My intention in this synthetic and somewhat incomplete text is to consider some topics relevant to understanding the religious problematic in the contemporary world. I won’t deal with this theme in its broadest scope, or with particularly complex issues of individual religiosity in modern life; I want, rather, to explore one dimension of this problem: the relationship between religion and globalization. Recent changes challenge us to think not only new themes, but also “traditional” objects in the social sciences, for phenomena that were previously well-known to us often acquire a new character in the present context. My inquiry starts from a premise that, to use geographer Milton Santos’s metaphor, insofar as the world has expanded and shrunk it has become a “place.” This has implications for religious universes. It is useful to remember that sociological literature has traditionally distinguished between universal and particular religions. Universal religions are associated with the idea of mobility, particular ones with that of rootedness. When Max Weber said that belief in magic is particular, he meant that its reach is limited to the sphere of a locality. I’m convinced that the process of “mondialization” of culture radically transforms notions such as international, national, and local. In this sense, “particular” religions also have their status altered by globalization (as, for instance, in the mobility of the different kinds of candomblé and voodoo that may be found today in Paris, Buenos Aires, or New York, so distant from their original centers). Nevertheless, I decided in this text to limit myself to the so-called universal religions. The reader should bear in mind, however, that this limitation results from an
analytic choice and is by no means evaluative. I don’t consider “particular”
religions to be outside of history, nor do I think that they are “inferior” or
“partial,” either in how they understand the world or in how they orient
conduct. Conversely, I don’t believe in the existence or in the “superiority”
of a universalist theology, be it religious or not. My aim, instead, is to un-
derstand a set of changes in the status of religious universes in the context of
globalization. In this sense, “universal” religions have a heuristic value, for
they allow us to explain a series of changes that, in my view, are constitutive
of the contemporary world. These notes have also a personal significance
for me since I return here to a subject with which I began my intellectual
journey, in the field of sociology and the anthropology of religion. Since
my most recent publications have been on the problematic of globalization
(Ortiz 1997, 1998, 2000), particularly the “mondialization” of culture, I take
advantage of this opportunity to revisit a familiar theme, calling attention to
some relevant elements, not only for religion, but for our contemporaneity
as a whole.

1.
The beliefs generally considered to be universal religions (Judaism, Con-
fucianism, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam) are those whose
understanding of the world proposes an ethics in which the individual
chooses, with different degrees of self-awareness or self-consciousness, the
path leading to his or her “salvation” (Weber 1984 [1921]). Weber con-
trasted these religions in typical ideal forms to “irrational” magical beliefs
(anthropologists rightly contest the adjective irrational when it is applied
to the magic-religious realm) in which the elements of choice and of indivi-
duation are contained by the demands of local deities and by customary
practices. Karl Jaspers (1953 [1949]) believed that universal religions played
a fundamental role in the history of human societies, since they represented
a kind of rupture with the past.1 Jaspers observes that around 500 B.C. a con-
junction of events in several places—the China of Confucius and Lao Tse,
the India of the Upanishads and the Buddha, the Persia of Zarathustra, the
Palestine of the Jewish prophets, the Greece of the Hellenist thinkers—led
to the emergence of an entirely different attitude toward life. For him, the
Mythical Age, that is, the era in which societies grounded their existence
in mythical discourse, came to an end. A kind of knowledge emerged,
anchored in rationalized and intellectualized wisdom (recall that Weber
used to say that universal religions are always the work of intellectuals),
whose foundation was of another nature altogether. These changes, which
Jaspers considered to be immanent to the civilizing process, present features such as the “spiritualization” of human life, the supremacy of the logos over myth, and the emergence of philosophers and of speculative thought (theology). He thereby emphasized the individualizing dimension of the process, whether in relation to religion (the ethics of salvation) or to thought (the rise of philosophy).

It is within this perspective that Hegel attributed to Christianity an outstanding role among other religions, since it offered a qualitatively “superior” contribution to the evolution of human consciousness (Hegelian theory is evidently teleological). There has been an extensive debate on the relationship between the individual and religion. Louis Dumont (1983), for instance, believes that the notion of “individualism” has its origin in primitive Christianity. Defined from a purely abstract point of view, the actualization of the “I” takes place as a negation of the world, as a stoic refusal of profane life, an attitude that would be perfected in the following centuries and reach its modern form with the “Western” societies. This aspect, amply discussed by the philosophical, sociological, and anthropological literature (with a reasonable degree of Eurocentrism), is no doubt important, but this is not the dimension I would like to stress. When Jaspers, and following him S. N. Eisenstadt (1997), defines the concept of “axial civilization,” what I want to retain is not so much the ethical or philosophical aspects of his proposal so much as its properly sociological character. For Jaspers, axial civilizations evolve from an axis, an irradiation center capable of encompassing an ample territory. These civilizations constitute a spatiality and a temporality with their own sense and significance. The transformations undergone on the plane of thought and belief thus correspond to substantive social changes: the unification of city-states and tribes around an integrating power; the establishment of “churches,” the bureaucratic authorities managed by intellectuals (Chinese scholars, Catholic priests, Hindu Brahmans, etc.), the centralization of the state. One result of this was the transition of Confucianism, after the unification of China (221 B.C.), from one school of thought among others to state religion, that is, to a coherent totality capable of explaining the world and founding the legitimacy of imperial power (Weber 1964).

Under these circumstances, what should be understood as universal? There is first the ethical dimension: the individual, instead of being immediately immersed in the mythic story, now belongs to a “world,” to a “universe,” thus liberating himself or herself from the fetters of local
traditions and choosing his or her own “way.” From the sociological point of view, the concept of universal incorporates such aspects as the following:

1. An opposition to “particularism,” that is, to customs, values, and powers enclosed within restricted localities. Jack Goody (1987) observes that the appearance of writing is fundamental to this process for, in contrast to orality, which is rooted in what is immediately at hand (past events must be constantly recalled so that they won’t be forgotten), writing is a determining factor in the decontextualization of norms. By materializing itself in a text and overcoming provincial limits, written language incorporates a larger symbolic universe.

2. The capacity to integrate different peoples inside the same norm of meaning. For example, Islamic civilization, whose expansion from the basis of a religious matrix and the Arabic language, considered sacred, managed to bring together groups with diverse traditions and origins.

3. The ability to irradiate from a center. This is one of the features that Eisenstadt explored in his work on the politics of empires. In “premodern” societies (in sociological terminology, those prior to the Industrial Revolution) universal religions would have given ideological solidity to imperial expansion (Eisenstadt 1969).

In summary, universalization is associated with the idea of “civilization,” that is, with culture fixed in an ample, integrative territoriality, capable of expanding from a common nucleus, “decontextualizing” individuals and social groups from their historically marked situations.

When compared to mythical thought, universal religions appear as a homogeneous bloc, but taking a closer look we notice substantial differences in the destiny of each of them. Put differently, if the notion of universality may be proposed in ideal terms, as I did earlier, one must, when turning to history, ascertain the limits of universality’s validity. There is first a restriction on the order of doctrine. Some religions have a theoretical body, that is, a coherent set of theological arguments, whose scope is restricted. This is the case of Brahmanism, which presupposes the existence of a caste society that exists only in India. Its migration to other places is thus problematic from the start. Something similar may be observed in Judaism. The concepts of “alliance” (it is God who makes a contract with the “chosen people,” electing the Jews and not the other peoples of the
Earth) and “promised land” act, on the one hand, as dynamic elements for the integration of the Jewish people and, on the other, as a hindrance to the universalization of Judaism beyond its particular boundaries (Long 1991). In this sense, it can be said of Christianity that, in comparison to Judaism, it opened up the prospect of expansion by distancing itself from the Judeo-Christian heritage and adopting the practice of conversion (Paul deemed it vital for Christianity to break away from the Jewish community) (Daniélon 1985).

However, the possible expansion of universal religions is not a question of doctrine only; they also must adapt themselves to the demands of history. In order to become universal, Catholicism and Islam had to be propelled by religious wars and by empires’ and civilizations’ interests in domination. Historical conditions liberate potentials and impose restrictions on the movement of such creeds. One other kind of limitation must be mentioned: Ernest Gellner (1988) remarks that the decontextualizing movement of norms, which is capable of removing social groups from their localities and immediate interests, thus integrating them into a broader totality, has taken place only fragmentarily in past societies, circumscribing at most cities and parts of empires. For him, traditional societies grounded in agrarian economies sharply contrast with modern ones, in which the Industrial Revolution has entirely redefined the social structure itself. The ancient world was thus characterized by a rigid separation between the elite (composed of military officers, administrators, and the clergy) and the other social layers (merchants, artisans, peasants); by the difference between city and country dwellers; and, finally, by the enormous distance separating heterogeneous ethnic groups that share the same geographical area. These societies are therefore segmented, divided into castes, and formed by compartments of scarcely communicating vessels. An example: the coexistence of Judaism and Christianity under Islamic rule. This cohabitation implied a relationship of power, but it was grounded in a de facto separation of their dissimilar “worlds.” Another example: the continuity of folk-magic beliefs in Confucian China, in Islam, and in Middle Age Christianity, permanently opposing and challenging cultural norms imposed by lettered groups and religious organizations. The conflict between lettered religion and folk religiosity is a constant in the history of all universal beliefs (Bourdieu 1974). In these two instances we find a dimension worth stressing: the impossibility of unifying existing diversity within a single normative pattern. In this sense, the religious universal exists as a potentiality frequently contradicted by reality. To its expansion local forces offer resistance, recurrently
and insistently, thus dividing those who in principle should share the same universe.

2.

The relationship between religion and modernity has been abundantly discussed by sociologists. They point to the disenchantedment of the world, the secularization of institutions and social relations, the separation of church and state, the rise of science and technique as secularized knowledge, in short, to religion’s loss of centrality as an organizing element of society as a whole. In its worst moments, when it has been badly articulated, this debate has led to dead ends, as in the discussion about the “end of religion” in the nineteenth century, and today, in my view, with the “return” of the sacred. No doubt, an evolutionist reading of progress has motivated many scholars to view religion as an anachronism. Given the advance of science, of technique and secularization, these writers believe that religions’ days are numbered. It is quite true that the nineteenth century also produced some syncretisms between religion and progress, which tried to bring together such apparently opposite poles. I am thinking here of Auguste Comte and his cult of humanity as well as of the “makers of gods” (as Vladimir Lenin used to say) of A. V. Lunacharski (1973) and Maxim Gorky during the Bolshevik revolution. But a more simplifying and less subtle view has certainly predominated, endowing technique with, if not primacy, at least the power to definitely eliminate religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, we need only open our eyes to see that the rise of industrial society did not generate the disappearance of religion but, rather, the decline of its centrality as a hegemonic form and instrument of social organization. The process of secularization thus limits religion’s sphere of action, but it doesn’t erase it as a social phenomenon. Understood this way, the debate over the disappearance of religious universes is simply inconsequential. It is enough to remember that Emile Durkheim (1970), in discussing the supremacy of science over religion, said that the latter, from an explanatory point of view, lost ground to scientific thought; nevertheless, since science for him was a “morality without ethics,” that is, an interpretative universe incapable of giving sense to collective action, the potential of religions to be an ethics for action in the world, a way of orienting behavior, remained completely valid. In fact, modernity does not eliminate but, rather, dislocates the place religion occupied in past societies. Consequently, the end of the religious monopoly does not imply the decline of religion tout court; instead, it is a sign of religious plurality and diversity, either from
an individual or a collective standpoint (in logical terms, then, there is no reason for us to imagine the “return” of something that never went away). In its structure, modern society is multireligious.

It is important to emphasize one dimension that is undervalued in the classic texts (Marx, Weber, Durkheim), namely, the relationship between nation and modernity. The emergence of the industrial society does not entail only secularization, technological development, the rationalization of knowledge, the appearance of different political authorities, and the redefinition of social classes. All of this obviously plays a crucial role in the organization of a new kind of society, and countless works have shown the consequences of this radical transformation. However, and here is the aspect that interests me, industrial society also entails a process of integration—economic, territorial, political, linguistic, and cultural—that takes place around another kind of social formation: the nation. The nation brings individuals together within a collective consciousness (a concept cherished by Durkheim) that encircles and transcends them. The nation is a kind of social organization that not only integrates different groups and classes within a single totality, but also represents them symbolically to that totality. It is both social form and collective representation, or, as Marcel Mauss (1969 [1920]) put it, “moral, intellectual, and mental unity.” “National identity” is therefore a symbolic construct rooted in modernity. In the establishment of this new order, religion may, or may not, be a unifying factor. In France, the radicalness of the Revolution has made Catholicism secondary in the constitution of nationality; in Latin America, things work differently. In countries such as Brazil and Mexico, the idea of a “Catholic nation” is important in the articulation of classes and social groups. The truth contained in these examples should not confuse us, however: modern industrial society, through the form of the nation-state, is not organized on the basis of predominantly religious values. Structurally, modernity presupposes the operation of other parameters. Hence the conflict between secularization and religion.

I can now return to the debate on the end of religious monopoly from another perspective. Philosophers, political scientists, and historians show us that the modern state was built from a set of premises: sovereignty, democracy, citizenship, and equal rights. Of course, it first had to conquer elements fundamental to its proper functioning, including the centralization of power and a monopoly on violence within a given geographical area; in short, it had to have at hand a series of mechanisms that could allow it to guarantee its own integrity (which to a great extent was carried
out by means of wars). But the principles of its legitimacy, conceived as valid within its autonomy, are now expressed in terms of a specific requirement: they must be “universal,” that is, valid for “all.” The modern state is impersonal, in contrast to previous conceptions that valorized its divine foundation, and is based on a legal order that delimits a common authority structure shared by the members of the same community. In this sense, sovereignty and popular will go hand in hand, for legitimacy in the art of ruling is supported by consensus among autonomous individuals. It is not so important for our particular discussion whether these values are truly shared by the majority of the populations living in these states. (There are objective factors—social classes, oligarchies, racism, wars—that oppose the realization of these values.) In most cases, the conquest of citizenship is slow, gradual, and incomplete. Citizenship became more widely available between the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth with the end of slavery, the working class’s right to organize without repression, women’s suffrage, and the right of Afro-American communities in the United States to freely express themselves in political life, but it has not yet been extended to all countries on the planet. We should keep in mind, however, that the Enlightenment and the subsequent political revolutions (among them those in France and the United States) conceived as universal a set of principles that included democracy, equality, freedom, and citizenship. Nevertheless, this universality can only exist as particularity, that is, as a set of values embodied in the nation-state. Each nation thus represents a miniature universal (a principle that has been adopted also in anticolonialist struggles, since each country claims the universality of its autonomy in the face of colonial oppression and its yoke). In this sense, the conflict between modern state and religion unfolds by means of the contradiction between nation and religion. Recall that the values presupposed by the Enlightenment legacy weren’t part of former religious thought. To be sure, it is possible today to “read” the Gospel as a revolutionary message, as liberation theology does, or to look for a philosophical link between the Koran and the tenets of modernity, as some Islamic interpreters do. But we should not forget that these are retroactive readings, performed a posteriori; this certainly isn’t how Catholicism and Islam asserted themselves historically. It is therefore possible to say that the integration of the nation dislocates religion’s universalizing capacity, depriving it of the primacy it once enjoyed. In this movement of tension and disputes, it is important to stress the emergence of a new horizon, one constitutive of political modernity. This means that religions’ universality is undermined, for from now
on another universal prevails as it is realized in each nation’s sphere. It is as though the state, modern and national, restricted universalist religious ambitions.

3.
To what extent does the process of globalization modify religion’s position in the contemporary world? In order to answer this question one must bear clearly in mind at least some aspects of what is understood as globalization: (a) it is a social process that crosses places in a differentiated and unequal fashion; (b) its logic cannot be explained in terms of the nation-state, hence the talk about “global society,” “world-system,” and “world-modernity” (modernidade-mundo); (c) in this context, the notion of space and time is redefined. I don’t want to dwell on the multiple other dimensions that could better characterize the problem; my intention is simply to call attention to this process and derive some of its consequences for our subject here. Two points must be elucidated at the outset. First, in the same way that it does not make sense to speak of a global culture (as I have argued elsewhere) it would be absurd to imagine the existence of a global religion. In the diversity inherent to the process of “mondialization” of culture, religions maintain their specificities and idiosyncrasies (to say that we live in the same world does not mean that it is identical to all). Second, religion’s lack of a structuring role in relation to the kernel of world-modernity and global capitalism does not change either. Rationalization of the spheres of knowledge, predominance of technique in the productive process, business management, separation of church and state, disenchantment of the world—all of these are modernity’s achievements (that is, elements that remain valid for our type of social organization—one that contrasts with traditional societies—as long as this “system” remains in force).

In this sense, then, there is no “return to the sacred.” World-modernity is not organized according to religious principles (which does not mean that in some countries, as in the Arab world, religion, as “collective consciousness,” is without capital importance). Despite the burgeoning of new religious beliefs, the intensification of individualized religiousness, the vitality of seemingly dead religions, one fact imposes itself: the place religious universes occupied in traditional societies has been definitively reshaped by modernity. Nevertheless, we must try to understand how the action of religions in a globalized world takes on a different configuration.

Traditionally, the opposition between religion and state has been analyzed from a point of view in which the secondary position of religious
universes is stressed. It is true that the nation-state replaces religion as the privileged source of social and cultural integration, founding its existence in another kind of logic. This can be easily stated in political terms, for since the nation-state is the central locus of collective action, religion is allotted a smaller role. This is the nucleus of the dispute between religious legitimacy and secularization. Even when state and religion act jointly, the relationship between them remains one of separation and distance. The notion of “concordat” analyzed by Antonio Gramsci reveals precisely this.  

When Benito Mussolini and the Vatican reached an agreement to common action, the result was the alliance between a state incapable of imposing its hegemony on the whole of the Italian people, and the Catholic Church, which in exchange for certain advantages endowed the established order with an additional legitimizing factor. The “concordat” principle no doubt expresses the complementary nature of the interests at stake, but it also indicates the exteriority between religious and secular powers, and thus guarantees the latter better conditions for dictating its rules. The fate of the nation is therefore concentrated in its lay space.

With globalization new questions arise. Doing politics, in its modern sense, means acting basically within the boundaries of the nation-state. Government, political parties, unions, and social movements have the nation-state as their main reference. International politics itself takes place with the nation-state at its center and starting point. The present dilemma is that the weakening of the nation-state takes away its power. Its capacity to act in a situation in which transnational decisions are ever more important becomes, as a result, limited. Here we have a substantial change. With the Industrial Revolution the nation-state was thought to be the ideal place for modernity’s universality. In a globalized world, the bond between nation and modernity is cut, because world-modernity spills over existing national borders. What before was viewed as a privileged place of universality becomes small and circumscribed. Now, the religions we are considering transcend, by their very nature, peoples and nation-states. This characteristic, which before the rise of the modern state was believed to be restrictive, turns into an advantage. Due to its transnational vocation, religion is at least theoretically able to exert a broader influence, without being constrained by local forces. I say “local” because the word is revealing. In the face of the globalizing process the status of the nation undergoes a radical transformation, moving from the “universal” to the “particular.” Present discussions on politics and culture confirm this. Regardless of the terms by which it is oriented (human rights, ecology, violence, the International
Monetary Fund, etc.), the debate over democracy in a globalized world implies an acknowledgment that national sovereignty is insufficient to delineate the themes of political action (Held 1997). If the nation was previously the privileged space for the realization of universalist values, now it becomes a problem. Its borders are seen as a cosmopolitan restrictions. From the cultural point of view, a subtle movement results, for the nation is no longer considered to be something “for all,” but rather as a “difference.” That is, it starts to constitute a specific “locality” in contrast to something that transcends it: the world, the globe. The notion of “difference” replaces that of “universal.”

And still another dimension can be added to the debate. I have tried to show how modernity’s universal is distinct from the religious universal. However, it is possible to argue that for some religions today values such as citizenship and democracy have been incorporated into religious practice and discourse. The Catholic Church, for instance, with its aggiornamento, which dates from the Vatican II council, has ceased to understand modernity as a threat and begun viewing it as a legitimate order. The defense of human rights thus becomes a premise, the basis for political action in the context of a “world civil society” (see, e.g., Casanova 1996). Let me make my reasoning clearer: I’m not suggesting that religion is either the ideal or most adequate form of “doing politics,” or of worldwide action. What I want to stress is that its universalist character gives it other possibilities of action, ones that are largely denied the nation-state. If we understand their power and potentials, their capacity to reach objectives in given situations in the contemporary world, religious institutions and transnational corporations, by defining themselves as “beyond borders,” have at their disposal the means to act on a planetary scale (this will of course vary according to the situations in which these institutions find themselves inserted).

4.

Recall that Durkheim’s definition of religion differs greatly from the one proposed by Weber. While the latter considers religion as a kind of “enterprise for the salvation of souls,” Durkheim underscores the element of solidarity: religions bind individuals inside a “church.” Each religion is, as a result, a locus of memory and identity. By bringing people together it gives them common ground and a referent in which the group’s identity can be expressed. As “collective consciousness,” religious beliefs congregate what was dispersed. It is no accident that the concept of “collective memory” was coined by Maurice Halbwachs (1968), a prominent member of the
Durkheimian school. Memory is a collective technique in which remembering is celebrated; it thus draws the past closer, uniting individuals into a community.

Now, as numerous authors have pointed out, identity formation is radically altered with the process of globalization. It becomes crucial. The crisis of national identities makes possible the explosion of ethnic, particularized identities, and even facilitates the forging of world identities within transnational consumption flows. It is possible to argue that for two centuries the nation-state held the monopoly on legitimacy to ordain what the “authentic” destiny of a collectivity should be. The expansion of world-modernity dislocates this privilege. National identity now becomes one “difference” among others. Religion’s capacity to bring people together on a greater scale and to create social ties gives it increased power. As a language, an ideology, and a worldview that, albeit dispersed, extend to a great territorial area, religion subordinates interests and coordinates collective action.

And this symbolic potential will only be amplified by new communication media. The computer age places in the hands of religious organizations a whole set of mechanisms of transnational reach that were unheard of before. To be sure, those organizations always tried to organize themselves on a large scale (through books, catechism, the radio, and newspapers), but the technology available to them had limitations. Even television had a relatively circumscribed, predominantly national audience, as was the case with televangelism. Today cable and satellite transmission allow religious programming to circulate in the most diverse and distant places. The rise of the Internet has made possible the emergence of a new on-line religious literature (which contrasts with the limited circulation of newspapers). These media stimulate the globalization of theological education and the coordination of collective action (meetings, congresses, protests, etc.) in a much more efficient way than in the past. The ambiguity that Islamic fundamentalism evinces in this respect is significant. On the one hand, these technologies are seen as supporting an undesirable “Western culture,” the enemy to be fought; on the other, they are indispensable instruments for the propagation of Islam’s messages. Television, tapes, e-mail, and videos allow for the worldwide diffusion of a religious culture (Tabrizi 1997). But we must understand that technical apparatuses don’t only make the circulation of messages faster and more efficient. In a globalized context, they acquire yet another modulation.
I draw here again on the idea of collective memory to make my reasoning clearer. When Halbwachs coined this concept, he had two dimensions in mind. The first one is evident and concerns temporality. Performed in the present, the mnemonic act evokes remembrances from the past; time is its material. But it contains another dimension, sometimes forgotten: space. Halbwachs emphasizes that, in order to materialize, collective memory needs to be incorporated in a place. Or, as some historians now say, space is a “place of memory.” To my mind, Roger Bastide (1971) worked this out best, in his studies of Afro-Brazilian cults. Bastide wanted to explain how the beliefs of black slaves could be reproduced in different regions of Brazil and Latin America, under such inauspicious conditions. He started with the idea that these beliefs were a memory that was fragmented by the slave trade. In order to survive as symbolic superstructure, in order to materialize, this memory needed a spatial “niche.” Brazilian candomblé and Haitian voodoo are these niches. There, gods are worshiped, myths are brought back to life, thus establishing a bond between Afro-Americans and their African past. The effort to remember, the continuous struggle against forgetting, must therefore “localize” and “territorialize” itself. What neither Bastide nor Halbwachs experienced was the “mondialization” of culture, which transforms our understanding of space. It is possible to say that with it collective memory not only materializes in a “niche,” but also articulates each “niche” through the media. The ritualizing of memories is no longer restricted to the locality where it is celebrated; it extends itself to a multiplicity of “territories,” shaping a single symbolic community. In other words, the technologies are not mere means—or “messages,” as Marshall McLuhan argued—but techniques of social interaction. They create bonds of solidarity that transcend the specificity of places.

These observations take us again to politics. In the specialized literature, the relationship between religion and politics has been generally thought as antithetical. Many authors have conceived of the modern, secularized state as something intrinsically associated with public life, with religions confined to the private sphere. Marx, when he pondered the Jewish question, reasoned from this point of view. The conflict between faith and political consciousness would be resolved as long as the Jews restricted their religiosity to the private realm. The same principle applies to Catholicism, Protestantism, and all other creeds. Their manifestations are legitimate when distant from the res publica. The church/state relationship would in this case be analogous to that of the private/public spheres. This is true in part. The separation brought about by secularization sets state and the
public in a different situation from religion and the private. In order for democratic principles to assert themselves they had to be distinguished from religious universes. Equality before the law is the right of everyone, not just of some faith groups. This has led, however, to the conception of a “public sphere” from which religion would be completely excluded (after all, bringing in such questions would amount, in a way, to privatizing religion). It is perhaps because of this that political science has always dealt with religious phenomena only in a peripheral fashion. Strictly speaking, this way of thinking smacks of Eurocentrism. One need only confront it with concrete historical examples to notice the decisive role religious beliefs often play in political life. The case of Confucianism in Japan is exemplary. The “public sphere” constructed around the national state was, after the Meiji revolution, pervaded by piety and filial values, respect for authority, conformity to prevailing rules (the cult of the emperor prior to the 1945 defeat; the unquestioning submission of the individual to authority) (Maruyama 1996; Yamamuro 1990). It is impossible to understand Japan’s political history without taking into account these elements. The same is true for Latin American liberation theology, a religious conception that inserts itself directly in the public domain of political action.

This kind of critique is not my objective at the moment, however; instead, I would like to call attention to the marked disjunction that the social science literature establishes between religion and politics. There can be no doubt that the individualizing dimension, that is, that of the private, which is intrinsic to modernity, also obtains in the religious universe. In this sense, the speeding up of world-modernity strengthens some “privatizing” features of contemporary man. It is not by chance that the term religiosity, used to characterize an individualized faith, contrasts with religion, meaning a coherent system of beliefs. It is as though personal inclinations had the primacy over collective ones (for instance, the diffuse “esotericism” found in the middle classes of industrialized countries and big cities). However, as Peter Beyer (1997) rightly observes, the globalizing process also favors religion by widening the scope of its public influence. In this case, religious norms become linked to compromises at the basis of collective actions, and not only of individual ones. The dimension of memory, or identity, mixes with political action, especially in times when the nation-state is weak. Perhaps this is why one trend in the literature on international relations has been to increasingly revalorize the religious phenomenon (either to promote it or to stigmatize it) in order to understand present dilemmas. Samuel Huntington’s book, The Clash of Civilizations
and the Remaking of World Order (1996), in which the religious factor is fundamental to the definition of interests and conflicts, is one example of this trend. His thoroughly ideological and conservative analysis of reality (as an organic intellectual of the “Pax Americana”) matters little here; what is important to stress is that the scope of religion has given it new weight and political force (the demonization of Islam by the world media is the reverse side of that valorization). This is made possible when religion ceases to be regarded as only a dimension of private life, in other words, when religion and the public sphere are no longer seen as mutually exclusive opposites.

5.
One recurrent theme in the debate on universal religions is that of ethics. In his The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1930 [1904]), Weber describes this dimension very well. He considers Protestantism, especially in its Calvinist version, to be an interpretation that is capable of validating action with specific economic implications, in this case, the action of capitalism. The path toward “salvation” thus demands that personal behavior be adjusted to conform with the rules dictated by the religious mentality. Ethics means action, behavior adapted to a set of values previously prescribed. It is significant that in recent years the debate about ethics has reemerged, now in planetary terms. In 1997 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization organized two discussions on “universal ethics” and its relationship toward globalization (the first in Paris in March, the second in Naples in December). The philosopher Karl Apel (2000) has been insisting that world problems must be dealt with from a common basis of values shared by “all.” Edgar Morin’s book Terre-patrie [Homeland Earth; 1993] expresses a similar conviction. Since environmental problems have a planetary impact, it is urgent, according to Morin, that we build a common foundation of values ethically shared. This is why it is not surprising to witness the emergence of a literature, written mostly by Catholic intellectuals, whose central preoccupation is advancing toward a “global ethics.” Hans Küng (1999) is one of the theologians most representative of this trend (see also Mancini 2000 [1996]). For him, there exist basic rules of human behavior that are expressed in all religions. By comparing philosophical maxims from different religious horizons—“Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself” (Confucius); “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Jesus); “None of you is a believer as long as you do not desire for your brethren what you desire for yourself” (Islam)—he concludes that the great traditions in the history
of humanity have always been guided by the same principles (and that they therefore presuppose the existence of universal, ahistorical values). To propose a global ethics is clearly a polemical gesture. Marked by a certain enlightened and Catholic Eurocentrism, it also postulates the existence of “one” global society, and not of a process of globalization, heterogeneous and unequal, within which any “universal” unity is always problematic. This reading, though full of good intentions, is not disinterested, and it presents a decontextualized history of religions. If its perspective were really true, it would be difficult to understand past religious conflicts, unless we attributed to intellectuals either bad faith or an inability to comprehend sacred texts. What happened in reality was that each universal defined itself from its own centrality; hence the clashes and persecutions (the expansion of the Islamic holy war, the Crusades, the Confucian repression of Taoism, the conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism, etc.).

Another aspect interests me, however. Since the 1993 meeting of the “Parliament of the World’s Religions” in Chicago, we can observe a movement of the agenda away from its Catholic origins to encompass members of multiple religions. The common declaration that resulted from the debates is suggestive. Grounded in the recognition that the world today faces a profound crisis—poverty, political corruption, unemployment, hunger, racial and ethnic conflict, organized crime, anarchy in big cities, drugs, the collapse of the ecosystem—the declaration emphasizes several points, two of which I will call attention to here: (a) “that a better global order cannot be created or enforced by laws, and conventions alone”; and (b) “that rights without morality cannot long endure, and that there will be no better global order without a global ethic” (Küng and Kuschel 1993, 18–19). And since the document’s signatories presuppose that universal religions, in their ancient knowledge, already possess a system of common ethical values, their conclusion is logical: in the effort to build a planetary consensus, to foster moral ties among individuals who share a common fate, these religions have a fundamental role to play.

A declaration of principles can only state intentions; it is a utopia, not a confirmation of reality. It is important to understand, however, the terms of the debate. The declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions has as its starting point an observation, the existence of an immense political, social, and economic crisis, and a diagnosis, the insufficiency of available institutions to solve it. It differentiates also between the ethical and the legal spheres. These are of course realms that communicate and act on each other, but each exists as a separate entity. The participants knew
that a simple statement of purpose does not solve today’s acute problems; the document is clear on this point: “Of course this ethic provides no direct solution for all the immense problems of the world, but it does supply the moral foundation for a better individual and global order” (Küng and Kuschel 1993, 18). This doesn’t mean that existing institutions such as the modern state or international agencies should be dismantled. On the contrary, the participants express faith that the democratic mechanisms at these institutions’ disposal can function better. The final declaration is actually progressive, for as it approaches contemporary adversities and inequalities it embraces without hesitation the cause of a “world civil society.” A clear conclusion follows from this: in order to work properly, legal institutions need a moral foundation. In this sense, politics is no longer an autonomous activity (as in Realpolitik) but is rooted in something that precedes and underpins it: ethics. Here we find ourselves at the opposite pole of the traditional situation, in which religion was presented as a secondary dimension of “doing politics.” For the incapacity of legal mechanisms to control or establish a world order is seen as a substantive, and not simply transitory, insufficiency. Religious discourse thus redesigns the role of religions in the public sphere and reclassifies (or, perhaps better, declassifies) politics.

Discussing global ethics means placing the question of action on a planetary horizon. We know that identity of any kind is a symbolic construct formed in relation to a given referent. There are certainly a great number of referents: ethnicity, nationality, gender, and so on. In order to build new identities, universal religions need a global referent. Hence the intimate link established with ecology. As an example, I quote two Buddhist scholars: “Buddhism helps us open our spiritual eyes and encompass the global and ecological cycle. It teaches us how to maintain our lives without wasting precious resources, and how to control our desires, which is possible according to Buddhism’s Middle-Way spirit applicable to production and consumption” (Hosaka and Magayasu 1993). According to this view, centuries-old wisdom inhibits man’s predatory behavior. Leonardo Boff’s (1993, 1994) works are also exemplary in this context. For him, the dominant ethics in contemporary society is utilitarian and anthropocentric. Everything begins and ends with human beings. Ecology could start a new paradigm, an ecocentered knowledge in which the relationship between humanity and nature finds a point of equilibrium. Boff’s interpretation of the Gospel privileges the idea of an ecologically oriented God. For Boff, the divine universe and the Earth are holistically melted into a single cosmos, in a vision of a new paradigm and, consequently, of a new way of being.
The emphasis on holism is important. It mediates the integrating view of environmental thought—all parts of the planet are connected to the same ecosystem—and the all-encompassing character of divine unity.

I’ll offer another example. In view of the process of globalization, a Protestant scholar proposes a rereading of the notion of “ecumenism” (Meeks 1992). Not forgetting the usual meaning of the term, generally used in reference to the dialogue among religions, he insists on its Greek origin. Οἶκος means “house,” “home,” or “dwelling.” To integrate nature into ecumenical thought would be to consider the Earth as an “oikos,” that is, our home, the source where all commune. Only thus could men and women live in peace. Here it is interesting to remember that Maximilien Sorre (1947) long ago used the term οἰκουμένη to describe how different societies found themselves localized in the same space. To each social group, inserted in a specific habitat, corresponded a “home,” that is, its cultural roots. The world is thus composed of a diversity of cultures, each occupying its own “environment.” The interpretation I suggested earlier to account for the situation of globalization has to deprive the notion of oikos of its cultural particularity in order to reach what would be common to all. The “home” of all cultures can no longer be the geographical soil of any one of them, but must be “homeland Earth,” to use Morin’s expression. The planet, in its fixity, would thus be able to contain the deterritorializing movement inherent to globalization by inserting men and women in the same “community.”

It is always pertinent to ask ourselves to what extent these perspectives are really viable, or whether they manage only to integrate a religious view of the world. I want to point out, however, that the correspondence between religion and ecology is not fortuitous. These are symbolic planetary referents around which it is possible to organize a “universal” behavior, that is, one with global amplitude. The world/planet, and not only the different “worlds” of each religion, is the stage for collective action and individual behavior. Ethics and morals, ancient concerns, are now thought about in globalized terms.

This proposal of universality thus conflicts with others of the same reach or scope, but with a different nature. Take, for example, the antagonism between Islam and consumerism. Akbar Ahmed registers this very well from an Islamic point of view when he contrasts the mosque to the shopping mall. The shopping mall seduces, lures the senses, submerges the individual in the realm of things by offering him the sensuality of opportunities (Ahmed 1992). The mosque, in opposition, annuls the individual’s corporeity, withdraws him from the flow of daily routine; its imposing
architecture impresses and transcends him, revealing his finite condition before God’s immensity. In the shopping mall hedonism prevails, the immediate realization of desire—“I want it and I want it now” is its leitmotiv; in the mosque, desire is suspended, ascetically contained by the emanation of the divine. It is the place of prayer and preaching, where the believer attentively listens to sermons that teach him about the eternal fight between “good” and “evil,” Islam and the Western world. The dream-like world of objects is anathema, a demonic temptation one must resist. The world of objects is not immovable and fixed, something confined to defined limits; on the contrary, and herein is precisely the danger. Its fluid manifestation in films, songs, things, in sexual enticement is “perverse,” pervasive and persuasive; it “invades” the believer’s intimacy in his home (the proof, according to the religious authorities, is the crisis of the family in “Western” society).

Bryan Turner (1994) correctly observes that consumption offers the promise of a kind of life that contradicts and directly competes with the rigid and ascetic behavior demanded by Islamic fundamentalism. For the latter to accept “market materialism” instead of condemning it would undermine the legitimacy of religious knowledge, opening a crevice in the interpretative monopoly traditionally canonized and, in modern times, reinterpreted by fundamentalism. But is this antagonism specific to the Islamic world? Is it the result of a specific “intolerance” vis-à-vis “Western” civilization? I don’t believe so, and for a number of reasons. Japan’s case is symptomatic. We know that Confucian values, such as filial piety and discipline, reinterpreted in the context of modernity, were fundamental to the elaboration of a work ideology and to the emergence of the national state (see, e.g., Morishima 1986). Japanese modernity in its origin is indebted to religion. But we forget this; it is a remembrance of the past (Ortiz 2000). The Japanese Confucian tradition clearly distinguishes between two opposing notions: oyake and watakushi. Oyake refers to a set of virtues practiced by the wise: frugality, equilibrated conduct, self-improvement, devotion to work, obedience to the elderly, the head of the family, and rulers. It is the equilibrium between man and the laws of nature, the right measure between his desire and the divine will. Watakushi is the opposite. It is life as an incessant struggle against the insidious appeals that intrude on the individual’s path to perfection. It is thus imbalance, the irresponsible waste of energy. The world of consumption illustrates the tyranny of egoistic desires, of the transitory in relation to the lasting. Nevertheless, this ethical truth (at a certain point in history fundamental to the formation of
an organic bond between state, capital, and labor) was redefined with the consumer society that began to emerge in the mid-1950s, and particularly as a result of the transformations that took place in the 1970s. In a context of economic expansion (cars, computers, electronic games, karaoke, foreign travel, entertainment), self-restraint and frugality are no longer seen positively: to consume becomes a “virtue” (this is actually what 1960s advertisements said: “Consumption is a virtue”). The *watakushi* of the world of objects loses its negative connotation and starts to represent the dream of “everyone.” This is why many people say that Japan is now experiencing a morality crisis. The “old” work ethic, the ethic that cherished respect for the elderly, loyalty to one’s employer, is now contested by “materialist” hedonism (Inoue 1997). These transformations have not resulted from economic crises but from structural changes within Japanese society. The same situation can be found in China. What we find there is no longer simply a tension between communist modernity and religious values, that is, the emergence of technique, science, and the modern state. Recent transformations have a new dimension: “A globalized culture via media, powerful new art forms, and rapid communications, have challenged, if not undermined, many of the qualities admired by Confucians. These qualities make heavy demands, particularly on the young, and unless they are reinterpreted in modern terms, or repackaged using a modern rhetoric, they will not appeal to future generations of the educated” (Gungwu 1997, 201).

We usually think of consumption as something belonging exclusively to the material realm, a sheer appropriation of goods, which are chosen according to the individual’s taste and inclinations. In reality, it presupposes an ethics, a disposition stimulated by the collective imaginary. Advertising is not merely a technique for selling objects, even though it was so in the past. In contemporary societies it is a permanent source of examples, lifestyles, and norms of conduct. As with religions, consumption is a universe full of signs and myths, a “world” with particularities and demands of its own. Due to the media, to cultural industries, transnational corporations, pop music idols, and movie stars, consumption has become a universe of planetary scope that constitutes a truly “international-popular” culture. As Jean Baudrillard (1970) has remarked, it is a “moral,” requiring a type of behavior, to which I would add that it stands in opposition to other moralities of worldwide compass. That is why criticism and denunciation of consumerism is a constant in the discourse of the most diverse religions.

Both in Catholic official preaching, as in the Pope’s condemnation of egocentric individualism, and in current neo-Confucian thought we find
similar arguments concerning the “materialist” and finally “inhuman” advance of the market (to avoid any misunderstanding I should make clear that I have no sympathy for the neoliberal ideology that celebrates the global market). Tu Weiming (1997) goes so far as to attempt to join together common features of Confucianism and Islam in order to revitalize them as a spiritual “alternative” for humanity. The literature produced by Catholic and Protestant theologians is replete with similar examples. They explain that the market as an institution has a long history in human societies, and that there is nothing wrong with that. In the past, however, it was “guided” by other forces, the moral tradition, legal restrictions, and, above all, religious ideas. The global market, for these theologians, represents the opposite of all this, for it has no “bridle,” and as such resembles Prometheus unbound, “melting all that is solid into air.” One of these authors adds, “As a Christian theologian I suggest that the ‘market religion’ which is the substance of this global market is, from a Christian perspective, clearly a form of idolatry—a ‘false religion’—but that instead of confronting it and challenging it as the early Christian did at Ephesus, Christians today all too often collude with it, and sometimes even sacralize it” (Cox 1999). This is a suggestive passage; yet, before commenting on it, I will quote another one. Criticizing the separation that economists draw between the market and other social institutions, as if the market constituted an autonomous and integrated entity, endowed with its own rules and laws, another religious thinker recalls that, were this the case, God would be apart from things human. And he ponders: “What separates most of modern theology from traditional theology is the tendency to construe God in ways that leave the laws of the market intact. In fact, one might say generally that modern liberal theology is the kind of theology that speaks of God under the conditions laid down by the theory of natural liberty and the laws of the modern market. God can only be and do what the modern market logically allows God to be and do” (Meeks 1993, 249).

In all these passages we find a clear contrast between divine will and the global market; they appear as two dispositions that are disjointed and in tension. Another important dimension is the perception of the market as a “religion,” a recurrent theme among religious writers. From the theological point of view, there are good reasons that this comparison, at first sight surprising, might sound somehow convincing. For the global market has two features that are frequently associated with the religious heritage: transcendence and omnipresence. Its globalness transcends individuals, social classes, and nations, enveloping all within the same integrating power.
Its dominion knows no borders and encompasses the whole planet: to it are subjected individuals, peoples, and nature. The market’s universality, that is, its extension, confers on it a dimension of totality (and very often of totalitarianism). However, this transcendence is always abstract and potential, for in order to be realized it must manifest itself in the world and impose its omnipotence. The market’s transcendence is perpetuated by consumption; this is what situates and singularizes it, thus inserting the individual in the market’s Being. Metaphorically, I could say that consumption brings about the coexistence of presence in transcendence. However, these characteristics are not “true” in a traditional sense, for in them the ontological, sacred grounding is missing; that is why the market is viewed as a “false religion,” and its worship as “idolatry.” Religion and the market thus appear as two world morals in competition and conflict, each with its own gods, demands, and ethics. Theological condemnation is therefore not an accidental fact in this or that creed as it confronts the world’s “materialism.” It is rather necessary, expressing as it does the presence of worldviews disputing the world’s stage.

Discussion of the universal is always difficult and controversial. Many philosophers and religious thinkers believe in the existence of a “human being,” a substratum that transcends time and space, cultures and history. If one accepts this postulate, one may evidently inquire into the nature and destiny of “human being” as an ahistorical category. But I am suspicious of this perspective and prefer to join those who think about the universal as something historicized, immersed in specific situations of social organization and power relations. In this sense there is not “a” human being, but different societies in which men and women find themselves. As a synonym for democracy, equality, and citizenship (values that I hold dear), the thematic of the universal is therefore a “particular” problem of modernity’s “universal.” We could hardly project it into the past (Moses Finley criticizes some historical studies for applying the concept of democracy to Greek society), and if we project it toward the future, in a certain utopian fashion, this is because we imagine the future to be relatively close to forms we know. Independent of which side one takes, reflecting on religions allows us to understand how the present debate, far from being outdated, as a certain postmodern literature would have it, is in fact pertinent and actual. Globalization’s rise revalidates the legitimacy of the “great narratives” in the contemporary context, to a degree inverting Jean-François Lyotard’s predictions. In order to be comprehended and to become a space
for political action, a global world necessitates the elaboration of a “universal” understanding, one that is encompassing and totalizing. The assertion of “differences,” though important, is not enough to come to terms with the present situation. Certainly, the “narratives” produced by different, often antagonistic, forces and interests are not analogous, nor do they coincide. There are substantive differences between the neoliberal perspective and its market apology, the ecological agenda (maybe it would be more correct to say “agendas”), religious views, and a possible neosocialism. However, each of these narratives is articulated as a “universality,” that is, its scope extends to the whole world. Borrowing Michel Foucault’s expression, I would say that they are “regimes of truth” that seek to affirm their validity on the whole planet. Their historicized universals coexist, complement each other, and, certainly, compete. The world is the stage for their materialization.

Translated by
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Notes
A shorter, Portuguese version of this text was presented in July 2000 at the meeting “The Challenges of Globalization,” organized by the World Association for Christian Communication and the Centro de Estudios Avanzados of the Universidad de Córdoba, Argentina.

1. Jaspers wrote from a teleological perspective according to which history would have an objective, an aim. I am aware that this position is highly suspicious and unsatisfactory; nevertheless, this was not the aspect that interested me in his reasoning.

2. Gramsci’s remarks on religion are particularly suggestive and can be found scattered throughout his Quaderni del carcere (1975). See also Ortiz 1980a and 1980b.

3. It is exactly this aspect that the German thinker Hans Küng (1999), who is opposed to Huntington’s view, emphasizes in his theological works, namely, the importance that religion acquires in the current situation.

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