

THE RESILIENCE OF RELIGION IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Abstract

This paper examines the resilience of religion in a rapidly changing world. Contrary to predictions of decline under modernization and globalization, religion continues to thrive by adapting to new cultural, technological, and social realities. Despite predictions of secularization, religion continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of modern challenges. Rather than disappearing, it has adapted to globalization, cultural shifts, and pluralistic contexts. This paper further argues that religion endures by transforming traditions, fostering interfaith cooperation, and maintaining moral authority. Drawing on scholarly perspectives, the study highlights four dimensions of religious resilience: adaptation to globalization, engagement with cultural change, interreligious cooperation, and renewal through resistance. Drawing on examples from Africa, South Africa, and global interreligious initiatives, the study highlights how religious communities renew themselves while remaining rooted in faith. The resilience of religion lies not in static preservation but in dynamic adaptation to a changing world. Case studies such as Pentecostal growth in Africa, Christian women in South Africa, and interfaith collaboration in Nigeria demonstrate how religion creatively reinterprets tradition while addressing contemporary challenges. The analysis concludes that religion endures not through rigidity but through flexibility, transformation, and its ongoing ability to provide meaning and moral guidance.

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, scholars widely assumed that modernization would inevitably lead to the decline of religion. According to the secularization thesis, scientific progress, economic development, and globalization would gradually render religion irrelevant in public and private life. Yet the twenty-first century tells a different story. Far from disappearing, religion remains a powerful force shaping identities, communities, and societies around the globe. Its resilience lies in its ability to adapt, reinterpret traditions, and respond to cultural and social change. As Benjamin Grant Purzycki and Richard Sosis argue; religion “is not static but an evolving cultural and ecological system” (12).

For decades, scholars advanced the secularization thesis, predicting that modernization, rationalism, and globalization would diminish religion's influence. Yet contemporary evidence demonstrates that religion remains a powerful and adaptive force. As Purzycki and Sosis note, religion is "an evolving cultural and ecological system" (12), capable of reshaping itself in response to social transformations. This essay examines how religion demonstrates resilience in today's changing world through globalization, cultural adaptation, interreligious cooperation, renewal in the face of resistance, the resilience of religion by focusing on four key dimensions: globalization, cultural adaptation, interreligious cooperation, and resistance to moral fragmentation.

Religion and Globalization

Globalization has reshaped nearly every aspect of human life, including religion. The rapid flow of people, ideas, and technologies has brought different traditions into closer contact, sometimes creating tension but also opening new opportunities for growth. Véronique Altglas observes that globalization challenges established religious authorities while simultaneously encouraging creative forms of expression and identity (9). Pentecostalism illustrates this resilience. Across Africa and Latin America, Pentecostal churches have expanded by embracing global theological emphases while adapting to local cultural realities. As Alberto da Silva Moreira notes, its "flexibility and contextual character" explain its remarkable growth in societies undergoing rapid transformation (3).

Technology has further amplified this adaptability. Through digital platforms, religious communities now worship, teach, and evangelize beyond geographic boundaries. Rather than being eroded by globalization, religion has transformed its modes of presence, proving its ability to thrive in an interconnected world.

Globalization has transformed the way religion interacts with society. Migration, technological advancement, and cultural exchange have placed diverse traditions in constant dialogue. Altglas suggests that globalization challenges religious authority while simultaneously providing new opportunities for renewal (9). Pentecostalism in Africa illustrates this dual dynamic. Moreira explains that its "flexibility and contextual character" allow Pentecostalism to thrive amid rapid

social change (3). Instead of being weakened, religion has leveraged globalization as a platform for expansion, demonstrating resilience by adapting across cultures and borders.

Adaptation to Cultural Change

Religion also endures by engaging with cultural change rather than retreating from it. While some perceive adaptation as compromise, history demonstrates that resilience often requires reinterpretation. It is observed, that western methods of thinking and learning with which theology came were not suited to the African ways and had to be made to go in African ways (O'Donovan 2 - 5). O'Donovan went on to say state three things on how to relate the Bible to Africans as; what the Bible says on the subject matter, how Africans relate to what the Bible says on the subject and how to express the truth of the scripture on the subject in a way related to the African culture (6). The scripture must be used to interpret scripture, and in a case whereby we have sixty-six Books in the scripture and written by about forty authors were based in different locations, whose cultures might not be unilateral or uniform and this call for a diversified cultural background in which they wrote the scripture (O'Donovan 20). The adaptation of the scripture, known to be western to a specific cultural background call for thorough exegetical analysis of the scripture in an unbiased way or in a way in which the truth is not swallowed with a certain cultural tendency.

In South Africa, Christian women negotiating shifting gender norms continue to affirm their faith in what they call an “unchanging God in a changing world” (Perera and Swartz 4046). Their faith practices show how tradition can remain meaningful while being lived out in new cultural contexts. Similarly, Dwight N. Hopkins and his colleagues argue that globalization inevitably reshapes religions, but survival depends on how traditions “embed themselves in the lived experiences of their adherents” (23). By absorbing aspects of culture and reinterpreting them within a religious framework, faith traditions remain vital across generations.

Interreligious Resilience and Collaboration

In today's pluralistic societies, resilience is also expressed through dialogue and cooperation between traditions. Instead of isolating themselves, religions increasingly collaborate to address shared challenges such as conflict, inequality, and climate change. Michael Hogue and Dean Phillip Bell emphasize that interreligious leadership is now essential for sustaining resilience in a diverse and interconnected world (57).

Such cooperation strengthens religious communities by building networks of trust and solidarity. Whether in peace-building initiatives between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria or global interfaith campaigns on environmental sustainability, resilience today often emerges not through competition but through collaboration.

Resistance and Renewal

On the other hand, resilience involves not only adaptation but also resistance. Religion has long been a source of strength against oppression, injustice, and moral fragmentation. Anna Halafoff and colleagues describe religion as both “power and resistance” in divided societies, enabling communities to survive and transform even in the midst of crisis (14).

In Nigeria, for example, globalization introduces secular ideologies and consumerist values, yet religion continues to serve as a moral compass for society. Ambrose Ogueche and his co-authors argue that rather than being diminished, religion in Nigeria has renewed its public role in shaping ethical discourse and guiding community life (5). Such resistance ensures that religion remains a relevant force even when confronted by competing worldviews. Odey et al observe, that African Traditional religion (ATR) and Christianity interact in a way that often that challenge and rejuvenate African cultural heritage and values, rejecting dehumanizing colonial imposition while affirming positive traditions (Odey et al 4).

Cultural Adaptation and Renewal

Resilience also emerges through adaptation to shifting cultural realities. This illustrates how religion remains relevant by embedding itself within lived experiences. Hopkins and colleagues emphasize that religious traditions survive when they respond creatively to cultural demands (23). Adaptation, therefore, is not a dilution of faith but a re-expression of timeless truths within evolving contexts.

Cultural adaptation refers to the modification of cultural patterns, practices, and worldviews in response to internal or external pressures. According to Paul G. Hiebert, adaptation occurs when individuals or societies encounter new environments and must “rethink old assumptions and adjust to new realities” (Hiebert 32). In Africa, cultural adaptation has been a historical constant from the

pre-colonial encounters between tribes to the colonial and postcolonial transformations of governance, education, and religion.

In the context of Christianity, cultural adaptation manifests in the way faith is expressed through indigenous music, dance, and art forms. Rather than merely adopting Western religious forms, African Christians have reinterpreted the Gospel through their own cultural idioms. Andrew F. Walls observes that Christianity, by nature, is a “translated religion,” one that continually adapts itself as it crosses cultural boundaries (Walls 26). Therefore, adaptation allows for the contextualization of the Gospel so that it speaks authentically within specific cultural frameworks.

While adaptation addresses external change, cultural renewal focuses on internal restoration. Renewal involves a deliberate effort to reclaim, preserve, and reinterpret cultural values and traditions that may have been eroded by colonialism, globalization, or secularism. As Kwame Gyekye notes, “Tradition is not a static inheritance but a resource for renewal and innovation” (Gyekye 45). Renewal thus seeks to balance heritage with progress.

In postcolonial Africa, cultural renewal has taken the form of language revival, revalorization of traditional governance systems, and integration of indigenous ethics into modern education and theology. Aylward Shorter describes this process as “inculturation,” the dialogue between faith and culture that enables mutual transformation (Shorter 12). Through inculturation, the Gospel not only adapts to local contexts but also renews cultural meaning by affirming values such as community, hospitality, and respect for life.

Interreligious Cooperation

Religious resilience increasingly depends on collaboration across traditions. In pluralistic societies, cooperation strengthens faith communities against fragmentation. Hogue and Bell argue that interreligious leadership is crucial for addressing global issues such as violence, inequality, and ecological crises (57). Examples of interfaith peace-building in Nigeria and environmental campaigns worldwide reveal how cooperation enhances the vitality of religion. By engaging in shared missions, religious groups not only preserve their identity but also strengthen their relevance in a globalized era.

Resistance and Moral Authority

Alongside adaptation, resilience is evident in religion's capacity to resist forces that undermine human dignity. Halafoff and colleagues describe religion as both "power and resistance," enabling communities to endure crisis and division (14). In Nigeria, globalization has introduced consumerism and secularism, yet religion continues to provide moral guidance. Ogueche and co-authors note that Nigerian religion has "renewed its public role in shaping ethical discourse" (5). Through resistance, religious communities reaffirm their authority while maintaining continuity with tradition.

Conclusion

The persistence of religion in a rapidly changing world underscores its remarkable resilience. By adapting to globalization, engaging cultural shifts, fostering interfaith collaboration, and resisting forces that threaten human dignity, religion continues to shape both private faith and public life. Its endurance does not reflect rigidity but rather creativity and transformation. As Perera and Swartz remind us, believers continue to encounter an "unchanging God" within ever-changing circumstances (4046). This paradox of continuity and change ensures that religion will remain central to human experience, not as a relic of the past but as a living force for meaning, hope, and renewal in the future.

Religion's endurance in the modern era demonstrates that it is neither obsolete nor stagnant. Its resilience lies in the ability to adapt, cooperate, and resist without losing its essence. By responding to globalization, embracing cultural change, engaging in interreligious collaboration, and upholding moral authority, religion continues to play a central role in shaping human life. As Perera and Swartz remind us, believers encounter an "unchanging God" amid changing realities (4046). This paradox explains religion's resilience: it is both rooted and dynamic, ensuring its ongoing relevance in a rapidly changing world.

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