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Global Society: Challenges for Christian Mission

In his CMS Annual Sermon, delivered in London, Oxford, Birmingham and York in October 2003, Vinoth Ramachandra sets the challenge of contemporary Christian discipleship and mission in the context of our changing political, economic and cultural context. He presents a vision of the gospel and the Church of Christ as the true universalism in the face of globalization, and challenges us to engage with the local as members of a global community.

Introduction: What is Globalization?

Globalization is a term that means different things to different people in different situations. In academic sociology it is used to refer to those global processes that dis-embed human activities from local contexts and re-embed them in complex ways in other contexts. This is largely driven by recent technological innovations. Economic globalization has come to refer to the political project to create a single global market in which all barriers to trade and capital flows are removed. This project is pursued, with much hypocrisy, by what is called the 'Washington Consensus' and opposed by those who are misleadingly referred to in the global media as 'anti-globalization' activists.

There is a third sense of globalization: the emergence of a global civil society, alongside the nation-state system, comprising transnational actors of different kinds and with varying degrees of global influence. It is this third aspect of globalization that is the primary focus of my talk, but we need to recognize that all these senses overlap to a considerable extent. Beginning with brief description and analysis, I shall go on to explore some of the missiological challenges that global society poses for us.

Nation-States and Global Actors

In November 2002 the oil tanker *Prestige* broke up and perished off the coast of Spain. Millions of gallons of crude oil washed ashore, destroying not only marine life but the livelihoods of fishing communities along the Spanish coast. The *Prestige* was registered by the Bahamas Maritime Authority, and was the only ship owned by a Liberian shipping company. The company is believed to be fronting for one of Greece's largest shipping families. The Bahamas Maritime Authority is situated not in the Bahamas, as one would expect, but in the City of London. Carrying the

Bahamas flag made the vessel exempt from tax. The *Prestige* carried oil for Crown Resources AG, a company formed in Gibraltar, with offices in London and headquarters in Switzerland. Crown is owned by the Alfa Group consortium, one of Russia's largest privately owned financial conglomerates. Alfa is run by Mikhail Fridman who made his fortune on the proceeds of Soviet state privatisations. According to Fortune magazine, Fridman is the ninth richest man in the world under the age of 40, with a combined wealth of \$2 billion.

Was this complex web of offshore ownership and registration intentionally designed to prevent the real owners of the *Prestige* and its cargo from footing the bill for the environmental damage? If so, it illustrates not only the fact that ecological disasters do not recognize national borders, but also the challenges to democracy and moral accountability that the globalization of corporate financial activity poses. Our understandings of liberal democracy, and even of moral obligation, have often been limited to citizens within the territorial boundaries defined by the nation-state. Will Kymlicka is typical of many political theorists when he argues that 'Democracy requires the adjudication of conflicting interests, and so works best when there is some sort of common identity that transcends these conflicting interests. Within nation-states, a common national identity...enables some level of trust and solidarity...It is difficult to see what serves this function at the transnational level.'¹

The Origins of the Modern State

However, this is to forget the way the modern state has *created* notions of 'common identity' and 'national interests', and privileged them over and against other competing sentiments and loyalties. The modern state is defined, not by shared ends, but by means: in particular the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given territory. Individuals give their primary loyalty to the nation-state, and the state in turn protects the individual from interference by his fellow citizens and wages war on other states that threaten its sovereignty. The modern state's need to secure absolute sovereignty over its subjects necessitated the *creation* of 'religion' (in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe) as a set of privately held beliefs, without political relevance. Thus, the domestication of the Church and the marginalization of all other collective identities went hand-in-hand with the growth of the modern nation-state.

The founding myth of this modern state was based on the notion that our natural human condition is one of aggressive individualism, a war of all against all. Individuals choose to enter society for mutual advantage. The liberal state is a neutral peace-maker, reconciling the contradictions in society. So the early European political theorists were adamant that all international affiliations on the part of individuals are a threat to the sovereignty of the state. For Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), for instance, the Church is no more the universal body of Christ, but is instead absorbed into the civil commonwealth. The members of the Church depend not on one another but directly on the Sovereign, with even the interpretation of Scripture the responsibility of the latter. There are as many

1 Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship*, OUP, Oxford 2001, p 239.

churches as there are Christian states, since the commonwealth is not subject to any superior power.²

Similarly, the influential French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788) argued that what the state needs is a religion subordinate to it and designed to teach patriotic, civic, and martial virtues. For Rousseau, Christianity is useless for this purpose for it teaches men to love the kingdom of heaven instead of their own republic on earth, and it teaches them to suffer but not to fight. It teaches the wrong virtues.³ So the state must set about creating an alternative to Christianity: a new *religio*, a civil religion that fosters a new collective identity. Rousseau writes, in a well-known passage:

It is education that must give souls a national formation, and direct their opinions and tastes in such a way that they will be patriotic by inclination, by passion, by necessity. When he first opens his eyes, an infant ought to see the fatherland, and up to the day of his death he ought never to see anything else. Every true republican has drunk in love of country, that is to say love of law and liberty, along with his mother's milk. This love is his whole existence; he sees nothing but the fatherland; he lives for it alone...⁴

In the ugly colonial carve-up of Africa, the European powers imposed the nation-state system on societies that were organized on different lines. Minorities with whom the colonial power sensed a kinship were put in positions of political power over majority tribal groups. Africa still struggles with that legacy. Moreover, war for the modern state has become one of the principal mechanisms for achieving social integration when shared ends are lacking. States extort large sums of money from their citizens to develop huge standing armies and claim the right to send their citizens out to kill and die. This is justified by the offer of defence from threats which they themselves have created, threats which are either imaginary or the results of the state's own activities.

Living in a World Society

What the *Prestige* example illustrates is that we have been living for some time now in a world society, in the sense that the notion of self-enclosed territorial spaces has become illusory. No country or group of people can shut itself off from others. Living together no longer means being in the same place, and being in the same place no longer implies being together. An increasing number of individuals, organizations and institutions act across national borders. A world-society without a world-state is coming into being, and it comprises the sum of social relationships which are not determined by national-state politics.

This does *not* mean the marginalization of the nation-state, but rather a curtailing of its sovereignty and autonomy. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck argues that: 'There are thus two arenas of world society: a *community of states*, in which the rules of diplomacy and national power remain the key variables; and a

2 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (eds. Richard Flathmann and David Johnston), W. W. Norton, New York 1997.

3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (trans. and introd. by Maurice Cranston), Penguin, London 1968, Bk. IV, Ch.8.

4 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Considerations on the Government of Poland' in F. Watkins (ed.), *Rousseau: Political Writings*, Nelson, Edinburgh 1953, p 176.

world of *transnational subpolitics*, in which such diverse players as multinational corporations, Greenpeace and Amnesty International, but also the World Bank, NATO or the European Union, stride around.⁵ There is a growing awareness among large sections of educated people worldwide, largely as a result of media coverage of environmental catastrophes and international wars (including in recent years international terrorism), that we belong to *one* world: 'Globality means that from now on nothing which happens on our planet is only a limited local event; all inventions, victories and catastrophes affect the whole world, and we must reorient and reorganize our lives and actions, our organizations and institutions, along a local-global axis.'⁶

The information and communications technologies that lie at the root of globalizing processes have made possible the free exchange of ideas and information around the world. New ideas and educational opportunities travel more easily than ever before. No longer can repressive governments hide their actions from the rest of the world. The internet and television have the potential to mobilize protest movements across nation-state boundaries, thus holding national states responsible for human rights violations and environmental catastrophes. The global sweep of the Jubilee 2000 movement that managed to wring concessions from rich nations towards the cancellation of the debt of the poorest countries, and the massive public outcry against Nestlé when it tried to claim \$6m (as compensation for its nationalisation) from the starving people of Ethiopia, were made possible by the power of international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). These NGOs can now operate transnationally and use electronic media to raise public awareness and hold governments and corporations to account. To this extent, the emergence of a global information society is a powerful democratising force.

On the other hand, the growth of a handful of giant multinational media corporations means that unelected business tycoons can wield enormous political influence and thus determine for the rest of the world what counts as 'news'.

Television news is dominated by a handful of providers who produce the news pictures for the world: these are channels from CNN, the BBC and Murdoch's News Corporation. Then there are the dominant news agencies WTN and Reuters. Their biggest buyer by far will always be the USA, something that is likely to slant their news priorities and ensure they will always reflect US interests. It is leading to greater homogenisation of news, so that even if there are many new TV news channels globally, they will still rely on the news agenda set by these few outlets, recycling the same old pictures and news priorities provided by them.⁷

This is why we are still talking about the World Trade Centre attacks in New York. In 1994, Rwanda, a country of just eight million, experienced the numerical equivalent of more than two World Trade Centre attacks every single day for one hundred days. But this did not – and still does not – evoke the same horror and grief.

5 Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2000, p 35.

6 Beck, *Globalization?*, p 11.

7 Polly Toynbee, 'Who's Afraid of Global Culture?' in W. Hutton and A. Giddens (eds.), *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, Vintage, London 2001, p 207.

Global Culture and Local Culture

The globalization of economic activity brings in its wake cultural transformations, by a process that is called 'cultural globalization'. Several popular writers have expressed what is called the *convergence of global culture* thesis. The key word here has become *McDonaldization*. According to this view, the entire planet is being wired into music, movies, news, television and other cultural products that originate primarily in the film and recording studios of the United States. Local cultures are being uprooted and replaced with universal cultural symbols, leading to an ever greater uniformity of personal tastes and lifestyles. Whether in Manila or Istanbul, people watch re-runs of *Friends* or the *Cosby Show* on TV, wear Levis and smoke Marlboro cigarettes. From Mickey Mouse to Madonna certain cultural icons are instantly recognizable, and brand names have become part of a global stock of images.

However, this widespread view does not capture the whole picture. It fails to appreciate the paradoxes and ambivalences that globalization spawns. Roland Robertson, one of the founders of cultural globalization research, has argued that globalization always also involves a process of *re-localization*. Those who are at the receiving end of globalizing processes are not passive, docile absorbers but are selective in their responses; after a while, novel hybrids of the foreign and the local emerge in an unpredictable pattern of cultural and political responses. Thus the local becomes an aspect of the global, rather than its opposite. Robertson proposed replacing the concept of cultural globalization with that of 'glocalization' (a combination of the words 'global' and 'local'). A renaissance of the local occurs when local traditions are re-interpreted in the light of global critique or threat and then re-located globally. Global symbols acquire new local meanings, and local meanings are expressed as globally significant.

Consider the rise of religious nationalism (or fundamentalism as it is sometimes, misleadingly, called). It is a child of globalization, which it both reacts to and utilises. Militant groups everywhere have made extensive use of new communications technologies. The al-Qa'ida network, far from being agents of anti-globalization rage, successfully used the deregulated global financial system to accumulate and transfer funds on a global scale to finance their terrorist activities. Before he came to power in Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini circulated videos and cassettes of his teachings from exile outside the country. Hindutva militants in India have made extensive use of the internet and electronic mail to create an unprecedented sense of a worldwide Hindu 'church'. They want to develop India as a nuclear and economic power and to attract foreign investment. The aspects of globalizing modernity that fundamentalisms most resist are the equality of men and women and the equality of all religious communities under the law.

Power and Otherness

Positively, globalization has the powerful potential to encourage genuine dialogue across cultures. No cultural, religious or ethnic group can shut itself off from others. In the presence of the 'other', things that used to be taken for granted are now open to question. Even where traditions assert themselves in the face of perceived external threat, loyalty to traditional ways of life and thought has to be put on a new footing.

However, given the huge inequalities of economic power between cultures, the tendency is for the more powerful cultural images, icons and practices to dominate the less powerful in a largely one-way traffic. So, while Americans and Europeans enjoy the best cuisine from Asia in their restaurants, most Asians have access only to American fast-food chains. The dominance of English as a world language, and the control of scientific and technological research by a relatively small number of nations, means that authentic cross-cultural interaction only happens occasionally.

Moreover, new barriers are being erected between peoples even as other barriers come down. Capital and consumer goods can cross borders more easily than people, including political refugees. So draconian has the regime of control become that it is ever more difficult even to enter a country legally in order to plead for sanctuary.

At the same time, many classes of skilled and professional workers are recruited from poor countries by companies and governments in the West. So, the majority of relatively unskilled workers who seek work and incomes abroad have to do so illegally. This has led to a massive international traffic in men, women and children by criminal networks that is as lucrative as the international traffic in hard drugs and small arms.

Globalization creates a footloose techno-managerial elite, connected more with their counterparts elsewhere than with their fellow countrymen and more interested in making money than in social well-being. According to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman there is now a new stratification of the world population into the globalized rich, who overcome space and never have enough time, and the localized poor, who are chained to the spot and can only 'kill' time. The only mobility the poor possess will take the form of dangerous journeys undertaken in the hope of escape. For them, the walls built of immigration controls and residence laws grow taller, and 'the moat separating them from the sites of their desire and of dreamed-of-redemption grow deeper, while all bridges, at the first attempt to cross them, prove to be drawbridges.'⁸

It is normal to find growing pockets of First World conditions within so-called Third World societies. Indeed, there is little to differentiate between the lives of the new postmodern technocrats, communications experts and business managers in, say, Sao Paulo and London. As Bernice Martin observes, in an essay on Latin American Pentecostalism:

The spatial separation of the prosperous and the poor is a striking feature of the Latin American mega-cities as indeed are the many devices which the prosperous devise to protect themselves from the indigent and importunate - from walled and guarded residential enclaves to the death squads that periodically rid the streets of inconvenient bands of street children...It is important to recognize, however, that such spatial separation cannot be consistently sustained. The poor inevitably spill over from their shanty towns into the public, commercial heartlands of the global cities in order to hustle a living offering services and/or begging/preying on the prosperous who work, live or shop there. Moreover, it is increasingly necessary to admit some of

8 Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1998, p 89.

the poor into the precious and vulnerable domestic space of the prosperous...The new dual-career, middle-class couples have to trust the nanny or housekeeper with their children and their house keys – hence the preference for the Pentecostal domestic whose religious formation, with its emphasis on honesty, sobriety and self-discipline, will guarantee her employer's most intimate haven against incursions of underclass disorder.⁹

Globalization of the Church

The rise of religious movements as part of the globalizing process has challenged the modernization theories popular in the middle period of the twentieth century. These theories took it for granted that the spread of globalizing modernity would lead to the erosion and eventual disappearance of religious sensibilities and institutions. Such theories mistook the *deregulation* of religion for the *decline* of religion. As David Lyon notes,

Religious symbols and stories are, like so much else in contemporary culture, cut loose, free-floating, fluid. They do not disappear. Rather, they reappear as cultural resources. Little surprise, then, that such surrogates tend towards the bricolage, the smorgasbord, the mixing and melding of once different elements. With religion deregulated, it seems, anything goes.¹⁰

A comment by the actress Nicole Kidman embodies this 'do-it-yourself religion': 'I believe in a bit of Scientology, Catholicism, Judaism and the Eastern philosophies. I take a bit of each, I am a hybrid.'

Far more spectacular than the spread of New Age spiritualities or even Islam has been the growth of Christian movements in the postcolonial era. Andrew Walls has spoken of 'a massive southwards shift of the centre of gravity of the Christian world'. '[W]e seem to stand at the threshold of a new age of Christianity', writes Walls, 'one in which its main base will be in the Southern continents, and where its dominant expressions will be filtered through the culture of those countries. Once again, Christianity has been saved for the world by its diffusion across cultural lines.'¹¹

'Third World' cultures, as well as varied expressions of the global church, have taken root at the heart of European and North American cities. Indigenous churches from remote places have become sister churches down the street. This has consequences for Christians in Western nations, because the form of Christianity that has developed in the southern hemisphere and has reached the great Western cities is marked by 'a culture of poverty, an oral liturgy, narrative preaching, uninhibited emotionalism, maximum participation in prayer and worship, dreams and visions, faith healing, and an intense search for community and belonging.'¹² To be willing to learn from such churches, indeed to partner with them in urban mission, while holding to the centrality of the biblical revelation for our life and doctrine, calls for humility and wisdom on the part of more traditional church leaders.

9 Bernice Martin, 'From Pre- to Postmodernity in Latin America: The Case of Pentecostalism' in Paul Heelas (ed.), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, Blackwells, Oxford 1998, pp117-18.

10 David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2000, p 134.

11 Andrew Walls, 'Culture and Coherence in Christian History', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 9 (1984), p 215.

12 Samuel Escobar, *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity*, IVP, Leicester 2003, p 13.

Along with the changing face of the Church, the character of mission has undergone a remarkable transformation. For instance, Russian university students were enthusiastically evangelized by African room-mates in the pre-*Glasnost* era; and, in the repressive feudal states of the Persian Gulf, Filipina housemaids gossip the gospel with their rich mistresses who, in turn, share it with their husbands when they return home. Sudanese and Chadean Christians take the gospel as refugees into 'unreached' parts of North Africa and beyond. Korean pastors work in Brazilian slums. In the past two decades, thousands of university graduates in India have crossed socio-economic and linguistic barriers to serve, in the name of Christ, as healthworkers, teachers, engineers, agricultural advisors and evangelists to marginalized and under-privileged peoples across that great subcontinent.

Conflicts and the New World Order

Once we recognize that there are many paths to (and many understandings of) modernization, we are tempted to fall into the opposite error of the 'clash of civilizations' argument (usually associated with the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington¹³). Global conflicts, we are told, have entered a new epoch since the fall of Soviet communism, where political ideology, economic interests, and territorial expansion have been replaced by incompatible and antagonistic cultural/civilizational values as the primary cause of war between nation-states. For instance, the lead analysis in the *New York Times* of Sept 16 2001 (commenting on the Twin Towers atrocity) stated that 'the perpetrators acted out of hatred for the values cherished in the West such as freedom, tolerance, prosperity, religious pluralism and universal suffrage.'

On (mis-)Understanding Others

Since 9/11 there has been an avalanche of books and articles designed to give us a crash course in 'understanding Islam'. Handbook introductions to the Quran, the life of Mohammed, 'Islamic values', the fast and pilgrimage, or the meaning of the veil are suddenly on offer. Self-styled authorities on Islam have arisen overnight. Some like the fiery Italian media personality, Oriana Fallaci, represent those who find in Islam a convenient scapegoat for the fears and anxieties of their societies. All Muslims are sinister, bearded mullahs hell-bent on destroying what are called 'Western values'. Other writers, like the English ex-nun Karen Armstrong, lean over backwards to concoct an equally mythical 'Islam' of profound learning and peaceable tolerance, another ideological tool to be wielded in her private crusade against the Church and Christian faith.

The Organization of Islamic Conference has fifty-five countries as its members. There are some other states, such as India and Russia, which have large numbers of Muslims as their citizens, and several others with significant Muslim minorities. Each of these groups, and sub-groups within them, relate to historic Islamic traditions in distinctive ways; they have different political systems and have argued for centuries among each other (as Christians and Jews have done) as to what constitutes a 'just war', how to interpret the concept of *jihad* ('struggle'), the relationship between the political ruler and the clergy, and so on. All cultures are

13 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Shuster, New York 1996.

complex, dynamic networks which are not sealed into water-tight compartments but interact constantly with others. What is invoked as 'our cultural values' or selected interpretations of religious texts often reflect a given political context and ideological purpose. Extra-textual concerns affect our approach to religious texts whether we are outside or within the particular culture being interpreted.

The 'clash of civilizations' approach to explaining religious nationalisms masks the real interests at work and the power struggles that are taking place. While religious nationalism (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or Christian) assumes different forms in different societies, in all societies the common enemy of religious nationalists is the secular state, and the goal is not to convert other people to their beliefs, but to seize political and social power within their own societies. The local frustrations that these groups exploit vary from country to country, but they usually have to do with anger at the corrupt and inefficient regime in power. The form the Islamist movement takes is also variable. Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia have very different histories of internal struggle. The deep differences that run through, as well as between, Muslim-majority states are sometimes obscured by pan-Islamic rhetoric.

However, as a result of a number of factors – the spread of global communications, the radicalization of some Islamist groups, and the rise of a free-floating transnational army of fighters ('jihadis') drawing their support from Pakistan, the Arab world, south-east Asia and Chechnya – conflict in one part of the Muslim world, with its specific local causes and character, is immediately presented and utilized as part of conflict in another region. The globalization of local conflict serves powerful propaganda purposes.

American Unilateralism

Perhaps a greater threat to global stability than militant Islam lies in the unilateralist tendencies of the world's only superpower. Even before 9/11, the US was ripping up the international rule-book and trying to bend the world to suit its military and economic interests. Several international treaties were sabotaged, and international institutions like the UN undermined. This accelerated after 9/11, and now many states are being bullied or bribed into joining its 'war against terrorism'. The unconcealed scorn which the present US administration has shown towards international conventions and organizations leaves a deep sense of foreboding among those who care for global justice and co-operation.

The real test of our commitment to human rights occurs when the promotion of human rights elsewhere runs counter to our own economic or political interests. The double standards practised by US and British governments over the years when it comes to human rights, democracy, free trade, weapons of mass destruction, and so on, have rarely been publicly challenged by Christian leaders, least of all by missionaries and mission agencies that claim to have a global vision. The silence of many American evangelical leaders in the face of the unilateralism of the US government threatens to undermine the credibility of American evangelical missions in the early twenty-first century, just as the involvement of nineteenth-century British evangelicalism in the imperialist project has had dire consequences for the credibility of the gospel among sensitive non-Christians both in Britain and the post-colonial world.

Economic Injustice

No less an authority than Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel laureate in economics and former chief economic advisor to the World Bank, has commented recently:

The world of international finance and economics is astonishing. What would seem to be basic, and even obvious, principles often seem contradicted. One might have thought that money would flow from rich countries to the poor countries; but year after year, exactly the opposite occurs. One might have thought that the rich countries, being far more capable of bearing the risks of volatility in interest rates and exchange rates, would largely bear those risks when they lend money to the poor nations. Yet the poor are left to bear the burdens. Of course, no one expected that the world market economy would be fair; but at least we are taught that it was efficient. Yet these and other tendencies suggest that it is neither.¹⁴

Corruption and tax evasion are two of the principal contributors to the poverty of the South, and the poverty of the poor is exploited by all militant movements. Here again the challenge is 'glocal', for we cannot tackle the local without the global, and vice versa. Corruption in poor nations would not be possible without the tacit support, and often active involvement, of rich corporations, banks and governments in the North. For every bribe taken, there is a bribe offered. These bribes are stored in the banking system owned and controlled by the rich nations. Why cannot Christian churches and NGOs put pressure on European and American banks to give back the billions of dollars they have received from corrupt Third World politicians and military generals – money stolen from the Third World poor? (If the Jewish community could do this in the case of Swiss banks and Nazi gold, why not Christians who far outnumber Jews in Europe?)

We should also demand that the Swiss banking system be reformed and that the status of offshore tax havens be withdrawn; these are major means of tax evasion, money laundering and homes to vast pools of speculative capital. Ulrich Beck, writing from a German context, observes that 'It is an irony of history that the very *losers* of globalization will in future have to pay for everything – from a welfare state to a functioning democracy – while the *winners* of globalization post dream profits and steal away from their responsibility for future democracy.'¹⁵ There are signs that, after 9/11 and with declining tax revenue in the European Union, the rich world is more open to consider such proposals as eminently sensible. As long as these havens serve politicians in the rich world, there will be strong resistance but we *must* collectively demand it, otherwise all talk of combating corruption in poor nations is hypocritical. And, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes correctly, 'The scope of our interconnectedness defines the radius of responsibility and concern.'¹⁶

False versus True Universalism

The reality of globalization offers Christians a wonderful opportunity to recover *the practice* of the doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ, a doctrine long-neglected by evangelical Christians.

14 Joseph E. Stiglitz, 'A Fair Deal for the World', *New York Review of Books*, May 23 2002, p 24.

15 Beck, *Globalization?*, p 6.

16 Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, Continuum, London 2002, p 121.

Globalism as a False Universalism

Transnational commerce and information promise to create one global village. Various borders – the territorial nation-state borders which marked out a ‘private’ from a ‘public’ realm (and consigned the Church to the former), borders which sharply divided ‘domestic’ policy from ‘foreign’ policy and ‘fellow-citizens’ from ‘aliens’ – have now begun to appear more brittle.

Globalism has become a new master-narrative. But, far from subverting the nation-state project, it actually imitates its subsumption of the local under the universal. It flings together people from all over the world in the same space-time. The logic of global capitalism is blind to the significance of place, history, culture, or religious identity to human work and well-being. Human beings are regarded as inter-changeable individuals. Difference is secondary, and so serious engagement with the genuinely *other* is side-stepped. Just as the nation-state freed the market from the disruptions of local customs and related individuals to other individuals on the basis of standardized legal and monetary systems, so globalism frees commerce from the nation-state which is simply one more local attachment hindering the universal flow of capital.

This is illustrated, for instance, by the mushrooming of ‘call-centres’ in Indian cities. Young educated Indians are trained to provide telephone services for the Western customers of transnational corporations. They learn to speak in British and American accents when answering calls from clients in these countries enquiring about a credit balance, an airline schedule, or a malfunctioning dishwasher. Those acting as medical secretaries for American hospitals have to watch American TV ‘soaps’ such as ER to pick up their knowledge of American hospital culture. Indian names are Anglicized when on call: Arvind becomes Andy, Sushila answers to Suzie, and so on. In this way, educated Indian men and women are de-cultured so as to find employment in the global economy at a fraction of the income of their counter-parts in Western countries. (Note: My point is not that this is economically exploitative – it is not. Rather, it is de-personalizing: if the only way I can gain work in the global economy is by stripping myself of everything that makes me uniquely ‘me’, then that work is self-alienating).

Thus the master-narrative of globalism represents a false universalism, what William Cavanaugh has called ‘a simulacrum of the catholicity of the Christian Church’.¹⁷ Unlike the latter, it sets diverse peoples in vigorous competition with one another. Nations may exploit and advertise their local distinctives (weak labour unions, good infrastructure, lax tax regime, etc) to attract foreign capital and to find niche markets, but these all serve the tyranny of the global economic system. Local culture and place are commodified, and their commodification is modeled on those localities that have been successful in drawing capital for development. Moreover, the local and particular are prized only because of their novelty. Novelty soon wears off, and particulars become interchangeable.

This also leads to what Richard Sennet of the London School of Economics has described as ‘the corrosion of character’.

17 See William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism*,

T&T Clark, Edinburgh 2002. I am indebted to Cavanaugh for much of the reflection in this section.

It is the time dimension of the new capitalism, rather than high-tech data transmission, global stock markets, or free trade, which most directly affects people's emotional lives outside the workplace. Transposed to the family realm, 'No long term' means keep moving, don't commit yourself, and don't sacrifice... 'No long term' disorients action over the long term, loosens bonds of trust and commitment, and divorces will from behaviour.¹⁸

Gospel and Church as True Universalism

By contrast, the Church as the Body of Christ manifests a true globality which is not merely empirical but organic. The gospel that creates the Church has a universal scope and intent, simply because its content is universal: it announces the dawn of God's future for humanity and the non-human creation. But this message is articulated and enacted through particular, local events. 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). Through the incarnation (a unique, local embodiment of the global presence of God) and the atoning death of Christ, we are united both to God as the centre and also to one another. The dividing walls of gender, ethnicity, age, economic class and social status are all broken down (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14-22).

As William Cavanaugh observes,

This is no liberal body, in which the centre seeks to maintain the independence of individuals from each other, nor a fascist body, which seeks to bind individuals to teach others through the centre. Christ is indeed the Head of the Body, but the members do not relate to one another through the Head alone, for Christ Himself is found not only in the centre but at the margins of the Body, radically identified with the 'least of my brothers and sisters' (Matt. 25:31-46), with whom all the members suffer and rejoice together (1 Cor. 12:26).¹⁹

Christian conversion involves a new *belonging* – this new global family takes precedence over our biological, ethnic and national loyalties.

Thus the counter-narrative of the gospel collapses spatial barriers – and temporal barriers, (cf. Heb. 12:1, 22-24) – but in a manner very different from globalizing capitalism. The Church is an anticipation of the eschatological humanity where we are not simply juxtaposed as competing individuals and groups, but *identified* with one another. In the body of Christ, as Paul says, 'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it' (1 Cor. 12:26). This entails showing greater honour and care for the weakest member, who is identified with oneself. At the same time, the other is still other, for while Christ himself identifies with the suffering members (Col. 1:24) he nevertheless remains other to the Church. Also, we engage with each other *through* our ethnic/cultural heritages, not abandoning them for some mythical 'global culture'. Whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, we enact a counter-narrative of globalization that builds the global Body of Christ in every local assembly. It is the *whole* Christ, not some part of him, that is given to us in every local gathering that meets in his name (Matt. 18:20).

18 Richard Sennet, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York 1998, pp.25, 31.

19 Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, p 49.

Global and Local Discipleship and Mission

For Christians to practise this counter-narrative of globalization would involve a break with the nationalist allegiances that have come to define us, along with others, in our respective nation-states. It would mean, for instance, British Christians openly identifying with their brethren in Burma and so challenging the commercial dealings of British companies with the Burmese military regime; or Christians in Malaysia and Singapore questioning the fashionable practise of recruiting maids from poorer Asian countries who have to leave their young children behind in taking up employment. On every issue, we ask, not 'Is this good for America?' or 'Does this serve Indian interests?' (such language masks the real differences within these states, as if 'America' or 'India' were monolithic entities), but 'How does this promote or hinder the cause of Christ's kingdom which is taking shape among the weak, the voiceless and the excluded around the world?'

Moreover, if the Church is truly the global Body of Christ, and the Body of Christ is qualitatively present in every local assembly, the way we become truly global Christians is not by detaching ourselves from local commitments in favour of a globe-trotting lifestyle (or spending more time on the Internet!), but rather by seriously engaging with the *local* as members of a *global* community that has re-defined our identities.

Western missionary organizations are uniquely positioned to help the Church in the West recover its global and political character. Such a Church will also recover its courage to proclaim a gospel in its own societies that relocates human freedom and equality in the trinitarian love of God for God's world. I believe that human freedom, human equality and human solidarity are only meaningful and sustainable within the wider framework of beliefs and practices grounded in the biblical narrative. When detached from that framework, freedom degenerates into the hedonistic self-gratification of consumerism and rights into the assertion of selfish or partisan interests. Only the gospel can safeguard the rights of the destitute, the downtrodden and the disabled.

These are disturbing and disorienting, but also challenging, times to be living in. I end by echoing the words of that great missionary statesman and former General Secretary of CMS, Max Warren, in a letter to his son-in-law towards the end of his life:

For my part I am in no kind of despair. I find this a most exciting moment to be alive. I want to fill what days remain to my lot to help folk to recover some basic certainties and then be ready to explore how to relate these certainties to a new world and a new age. The great days of mission lie ahead – Hallelujah!²⁰

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²⁰ Quoted in Graham Kings, *Christianity Connected: Hindus, Muslims and the World in the Letters of Max Warren and Roger Hooker*, Boekenscentrum, Netherlands 2002, p 211.

Christian mission in the twenty-first century has become the responsibility of a global church. The heart of 'mission' is the drive to cross geographical, cultural and social barriers in order to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all peoples. Drawing on his involvement in missionary work over many years, Samuel Escobar explores how the church spreads the Christian faith. His stimulating and challenging analysis contributes significantly to a global evangelical dialogue on mission today and in the future. Preview this book ».

What people are saying - Write a review. He is also president of the United Bible Societies and past president of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Bibliographic information. Title. This has consequences for Christians in Western nations, because the form of Christianity that has developed in the southern hemisphere and has reached the great Western cities is marked by a culture of poverty, an oral liturgy, narrative preaching, uninhibited emotionalism, maximum participation in prayer and worship, dreams and visions, faith healing, and an intense search for community and belonging.™12 To be. willing to learn from such churches, indeed to partner with them in urban mission, while holding to the centrality of the biblical revelation for our life and doctrine, calls for hum... Continuum, London 2002, p 121. Vinoth Ramachandra Global Society: Challenges for Christian Mission. 19. Religion in global society. Address by Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia, WCC general secretary, at the international conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Chicago, 24-27 July 2005. The International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) has chosen a stately, if challenging, title for the overall theme of this conference in Chicago. Healing the world and working together is the role of religion in global society. Who could oppose such a grand call to mission? One can only agree heartily and associate oneself with it. In fact, the theme of the upcoming WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil captures the theological vision behind our topic today.