Global System Theory and “Market-friendly” Religion

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This article explores some implications of the interplay of neoliberal economic policy and religion for Leslie Sklair’s Global System Theory (GST), and some implications of Sklair’s theory for the study of contemporary religion. We first suggest that Sklair needlessly restricted his theory’s scope by analyzing culture in terms of consumerist ideologies without systematic consideration of religious doctrines and practices. Second, based on studies of “market Islam” and our own research on neo-Pentecostal Christianity in Guatemala, we argue that Sklair’s notion of a transnational capitalist class is needed for an adequate understanding of the rapid growth of these religious movements. We conclude that GST can benefit from consideration of contemporary religious change, while the study of contemporary religion has perhaps even more to gain from theorizing the influence of transnational elites.

Keywords: Global System Theory, Transnational Capitalist Class, Market Religion, Market Islam, Neo-Pentecostalism

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Abstract
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I. Introduction

Introduced by Leslie Sklair in the 1990s, Global System Theory (GST) is widely regarded as one of the most influential paradigms in globalization scholarship (Sklair 1993, 1996, 2000, 2001). Establishing a middle ground between minimalist, state-centric definitions of globalization and definitions in which states are said to be in the process of disappearing, GST focuses on both transnational and national-level practices operating in economic, political, and cultural-ideological spheres. A centerpiece of Global System Theory is Sklair’s concept of the Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC). In formulating the TCC concept, Sklair argued that in seeking to distance themselves from Marxian class analysis, globalization scholars had excluded class from globalization research entirely. This exclusion has resulted in globalization often being portrayed as a quasi-evolutionary historical process. As an alternative to such naturalistic portrayals, Sklair argued that globalization was an economic project instantiated by a new international elite class dedicated to the global expansion of capitalist business practices and to political and ideological configurations supportive of such practices. For Sklair, globalization is anything but inevitable; it is a result of the concerted efforts of a globally dispersed but nevertheless cohesive social class whose interests it serves.

Sklair has taken pains to trace the precise contours of the Transnational Capitalist Class. His first step is to describe the TCC as comprising four main fractions. The first fraction are owners and controllers of transnational corporations (TNCs) and their local affiliates, who are the main proponents of economic globalization. However, because they cannot effectively control or promote globalization on their own, they require the assistance of three other groups: globalizing bureaucrats and politicians; globalizing professionals; and consumerist elites (merchants and media). Sklair’s second step is to suggest that members of the four fractions of
the TCC share five characteristics in common: A) they share global economic interests; B) they exert control through rhetorics of global competitiveness and consumerism; C) they share outward-oriented global perspectives on most political and culture-ideology issues; D) they share similar life-styles, particularly patterns of higher education and consumption of luxury goods and services; and E) they project images of themselves as citizens of the world as well as of their places and/or countries of birth.

The TCC concept has been used by Sklair himself to analyze corporate actions and trends such as the sustainability movement (Sklair 2001). Sklair suggests that by controlling the strategies and initiatives regarding environmentalism and sustainability, the TCC has been able to communicate a vision of the environmental crisis which views it not as a singular ecological phenomenon, but rather as comprising a number of discrete, manageable environmental problems. This vision is conducive to the functioning of the TCC because it does not require major changes in the global capitalist system but rather only minor reforms that do not entail meaningful reductions in consumption, and may represent opportunities for capitalism’s expansion into new markets. There is a sizable literature on transnational corporate networks that including studies of interlocking directorates, financial participation, and policy group affiliations that draws heavily on GST and the TCC concept (e.g. Carroll and Fenneman 2002; Carroll and Carson 2003; Nollert 2005; Staples 2006; Carroll 2010). And Baker (2009, 2011) has recently used Global System Theory and the TCC concept to analyze the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Baker argues that the invasion was not primarily motivated by US concern that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, or even by US regional political interests. Rather, Baker posits that the war was “part of an effort to integrate Iraq into global neo-liberal capitalism” by “bolstering an emerging transnationally-oriented elite in Iraq” through development of a new
national legal framework and national institutional structures supportive of global capitalism (Baker 2009).

A number of studies have challenged Global System Theory, mainly on empirical grounds (e.g. Nollert 2005). Our contention in this article is that relative to the theoretical ambitions and explanatory potential of GST, the number of empirical studies based on GST has indeed been small, and this is partly because GST is too restricted theoretically. One strategy to encourage further empirical work that uses and contributes to GST is to broaden the theory’s scope, and that is precisely the intention of this article. We hope to bridge a gap between transnational class analysis and research on new religious movements, and to do so we first follow Sprague’s (2012) suggestion that the TCC is not monolithic, and that “many fractions exist within this class, with different historic trajectories and tethered in different ways to one another and to various institutions, states, regions, companies, and industries” (p. 201). But we make a more pointed argument as well: that Sklair’s definition of the TCC is too restricted, because while Sklair made a point of rejecting cultural imperialism accounts of the ostensibly homogenizing effects of globalization on local cultures, arguing that such accounts did not reflect the complexity and mutability of cultural traditions (Sklair 2001: 256, 289-91), his rejection of such accounts led Sklair to effectively treat religion and culture as either irrelevant to, or having no systematic relations with, consumerist culture-ideology. In this way GST shares much in common with World System Theory (Wallerstein 1974) and other materialist approaches to globalization that treat culture (and with it religion) as tangential to macro-economic phenomena. We argue that this is an oversight on the part of Sklair and GST proponents because the leaders of a large number of contemporary “market-friendly” religious movements (Haenni 2005; Martikainen and Gauthier 2013) fully qualify as members of the
Transnational Capitalist Class. Recognizing the existence of a religious faction of the TCC (or, put another way, a segment of the global religious landscape colonized by members of the Transnational Capitalist Class) can potentially bridge a gap between research on the TCC and studies of new transnational and globalized religious movements (e.g. Haenni 2005; Robbins 2004; Rudnyckyj 2009, 2010; Hunter and Yates 2002), and encourage a somewhat broader conception of the TCC that may lead GST research in promising new directions.

II. Global Capitalism, GST, and “Market-Friendly” Religion

Sympathetic to globalization skeptics, Sklair has described Global System Theory as an attempt to “limit drastically the theoretical scope of the concept of globalization and its concrete application in the sphere of empirical research” (Sklair 2000). In explicitly limiting the scope of GST to corporations, political elites, credentialed professionals and secular cultural elites, Sklair treats religious elites as a residual category, and religious ideas as irrelevant to capitalism. Unsurprisingly, within the social science literature that employs Global System Theory, religion is rarely mentioned. Sklair does not treat traditional religion as necessarily an impediment to capitalist expansion; instead he views resistance to globalization as mainly a matter of identity politics (1999). Although Sklair has successfully distanced GST from cultural homogenization and imperialism arguments, as well as from naïve views of local cultures as static entities, Sklair’s neglect of religion has needlessly limited the scope of GST and isolated it from contemporary religion scholarship. This is unfortunate because while scholars of contemporary religious movements recognize that rapid capitalist development has coincided with a resurgence of religion in many parts of the world, and have hypothesized a number of possible causal relationships between these two historical macro-trends (e.g. Csordas 2009; Foltz 2007;
few of these analyses focus systematically or comparatively on class, and fewer still entertain the idea that religious change may be produced by members of a global elite class.

Since the early 2000s there has been a steadily growing social science literature explaining how religious institutions and organizations have come to grips with global capitalism and the transnational capitalist class. Haenni’s recent analysis of “market Islam” (l’Islam de marché) in the Middle East, Turkey, and Southeast Asia (Haenni 2005) is one example of these efforts\(^2\). Haenni uses the term market Islam to aid in understanding the simultaneous emergence of market-friendly forms of Islam worldwide that represent an innovative response to contemporary neoliberal economic policies and practices. Supporting Haenni’s arguments, Hunter and Yates (2002) suggest that in developing countries Evangelical organizations’ operations closely resemble the working of multinational corporations. Hunter and Yates quote an Evangelical leader who declares that “We want to do business with the world and in so doing put ourselves out into the market. It’s just how it works” (340). American Evangelical globalizers describe their operations as taking place in a world characterized by “expanding markets,” the need for “competitive advantage,” “efficiency,” “cost-effectiveness,” “maximizing benefits and minimizing costs,” “niche markets,” “profitability,” and the “bottom line.” These examples suggest that the geographical expansion of capitalism and its deeper penetration into social relations have not brought about a decline of religion, but rather changes within religions that have allowed religion to work in concert with practices of global capitalism (Adas 2008: 169-170).

In this article we argue for a reconceptualization of the TCC so that it is expanded to include leaders and elite adherents of the sorts of market-friendly religious groups and

\(^2\)
movements analyzed by Haenni and Yates, as well as Adas (2006, 2008), Haenni (2005), Hendrick (2009), Ignatow and Johnson (2012), Keskin (2009), Kosebalaban (2005), Maigre (2007), Mora (2008), and Rudnyckyj (2009, 2010), and that fit the profile of the TCC as defined by Sklair (2001). We demonstrate the value of GST and the TCC concept through an overview of recent studies of “market Islam,” and through our own research on neo-Pentecostal Christianity in Guatemala.

III. Market Islam and the Transnational Capitalist Class

Islam’s engagement with the neoliberal economic system has resulted in Islamic forms of banking (Pollard and Samers 2007), finance (Warde 2010), and consumption (Fischer 2008). It has also given rise to “Islamic entrepreneurs” in Turkey, the Middle East and southeast Asia, which Haenni (2005) groups together under the rubric of “market Islam.” These entrepreneurs have supported religious movements that have helped to reconcile their religious culture and practices with the opportunities and hard realities of economic globalization. Other scholars including Adas, Rudnyckyj, and Kosebalaban have carefully documented these “market Islam” movements in terms of their ideological character, their constituencies, and the sociopolitical contexts that have given rise to them.

For instance, by introducing a program of spiritual training grounded in moderate Islam, Indonesian factory managers and self-styled spiritual reformers sought to create a responsible, accountable, self-managing subject who acted according to the norms of the free market (Rudnyckyj 2009: 197).

Another example of market Islam is the establishment of the Turkish religious businessman’s association, MÜSİAD, founded in 1990 as a collective organization of newly emerging Islamic entrepreneurs. MÜSİAD has been particularly important for the development and spread of Islamic economic discourse in the region (Adas 2006: 123). One businessman succinctly summarizes the feelings of Islamic entrepreneurs: “Economic backwardness has nothing do with our religion. On the contrary, if we had lived according to our Islamic principles, we could have been the most developed country in the world.” Islamic entrepreneurs believe that the Islamization of both society and the economy can be a solution to the problem of underdevelopment and provide a viable alternative to the western secularist order (Adas 2006: 124-125). Adas (2006: 119-120) reviews many other examples of the compatibility of Islam and economic liberalization from Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Libya, and Malaysia. Market Islam is thus less concerned with state power and the articulation of politics and religion, and more focused on eliciting ethical dispositions conducive to economic liberalism (Rudnyckyj 2009: 183).

Leaders and some elite adherents of market Islamic movements and organizations appear to share the five main characteristics of the TCC as the concept has been defined by Sklair (2001): A) global economic interests, B) rhetorics of global competitiveness and consumerism, C) outward-oriented global perspectives, D) lifestyles, patterns of higher education, and consumption of luxury goods and services, and E) self-presentation as citizens of the world.
A. Global Economic Interests. Maigre (2007) argues that three groups in Turkish society—Islamist political reformers, businessmen, and followers of religious leader Fethullah Gülen—converged around the common concepts of Turkish Islam, conservative democracy, and business to re-elaborate the cultural content of the Islamic movement in Turkey with a more Western democratic and capitalist orientation (Maigre 2007: 33). All three groups have profited from Turkey’s incorporation into the capitalist global economy.

Islamist political reformers include Turkey’s current Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and its President Abdullah Gul, who have close ties to medium-sized Anatolian business interests that have benefitted from globalization.

Islamic entrepreneurs in Turkey engage in highly diversified economic activities, and are active in almost all modern economic sectors from manufacturing to commerce and service sectors.

Based in Turkey and thought to epitomize a liberal and moderate interpretation of Islam that does not conflict with the market or the global economy (Keskin 2009), the Gülen movement claims that religious doctrine can be practiced within the private lives of Turkish citizens while they publicly engage in modern economic activity (Keskin 2009: 88-89), the Gülen movement led by its exiled leader Fethullah Gülen has benefitted greatly from this neoliberal transformation of modern Turkey (Hendrick 2009). The movement has opened small- and middle-scale import and export companies in Russia, Central Asia and Europe, because it has become absorbed within and has adapted to the market economy (Keskin 2009: 109).

B. Rhetorics of global competitiveness and consumerism. As Calvinist doctrine provided a “vocabulary of motives” (Mill 1940) justifying capitalist acquisitiveness, market religions’
doctrines deemphasize sin, militarism, and “grand collective projects” in favor of an open, individualistic, economically oriented, “positive thinking” religion.

Market Islam generally promotes Weberian rationality, a “distillation of elements of the Protestant ethic” (Haenni 2005: 10). Thus, the Islamic work ethic, similar to Calvinism, not only gives value to hard work, responsibility, accountability, wealth and success, but also implies that a good Muslim should be an entrepreneurial Muslim (Adas 2006; Rudnyckyj 2009). Islamic businessmen contrast this view with what they view as a more common but mistaken Muslim attitude toward wealth that values “being satisfied with less.” This idea has led Muslims to adopt a passive and negative attitude towards this world, which has to be corrected by the message of authentic Islam, if Muslims are to become active players in today’s global economy (Adas 2006: 129). Adas argues that instead of defining themselves as “homo-economicus” that is more rational or “homo-traditionalus” that emphasizes morality, Islamic businessmen see themselves as “homo-Islamicus” which is both entrepreneurial and moral. Homo-Islamicus person does not eschew economic activity and retreat to other-worldly asceticism because of his religion. Nor does he make concessions with regard to his religion and morals for his business activity. He is competitive, productive and innovative, rather than a rent-seeker and speculative. He thinks that being economically successful is a duty of every Muslim, because Islam condemns idleness and laziness, and encourages hard work and resourcefulness. He is the ideal Muslim who will bring genuine economic and technological development, while being just and fair towards others as dictated by his religion (Adas 2006: 127).

Rudnyckyj (2009: 187) argues that Market Islam is designed to inculcate the kind of ethical dispositions deemed conducive to greater competitiveness in a global economy. By enhancing spiritual reform, Indonesian Muslims sought to produce a workforce capable of
competing globally by investing everyday practices with what were represented as Islamic ethics. Proponents of spiritual reform specifically emphasized honesty, self-discipline, accountability, and viewing work as a form of worship (Rudnyckyj 2009: 197-198). Adas quotes an Islamic businessmen in Turkey discussing global competitiveness and economic success: “we Muslim Businessmen have to win this economic warfare. We, the driving force of the Muslim rebirth, mindful, resourceful, and powerful must cover the whole world with information and business networks” (Adas 2006: 128). Although they try to solve Islam’s injunction against interest by creating new institutions and practices such as interest free Islamic banking that operate on profit-and-loss sharing, they believe that Islamic companies should not restrict themselves to Islamic banks alone or stay out of transactions that involve interest, because large firms, unlike small ones, cannot survive on the small amounts of capital that they may be able to collect from their friends and families. Therefore, they need either to find some alternative solutions to tap into large amounts of money, or to develop a more flexible approach to rules and regulations imposed by Islam in order to survive (Adas 2006: 121-122).

Adherents of market Islam are less interested in “grand political designs” than are more orthodox Islamist groups (Haenni 2005: 8). Representing the “neoliberal politicization of Islam” (p. 11), market Islam is not a prelude to the restoration of an Islamic state or the imposition of Sharia law, but rather a force for empowerment of individuals as producers and consumers (Haenni refers to “Islam proactive”), and for the privatization of the state. In this way, Haenni claims, market Islam resembles the “faith-based initiatives” and “compassionate conservatism” of United States conservatives. Turkey’s current Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has proclaimed globalization an irreversible trend: “Those who build higher walls around their borders, those who suspect change, do not prioritize political and economic benefits of their
citizens, those who do not support their entrepreneurs, they will be merely spectators [of this process]” (Kosebalaban 2005: 31).

C. Outward-oriented global perspectives. Market Islam’s leaders and adherents embrace globalization and consumerism, while at the organizational level market religions make use of modern corporate management ideology and techniques of human resource management and corporate strategy. They make extensive use of global communications technology including satellite television (e.g. talk shows, religious stations) and the internet (sophisticated websites, Facebook, and Twitter), and publishing empires featuring self-help books. Relative to Turkey’s secular elite, MÜSİAD is seen as more globally oriented and as stronger proponents of democratization (Kosebalaban 2005). MÜSİAD has played an important role in propagating and spreading ideals of Islamic economy and Islamic entrepreneurship through its publications, weekly meetings, seminars, international fairs and conferences (Adas 2006: 123). Fethullah Gülen’s followers have invested in a global network of newspapers, schools, hospitals, television and radio stations, financial corporations, insurance companies, and other types of companies (Keskin 2009). Maigre (2005) claims that new media holdings related to old Sufi brotherhoods (tarikatlar), Islamic banks, and business associations like MÜSİAD or İŞHAD represent a bridge between global modernity and traditional Anatolian society (Maigre 2007: 35-36).

D. Lifestyles, patterns of higher education, and consumption of luxury goods and services. Haenni (2005) describes market Islam as a product of embourgeoisement: its adherents are new bourgeoisie who do not wish to abandon their religion as they enter into global capitalist competition (see also Nasr 2009). Market Islam valorizes hedonism and consumption rather than militancy or “ostentatious piety.” In Turkey privatization and deregulation of the market have
helped Muslims and political Islam to move upward socioeconomically, resulting in the emergence of an Islamic-oriented middle class (Keskin 2009). Maigre (2007) argues that for Gülen, nothing should hinder Muslims from seizing the benefits of a business-oriented society that will improve their lifestyle and help promote the splendor of their religious beliefs (Maigre 2007: 45).

E. Global Citizenship

Islamic entrepreneurs are already a part of the modern capitalist economy and are acting within the pace and discipline of a global capitalist system. Furthermore, they construct their identity and justificatory discourses within the global context of the capitalist economy and in relation to other political and economic actors (Adas 2006: 128). Although scholars including Adas (2006) and Kosebalaban (2005) emphasize the importance of Islamic identity among Islamic entrepreneurs, what is new is their global vision (Kosebalaban 2005: 31). Although Islamic groups in Turkey have traditionally opposed Turkey’s bid for European Union membership, labeling the EU a “Christian Club,” this position has gradually changed, reflecting steadily strengthening support among the Turkish public for full membership (at least until the recent Eurozone economic crisis). Particularly noteworthy here is the position adopted by Fethullah Gülen, who favors close relations with the West and advocates full integration with the EU. Meanwhile, Islamic economic interests have emerged as major supporters of EU membership (Kosebalaban 2005: 33). By creating sufficient conditions for the mobilization of social actors and providing avenues of opportunity for them, globalization serves as a framework in which the transformation of Turkish Islam has taken place. Social actors will see globalization as an avenue of opportunity when their mobilization is matched by participatory institutions and frameworks both domestically and internationally. The Turkish system allows rapidly
mobilizing, religiously observant members of society sufficient participation in the domestic system while transnational institutions, particularly the European integration process, present them with a framework of participation at the global level. This double participation has provided a learning process for political Islamic identity in Turkey, transforming its perceptions of its interests and shifting its confrontational discourse to a globalist vision (Kosebalaban 2005: 36).

IV. Guatemalan Neo-Pentecostalism and the TCC

In this section we use Sklair’s TCC concept as a tool to analyze a religious movement that is not Islamic but is otherwise similar in many respects to the movements analyzed by Adas, Haenni, Kosebalaban, Rudnyckyj and others: neo-Pentecostalism in Guatemala. Our analysis is based on two data sources. The first is historical studies of the neo-Pentecostal movement in Guatemala, as well as in Latin America as a whole. The second is ethnographic research performed by the second author in churches in Guatemala City and at a 2011 “prayer rally” in Dallas, Texas organized by a prominent Guatemalan neo-Pentecostal pastor.

Protestant denominations have been gaining ground in Latin America (e.g. O’Neill 2010; Stoll 1990) and much of the world. Within this broad movement, neo-Pentecostalism is one of the most influential theological-ecclesial movements in Latin America, but is also growing in popularity in Africa and parts of Asia (Meyer 2010: 121). The term “neo-Pentecostal” is somewhat problematic because it has been applied to religious movements in varied global contexts has been referred to at times as the “Charismatic movement” and occasionally been studied as a strand of Pentecostalism (Smith 2009).

In Guatemala, Pentecostalism has traditionally attracted the poorer classes and has had an “other-worldly” focus in which salvation was understood to be restricted to the afterlife. In stark
contrast, neo-Pentecostalism attracts Guatemala’s emerging middle and upper classes, and resembles market Islam both doctrinally and socially. While Pentecostals place their hope in a better future, neo-Pentecostals seek a better life in the present. This is specifically encouraged by their belief in a “prosperity gospel” that emphasizes economic success and self-improvement. Scholars have also referred to the prosperity gospel as the “health and wealth gospel” (Mora 2008) and the “faith movement” (Coleman 2000; Hunt 2000). Prosperity gospel is this-worldly in that it encourages followers to be involved both economically and politically in society (Kim 2006).

In Guatemala neo-Pentecostalism is an offshoot of Pentecostalism, although some neo-Pentecostal churches originated in non-Pentecostal Protestant denominations (Schäfer 1991). There are no official government statistics on Guatemalan neo-Pentecostals, and although different organizations have tried to calculate the number of Protestants, they have received varied results. In 2005 Pentecostals represented about 73% of the Latin American Protestant population (World Christian Database) and at least 10% of the Guatemalan population (Pew 2006). Neo-Pentecostalism’s rate of growth is faster in Guatemala than in most other Latin American countries; there is evidence that the Catholic Church and also many Protestant denominations have lost members to neo-Pentecostal churches (Evans 1991; Suazo 2009b).

Guatemalan neo-Pentecostalism is a mainly urban and middle-class phenomenon centered in the megachurches of Guatemala City (Smith 2008). Steigenga (1999) argues that neo-Pentecostals have the “background, resources, and the motivation to take advantage of the democratic openings occurring in the Guatemalan political system” (p. 174). Furthermore, as the neo-Pentecostal population grows and as Guatemalans grow increasingly weary of violence and corruption, neo-Pentecostal politicians who promote social and moral values are positioned to
continue to grow in popularity. Presidents Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983) and Jorge Serrano Elías (1991-1993) were both members of the neo-Pentecostal church El Verbo, and both appointed church leaders to high government positions (Mathews Samson 2008). During Ríos Montt’s presidency one of his secretaries, Francisco Bianchi, who had ties to El Verbo and to Guatemala’s business elite, unsuccessfully ran for president in 1999 for the ARDE (Democratic Reconciling Action) Party. While the ARDE did not identify itself as an evangelical party, it was a self-described “party of biblical principles” (Mathews Samson 2008: 74). Bianchi was also a member of Asociación LIDER, a Christian political association that encourages businessmen and religious leaders to become involved in politics. In 2007 former senior pastor Harold Caballeros left the El Shaddai pastorate to found the Visión Con Valores (Vision with Values) political party, and attempted to run for president in that same year but was disqualified due to his registering late. In the presidential election in September 2011 Caballeros finished fifth. His platform promoted capitalism and free trade as solutions to Guatemala’s economic problems.

Four of the most prominent neo-Pentecostal megachurches are the Fraternidad Cristiana (established in 1978 with a second church structure, popularly known as “The Mega-Frater,” built in 2007), El Shaddai (1983), La Familia de Dios (1990), and Casa de Dios (1994). According to the Fraternidad Cristiana’s website, its “Mega Auditorium,” completed in 2007, contains 12,200 seats (Fraternidad Cristiana de Guatemala 2011). Casa de Dios claims to reach 20,000 people on Sunday mornings through their on-site services and house groups (Ministerios de Cash Luna 2010). El Shaddai’s current building was built in 1995 and has 5,000 seats (Iglesia Ministerios El Shaddai 2010). Many of these churches have built large structures in the recent years. La Fraternidad Cristiana finished the Mega-Frater 2007, La Familia de Dios recently constructed a large building containing not only the church, but also radio and television studios,
and Cash Luna’s church, Casa de Dios, is in process of constructing a new building. All three of
these new structures lie on the outskirts of Guatemala City. Although Guatemalan neo-
Pentecostalism appears to be a largely upper-middle-class and elite movement (Freston, 2013;
Haynes, 2012; Hunt, 2000; Girard 2013), the evidence on this point is not conclusive.

With other Latin American countries, in the 1970s and early 1980s Guatemala faced a
crisis of its relatively inward-looking import-substitution economic model (Bulmer-Thomas
2003; Taylor 1998). As a response to decades of slow growth, inflation, and recession, in the
1980s Guatemala instituted neoliberal policy reforms intended to open the country to foreign
investment and competition (see Baer and Maloney 1997). Guatemala returned to democratic
rule in 1986 and in 1996 signed peace accords ending a 36-year civil war between guerrillas and
the military. In 1995 the country joined the World Trade Organization and in 2005 ratified the
CAFTA-DR. This facilitated trade between the U.S., Guatemala and other Central American
countries. The most rapid period of growth of neo-Pentecostalism in Guatemala occurred during
the 1980s and 1990s, roughly simultaneous with the country’s economic liberalization and
democratization.

A. Global economic interests. According to Stoll (1994, qtd. in Freston 2001), Protestants
make up less than five percent of Guatemala’s elite, but are disproportionately represented
among the country’s large business owners. Freston claims that it is the “Better-off Protestants”
who are “increasingly drawn to visions of dominion theology, which gives believers a place in
the divine plan. The rhetoric of empowerment is most attractive to the elite and middle-class
professionals (2001: 279-280). Guatemalan neo-Pentecostal churches are sprawling corporations
that often use a franchise business model (Smith 2008: 4). Many of the neo-Pentecostal
megachurches in Guatemala City have satellite churches in rural parts of the country and have
even established churches outside Latin America, and many of these churches include bookstores that feature books written by their own pastors along with other Christian-themed merchandise.

**B. Rhetorics of global competitiveness and consumerism.** The “prosperity gospel” preached in neo-Pentecostal churches closely resembles the “market-friendly” Islamic doctrine described by Haenni (2005) and others. Both religious ideologies have been directly influenced by American evangelicalism (see e.g. Sakr 2007). In neo-Pentecostalism prosperity gospel, or the “health and wealth gospel” (Mora 2008), “emphasizes a God who guarantees success” (Kim 2006). Personal material wealth is interpreted as a sign of God’s favor on the believer’s life, and it is believed that people who give much to the church will be blessed with even more material prosperity (Cox 2006; Smith 2007). This is because “God has promised, in some way, the material prosperity of his children who are faithful, who have faith,” and poverty is “a sign of sin” that a person has acted “against the will of God” (Suazo 2009b: 3).

Neo-Pentecostals use the biblical passage 2 Corinthians 9:6 to justify the acquisition of material wealth: “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.” Pastors use this verse to encourage members to give money or material goods directly to their local neo-Pentecostal church with the promise that they will receive economic blessings (Robbins 2004). For example, in a 2011 Noches de Gloria (Nights of Glory) event in Dallas, Texas, the Guatemalan neo-Pentecostal pastor Cash Luna cited this verse from Corinthians when asking those in attendance to donate at least $20 to defray the cost of the event. Prosperity gospel also teaches that as children of the King (God), Christians “have the right to inherit everything that belongs to the King” (Suazo 2009b: 3). Prosperity gospel in the Guatemalan setting includes many self- and group-affirming messages. During his 2011 event in Dallas, Cash Luna mentioned that the reason he decided to hold Noches de Gloria
in the high-end American Airlines Center in downtown Dallas was because Latinos aren “not second-class people.” Sermons preached in neo-Pentecostal megachurches generally do not focus on actions traditionally labeled as sinful (Smith 2006).

C. Outward-oriented global perspectives. Guatemalan neo-Pentecostals appear to be more active in promoting globally oriented national-political economic reforms than are adherents of the new market-friendly forms of Islam. These activities are guided by what is known as “dominion theology,” a theological system claiming that “believers are destined to rule the world in the name of God” (Mathews Samson 2008: 83). Mathews Samson notes that “much neo-Pentecostal discourse claims believers are destined to rule the world in the name of God” (2008, p. 83).

Guatemalan neo-Pentecostal mega churches generally follow modern, corporate-style management principles and practices throughout their organizational structures and in event planning, including corporate-style benchmarking and “World’s Best Practice” (WBP). Senior pastors of Guatemala City megachurches function much like corporate CEOs: each church is led by a charismatic pastor who is believed to have received unique spiritual authority directly from God. He is an “‘anointed’ leader who fulfills the will of God” (Freston 2001: 277). Power and authority are centralized in the churches (Levine 2009), and senior pastors are generally not accessible to regular church attendees.

D. Lifestyles, patterns of higher education, and consumption of luxury goods and services. While in rural Guatemala traditional forms of Pentecostalism are popular among the poor and working classes, in Guatemala City and other urban areas it is the newer forms of Pentecostalism that are attractive to the middle and upper classes (Freston 2001; Evans 1991;
Smith 2009; Robbins 2004). Neo-Pentecostal megachurches in Guatemala City are almost always located in wealthy areas of the city or on the outskirts of the city at a remove from poor areas.

Credentialism is pronounced among the leadership of Guatemalan neo-Pentecostal churches. Apostles and senior pastors often advertise their many degrees, including honorary degrees, obtained mainly from brand-name US universities. Harold Caballeros, former pastor of El Shaddai, holds a masters in international relations from Tufts University, an MBA from Miami University, and a doctorate in theology and a graduate degree in sociology from the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard (Partido VIVA: Visión con Valores 2011). Cash Luna holds a bachelors degree in Systems Management and a doctorate in Pastoral Ministry from California Christian University (Ministerios Cash Luna 2010). Jorge H. López, pastor of Fraternidad Cristiana, earned a Masters of Divinity from Logos Graduate School and an honorary doctorate in Humane Letters from the Institute of International Studies in Virginia (Fraternidad Cristiana 2011).

Studies of Guatemalan neo-Pentecostalism have found that members of neo-Pentecostal churches consume brand-name clothing, shoes, cars, and jewelry as symbols of their middle- and upper-class status (Girard 2013).

E. Present images of themselves as citizens of the world. On their home pages and social media sites, neo-Pentecostal churches make frequent mention of their organizations’ international reach. The Guatemala City neo-Pentecostal megachurches all use high-tech media in the form of television stations (Canal 27, Enlace), radio (Stereo Visión, Radio Exclusiva), and websites. During Cash Luna’s Noches de Gloria event in Dallas, electronic signs throughout the stadium flashed Cash Luna’s Facebook and Twitter addresses. As of 2011 Luna had
approximately 70,000 Twitter followers, over a million Facebook fans, and a YouTube profile that made videos of his sermons and teachings available free of charge. Harold Caballeros, Jorge H. López, and Cecilia de Caballeros also have popular web sites and Twitter and Facebook pages. While Cash Luna’s website focuses on his ministry to Guatemala, it also includes information regarding his Noches de Gloria which are part of his international ministry, taking place all across the Americas. At the Dallas event a video was shown with clips of Noches de Gloria events in various countries in Central and South America.

Conclusions

It appears that increasing numbers of religions, denominations, churches, mosques and temples across the world espouse doctrines supportive of neoliberal global capitalism, in terms of promoting hard work, individualism, and consumerism. And the leaders and elite adherents of many of these movements appear to fit Sklair’s definition of the Transnational Capitalist Class to a tee. But Global System Theory and the Transnational Capitalist Class concept do not necessarily apply in every case, and at this point it is unclear under what circumstances Sklair’s class analysis framework provides the best available explanation of contemporary religious change. For instance, little is known about the intersection of market-friendly religious beliefs and social class. Some studies portray market-friendly religions as based in new elite and middle classes, while others focus on the increasingly pro-market beliefs of the poor and working class (e.g. Rudnyckyj 2009). In addition, while national-level political conflicts appear to play a crucial role in the success of market-friendly religious movements (e.g. Tugal 2009), the complex interactions between national politics and market-friendly religions are not well captured by Global System Theory in its current state of development.
While there is significant organized resistance to the neoliberal economic system by jihadi and extremist groups in the Muslim world and elsewhere, the literature reviewed above suggests that there is ample evidence of religion-TCC mutual accommodation and even unity in Turkey, the Arab world, Indonesia, and South and Central America. This accommodation and overlap suggests that Sklair’s theory has been underutilized in studies of contemporary religious change, perhaps partly because of Sklair’s own benign neglect of religion and insufficient attention paid to globalization’s profound effects on cultural traditions and identities. The TCC and global capitalism have had tidal effects on religion and culture that are difficult to apprehend in terms of binary modernist theories (“modernity” versus “tradition,” “core” versus periphery,” “East” versus “West,” etc.), but are perhaps better captured theoretically in terms of hybridity and mixing driven by globalization (Tomlinson 1999). In the end, the mounting evidence that the TCC has incorporated religion into the global capitalist system shows the extent of the power the TCC holds over society and culture. Sklair argues that global capitalism “succeeds by turning most spheres of social life into business” (Sklair 2000), and “traditional” religion appears not to be an exception.
References


