplify its voice; and if the pope's voice could actually join and add volume and prestige to the already existing choruses of voices everywhere, until state walls came falling down. The globalization of mass media and the extremely effective use by the papacy of these media have met the first condition. The centralization and homogenization of Catholicism achieved by the Second Vatican Council and by the general process of *aggiornamento* to modernity have met the second condition. The third condition was also met, for, in questioning the principles of state sovereignty and *raison d'état*, the two cornerstones of the modern system of nation-states, the Church was only joining a whole array of local social forces and transnational institutions, organizations, and social movements, working toward the establishment of autonomous civil societies and toward the constitution of one free global civil society.

Particularly in those societies in which the voice of the papacy carried a special weight, this concerted civil effort had dramatic effects. Suddenly, human rights doctrines could be used to put into question simultaneously the national-Catholicism of the Franco regime, the national security doctrines of bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes throughout Latin America, the corrupt oligarchic dictatorship of a cold war caudillo like Ferdinand Marcos, and the official lies of people's democracies in Poland and elsewhere. Those who took the voice of the pope most seriously – priests and nuns, pastoral agents, and engaged laity – were at the forefront of a new worldwide democratic revolution.

Ironically, the diplomatic power of the papacy has also increased as the size of the Vatican state has shrunk and as the Holy See agreed to "remain extraneous to all temporal disputes between nations and to international congresses." The number of countries that have established diplomatic relations with the Vatican has increased continuously: It was four in 1878 at the time of Pius IX's death, fourteen in 1914 when Benedict XV began his papal reign and twenty-five in 1922 at the time of his death; by 1939, on the eve of World War II, the number was thirty-eight, and it reached seventy by 1973. At long last in 1984, overcoming its anti-popish bias, the 1867 US congressional ban on diplomatic relations with the Vatican was lifted and the Reagan administration established full diplomatic relations with the Vatican. The collapse of the Soviet system of states and the disintegration of the Soviet Union have added a significant number of countries to the diplomatic corps at the Vatican. By 1993, 144 countries had established diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

The reason for the growing diplomatic relevance of the Vatican is clearly not that Vatican City is such a powerful sovereign state. Rather, the Catholic Church has become such an important transnational organization in the emerging world system that no state can afford to ignore it. In the open public field of a global civil society the pope's divisions and their allies have appeared to be more effective and to have greater freedom of movement than the riot control units and the mechanized tank

divisions amassed by Machiavellian princes and statesmen following the outmoded rules of engagement of *realpolitik*. In today's world, power does not come solely or even primarily from the barrel of a gun, particularly when states holding onto the monopoly of the means of violence have no legitimacy in civil society and do not have the moral or political resolve to use those guns against unarmed civilians. [...]

To a large extent this process of globalization and the ability of the papacy to exploit the opportunities created by this process, thereby enhancing its role and prestige in the emerging world system, have their origins in World War II and its aftermath. The cold war and the policy of containment of communism offered the Catholic Church, Catholic countries, and Catholic minorities within Protestant countries the possibility to realign themselves and to join the center of the North Atlantic Protestant capitalist system from which they had been alienated or marginalized since the Counter Reformation. The Washington-Rome alliance became one of the key axes in the policy of containment of communism. Catholics became full partners of a Christian Democratic West and of the North Atlantic alliance. Catholics and Christian Democracy led the process of integration of the European Community. The Second Vatican Council had to be called precisely in order to ratify officially the process of *aggiornamento* to modernity that was already well under way in Catholic Western Europe. Once convened, however, the Council created a totally unforeseen dynamic of Catholic transformation and globalization.

The centrality of the papacy in the new global system was even recognized by the Soviets when Nikita Khrushchev welcomed John XXIII's mediation during the Cuban missile crisis and solicited that this mediation for the cause of peace and the sacred values of human life should not be limited to moments of crisis. When the superpowers and the entire world saw themselves at the brink of nuclear war, a higher principle of mediation had to be found. Once it could no longer be taken for granted, the survival of the species had to become a conscious and concerted effort of all of humanity. The security of humanity and of the planet had to have precedence over national and state security. Thereafter, the Vatican's *Ostpolitik* and the United States policy of *détente* took parallel tracks. Yet the Vatican was careful to cultivate an image of mediation above the superpowers. Indeed, it claims to represent the interests of the international system as a whole. Since Benedict XV's enthusiastic support for the League of Nations, the popes have been consistent advocates of worldwide international bodies, from the World Court to the United Nations, which would limit absolutist state sovereignty, arbitrate international disputes, and represent the interests of the entire family of nations.

The papacy has also assumed eagerly the vacant role of spokesperson for humanity, for the sacred dignity of the human person, for world peace, and for a more fair division of labor and power in the world system. The role comes naturally to the papacy since it is fully in accordance with its traditional claims of universal authority. In a sense the papacy has been trying to re-create the universalistic system of medieval Christendom, but now on a truly global scale. The fundamental difference, however, is that the spiritual sword can no longer seek the protection of the temporal sword to buttress its authority against competing religious regimes in order to gain monopoly of the means of salvation. The official recognition of the principle of religious freedom means that the Church has accepted the challenge to compete in a relatively

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open global system of religious regimes. Given its highly centralized structure and its imposing transnational network of human, institutional, and material resources, the Church can reasonably assume that it has a competitive advantage.

Considering the fact that for centuries, practically since the early modern era, the papacy has been physically tied to the Vatican and symbolically to Rome, it is striking how eagerly recent popes have tried to globalize their image and become world travelers. Modern mass media and means of communication have given the papacy the opportunity to communicate directly with Catholics, as well as with non-Catholics, all over the world. Particularly, John Paul II has deployed this direct contact with the masses of faithful extremely effectively as a kind of popular plebiscitarian support for his authority and his policies, using it whenever necessary to impress secular leaders, to bypass national hierarchies, or to check dissenting tendencies from Catholic elites.

Even though the Catholic Church has its own network of national and transnational mass media, the impact of the papacy on world public opinion does not derive primarily from Catholic mass media but rather from the prominent and extensive coverage that the pope's words and deeds receive in Western media. Considering that since the late Middle Ages the image of the papacy had been associated, at least in modern hegemonic Protestant cultural areas, with strongly negative symbols, the fact that the very person of the pope has become today a positive media event is in itself an impressive achievement, indicative of the level of prestige and influence reached by the modern papacy. Without discounting the relevance of John Paul II's repeatedly manifest personal charisma, nor the role of a well-orchestrated job of charismatic image management by the Vatican staff, it would seem that the papacy has found a fitting role that meets the expectations of a much wider audience than the Catholic faithful. The pope has learned to play, perhaps more effectively than any competitor, the role of first citizen of a catholic, that is, a global and universal, human society. It just happens that this role is often in tension with his other official role as infallible head and supreme guardian of the particular doctrines, laws, rituals, and traditions of the *Una, Sancta, Catholica, and Apostolica* Roman Church. [...]

Simultaneously with this process of Vatican centralization and Romanization of Catholicism, however, there has taken place a parallel process of internationalization of the Roman administrative structures and of globalization of Catholicism as a religious regime. The Roman Catholic Church has ceased being a predominantly Roman and European institution. Along with the demographic increase in Catholic population from 100 million in 1900 to 600 million in 1960 and to close to one billion in 1990, there has been a notable displacement of the Catholic population from the Old to the New World and from North to South. The episcopal and administrative cadres of the Church have changed accordingly. The First Vatican Council was still a predominantly European event, even though the forty-nine prelates from the United States comprised already one-tenth of the gathered bishops. The Second Vatican Council, by contrast, was the first truly ecumenical council. The 2,500 Fathers in attendance came from practically all parts of the world. Europeans no longer formed a majority. The US delegation, with over 200 bishops, was the second largest, though it was already smaller than the combined number of 228 indigenous Asian and African bishops at the end of the Council. The number is significant considering that only under the papacy of Benedict XV did the Vatican begin to promote the recruitment

of indigenous clergy and the formation of native hierarchies, thus abandoning the European colonial legacy of considering missions as religious colonies. Even more significant has been the internationalization of the College of Cardinals, and though more slowly, the internationalization of the Curia. Since the time of Julius II (1503) not only the popes but also most of the curials had been Italian. In 1946, Italians still constituted almost two-thirds of all cardinals. That year Pius XII created thirty-two new cardinals, only four of whom were Italians and thirteen were non-European. The College of Cardinals that voted for a non-Italian pope in 1978 already had a much more international and representative composition: 27 Italians, 29 from the rest of Europe, 12 Africans, 13 Asians, 19 Latin Americans, 11 North Americans. The contemporary process of internationalization of Catholicism, moreover, does not have only a radial structure centered in Rome. In the last decades there has been a remarkable increase in transnational Catholic networks and exchanges of all kinds that criss-cross nations and world regions, often bypassing Rome.

Interrelated with, yet in tension with this dual process of Romanization of world Catholicism and internationalization of Rome, there has also taken place a process of "nationalization," that is, of centralization of the Catholic churches at the national level. The institutionalization of national conferences of bishops following Vatican II reinforced the dynamics of the process of nationalization that had been carried primarily by different forms of Catholic Action with their shared strategy of mobilization of the Catholic laity to defend and promote the interests of the Catholic Church in what was perceived as a hostile modern secular environment. This political mobilization of Catholicism had been oriented toward the state, its aim being either to resist disestablishment or to counteract state-oriented secularist movements and parties. The final Catholic recognition of the principle of religious freedom, together with the Church's change of attitude toward the modern secular environment, has led to a fundamental transformation of the national Catholic churches. They have ceased being or aspiring to become state compulsory institutions and have become free religious institutions of civil society. In the process, Catholic churches throughout the world have dissociated themselves from and entered into conflict with authoritarian regimes that were predominant in many Catholic countries. This voluntary "disestablishment" of Catholicism has permitted the Church to play a key role in recent transitions to democracy throughout the Catholic world.

The traditional position and attitude of the Catholic Church toward modern political regimes had been that of neutrality toward all "forms" of government. So long as the policies of those governments did not infringe systematically upon the corporate rights of the Church to religious freedom, *libertas ecclesiae*, and to the exercise of its functions as *mater et magistra*, the Church would not question their legitimacy. The assumption of the modern doctrine of human rights entails, however, more than the acceptance of democracy as a legitimate "form" of government. It implies the recognition that modern democracy is not only a form of government but a type of polity based normatively on the universalist principles of individual freedom and individual rights. As national churches transfer the defense of their particularistic privileges to the human person, Catholicism becomes mobilized again, this time to defend the institutionalization of modern universal rights and the very right of a democratic civil society to exist. [...]