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Highly Influential Books

*Economy and Society*, by Max Weber
*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, by Émile Durkheim
*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, by Max Weber

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Zen Buddhism
Zionism
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Youth
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The term transnationalism is frequently used to refer to a company that operates, and has networks, in more than one country, but it mainly indicates the movement of people or communities between nations. It is also often used to describe the relationships between the immigrants who live in a new country and the people from their home country with whom they maintain close contact this for various economic, political, or familial reasons. With regard to religion, transnationalism refers to religious communities that have a strong network between nation-states and which expand their services globally. This entry first discusses the definition of transnationalism in general and explores the foci of transnationalism. It then explains transnational religious movements (TRMs) as one example of a rapidly growing subject in the field of sociology of religion. Finally, the entry gives examples of religious movements across the globe, which continue expanding their development and services with the benefit of transnationalism.

History and Definition

The term transnationalism began to emerge in the 1990s, and at that time, it was mainly used to explain the situation of the immigrant phenomena that were just beginning to spread in North America and Western Europe. According to Mark Juergensmeyer, transnationalism can be identified as a community that shares common worldviews, purposes, interests, and practices, and which gets together in the arena, or places, across nations. Transnationalism can also be understood as attachments and interactions that link communities across national borders.

Globalization has played a pivotal role on the emergence of transnationalism. As the world is increasingly connected and global with ease of communication and transportation, today, immigrants, or anyone traveling, can live in a distant place and still be able to quickly connect with family and significant others in their home country. The concept of transnationalism helps us to understand that immigrants have a very strong relationship with their place of origin and carry not only themselves into the destination country but also their identity, understandings, political views, religion, and beliefs. So, as much as they want to settle in the new country, their connection to their home country remains strong. This is particularly true for the first generation of immigrants. The concept of transnationalism also helps us to understand that a community and movement develop significantly when utilizing transnational networks, especially religious communities that are thus able to extend their gamut of service, as discussed later in this entry.
Foci of Transnationalism

The study of transnationalism has attracted scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, geography, political science, law, economics, and history, as well as interdisciplinary fields such as international relations, development studies, business studies, ethnic and racial studies, gender studies, religious studies, and media and cultural studies. Taking this fact into account, the study of transnationalism has grown rapidly and is likely to continue to expand as the world is becoming less and less local.

According to Steven Vertovec, transnationalism has four main foci. The first focus is migration, which covers the study area of diasporas, transnational migration, refugees, and asylum seekers. The second focus is economic which deals with such topics as global economic networks, transnational corporations, and transnational household strategies. The third topic is politics, which includes global political networks, policies, gender, communities, and power. The last focus is society and culture, which includes social forms and institutions, cultural reproduction, and consumption, and, as addressed in this entry, transnational religious communities.

Transnationalism and Religious Communities

In the study of transnationalism, TRM studies can be one of the most developed and important themes today. This is because people increasingly see that religions play a significant role in society and many religious movements are transnational.

Religious communities have become global as they engage in religious teachings across borders and nations. According to James A. Beckford, religious movements are mobilizations of people, material resources, and ideas as well as feelings, whether formally or informally, to achieve ultimate religious goals. Religious movements could also be defined as constellations of beliefs, practices, and ideas which are organized by religious institutions to promote worship and religious activities. TRMs have attracted many religious adherents. More than 6.8 billion people are affiliated at some level with TRMs.

The first significant focus on global religion was stimulated by Karl Jaspers’s work on the Axial Age. The Axial Age is thought to have occurred between 800 and 200 BCE, during a period of intellectual development in human history. Regions composed of large multiethnic empires, whose peoples traded with other communities, saw the development of universalist religions or world religions, which addressed questions of humanity and contained sophisticated theologies. Hinduism in India (South Asia), Confucianism and Buddhism in China (East Asia), and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition in the Mediterranean (West Eurasia) have all contributed significantly to the history of human beings, from the Axial Age to the present day.

Certain religions deal only with the concerns of a particular family and tribal community (for parallelism). Robert N. Bellah refers to these religions as primitive religions. They are “not for export” and so have remained largely confined to one small geographic area. Others, which Max Weber called universalistic religions and comparative religion textbooks commonly call world religions, have spread from their communities of origin to many other parts of the world, introducing new practices, values, and worldviews.

Transnational religious activities therefore have a long history, going back well before the formation of nation-states, which date only from the late 18th century. It is now common for scholars and other commentators to refer to premodern, pre-nation-state, supralocal religions as transnational. Thus, Susanne Hoeber Rudolph observes that religious communities are among the very first examples of transnationals. Among them, the Sufi orders, Catholic missionaries, and Buddhist monks carried their religious values and teachings across to other lands at a time when the concept of nation-states had not yet developed. Such religious travelers were versions of civil society playing their roles across borders to carry their beliefs and continue to serve the communities they visited.

There are at least three reasons, aside from their universalistic framing, why world religions continue to be so active across the community and national boundaries. First, they have a tendency toward missionary expansion and intensive penetration of social life. Second, world religions
always contain some competitive impulse. Thus, according to Juergensmeyer, transnational religions are “religions of expansion” despite their geographical and cultural roots being in one locality. In addition, all world religions have traditions of pilgrimage to the sites of their historical origins or to places associated with figures and events of significance to their believers, such as Shalosh Regalim for Jews, and the hajj for Muslims.

The second major impetus to the study of transnational religion was post–World War II migration to North America and Western Europe; especially after the mid-1980s when religious activities became more obvious among the diaspora communities. In addition, around that time scholars began to research the new academic topic of “Islam in the West.” Immigrants’ religious affiliations came to be seen as a significant feature of their social adaptation, and they were no longer expected to become secular in a Western setting.

The third advance in the study of transnationalism was in the 1990s, when the technical facilitators of globalization, such as electronic communication technology and rapid transportation, enabled diasporic communities to be more intensely involved with their countries of origin and to develop ever more effective transnational networks supporting their religious groups. This development helps to explain the contrast scholars have observed between the older and the more recent immigrants.

Studies of older generations of immigrants in Western countries showed that they quickly and successfully became integrated into their host communities. They merged in such a way that they became part of the new society and did not overly concern themselves with their place of origin. However, there have been significant changes in recent decades, particularly in terms of connectedness to the homeland and the involvement of migrants in the local issues of their home countries, including religious activities. Nowadays, recent immigrants tend to remain connected to their former homeland and even play a significant role in developments there.

There are numerous religious transnational movements ranging from different religions working to extend their services across nations. These are, for example, the Soka Gakkai, a transnational Buddhist movement that originated in Japan; the Aga Khan Foundation, which is linked to the Shi’i Ismaili tradition of Islam with some connections with both Iran and India; the Gulen Movement, a well-known transnational movement that originated in Turkey and is one of the representatives of Sunni Islam; the Swaminarayan, a Hindu transnational social service community in Gujarat, India; Baha’i, which began in Persia; Gawad Kalinga, a Catholic movement from the Philippines; and The Redeemed Church of God, an indigenous African Pentecostal church that emerged in Lagos, Nigeria.

Conclusion

Transnationalism is a useful term to understand the movement, linkage, and interaction of people across borders. It started with the phenomenon of migration and then expanded into a wider subject of study with diverse related foci. One such focus is religion. Studies show that religious movements have been transnational for a very long time. However, in the modern era of globalization, with sophisticated communications, transport, and bureaucratic structures, religions are manifesting this feature in new ways.

Firdaus Wajdi

See also Axial Age; Globalization; Gülen Movement; Social Movements; Soka Gakkai International

Further Readings


