UNIVERSITY "OVIDIUS" OF CONSTANȚA
DOCTORAL SCHOOL
DOMAIN: THEOLOGY

PHD THESIS ABSTRACT

The Golden Rule in Abrahamic religions. Ethical and ecumenical perspectives

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CONSTANȚA
2023

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1. Argument

Today's world is a shared space of relationships on all levels. Religious identities are caught up in the fluid rhythm of interdependence. It is up to each religion or religious community whether it turns its own borders into walls that cannot be overcome, or whether it engages in an openness to otherness without restructuring its own identity, in an assertive and edifying way. Isolation is not a solution, as it inevitably leads to refractory and fundamentalist attitudes. The context of plurality thus becomes a pertinent reflection on who we are in the religious order.

However, the world of the 20th and 21st centuries suffers from a paradox, brought up to date by the obvious reality of religious plurality. Just when the world needs the "Golden Rule" the most, it is less available in its applicability by people and communities, by states and religious cultures. Every major religious tradition has a "Golden Rule", but social and legal restrictions on the freedom of conscience to practice their faith have steadily increased globally, hindering the practice of the Golden Rule. In a global world - where our common challenges transcend borders and can only be solved in concert - the Golden Rule is not only the right thing to do, it is also in our common interest as an ethical principle of relationship.

The argument for which we have opted in the analysis of the Golden Rule as a relational norm for establishing principles of good understanding between different religious identities, and which does not intend the construction of a multi-religious syncretism nor the relativization of each religious-social identity participating in this relationship, is motivated by two undeniable contemporary challenges. Firstly, the evidence of religious diversity, and secondly, the intense dynamics of mass movement through migration. Moving from one country to another is a locational transition, but not one of changing religious identity. Thus, migrants are agents of planting new and different religious versions in the social framework in relation to those of the country in which they settle.

Regarding the first reason: worldwide, more than 84% of people identify with a religious group. In 2023, Christianity is by far the largest religion in the world, with an estimated 2.38 billion adherents, almost a third (31.1%) of the world's 7.66 billion people. Islam is in second place, with 1.9 billion followers, or 24.9% of the global population. The world's unaffiliated population is about 1.2 billion or 15.6% of the global population. Hinduism ranks fourth, with 1.16 billion followers, or 15.2% of the

global population, followed by Buddhism, with 500 million followers, or 6.6% of the global population.
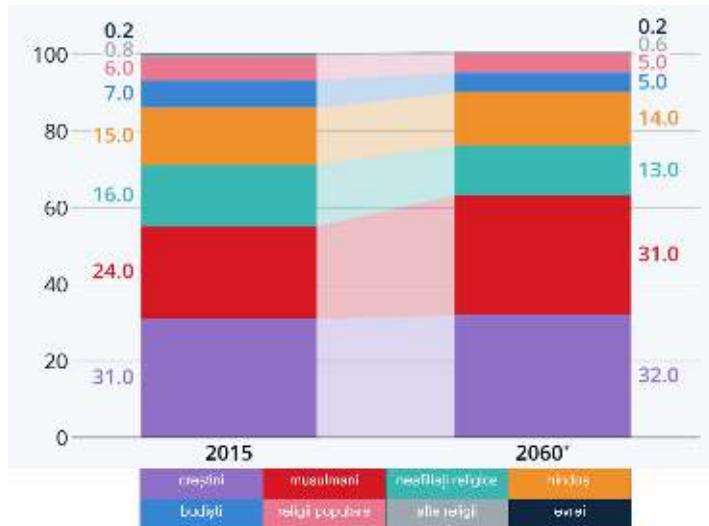
SOURCE: Claire Jenik, "The World's Largest Religious Groups Over Time," Aug 23, 2021, https://www.statista.com

On the second reason: according to current global estimates, in 2020 there will be about 281 million international migrants in the world, representing 3.6% of the world's population. Overall, the estimated number of international migrants has increased over the last five decades. The total estimated number of 281 million people living in a country other than their country of birth in 2020 was 128 million higher than in 1990 and more than three times the number estimated in 1970.
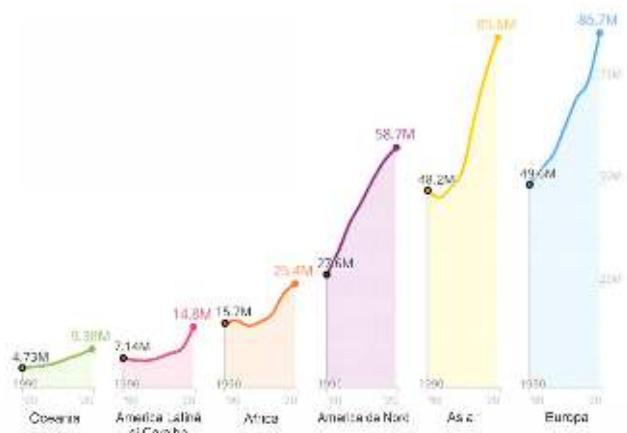
SOURCE: WORLD MIGRATION REPORT 2022 by International Organization for Migration (IOM), https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int
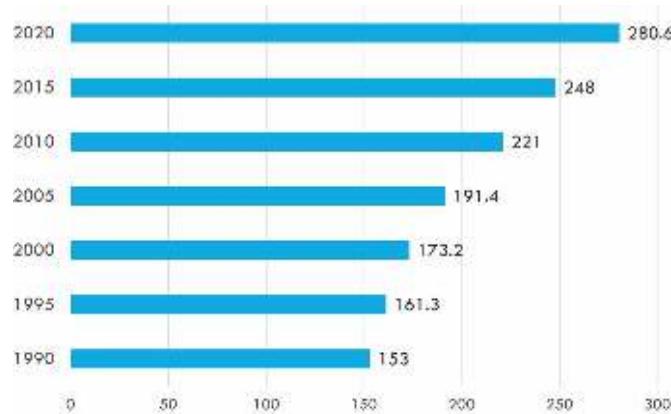
SOURCE: United Nations - Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) report 2021

Migration, as a phenomenon that actualizes a new and constant map of interaction between people in different places and cultures, implies two theses in the analysis of identity: (a) the reality of a multiplicity of identities, representing different aspects of the self that may vary in importance/prominence and relevance/evidence for a given time or place; (b) concern for processes of choice and change that reveal the flexible and dynamic characteristics of identity.

So the current global context is challenging. The conflictual events of recent years are overwhelming and promise to get worse. We are now witnessing the return of religiously and politically radical groups whose discourse is trenchant and based on exclusivism. There is a common root of this global complexity: the inability to live with our deepest differences. As soon as we lose our ability to respect the inherent dignity of someone else's freedom to disagree, stereotypes take hold. And stereotypes are the first step towards dehumanisation and ultimately violence. If these are the stakes, it is imperative that we understand the nature of our global environment if we are to try to influence it for the better. In other words, any theory of change and strategy for transformation must be consistent with the nature of the environment if it is to have an impact.

2. Research objectives

The Golden Rule is a norm embedded in most religious cultures of the world. In Christianity, the New Testament mentions it in the words of the Saviour Jesus Christ: the Gospel of Matthew, 7:12: "But whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do

ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets". Gospel according to Luke, ca. 6:31: "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also unto them."

In Judaism we find it also. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a: "Once there was a man came before Shammai and said to him: Convert me on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one leg. Shammai pushed him aside with the measuring stick he was holding. The same man came before Hillel, and Hillel converted him, saying: No, no, no: What is vile to you, do not do this to your neighbor, this is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary, go and learn it." The Old Testament mentions it in the Book of Tobit, chapter 4:15. "What you hate yourself, that you shall not do to anyone". Most modern biblical scholars date the Book of Tobit to between the 5th and 3rd centuries BC. The same period (or even earlier) is attributed to the teachings of Confucius. Analects (Lun Yu), XV, 24: "Zi Gong [a disciple] asked: Is there any word that could guide a person through life?. The master replied, What about reciprocity! Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself."

Similar statements appear in ancient Indian and Muslim texts. A saying of the Buddha says: "As one teaches others, so one should teach oneself" (Dhammapada XII: 159). A hadith of the Prophet Muhammad says: "None of you has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself" (Hadith 13).

Modern ethologists believe that mutual altruism is the result of human evolution from natural selfishness. Without going into the depths of the history of the Golden Rule (time, place and origin), we consider pointing out the fundamental difference between the statements in the New and Old Testaments. Many consider these statements to be identical and even believe that the Golden Rule originated in the New Testament from the Old Testament. Despite the superficial similarity, they have different, one might say, opposite meanings. In the New Testament, the statement of the Golden Rule is positive: do unto others as is good for you. But good for us does not always mean good for others. On the other hand, the Old Testament suggests the negative statement: don't do to others what is bad for you. Following this principle, one does not harm anyone, not even a stranger. This principle is more universal and better grounded in relationships with both friends and friends and strangers.

Interestingly, the Golden Rule, as a principle of ethics, can also be found in philosophy. Thales of Miletus, the first of the seven famous Greek sages and philosophers, answered the question "What method should we adopt to lead a good life?" in the following way: "Let us do nothing that we condemn in others".

Along these lines, we propose the following objectives in this PhD thesis:

a) to map the contemporary religious context and the challenges that threaten the stability of inter-religious interactions;

b) to explore the ethical and religious dimensions of the Golden Rule;

c) to verify the applicability of the Golden Rule as a norm for relations between religious cultures in the perspective of religious tolerance;

d) to evaluate the Golden Rule from a Christian missionary point of view by referring to official documents drawn up by the authoritative institutions of the three Abrahamic religions.

3. The topicality of the topic researched

The topic under consideration is highly relevant in the current global context for several reasons. Despite the predictions of leading academics in the mid-20th century, the world is becoming increasingly religious. For example, in 1968, Peter Berger predicted a disastrous future for religious communities in the 21st century. He declared, "Religious believers will probably be found only in small sects, banded together to resist a worldwide secular culture." In 1970, the percentage of people worldwide who declared an affiliation to a religion of some kind was 80.8%. By the year 2000, however, that figure jumped to 87.0% and continued to rise, reaching 88.7% by 2022. The demographic pivots were the collapse of communism at the end of the 20th century and China's opening up to the rest of the world. China, the world's largest country, has seen a revival of religions of all kinds since the end of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. China's religious population has risen dramatically from 39.8% in 1970 to 61.2% in 2022. Russia has recovered its Orthodox national heritage (82.4% Christian in 2022), as have other former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe. Like Russia, some post-Soviet states are majority Christian, such as Armenia (94.7%), Romania (83.9%) and Belarus (79.0%).

Others are predominantly Muslim, such as Tajikistan (97.9%), Turkmenistan (96.5%) and Uzbekistan (95.6%). Many other countries have also seen an increase in religious affiliation over the last thirty years, including Albania (formerly the world's only official atheist country), Bosnia-Herzegovina and Moldova, all with over 96% religious.

In addition to these changes in religious demographics, it is also significant that Christians and Muslims together accounted for only 33% of the world's population in 1800, rising to 47% in 1900. In 2022, Christians and Muslims together accounted for 57%, and this is expected to rise to over 63% by 2050. Consequently, the importance of improving Christian-Muslim and other relations globally and locally - including mutual understanding and compassion - will only become more pressing in local, national and international contexts.

With the development of new techniques of communication and mobility, in tandem with the progress of modernisation and the creation of the global economic network, the countries of the world have become more religiously diverse in the 20th century, especially when measured at the national level. This is especially true in Asia (which has always been the most religiously diverse continent), where immigration has transformed previously homogeneous societies into more diverse communities. Han Chinese, for example, can be found in their millions throughout Southeast Asia and around the world, including Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the United States, bringing with them their unique East Asian religions.

Some of the most profound increases in religious diversity are in Germany and the United States. Measured by the Religious Diversity Index , Germany's religious diversity jumps from 0.3% in 1900 to 5.2% by 2022. Likewise, the United States has grown from 0.6% in 1900 to 4.6% in 2022. By one measure, Singapore remained the most diverse country in the world in 2020, as the country is home to seven religions, each claiming at least 1% of the country's population (all figures are percentages): Chinese folk religion (36%), Christianity (21%), Buddhism (15%), Islam (15%), agnosticism (5%), Hinduism (5%) and new religions (1%). At the same time, however, some regions were becoming less religiously diverse, such as sub-Saharan Africa, where Christianity and Islam were on the rise due to conversions from traditional African religions. Christianity in the region grew from 9.1% in 1900 to 59.1% in 2022; Islam grew from 14.2% to 30.0% over the same period.

Christians have inadequate personal contact with people of other religions. Broadly speaking, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims have relatively little contact with Christians around the world, and this has not changed much in the last two decades. The measure of personal contact focuses on the importance of friendship across religious boundaries and challenges Christian missionary efforts that see people as mere targets for evangelism rather than human beings living, working and acting in specific

social contexts. The terms "personal contact" and "personal acquaintance" imply more than a casual or superficial relationship. It is estimated that 87% of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims do not know a Christian personally. With the exception of Asia, non-religious people have closer contact with Christians, which is not unexpected since many agnostics and atheists in the West are former Christians. Ethnic religious people also have more contact with Christians, probably because ethnic religious peoples were a major target of Christian missionary efforts in the 20th century.

Personal contact between Christians and non-Christians varies by region. In North America, for example, it is estimated that 56% of Muslims know a Christian, while in Europe the figure is less than 18%. Buddhist communities, by contrast, appear to be more integrated in Latin America (66% know a Christian) than in North America (35%) or Europe (28%). The biggest challenge is in Asia, partly because the Christian community is relatively small and in many places separated from followers of other religions by geography or culture. In Asia, only 12% of all non-Christians know a Christian personally (13% for Buddhists, 13% for Hindus and 10% for Muslims).

It may seem counter-intuitive that Christians are not in contact with people of other religions, given that the world has become more religiously diverse. However, this diversity is often stifled at best by lack of knowledge and at worst by fear of the 'other', causing a ghettoisation of religious and ethnic communities.

What are Christians doing in this global religious context? An important Christian virtue is solidarity - a shared vision of valuing one another and working together for the common good, despite religious differences. To this end, Christians face at least three relational challenges:

(a) First, Christians must learn how to get along with Christians of other traditions. This has been generally referred to as the "ecumenical challenge", a challenge that is underscored each year by the number of denominations in the world, currently over 46,000.

b) Secondly, Christians need to get on well with other religious as well as non-religious people - the "interfaith challenge". Current data provide a demographic context for the importance of religious beliefs, behaviours and attitudes, which are growing in size and influence over time.

c) Third, working for solidarity also includes relating well to people out of respect for our global human family, without reference primarily to religious identity - the challenge of "common humanity."

The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, institutional racism, lack of education for girls, the urban poor, and a host of other serious and systemic challenges all require a strong Christian commitment that is strengthened when Christians intentionally work across differences.

In general, Christians might agree with the idea of getting along well with others, but questions persist: How do we maintain a strong Christian identity while engaging with others who are different? What does true solidarity look like? How do we achieve solidarity in light of such a plurality of faiths? By "solidarity" we are not encouraging Christians or any other religious people to abandon their core beliefs. Solidarity is an attitude towards others characterised by love, respect, friendship and hospitality. Examining the demographics of religious growth, religious diversity and personal contacts highlights the important factor of receiving and applying the Golden Rule in the context of today's multi-religious world.

We believe that the systematic treatment of the dimensions of the Golden Rule as an ethical and normative principle of relationship beyond the particularities of religious and cultural identities in the perspective of its application in the multi-religious context of contemporary society is of prime relevance.

4. Scientific methodology used

The topic under investigation has a multilateral rather than an exclusively theological orientation. This is for several reasons. Firstly, the appeal to the Golden Rule introduces us to the ethical register, since this rule is by definition a moral ethical framework. Secondly, the appeal to current statistical data on migration, contemporary religious diversity and the 2021 census in Romania have made a sociological analysis necessary. Thirdly, the exploration of the historical and political frameworks of the Golden Rule and religious tolerance forced us to resort to the historical approach, and the analysis of the documents elaborated by the religious institutions of the three monotheistic religions with reference to the valorisation of good relations of reciprocity and peace led to some political-religious arguments.

We considered using a working methodology that would facilitate a logical and efficient approach to reading. Consequently, the methods used are the following: systematic (structural presentation of the arguments in order to tick off the proposed

objectives), comparative (placing in parallel the ethical elements of the Abrahamic religions).

It should be noted that in the Romanian theological literature, the Golden Rule in its ethical dimensions is addressed only to a vague degree of generality. For this reason, we have used mainly English-language bibliography to guide our analysis.

5. Conclusions

This PhD thesis was intended as an exploration of the ethical dimension of the Golden Rule as applied to the relationship between the three monotheistic religions and we believe that, following the analysis undertaken, we have achieved our proposed objectives (mapping the contemporary religious context and the challenges that threaten the stability of interreligious interactions; exploring the ethical and religious dimensions of the Golden Rule; verifying the applicability of the Golden Rule as a norm for relations between religious cultures in the perspective of religious tolerance; evaluating the Golden Rule from a Christian missionary point of view by referring to official documents drawn up by the authoritative institutions of the three Abrahamic religions). The basic conclusion is that the Golden Rule is not an abstract but an ethical norm. People do not need special training or skills to use this rule, because it is not a logical formula, but a functional pattern of behaviour. Everyone knows and recognizes this rule because it is present in our experience. The Golden Rule is a fundamental principle of our everyday life, based on morality.

This rule is more than necessary in the context of today's world, when religions are engaged in the dynamic interplay of relationships on the public social stage. Three words define the global era of this century: identity, resilience and partnership. Understanding each other and their interaction is the foundation for a "Golden Rule" in a global society that enables sustainable and positive change from the bottom up - i.e. from people to communities, a change that is also protected and promoted from the top down by governments around the world.

Globalisation means different things and there are many theories about it. What defines it is the interaction and compression at the relational level of local structural elements, until recently located at a great distance from each other, whether we are talking about ethnicities, religions, cultures, economies. The global dynamic is that of contraction and bringing differences into spatial and communicative proximity.

However, we have noticed one main result: a challenge to identity. Technology, travel and trade expose people to information and ideas that constantly challenge the way identity is conceived of self and received by others. In response, most people are left with two (sub)conscious choices: to be defined by what they are for or to be defined by what they are against. The first option requires careful and ongoing reflection on who one is - in the context of one's spiritual, global and national citizenship, and the discipline to administer that citizenship in the manner of the "Golden Rule". Such a process requires great maturity. Being defined against someone raises issues. It is all too easy to manipulate identity by playing on the stereotypes of different identity groups. If identity is to be defined by what it is for, both individually and as a community of different identities, then society must have a "Golden Rule" that is also protected and promoted by the state as a function of what it means to be a good citizen.

The reality of the years we live in suggests a mix of risk and resilience. There are so many risks in today's world - from sudden geo-political shocks to long-term environmental stress - that the only way to reduce and manage risk is to build resilience. There have been two different approaches to resilience, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The first approach suggested that authorities and institutions should create referential resilience factors, who would be responsible for implementing new ideas and training on how people and platforms could be resilient to future shocks/stresses. The second suggestion sought to create a 'culture of resilience' based on a clear organisational and individual identity and direction - a much simpler but more difficult task. In other words: if you know who you are - if you know your values and their application (the Golden Rule), both individually and corporately as a community - then you will know where you are going. Only a mature understanding of identity provides the resilience needed to survive, overcome and thrive amidst the continuous change and risks of the 21st century.

Today's global challenges share two common characteristics: (1) they cannot be meaningfully addressed, much less solved, by a single state (governmental) or non-state (non-governmental, Church, institutionalized religious authority, NGO) actor; and, (2) it is therefore not a matter of knowing, but of knowing when to partner with a government or religious-cultural authority, NGO as partners that invariably. Which also means that in the process of partnering, whether consciously or unconsciously, individuals and institutions of state and non-state actors will demonstrate a 'philosophy of partnership' in the way they build (or, as the case may be, fail to build) mutual respect

and trust between different partners with different backgrounds and beliefs. In fact, in one way or another, a 'philosophy of partnership' will convey how the 'other' is conceived and received, and therefore shape and inform how that partnership serves those who are most affected by the specific global challenge at hand. Done well, the partnership accelerates practical action and the lasting success of the partnership's goals, precisely because the partnership embodies what it seeks to impart: a model of mutual respect and trust between people of different faiths and identities, according to the Golden Rule. A partnership that respects identity is a resilient partnership that serves the common good. The logic of partnership is an innovation in current theological and sociological research, which is beginning to take on a more articulate shape as a possibility for the interaction of differences on the basis of dialogue. These three elements mentioned form a basis for building an intentional theory of change and a transformative strategy that is organic to the environment in which it seeks to have influence and impact.

Our world is a global world in which we need to engage our neighbours who are different from us: not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because we need these neighbours to help us solve the global challenges that affect us all. We have no choice but to learn and work together. It is this model of learning together - through the Golden Rule and therefore through mutual respect for each other's identity - that often reduces stereotypes, while creating relationships that can serve as the basis for future innovative and resilient partnerships. It takes time, but it is the quickest way to mitigate and manage the enormous global risks to humanity's most basic freedom - freedom of conscience - and thus preserve our ability to address the rest of our global challenges.

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