

## Globalization and the Church

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I still remember with some excitement my trip to Southern Serbia during the Kosovo tensions. We traveled by car from Macedonia. Crossing the tense border checkpoint we could see the blue tents on the hills from where UN peace-keepers kept an eye on the valley below.

In Serbia, we spent the night in a town not far from where, days earlier, a NATO bomb fell by mistake. Our hosts were a Serb pastor and his wife, leaders of a new church which met in their home. One evening we went to the Gypsy district, where a group of 200 believers received us for a special church meeting. I remember perspiring profusely in this small room where we crowded together in narrow bench rows, knees pressing on the person in front. It was a cold evening outside but the crowded room was very warm, as was the welcome from the Gypsy believers.

My mind skips from Serbia to Bangladesh, where I met for worship with about 20 laborers. We met in the late afternoon, on the floor of their semi-private sleeping quarters within the makeshift factory in which they worked. Even as I try to describe this scene, another image begins to form, this time in West Kalimantan, in a Dayak village where some months earlier Dayaks had killed and beheaded immigrant Madurese in a flurry of racial tension. We met in a church building and then went to the pastor's house nearby for a meal.

### The Church Is Global

I can roll out similar stories from more than 50 countries where I have seen the church in a variety of local forms and conditions. The church is global, by God's intent and through the obedience of missions. The church, though a spiritual entity **not of this world**, exists **in this world** and ministers to it through the physical, social and economic vehicles available. By virtue of its ability to emerge and thrive anywhere on earth, the expanding church displays some characteristics similar to other global structures. Yet, it would be a mistake to read too much similarity into it.

### Globalization

There are many helpful definitions of globalization, and I will select, for the purpose of this article, R. Robertson's definition cited by Malcolm Waters in his book Globalization.<sup>1</sup>

Globalization as a concept refers to both the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole ... both concrete global interdependence and consciousness of the global whole.

Globalization, at its most basic, means at least two things:

1. the dynamic expansion, of a local phenomenon -- a product (Coca-Cola), an idea (human rights), a system of social interaction (banking) -- to the rest of the world.
2. the global influence on otherwise local phenomena: i.e., the pervasive insertion of English idiomatic expressions in the daily

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<sup>1</sup> Waters, M. (1995) Globalization, London, Routledge

life of non-English-speaking societies because of the computer revolution.

In the realm of ideas, and more fundamentally, of worldviews, globalization means greater exposure to, and less protective isolation from, alien worldviews on local communities. This exposure generates pressure toward relativism concerning ultimate things. It may be said that relativism is a foundational mindset of globalization. In order to succeed, globalization must not only discard rigid geopolitical borders. It must also weaken localized worldviews. A very simple but very real illustration is the conflict between globalized clothing fashion and local Islamic convictions about female modesty. On a recent trip to Lebanon I could observe the contrast between pervasive fashion marketing and public display of 'immodest' fashion by some women on the one hand, with affirmations of Islamic modesty values by other women. Globalization pressures us into withholding our convictions in order to co-exist with other value systems, for the sake of peace. But it is in this realm of worldviews that the interaction of the church with the globalization phenomenon becomes particularly relevant. While the church can legitimately assume different forms of expression in different social and cultural contexts, it cannot legitimately hold to more than one worldview without denying its very nature and purpose. Christians are generally quite clear about what distinguishes them from other formal religions. We know that Hinduism (or Buddhism, or Islam) is not Christianity. Attempts to integrate the Christian faith with any of the others is not likely to find wide acceptance nor to last very long. The challenge for Christians (and presumably for Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims) comes from unexpected, subtler corners. We acquire our theology consciously through proposition statements. Our worldview, however, is acquired subconsciously, in small and imperceptible parts. Note, for instance, the consumerist life-style and dependency among conservative Evangelicals in the West. Faultless theology, yet practical daily surrender to a worldview that rationalizes and excuses consumption excesses.

C. S. Lewis describes this process by placing in the mouth of his fictional Screwtape the following words:

*[CSLewis, Screwtape Letters, chap. 12] ...We know that we have introduced a change of direction in his course which is already carrying him out of his orbit around the Enemy [God]; but he must be made to imagine that all the choices which have effected this change of course are trivial and revocable. He must not be allowed to suspect that he is now, however slowly, heading right away from the sun on a line which will carry him into the cold and dark of utmost space.*

*For this reason I am almost glad to hear that he is still a churchgoer and a communicant. I know there are dangers in this; but anything is better than that he should realise the break he has made ...*

### **The Church is 'other'**

The church is, according to Scripture, the people of God in pilgrimage through this fallen world.

By faith he [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob,

who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup>For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”<sup>2</sup>

Christ himself declared that his followers are in the world but not of the world.

“I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. <sup>1</sup>My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. <sup>1</sup>They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.”<sup>3</sup>

Redemption from sin and a whole new birth bring a person into a new community, marked by a new fellowship with God the creator. This understanding is fundamental to our grasp of how the church relates to the globalizing process that so shapes current human life. This question of being **in** but **not of** the world is at the root of how we understand the church's relation to the world's globalizing process.

### **Parallels with globalization**

We acknowledge the parallels, at a secondary level, between the worldwide spread of the church and its biblical values, and the secular globalization of social values, goods and structures. Both phenomena propagate core values that transcend geographical and cultural borders; the potential for community when people of different countries meet: common concerns, vocabulary, themes; there is also a sense of identification that comes from the similarity of forms of social interaction, tools and instruments. In the church, music and instrumental arrangements resemble each other across cultural borders; outside the church, young business managers have been steeped in Druckerisms and One Minute Manager concepts and language.

These similarities are often readily visible, and may deceive us as to the utterly different essential natures of the church and of a global world order. This deceit is particularly strong in societies that manifest the more positive characteristics of globalization. In affluent countries and among the affluent segments of poorer societies, benefits of globalization are more clearly seen and appreciated. For Christians in those places, it is easier to believe that globalization is useful to the pursuit of our Christian ideals. Since computer technology has generated wealth and material benefits in these societies, it seems reasonable to assume that technology will have similarly beneficial impact on the remaining task of world evangelization. More than that, the visible and awe-inspiring achievements of globalized technology often mask its shortcomings. Affluent Christians may not realize that believers living in places under the unfavorable effects of globalization, on the other hand, are less likely to make that assumption.

We also acknowledge that the church manifests itself in the world through the various means of human social expression available. We eat, drink, sleep, and work in the same way, and use the same tools that all other people do. We share communal conditions with our neighbors and fellow citizens. We propagate the gospel through communication and transportation and other technical means shared by everyone else.

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<sup>2</sup> Heb 11:9-10 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> John 17:14-16 (NIV)

## **The church is radically different**

Most important for this discussion, however, is the fact that we differ radically from the world as to the fundamental meaning of human existence. This means that while we live in, and make use of the same created environment, we attribute crucially different meanings to all things. As Paul the apostle puts it:

*Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* (2 Cor 5:16-17).

And

*... you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.* (Eph 4:20-24).

This difference in perspective, in the fundamental way in which we differ from the world, in our understanding of ourselves and everything else, is further clarified in Paul's instructions to Christ's followers:

*<sup>2</sup>Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.* (Rom 12:2)

Though once we were fully part of this world, sharing with it not only the externals of life on earth but its very spiritual condition and worldview, now as Christians, we no longer share except the externals.

At this point, it is fair to ask the question: Is that so? Note the contrast between Paul's two statements above. The first states it as a fact that we have been radically changed and no longer share the world's view. The second statement calls us to intentionally avoid being conformed by the world's pattern, implying that we are not yet sufficiently different. Ajith Fernando says, "Biblical community is an area in which the church will have to present a prophetic alternative in today's society. Yet I fear that this is an area in which we have conformed greatly to the pattern of this world . . . I fear that many of our structures of community life are derived more from the business world than from the Bible."<sup>4</sup>

So what does this have to do with globalization? Globalization is more than a way of organizing how humans relate to each other as individuals and societies; it is a framework for making sense of the universe and of our existence in it. In this sense, globalization is another version of previous human frameworks for making sense of life without God. This should not surprise us, since a world that does not have God as its point of reference inevitably develops a God-less worldview. This does not mean that globalization is without virtue in any of its parts. It does

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<sup>4</sup> Fernando, A. (2000). The Church: The mirror of the Trinity. In W. D. Taylor (Ed.) Global Missiology for The 21<sup>st</sup> Century (pp. 254-255). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic

mean, however, that to the extent that it is a worldview, a way of making sense of God's world without reference to God, it is unable to meet fundamental human aspirations. It is here that the church, the only effective alternative, needs to exercise its prophetic role. To quote Ajith Fernando once more, "We have to be prophetic in the way we practice biblical community, because biblical community is so different from what we see in the world."<sup>5</sup>

The danger of globalization for Christians today is in its power to shape not only how we live but how we think and how we place ultimate value on things. This danger is not new, of course. Earlier historical manifestations of worldly patterns have had similar effect, and often the church fell into them unwittingly. Notable among them is the attempt to propagate the gospel by military force in the era of the crusades, or in more recent history, ideas of racial superiority that Western Christians shared with their unbelieving compatriots. Globalization, at the level of worldviews, is today's dominant manifestation of the "patern of this world" to which the apostle Paul refers, and is aided by new and powerful instruments. Technological development strengthens globalization's power to shape our thinking:

- It accelerates the propagation of products and ideas around the world so that we are bombarded by information at a rate impossible to control. It generates sweeping changes very quickly, affording Christians little time to consider and prepare a biblically sound response. The sheer volume of information dulls our senses and our ability to discern. Our best efforts at resisting the pressure drives us either to give in and choose to only see the objects and the immediate benefits, or they drive us to a withdrawal from taking part in any of its offers.<sup>6</sup> It facilitates ethical accommodations: as some might say: "If you can't beat it, join it." Some colleagues in the missions movement argue hopefully that we can control the effects of globalization so that they serve our purposes and advances the gospel. Yet, if it represents a worldview antithetical to the gospel, doesn't that demand some serious reflection?
- Sophisticated marketing language, dominant worldwide in this globalizing age, is capable of creating artificial impressions, pseudo-realities that offer persuasive arguments against every reservation raised by our overwhelmed but still struggling mind. It entices us by suggesting that we take advantage of its help to accomplish our ends, even though with the means comes also the meaning, with use of the tools comes also a new pattern of thinking.

Here lies the major challenge to the church. Are we able to see beyond the immediate and isolated parts to the pattern that lies behind the whole system? In every age the church has had the same challenge. The church in this generation faces its own in the form of a globalizing process. Globalization can be particularly deceitful in that it can present its fantasies in full color and movement - the evolution of highly developed marketing techniques, supported by special-effects technology, promises the church amazing results from simple and

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<sup>5</sup> Idem

<sup>6</sup> Zengotita, T. (2002). The numbing of the American mind: culture as anesthetic. In Harper's Magazine, April 2002, Harpers Magazine Foundation, New York, NY.

inoffensive things. In that, it reveals the character of the one the Scriptures call the prince of this world, the one who shapes the pattern of this world's thinking. It harks back to the simple enticing promise made to our first mother and later to our Saviour: what can be wrong with a bite of fruit when you consider what you will accomplish with it? How can the transformation of stones into bread to allay legitimate hunger be anything but good? Eve did not see through the ruse. Christ saw through it clearly, and did not even entertain a discussion on the merits of the offer. He saw the pattern of the prince of this world clearly and responded accordingly. When Eve failed to see, she introduced herself and her descendants to a world of distortions and death. Christ came to give us new eyes to see. History is clear: the pattern of this world will always seem enticing and sensible. Resisting may at times look foolish. After all, we can reach the world with the gospel a lot faster and more effectively by making full use of the instruments of globalization. Perhaps, but do we see the pattern behind it? Can we discern the truth of it all? Is the church equipped to see? Or have we spent all our energies trying to capitalize on the bounty offered by the world at the expense of spiritual edification of believers, and in so doing, failed to sharpen their eyes to see through the ruse.

As I said before, we live in this world, using the means available in the natural and social environment that constitutes earthly existence today. How else can we bear witness of the new world in Christ if not within the context of this world? Yet, we must not diminish in anyway the fact that we are no longer of this world. Christ gives us a new pattern of thinking that guides us even as we live in, and minister to, this world. It is the calling of the church today to so equip believers that they will be able to avoid being conformed to this world's pattern and instead be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

Since we are talking about a way of thinking, practical action must involve changes in those places and mechanisms by which Christians are taught to think about their faith. Seminaries must do more than turn out preachers and local church administrators. It needs to develop Christian thinkers, people competent to engage the issues of the day in light of the uniqueness of the gospel. Local churches must no longer be a weekly detour from our real, secular, life. Rather, they need to be a place where we are reminded of our distinct calling. Sunday school curricula need to go beyond teaching fact and behavior and help children, youth and adults to think about our unique, distinctive nature as people of God and how it must speak to the world.

There needs to be an energetic critique of what passes for Christian literature today. So-called Christian publishing has become largely part of the system of this world. As such, it has a vested interest in maintaining that system, even if it contains small-scale messages to the contrary. It has embraced conspicuous, superfluous consumption as its necessary operational base. But it precisely against such things that the Christian worldview stands. The gospel does away with the need to buy, the need to have, because it fulfills our deepest longings with the love of Christ. We need to rebuild Christian literature around the pattern of the gospel so that the new generation of Christians will be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

## **So, what does this have to do with missions?**

The evangelical missions movement today places great significance on church-planting, yet I hear very little in missions circles about the nature of the church. Typically the approach seeks primarily to answer the question of quantifiable church presence: a church for X number of people; a church for each village; X number of adult believers make up a local church; There seems to exist an understandable fear of artificial and unhelpful disunity between various denominational views of church structure, which may in part explain the silence on the subject of what is church. Another probable cause is the likely absence of serious ecclesiology in our current missions workforce. I have detected no significant discussion on this subject in missions circles in the last 25 years. The emphasis has been on evangelism. Where church-planting is specified as an goal, it seems to be conceived as a necessary collection of evangelized individuals rather than a clearly developed spiritual community along the lines of Ephesians 4. The local 'church' seems validated by its mere numerical existence rather than by its spiritual essence and nature.

The modern missions movement may have been propagating a truncated model of the church, one that is incapable of judging the spirit of the age. More likely the local church becomes merely another player in the world's game rather than presenting an alternative to it. If I am correct in this assessment, it becomes vital to re-introduce in our missions movement the discussion of what is the church and what is its role in the face of globalizing trends that shape so much of how we live and think today. The missions movement needs to rethink itself as a promoter not simply of a truth statement but as propagators of a people of God. Evangelical missions have for the most part abandoned a conscious intention to expand the religious structure of Christendom, yet in practice that seems to be precisely what we continue to do. We are caught up in methodologies and structures, in visible and quantifiable entities, when what we need is a living spiritual body that manifests itself in a diversity of ways because it is not bound to any one form, rather it transcends form.

Christian missions must be about an alternative way of thinking about ourselves and the world, not simply a formal change of religious allegiance and behavior. Globalization has been casting the church as "Christianity", merely another religion that needs to be recognized among the competing religions. This is a trend of enormous power, difficult to resist, because it offers us benefits if we conform to this identity. We will be allowed a vending stall in the globalized market place, if we play by the rules and do not challenge the arrangement. Yet, the church must follow its head, Christ, and be willing to overturn the market stalls and scatter the profits on the ground. I mean this not in the literal sense of vandalizing material objects and structures, but more traumatic still, to shatter a whole way of thinking that God has rejected and offering the gospel of God's love in Christ as a new determiner of what matters in this world.

Globalization has a definite Western flavour to it. This is not surprising, because when globalization breaks down national barriers, those societies with greater power of projection will be in a better position to take advantage of it. There is a flow of people and information in all

directions today. Yet, the rules of engagement are mostly defined by the West. The ubiquitous presence of CNN and the BBC wherever there are television sets by far outweigh the token foreign TV programs that find occasional presence in Western living rooms. Joseph Stiglitz, formerly senior vice president and chief economist of the World Bank, puts it bluntly:

“The Western countries have pushed poor countries to eliminate trade barriers, but kept up their own barriers, preventing developing countries from exporting their agricultural products and so depriving them of desperately needed export income ... But even when not guilty of hypocrisy, the West has driven the globalization agenda, ensuring that it garners a disproportionate share of the benefits, at the expense of the developing world.”<sup>7</sup>

The Western missions movement also shares in the West's power of projection. Western mission agencies have the capacity to mobilize resources and establish a presence among the new mission frontiers of the world sooner and more solidly than most any others. Where it cannot literally establish a permanent presence, it can provide resources to locals and others so that its influence is felt even where its personnel can't be physically present. The church established under this influence will reflect the benefits and problems of the West. When Jimmy Swaggart lost much of his visibility in the United States as a result of his public embarrassment, his ministry had already established solid enough activities elsewhere (in Brazil, for instance) to sustain his enterprise.

Take for instance the question of what is the appropriate form of worship. In North America this has been of primary concern for church leaders. It is amazing to see that question becoming central to churches in Brazil. This was not a concern during my growing up evangelical in Brazil. Globalization is in great part the Westernization, even the Americanization of the world. The world missions movement undeniably reflects this. In North America the church exists to a great extent as one of the many interest groups competing to gain benefits from the established social structures. It sacrifices its claim as a beacon pointing to a different world in order to become one more player in the competition for advantages within the existing world system. In countries where the work of missions has led to a well established church, this same phenomenon is already taking shape. Thus we see the evangelical presence in South Korea, Malaysia, Chile and Brazil among others, assuming the form of social interest groups seeking power and influence with the political and social structures, as it has done in North America.

It is important to recognize that the mechanisms of globalization have an inherent power to shape not only how people in general think but also how we, the church, think. It is in that sense that the church may become a vehicle for the globalization of a new pattern of this world, about which Paul warns us in Romans 12:2. There is no need for the existence of intentional human agents for this to happen. There is no need to see some dark conspiracy of dominant societies that shape how everyone else lives or thinks. Globalization is like a well-paved highway open to everyone, but in which those with the most automobiles are the primary and preferential users, for the simple reason that they have the greater means to use it. We must heed Paul's admonition by recovering a mustard seed perspective, the small band of twelve with which Jesus

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<sup>7</sup> Stiglitz, J. (2002) *Globalization and Its Discontents*, W. W. Norton, New York, NY.

changed the world. The system of this world is caught up in largeness, loudness, in overwhelming clutter that impairs thinking and encourages consumption. We need to break this mindset not just as individuals, but as the church and as a missions movement. We need to rediscover the power of smallness, of low visibility. Like salt, we release our flavour by emptying ourselves, not by gathering ourselves in ever bigger salt-shakers with great spires for everyone to see. Unless we intentionally heed Paul's admonition, we become simply part of the system with nothing significant to contribute to it. The salt loses its flavour.

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