

Neocolonialism as Religious Polarization

Kevin Grane

Introduction

In the era of globalization, the legacy of colonialism has taken on new forms, weaving itself into the fabric of cultural, economic, and religious interactions around the world. The establishment of colonialism was not just an economic or territorial endeavor—it was a profound imposition of cultural norms, values, and systems that sought to reshape the world in a specifically western format. This process imposed Western (monotheistic and Abrahamic) religious frameworks that disrupted existing religious landscapes. As many nations transitioned to postcolonial and decolonial movements, they became aware of the necessity of untangling these colonial threads to redefine their cultural identities in a manner that respects historical roots while embracing a unique and organic modernity.

Despite the formal end of colonial rule, neocolonial influences continued to influence various aspects of life in former colonies, paving a pathway to what we now recognize as neocolonialism. In this context, religious polarization has emerged as a critical issue. Western narratives of religious vitality are intertwined with geopolitical interests and media representations resulting in intensified divides within societies, pressuring individuals toward the extremes of religious identity. The debate around religious vitality—the degree to which it is a valuable and viable engagement—highlights the divisive impact of neocolonial influence.

This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of neocolonial religious influences, arguing that the current polarization in religious engagement experienced in the global West has

translated to a global influence of polarization, both overt and covert. I aim to uncover how global power structures continue to shape religious landscapes, pushing communities toward reactive identities that either cling fiercely to religious adherence or abandon spiritual affiliations altogether. In doing so, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the ongoing impacts of neocolonialism in a world that often perceives itself as increasingly uniform but remains deeply fractured along lines of cultural and religious belief.

Globalization and Colonialism

Globalization is the process of increased interconnectedness and interdependence among nation-states, characterized by the exchange of goods, services, information, and people across international borders. By and large, the world is getting smaller in the sense that the entirety of the global geography is accounted for. With few exceptions, much of the world and its people may now be known. Furthermore, with modern technology, information about a truly global population is instantaneously available to all those with satellite service. Innovation in the travel industry has also made it possible to get to most of the world's population physically. The entire planet is truly connected and growing in its interconnection daily. Before looking at globalization's effects, we must take a moment to think about the pioneering factors behind globalization.

Religion

Religious proselytization has historically played a significant role in globalization. The spread of religious beliefs has been intrinsically tied to the expansion of cultural, social, and economic networks across the globe. During the Age of Exploration (beginning in the 15th

century), religious motives were among the primary driving forces behind European expansion. The Catholic Church, for instance, saw the "discovery" of new lands by European powers as an opportunity to spread Christianity. Figures like Christopher Columbus were motivated by economic gain and the desire to convert indigenous peoples to Christianity, seeing their voyages as divinely ordained missions.¹

In many ways, the process of religious proselytization itself laid the early groundwork for globalization by establishing links between territorially distant societies initially through religious institutions. As European explorers and colonizers ventured into the Americas, Africa, and Asia, they brought with them missionaries who sought to embed Western religious doctrines into the fabric of these societies. The Jesuits are a great example of pioneering proselytizing. One of the most notable Catholic missionary groups, Jesuits traveled extensively to China, Japan, India, and other regions to spread Christianity, learn local languages, understand indigenous cultures, and translate religious texts—their efforts contributed to early cultural exchanges.²

These religious associations did not create one-way networks of cultural dissemination. Local populations often adapted or resisted these new religious ideologies, leading to a dynamism that shaped both the colonizer and the colonizee. Syncretism, blending different religious and cultural practices, often resulted from interaction between indigenous traditions and imposed Western doctrines. In some cases, such as in Latin America, indigenous spiritual beliefs were mixed with Catholic imagery and practices, creating unique hybrids that evolved over time. This resulted in a globalization of religious ideas that was complex and characterized by both conflict and creative adaptation.³

¹ Timothy Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (Routledge, 2014).

² John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

The link between religion and globalization was not limited to eurochristianity.⁴ The spread of Islam beginning in the 7th century also demonstrates how religious missions encouraged wider cultural and economic connections. Islam expanded rapidly through trade routes across the Middle East, North Africa, and even parts of Europe and Asia, as a blend of military conquest, trade, and missionary activities. Islamic expansion significantly impacted local cultures and economies through its conversionary influences and cultural dominations.⁵

Economics

Many scholars, such as Jan Pieterse, suggest that globalization is a multipolar process with several driving forces. One of them is assuredly religious, yet another must be economic.⁶ Historically, the pursuit of trade has been a key motivator for global exploration and expansion. The quest for lucrative trade routes and access to valuable resources prompted European powers to venture into previously unexplored territories. The Age of Exploration saw symbolic expeditions by figures like Vasco da Gama and Ferdinand Magellan, whose voyages opened sea routes to Asia and the Americas, further emphasizing the link between economic ambition and global connectedness.⁷

The Silk Road is one of the earliest manifestations of economic-driven globalization. It facilitated the exchange of goods, cultures, and ideas from the East to the West, creating a network that connected China, the Middle East, and Europe. This network underscores the

⁴ “Eurochristianity” refers to the unique hybrid of European culture and Christianity.

⁵ John L. Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶ Jan Nederveen Pieterse is a prominent scholar in globalization, development, and cultural studies. One of his key contributions is the concept of “globalization as hybridization,” where he argues that globalization leads to the mixing and interaction of cultures, creating new hybrid forms rather than homogenizing cultures into a single global culture. This perspective challenges more simplistic views of globalization as merely the spread of Western culture and emphasizes the agency of local cultures in shaping global interactions.

⁷ Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (Vintage, 2017), 3–28.

importance of trade in creating ties across diverse nations long before the modern era. As Peter Frankopan notes, these early economic links were instrumental in fostering an environment in which cultural and technological exchanges could thrive, laying the groundwork for today's global economy.⁸

The Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries marked a significant acceleration in economic globalization. Innovations in manufacturing and transportation dramatically lowered production costs and enabled mass production. This period saw the expansion of European colonial empires, which facilitated the flow of raw materials from colonies to the industrial centers of Europe. The influx of resources and exports of goods knitted together so much of the world into a single economic framework characterized by increased trade and the spread of capitalist economic principles.⁹

Moreover, the development of financial systems capable of managing international trade, such as banking and credit institutions, further cemented economic globalization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As economist Karl Polanyi argues, the self-regulating market became the central institution shaping modern economies and global interactions, driven by the quest for profit and efficiency.¹⁰ These financial innovations contributed to the global integration of national economies, encouraging cooperation and competition among nations.

Of course, there are innumerable potential influences on the globalization process, with religion and economics standing out as perhaps the most significant. As previously stated, globalization is an ongoing process, yet it is today more a question of depth rather than birth.

⁸ A prominent historian and academic known for his work on the history of the Silk Road. 197-214.

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: The Birth of The Industrial Revolution* (Penguin Group, 1999).

¹⁰ Karl Polanyi, "The Great Transformation." *Readings in Economic Sociology* (2002): 38–62.

Globalization is often viewed as a seamless integration of economies, societies, and cultures worldwide. Yet globalization has enabled a sinister process of Westernization and colonialism.

Westernization / Colonialism

Participating in the transnational global interaction of nations, the concept of modernity, as defined by the global West, is often characterized by a series of cultural, intellectual, and economic transformations that emerged in Europe between the 17th and 19th centuries. This period witnessed the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of capitalism, shaping a worldview valorizing reason, scientific progress, and individual liberties. Western development narratives emphasize industrialization, urbanization, and capitalist market systems, presenting them as one-size-fits-all (Metanarrative) solution to poverty and underdevelopment.¹¹

Western powers monopolized modernity by promoting a linear notion of progress, positing Western society's history and structure as the “gold standard” that all nations should emulate. Max Weber, in his seminal work "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1930), argued that modernity involved a rationalization process that affected all spheres of life.¹² Similarly, Jürgen Habermas explored the tension between modernity's liberative and empowering potential and its propensity for domination through structures of power.¹³ In this Western-centric view, modernity is often equated with the ideal of progress and development associated with technological advancement and bureaucratic efficiencies.

¹¹ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Vol. 1. (Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹² Max Weber, and Stephen Kalberg, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge, 2013).

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, "The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (1985)" (*Cambridge UP*, 1987).

However, this notion of modernity did not develop in a vacuum; instead, it was intricately linked to colonial enterprise. As scholars like Enrique Dussel argue in "The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of 'the Other' and the Myth of Modernity" (1995), the European determination of modernity was heavily reliant on the subjugation and exploitation of non-Western peoples and lands.¹⁴ Dussel's critique points out that colonialism did not just accompany modernity but was central to its development. Economic and ideological underpinnings of European modernity were well established by the flow of resources and labor extracted from colonized territories. This intricate interplay between modernity and colonialism invites us to critically assess how the Western-centric narrative of progress often obscured its violent and exploitative facets. Moving forward from this discourse, we must delve deeper into how colonialism's legacy continues to shape contemporary understandings of modernity and the global power dynamics that persist today.

Japanese scholar Fukuzawa Yukichi engaged Westernization in the late 19th century using the term "seiyōka" (西洋化) to describe Japan's adoption of specifically Western ideas, technology, and institutions during the Meiji Restoration period (1868 – 1912).¹⁵¹⁶ Westernization here describing an almost aspirational characteristic of advancement driven by curiosity, admiration, and a desire for progress. Non-Western societies came into contact with Western advancements in technology, science, and governance, leading some in Japan to

¹⁴ Enrique Dussel, "The Invention of the Americas. Eclipse of 'the Other' and the Myth of Modernity" *Utopian Studies* 8, no. 1, 1995.

¹⁵ Fukuzawa Yukichi was a prominent Japanese intellectual, writer, and educator during the late 19th century. He was a key proponent of Western learning and modernization in Japan and is best known for his influential works advocating for the adoption of Western knowledge and practices. His writings emphasized the importance of education, individual independence, and informed citizenship, helping Japan transition from a feudal society to a modern, industrial state. Fukuzawa's face appears on the 10,000-yen banknote.

¹⁶ Yukichi Fukuzawa, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* (Columbia University Press, 2009).

willingly embrace aspects of Western culture and systems to modernize and compete globally. However, over time, Westernization was almost always imposed.¹⁷

The case of Japan in the early 20th century serves as a fascinating testament to the varied responses of European cultural dissemination. While Japan may have initially voluntarily adopted some aspects of Westernization, other nations did not have the luxury of a choice. Places like India, Africa, and the Middle East experienced an infrastructural imposition.¹⁸ Western colonialism emerged primarily in the 15th century, with European powers expanding overseas for economic, political, and religious motivations. It existed long before anyone discussed globalization the way we discuss it today. Yet, while globalization may not have been a popular term, the sentiment of exploring and interconnecting the planet was still very much the precursor and enabler of colonial expansion, with the two oftentimes working hand in hand.

The mechanics of colonialism were often grounded in commercial interests and the strategic military advantage of controlling new territories. Adam Smith, in "The Wealth of Nations" (1776), highlighted how European nations sought colonies for economic benefits, using monopolistic practices to control the trade of valuable commodities like spices, textiles, and precious metals.¹⁹ The establishment of complex supply chains served to fuel the burgeoning industrial machinery within Europe, reinforcing unequal economic relationships between the colonizers and the colonized. Similarly, military technology and naval superiority, as analyzed

¹⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979).

¹⁸ In India, British control began with the East India Company's trading posts in the 17th century, evolving into direct rule by the British government in the mid-19th century, known as the British Raj. This period saw significant economic restructuring and the introduction of Western education and governance. Africa's colonization unfolded in the late 19th century, when European powers divided and annexed almost the entire continent, often disregarding ethnic and cultural boundaries. This led to exploitative systems and lasting conflicts. In the Middle East, colonial influence intensified post-World War I with the establishment of League of Nations mandates by Britain and France over territories like Iraq, Palestine, and Syria. These mandates disregarded local political and social dynamics, sowing seeds of tension. Though unique in its colonization experience, each region shares a legacy of economic exploitation and socio-political change initiated by Western powers.

¹⁹ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* [1776]. Vol. 11937. na, 1937.

by Alfred W. Crosby in "Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900" (1986), ensured that European powers could exert and maintain control over vast territories.

Western colonialism's manifestations varied, ranging from the outright annexation of territories, as in the case of the Spanish empire in the Americas, to more subtle forms of economic control, such as Britain's influence in India before full annexation. The imposition of Western political structures, legal systems, and cultural norms often served to erode indigenous governance systems, a process documented by Franz Fanon.²⁰ Fanon argued that colonialism did not merely alter economic and political landscapes but sought to dominate the cultural and psychological realms, thereby creating a distorted sense of identity among the colonized. To justify their actions, colonial powers used cultural narratives such as the "civilizing mission," where they purported to bring civilization to so-called 'backward' societies, as a means of asserting Eurocentric dominance.²¹

The establishment of colonial rule often involved the creation of new social hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, and class. In his book "The Colonizer and the Colonized" (1957), Albert Memmi describes how a systemic divide-and-rule strategy was implemented to prevent unified resistance against colonial authorities. Traditional power structures were dismantled and replaced with arrangements that favored European elites. These practices often created or exacerbating ethnic tensions that endured long after the colonial period. This socio-political restructuring entrenched a legacy of fragmentation and conflict in many former colonies, illustrating colonialism's significant and lasting impact on global geopolitical interaction.

²⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2004).

²¹ A justification critiqued by Edward Said in "Orientalism" (1978).

Western colonialism was not merely a process of territorial expansion but involved a complex interplay of economic, military, and ideological forces. Transitioning from the coercive mechanics to understand its present implications requires further exploration into how colonial legacies manifest today. Colonial legacies are observed in ongoing economic disparities, decolonial movements, and broader neocolonial patterns within the globalized world, inviting deeper inquiry into colonialism's enduring influence on international relations and global development.

The imposition of Western colonialism led to a nearly unanimous assessment of particularly European involvement in global affairs as intrusive and exploitative. From this critique, the decolonial field of study has emerged, seeking to liberate and enlighten both the oppressed and oppressor. Many theorists, such as Indian cultural theorist Homi Bhabha, have observed this historical transition and discussed how colonized societies engage with and resist Western cultural impositions, emphasizing the agency and creative responses of the colonized.²²

Decolonization and Postmodernism

Decolonial movements can be traced back to the early to mid-20th century wherein colonized peoples seek to reclaim autonomy and cultural identity in the wake of oppressive colonial rule. Many authors who worked to bring attention to the harmful reality of colonialism, such as Memmi and Fanon, were among the first to pioneer a decolonial discourse. Post-World War II, the geopolitical landscape shifted significantly, as colonized nations pushed for political independence in movements symbolized by leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi in India and

²² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana. These leaders championed the cause of self-determination, challenging colonial empires' moral and political legitimacy in forums like the United Nations.

The aims of decolonialism extend beyond political independence to encompass broader socio-economic, cultural, and epistemological emancipation. Fanon brought attention to the importance of psychological liberation for former colonies to reach a truly liberated state.²³ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in "Decolonizing the Mind" (1986), articulates how reclaiming indigenous languages and narratives plays an essential role in decolonial resistance, reforming the mindsets colonizers sought to control.²⁴ The objective was to dismantle deeply engrained colonial structures and ideologies that continued to manifest in neocolonial forms, such as economic dependencies and cultural imperialism, even after a strictly political autonomy was achieved. Thus, decolonization inherently involves a radical reimagining of political economies, educational systems, and cultural identities towards forms of governance and social interactions that are self-defined and free from colonial influence.

Manifestations of decolonization are varied, encompassing political movements, cultural renaissances, and intellectual discourses. Politically, decolonization is evidenced by the emancipatory formation of new nation states and the restructuring of international alliances in a more equitable fashion. The Bandung Conference of 1955 where Asian and African states met to discuss a vision for mutual cultural, political, and economic sovereignty is a prime example of decolonial movement. Culturally, decoloniality has led to a renaissance in indigenous arts, literature, and religious practices as nations work to restore and empower historical narratives. Academically, decolonial thought fosters critical inquiry into entrenched Western paradigms,

²³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

²⁴ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, James Ngugi, James Gugi, Ngaugai Wa Thiong'o, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. J. Currey, 1986.

questioning the universality of Western-centric knowledge. Walter D. Mignolo advocates for a “pluriversal” approach that recognizes multiple epistemologies instead of a universalist one inherent in colonial structures.²⁵

This universal approach is one of the most foundational features of the modern condition and it is precisely the decline of universal approaches that is most characteristic of the postmodern condition. Jean-François Lyotard's seminal work, "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge" (1979), is pivotal in exploring this relationship to what he calls metanarratives, particularly as he describes the "decline of metanarratives."²⁶ Lyotard argues that postmodern society is characterized by skepticism towards grand narratives, such as those offered by Enlightenment and Marxist ideologies, that claim to present universal truths or pathways to progress. This skepticism lends itself to movements of decolonial thought, which challenges the metanarratives imposed by colonial powers that justified imperialism and asserted the supremacy of Western civilization over other cultures.

In the process of decolonization, formerly colonized nations confront the metanarratives of the colonial era, which depicted them as inferior or primitive. These narratives were bolstered by Eurocentric views that claimed a linear progression from "barbarism to civilization," positioning European development as the maxim of all human development. Decolonial efforts seek to dismantle these myths and validate alternative stories that have been silenced. Here, postmodernism provides a crucial framework by validating pluralism and questioning monolithic narratives that have structured global discourses. As Lyotard puts it, the decline of

²⁵ Walter D. Mignolo, "Coloniality and Globalization: A Decolonial Take," In *Why Globalization Matters* (Routledge, 2021) 38–55.

²⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition: A Rapport on Knowledge" (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

metanarratives offers a fertile ground for decolonized societies to articulate their own stories and frameworks of understanding, untethered from the dominant Western epistemologies.

Both postmodernism and decolonialism also deal with the recognition of multiplicity within knowledge systems and pedagogies. Lyotard's emphasis on "incredulity toward metanarratives" aligns with the decolonial demand for acknowledging multiple perspectives and experiences, challenging the binary oppositions between the colonizer and the colonized or, as Said would say, the "Occident" from the "Orient." This shared focus on diverse narratives encourages the recognition that no single perspective can apprehend the complexity of human societies and cultures. Instead, acknowledging a myriad of voices and pedagogies becomes a way to resist colonial legacies. With the culmination of this discourse on the relationship between postmodernism and decolonization, we may conclude that the decolonial movement is a symptom or manifestation of a broader postmodern shift.

Yet even in this postmodern context, colonialism, or what many are now calling "neocolonialism," is influenced by the global West on the world stage. Unlike classical colonialism, which involved establishing direct political rule, neocolonialism operates through economic dependency, cultural imperialism, and manipulation of global trade and political systems.²⁷ Structural adjustment programs imposed by institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank are often referred to as neocolonial influences upon developing nations to implement economic policies which benefit Western interests and cooperations but can exacerbate inequality and dependency within the local populations.²⁸ The imposed austerity measures are perceived as modern iterations of neocolonial control, tethering

²⁷ Kwame Nkrumah, "Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism," 1965.

²⁸ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford University Press, 2007).

national economies to Western interests.²⁹ Another manifestation of neocolonial influence is the same cultural imperialism seen in classical colonialism. Western norms, values, and lifestyles propagated through global media and entertainment overshadow local traditions and cultural identities. Yet unique for the neocolonial context is this imposition at the behest of more covert means, such as economic dominance by Western-based transnational corporations and technological / information control, which results in a homogenization effect, where Western culture is elevated, subtly erasing indigenous culture.

Religious Polarization as Postmodern Neocolonialism

Now that we have an appreciation for the conceptual interpretations of international relationship building, we arrive at the critical intervention for our religious theorists. In the midst of so many people groups interacting in new ways, where does religion fit into all of this? If we understand neocolonialism correctly, the global West has an ongoing influence on the surrounding world. How this Western influence is disseminated is not nearly as aggressive and explicit as in the former period of colonialism. However, this influence persists, nevertheless.

Much of the rhetoric wrapped up in colonial discourse has to do with particularly Christian proselytization. Religious dissemination was one of the foundational forces of globalization. During the Enlightenment, many supposed a broader metanarrative of secularization to be an overwhelming force of Western influence, perhaps even overtaking

²⁹ Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick, *Theories of Development: Contentions, Arguments, Alternatives* (Guilford Publications, 2015).

Christian proselytization.³⁰ Yet today, in the postmodern context of the global West, the metanarrative of secularization is challenged.

The contemporary religious climate of the Global West is marked by polarization concerning the vitality and role of religion in public and private spheres. This polarization reflects a broader sociopolitical and cultural division, highlighted by the competing tendencies towards both religious revitalization and secular agnosticism. The phenomenon is well-explained through the law of group polarization, which suggests that discussions and interactions within like-minded communities exacerbate initial beliefs and attitudes, leading to more extreme positioning over time.³¹

On one side of the spectrum, there is a significant move towards religiosity, often manifesting in the increased visibility and political activism of new evangelical movements or religious groups. Scholars argue that this trend represents a reaction to perceived moral decline and a craving for social cohesion in rapidly changing societies.³² Here, religion is viewed as an essential pillar of personal identity and a collective source of values amid the challenges posed by globalization and multicultural integration.³³ These communities often resist secular policies, promoting Christianity or other religious identities as central elements of civic culture and national identity in countries such as the United States and parts of Europe.³⁴

³⁰ Peter Berger was perhaps the first to note this shift in his book *The Sacred Canopy*, though he eventually changed his position on secularization theory. People like Charles Taylor later picked up this thread in his work *A Secular Age* and Steve Brooke in his work *God is Dead: secularization in the West*.

³¹ Cass R. Sunstein, "The law of group polarization." *University of Chicago Law School, John M. Olin Law & Economics Working Paper* 91, 1999.

³² Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

³³ Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward A Paradigm for Religion in A Pluralist Age*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2014.

³⁴ Virginia Villa, "Four-in-Ten Countries and Territories Worldwide Had Blasphemy Laws in 2019" *Pew Research Center*, 25 Jan. 2022. www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/01/25/four-in-ten-countries-and-territories-worldwide-had-blasphemy-laws-in-2019-2/.

Conversely, an opposing reaction is witnessed in a growing secularization, with many advocating for an eradication of religion's role in public life, embracing agnosticism, atheism, or humanism. This trend is prominent in Western European countries, where secular ideologies dominate public and political discourse, culminating in policies promoting the separation of church and state and emphasizing pluralism and individual freedoms.³⁵ Such a shift towards secular ideologies cannot be denounced, considering recent studies showing up to 30% of Americans now identify as religious "nones."³⁶

This stark juxtaposition of belief systems within the Global West shapes cultural and political dialogues and affects legislative and policy decisions. Debates over issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, education, and bioethics frequently expose underlying tensions between these two orientations, each camp lobbying for outcomes that align with their fundamentally different value systems.³⁷ The laws and policies emerging from these polarized climates often reflect the dominant ideological force within a given region or nation-state, further entrenching division.

Polarization affects not only public debates but also personal and community relations. As individuals increasingly identify with ideological subgroups that reinforce their beliefs, they create echo chambers that inhibit cross-dialogue and mutual understanding.³⁸ This divide is exacerbated by media representations and political rhetoric, which can further entrench group polarization by selectively displaying content that affirms pre-existing biases.³⁹ Thus, the Global

³⁵ Pippa Norris, and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Gregory A. Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated." *Pew Research Center*, 14 Dec. 2021, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

³⁷ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³⁸ Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, "The politicization of climate change and polarization in the American public's views of global warming, 2001–2010." *The Sociological Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2011): 155–194.

³⁹ Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community." *Simon Schuster* (2000).

West faces a complex environment where religion's role is persistently contested, highlighting the continuing impact of modernization, multiculturalism, and the role of ideology in shaping societal norms.

The polarization of religion in the Global West extends beyond its borders, influencing global networks and internal dynamics in ways reminiscent of historical colonial impacts. This religious divide frames domestic policy and acts as a new form of cultural export, shaping international relations and contributing to the spread of what can be seen as a form of neocolonial influence. The projection of Western religious and secular norms onto global platforms echoes the cultural hegemonies established under traditional colonial powers, creating ripple effects in transnational interactions.

In the context of globalization, the influence of Western polarization is mediated through a complex array of international networks, including media, entertainment, and educational systems, implicitly exporting ideological stances and reinforcing a global cultural hierarchy. For instance, western media and entertainment industries often propagate narratives that reflect either heavily secular or religiously influenced worldviews, thereby impacting consumer perceptions and values across cultures.⁴⁰ Similarly, Western academic institutions, regarded as centers of intellectual authority, transmit these polarized religious and secular paradigms to students worldwide, influencing future leaders and thinkers.⁴¹

Historically, recipients of Western influence, countries in the Global South experience this polarization in unique ways, as it intersects with their indigenous belief systems and socio-political realities. On one hand, there is an attraction to Western secular ideals, often perceived as gateways to progress and modernity, promoting human rights, scientific advancement, and

⁴⁰ John Tomlinson, "What is Globalization?" *Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁴¹ Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives* (Taylor & Francis, 2003).

democratic governance. On the other hand, Western religious rhetoric, especially that emanating from influential evangelical movements, provides support and legitimacy to local conservative factions pushing back against many of the supposed values of western modernity such as empiricism and objectivity.⁴² This dichotomy exemplifies a new cultural imperialism, in which the battleground shifts from territorial conquests to ideological dominance and reshaping cultural landscapes.

Furthermore, non-Western nations often find themselves navigating this ideological tug-of-war, adjusting domestic policies and public discourses to align with influential Western minority groups or powerful secular entities. This dynamism is evident in the ways states manage issues of religious freedom, gender rights, and education, frequently swayed by transnational advocacy networks endorsed by Western religious or secular constituencies.⁴³ Consequently, international policy agendas are increasingly seen through the lens of Western polarized influences, reinforcing power dynamics akin to those seen during the colonial era.

Despite efforts to assert cultural autonomy, many non-Western countries experience this outreach as a continuation of Western hegemony, raising questions about sovereignty and the right to self-determination. By exporting religious polarization, the West inadvertently sets benchmarks for religious tolerance versus fervor and secular liberalism versus conservatism, creating tension between adopting global cosmopolitan ideals and preserving cultural heritage. The result is a global tapestry increasingly characterized by ideological fragmentation as nations either align with or resist the shifting paradigms flowing from the Global West's new secular-religious dynamic.

⁴² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Vol. 1. (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁴³ Margaret E. Keck, and Kathryn A. Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

This evolving network of influence compels states and societies worldwide to reckon with the cultural and religious questions imposed by Western polarization, forging distinct paths in an ever-interconnected world. Balancing the imposition of foreign ideologies with national narratives and values poses intricate challenges, shaping global interactions and power dynamics for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

In navigating the intricate historical landscape of globalization and colonialism, this paper has sought to contextualize the emergence of religious polarization in the Global West as a novel form of neocolonial influence. Tracing the trajectory from the advent of European imperialism to the decolonization movements following World War II, we established a framework for understanding how power and influence have historically been exercised and subsequently transformed throughout continents and generations. As postmodernist thought critiqued grand narratives and acknowledged the multiplicity of voices silenced under imperial rule, decolonization brought forth aspirations for political and cultural autonomy, challenging the deep-seated legacy of Western supremacy.

However, the retreat of traditional colonialism has given way to more subtle forms of influence that persist in the global order, with religious polarization now serving as a significant instrument of Western soft power. The global West's ideological divisions, encompassing robust secularism and fervent religiosity, reverberate through global networks, influencing cultural and socio-political discourses in non-Western nations. This phenomenon can be likened to a new wave of cultural imperialism, characterized not by territorial conquest but by the exportation of

ideological paradigms that shape local contexts, negotiate developmental paradigms, and redefine cultural identities.

The implications of such a polarization are profound and multifaceted. Non-Western countries striving for cultural autonomy and development often find themselves negotiating the pressures of this evolving Western influence. Whether through reinforcing existing conservative power structures or promoting secular reforms, the West's polarizing discourse permeates local narratives, making it a ubiquitous yet often unacknowledged force in shaping contemporary global politics.

Recognizing and critically engaging with these dynamics is essential to fostering a more equitable global order that appreciates diverse cultural expressions and developmental paths. As nations continue to grapple with the complex legacies of past empires and the insidious influences of current hegemonies, there lies a collective responsibility to unpack and address the mechanisms of power that perpetuate inequality. The challenge moving forward will be to dismantle the hegemonic reach of Western religious polarization while promoting an enduring dialogue that honors the intricate tapestry of global cultures, fostering cooperation, mutual respect, and understanding across all borders.

Bibliography

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Vol. 1. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Berger, Peter L. *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward A Paradigm for Religion in A Pluralist Age*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2014.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Dussel, Enrique. "The Invention of the Americas. Eclipse of the Other" and "the Myth of Modernity." *Utopian Studies* 8, no. 1 1995.
- Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Vol. 1. Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Esposito, John L. *The Oxford History of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2004.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*. Routledge, 2014.
- Frankopan, Peter. *The Silk Roads: A New History of The World*. Vintage, 2017, 3–28.
- Fukuzawa, Yukichi. *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*. Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives*. Taylor & Francis, 2003.
- Habermas, Jürgen. "The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (1985)." Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1987.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2007.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *Industry and Empire: The Birth of The Industrial Revolution*. Penguin Group, 1999.
- Keck, Margaret E., and Kathryn A. Sikkink. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Cornell University Press, 2014.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge." University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

- McCright, Aaron M., and Riley E. Dunlap. "The Politicization of Climate Change And Polarization in the American Public's Views Of Global Warming, 2001–2010." *The Sociological Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2011): 155–194.
- Mignolo, Walter D. "Coloniality and Globalization: A Decolonial Take." In *Why Globalization Matters*, Routledge, 2021. 38–55.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, James Ngugi, James Gugi, Nguaiwa Wa Thiong'o, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing The Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Edited by J. Currey, 1986.
- Nkrumah, Kwame. "Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism." 1965.
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- O'Malley, John W. *The First Jesuits*. Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Peet, Richard, and Elaine Hartwick. *Theories of Development: Contentions, Arguments, Alternatives*. Guilford Publications, 2015.
- Polanyi, Karl. "The Great Transformation." *Readings in Economic Sociology* (2002): 38–62.
- Putnam, Robert D. "Bowling alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community." Simon Schuster (2000).
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, 1979.
- Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations* [1776]. Vol. 11937. na, 1937.
- Smith, Christian. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Smith, Gregory A. "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated." Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 14 Dec. 2021, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.
- Sunstein, Cass R. "The law of group polarization." *University of Chicago Law School*, John M. Olin Law & Economics, Working Paper 91, 1999.
- Tomlinson, John. "What is Globalization?" *Culture*. University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Villa, Virginia. "Four-in-Ten Countries and Territories Worldwide Had Blasphemy Laws in 2019." *Pew Research Center*, 25 Jan. 2022. www.pewresearch.org/short-

reads/2022/01/25/four-in-ten-countries-and-territories-worldwide-had-blasphemy-laws-in-2019-2/.

Weber, Max, and Stephen Kalberg. *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit Of Capitalism*. Routledge, 2013.