

Mega-Cities and the Globalization of Religions

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At the dawn of the 21st century, the mega-city is rapidly becoming the stage for the transition of local religions to the status of global religions. Once relegated to the margins of world religions, migration to the world mega-cities has catapulted them to the status of world religions.

This article analyzes the five stages in the globalization of religions and applies them to the Unification Movement in the context of developments in Caribbean culture. The stages are: religions in the mega-city; the role of the media

globalizing religions; the establishment of a formal clergy; the institutionalization of religions; and, religions and academia.



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Religions in the mega-cities

United Nations statistics show that over half of the world's population resided in cities over one million in population as of 2007 and urbanites are predicted to comprise 70% of the world's population by 2050. These statistics include rural residents fleeing poverty to cities in their own country as well as mega-cities in other countries.

Among these new urbanites are some 60 million settlers from the Caribbean islands. This demographic reality has a double effect on the migrants. Firstly, Caribbean people are being transformed from residents of isolated islands into global urbanites. The majority are uneducated poor rural farmers fleeing poverty, landlord oppression, and semi-slave factory work. They establish urban ghettos in their new mega-city home and seek to recreate a semblance of their island homelands.

Secondly, in this often hostile mega-city environment, the migrants cling to the religions, cultures, and traditions of their island homelands. Isolated, fearful, and often persecuted, they construct ethnic neighborhoods. Often the citizens of their new homelands are intrigued by these exotic newcomers, visit their neighborhoods, and attend their religious observances. Suddenly, a local island cult is a global reality.

The Unification Movement was founded by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon in Seoul, South Korea, in 1954.

Like most religious movements in emerging countries, the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, could well have remained a local movement or even withered away into obscurity. Both the formal name of the movement and the simpler "Unification Movement" illustrate that Rev. Moon's ambitions were larger than the small, isolated, war-ravaged peninsula could accommodate. In 1972, he moved his headquarters to the mega-city of New York where he established the offices of many associations and his permanent residence.

Rev. Moon recognized that the mega-city was the crucible where the many races, peoples, languages, cultures, and religions encountered and confronted. Rev. Moon's radical solution to the rise of the multi-religious, -ethnic, -linguistic, and -racial mega-city was a vision of the merging of these diverse populations into a restored Edenic family. The great mega-cities of the world were the platforms for accomplishment of this great drama, a unified humanity under the leadership of True Parents (Father and Mother Moon) residing in a new Garden of Eden. Unlike the cults of the Caribbean islands which were globalized by accident, Rev. Moon intentionally transferred the focus of his movement to the 20 million strong New York mega-region. The future evolution of humanity would take place in the mega-city.

The role of the media globalizing religions

Exotic is a term often applied to the peoples, cultures, cuisines, languages, dress, and religions of the Caribbean islands. Their ethnic neighborhoods become tourist attractions, where daily life is in sharp contrast to that in the modern, technological, fast paced mega-city. The *botanicas* (retail stores that sell folk medicine, religious articles, statues, amulets, magic products, and herbal medicines), restaurants and food stands, street markets, and festivals attract visitors and customers, and performances of island dances

thrill visitors. In addition to these experiences, many visitors return home with recordings of island music and artwork. Music, dance, and art are strongly associated with island religions. No island religious festival, holiday, or ceremony is without music and dance. Local religions also inspire the bulk of statues, paintings, beadwork, masks, flags, and costumes that sophisticated residents of the modern mega-city crave.

It is only a matter of time before island musicians are invited to appear in clubs and concerts and sign music contracts. Island artwork appears in galleries and museums with explanatory wall panels, articles, descriptions, fliers, web sites, books, television programs and films. What had often been a disparaged and often suppressed folk culture in the context of the islands, was transformed into highly appreciated cultural phenomena by the media in the context of the mega-city. A host of popular films ranging from the gory to insightful featuring vampires, palm trees, and thrilling music, have also fueled the popularity of island religions.

The mega-cities of the world are the stages where the Unification Movement gained global visibility, fame, and at times infamy. Rev. Moon clearly recognized the importance of the mass media in the globalizing 21st century world. In 1982, he selected 4,150 men and women, paired them, and blessed their unions in a lavish Madison Square Garden ceremony that was covered by the global press. In 1999, he performed the same ceremony for 21,000 couples at Seoul's Olympic Stadium. The world press could not ignore the sight of 42,000 individuals representing the races, ethnic groups, linguistic groups, and religions of the world processing through the stadium to receive Rev. Moon's blessing. His Million Family March of 2000 and Global Peace Festivals further increased his global image.



Religious icons, including an Indian Spirit, the Virgin Mary and Buddhas, adorn the home of Santería followers in Havana, Cuba. A soup tureen in the shape of a blue fish embodies the sea goddess Yemayá.

The establishment of a formal clergy

On the islands, Voodoo priests, local shamans, holy men, and healers (*curanderos*), ceremonies venerating local *santos* (saints), apparitions, and miracles, and life changes such as births, coming of age, marriage, and funerals, were generally forbidden by the local Catholic hierarchies, and at times even declared illegal by the local governments. Such events took place in isolated locations, far from the prying eyes of Catholic or increasingly Protestant ministers, police, or government officials.

In the ethnic neighborhoods of the modern tolerant and secularized mega-city there was no need to hide from prying eyes. Instrumental in this process is the role of what Thomas Friedman termed “super-empowered individuals.” Today, island preachers, shamans, priests, and prophets can harness modern media, cheap air travel, and global financial resources to become super-empowered clerics. Sensation hungry media eagerly train the spotlight on every act, pronouncement, ceremony, and scandal no matter how outrageous or solemn.

As island “cults” and “sects” enter the mega-city religious mainstream, their leaders were forced to

conform to the accepted norms of “clergy” men and women. Hospital, school, university, prison, and military chaplaincy is a central and growing function of clergy in the modern city. A Dominican Santería or Jamaican Myal “priest” with a drum, rattle, and bundle of herbs would not be recognized as a chaplain. A seminary or university degree in religion, bona fide ordination by a recognized religious institution, certification by appropriate government authorities, and approval by the hospital or prison board are required of any chaplain.

With the growth of the Unification Movement, Rev. Moon recognized the need to organize a clearly defined cadre of leaders. Shortly after his move to the USA, he organized missionaries to spread his teachings. In 1973, he sent a group of Austrian and other followers to the Soviet Union in the famous “Project Butterfly.” In 1975, other missionaries were sent to Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere. That year, he also opened the Unification Theological Seminary north of the city with 56 students, and in 1977, he selected a group of seminary graduates to continue studies at major American universities and earn doctoral degrees in various fields. The missionaries and graduate students would form the nucleus of movement leadership. Eventually local churches were established and “pastors” appointed or selected but the movement has still not formed a cadre of ordained clergy.

The institutionalization of religions

It took the major religions of the world many painful and violent centuries to emerge as distinct religions with lists of beliefs and dogmas, holy books, formal ceremonies, and hierarchies, and root out heretics and suppress schisms. Bathing in the limelight of the modern mega-city, the island cults are forced to adopt the institutions of a major religious organization. This is especially necessary as islanders flow freely from one mega-city to the next and back home again.

One of the distinctive features of the modern, diverse mega-city are the many inter-religious events, councils of religious leaders, ecumenical gatherings, and national ceremonies and holidays, which require the presence of duly ordained and authorized representative of an island religion. A Voodoo, Rasta or Myal leader must assume his or her place alongside a Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist leader. The newly “official” island religions also expect official recognition of their holidays, participation in inter-religious events, tax exemption, and licenses to practice their religions.

The Unification Movement eagerly responded to the demand to institutionalize. Rev. Moon and his followers established a plethora of organizations including the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, Universal Peace Federation, Women’s Federation for World Peace, Service for Peace, International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences, Assembly of the World’s Religions, and the American Clergy Leadership Conference. In addition, the movement founded *The Washington Times* newspaper in 1982, and holds regular meetings with world religious, political, cultural, and academic leaders. The compilation of an authoritative body of scriptures, the Divine Principle, was a major step in this process.

Religions and academia

A central step in achieving the status of world religion was their recognition as worthy of serious academic study. Academic organizations such as the American Academy of Religion (AAR, USA), Society of Biblical Literature (SBL, USA), CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions, Italy), Contemporary Religions and Faith in Transition (CRAFT, Italy), International Society for the Study of New Religions (ISSNR, Switzerland), and Caribbean Studies Association (CSA) have focused on Caribbean religions. University departments of Latin American and Caribbean Studies in the islands, the USA and Europe, American Historical Association, World History Association, Parliament of World Religions, and World Religions Conference regularly feature conferences, symposiums, seminars, and films on Caribbean religions.

Academic publishers and journals encourage the production of scholarly works on lesser-known religious movements. Rutgers University established a series titled Critical Caribbean Studies, the Freie Universität in Berlin has become a major center for Caribbean diaspora studies, research and publishing, and with strong support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, major industries, and academia, Japan founded the Japan Association of Latin American and the Caribbean (JALAC). China recently expanded its Belt and Road infrastructure construction initiative to include the Caribbean islands of Antigua, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago. The Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs recently recognized the growing Chinese interest and presence in the islands in an article: “Filling the Void: China’s expanding Caribbean Presence.” The Institute for World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has taken a strong interest in new religions.

The Unification Movement has attracted scholarly attention for various reasons. J. Gordon Melton’s *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America* (1992), for example, pronounced it as the “single most controversial new religion during the 1970s and 1980s.” Most major encyclopedias contain lengthy articles on the movement and Rev. Moon, and public television devoted a program to the movement in

2012. Signature Books published *The Unification Church* as part of its series “Studies in Contemporary Religion,” and other scholarly works include *The Advent of Sun Myung Moon: The Origins, Beliefs and Practices of the Unification Church* by George Chryssides. Panels and conferences at the American Academy of Religion and other scholarly forums frequently include sessions on Rev. Moon and the movement.

Conclusion

The globalization of local Caribbean island “sects” and “cults” can serve as a template for the emergence of local religions as global world religions. Unlike the cults of the Caribbean islands who have not sought global status but rather have had it thrust upon them, the Unification Movement has eagerly sought, and achieved, global status. Rev. Moon recognized that the mega-city was a new Garden of Eden where the future would be forged. However, the gods of the 21st century are a warlike crowd, and many new religions are called, but few will be chosen to survive the new century.

An expanded version of this paper will be presented at the 28th Annual Conference of the World History Association to be held in San Juan, Puerto Rico in June 2019.

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