

Globalization: A Challenge for Lutheran Missiology in the 21st Century¹

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Doing theology and mission contextually is today our only option. The contextualization of theology—the attempt to understand the gospel in terms of a particular context—is an imperative which should concern all Christians committed to mission. The time is past when we can speak of one right, unchanging theology, a *theologia perennis*, from the 16th century or any other period in church history. Just as our cultural and historical context plays a part in the construction of the reality in which we live, so this same context influences our understanding of God, the human condition, the incarnation, the reality of sin, salvation and faith. As mission history richly teaches, therefore, a theology which does not reflect the times, culture and concerns of a people, will be irrelevant at best and possibly harmful for the mission of the church in that place.

The ability to analyze and comprehend a given context is, consequently, one of the

first and most critical steps in developing any theology or praxis of mission. This is no easy task, as many struggling North American churches today can confirm.

But what if a church's context is not restricted to merely its "own" local culture? How does one theologize or do mission if the context in which the church works is simultaneously local and global? In other words, how does a church do theology and mission contextually when its context is, so to speak, "glocal"? This question is critical because it reflects the growing reality of a shrinking world, a world in which the boundaries between local and global events, contexts, economies, information, technology and cultures are fluid. What this "new global order" means is that contextual the-

¹Parts of this essay will appear in the article "Globalization" to be published in *The Dictionary of Mission* (Orbis Press, Fall 1997).

ology is still relevant, but it can no longer be restricted merely to local cultural, social or religious forces. Theology and mission must acknowledge the marriage between the global and local or risk missing the true nature of the world context in which we are called to do mission.

Globalization: a description

One emerging concept which addresses the relationship between the global and local is globalization. Just as postmodernism was *the* concept of the 1980s, globalization may be *the* concept of the 1990s, a concept which tries to express and analyze human development and change on a vast scale at the inauguration of the third millennium. Globalization has been used as a business concept since the early 1960s. By the 1970s its popularity expanded into many disciplines so that it began to replace the term "internationalization" in not only business, but in the areas of education and politics. The use of the term globalization today is ubiquitous both inside and outside the academic community. This is true despite the curious fact that within the academic community, especially among theologians, there is still no consensus on definition.

The word globalization has had at least four rather general meanings in reference to the way in which theology is taught at theological schools:²

1. Globalization means the church's universal mission to evangelize the world; to take the message of the gospel to all people, all nations, all cultures, and all religious faiths.

2. Globalization points to the ecumenical cooperation between various manifestations of the Christian church throughout the world involving an openness to and respect for the great variety of local theologies that are springing up all over the world church.

3. Globalization reflects the necessity of dialogue between Christianity and other religions.

4. Globalization refers to the mission of the church to the world, not only to convert and to evangelize, but to improve and develop the lives of the poor and politically disadvantaged.

Globalization, as used above, has already made a powerful impact on theological education.³ This is true despite the fact that little work has been done to directly define or theologically understand globalization as a social phenomenon. In contrast, globalization is increasingly being used outside theological schools as a technical term by sociologists to define a new social dynamic around the globe. Some consensus is beginning to form among sociologists and philosophers about globalization's reality, dynamics, social impact and, in addition, its effect on religion. The nature of these findings could have a major impact on how the church understands mission "glocally." In other words, globalization may emerge for missiologists as one of the key concepts for comprehending the global context for doing mission in the 21st century.

How is globalization defined?⁴ First, globalization is seen as an outgrowth and continuation of the modernization process

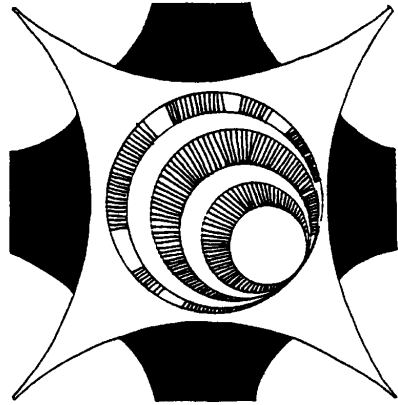
² Don Browning, "Globalization and the Task of Theological Education," *Theological Education Supplement—Globalization: Tracing the Journey, Charting the Course* (Pittsburgh: ATS, 1993), 15.

³ See "Globalization and the Practical Theological Disciplines," *Theological Education 30.1* (Pittsburgh: ATS, 1993). Introduction by William Leshner and Robert Schreiter.

⁴ See P. Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (California: Sage Publications, 1994), 14f.; Malcolm Waters, *Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 159f.; R. Robertson, *Globalization* (London, 1992).

in the West. This process, embedded in a capitalistic economy, frees the individual from some of the constraints of society. Because of its expansionist nature, globalization like modernization values progress and innovation. Its ethos for the individual is embodied in the French Revolution's "liberty, equality, fraternity," or in the American Revolution's "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Second, although some measure of globalization like modernization has always occurred, recent advancements in technology have accelerated these processes so that today, globalization is creating a worldwide uniform cultural reality; that is, globalization describes the process of the world becoming more and more "a single place" (R. Robertson). Globalization refers both to the compression of the world into a single place and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole (R. Robertson). The former "natural" constraints of geography and time are being quickly erased. The onrush of economic, technological, ecological, scientific, material, and political forces are demanding integration and uniformity, thus rapidly creating a homogeneous culture across the globe. The emerging global culture—sometimes whimsically referred to as McWorld, or the process of global culture's formation as "the Coca-colonization of the world"—is tied together by technology, communications, and commerce. Its icons include T-shirts, baseball caps, denim jeans, athletic shoes, MTV, Macintosh and McDonalds. The deeper processes and actions to which the concept of globalization now refers have been proceeding, with some interruptions, for many centuries. Nevertheless, the main focus of the discussion of globalization is on relatively recent times. The increasing interconnectedness of the world as a single place, and the consequences and dynamics of this



growing interconnectedness, is the primary focus of attention in globalization studies (P. Beyer, M. Waters).

Third, despite its connection with modernization, globalization as a movement is not simply another form of Western imperialism (although non-Western scholars and theologians often disagree with this point).⁵ Modernization has been changing as it has been exported around the globe because its receiving cultures have not been passive but active. As modernization has interacted with local cultures, it has experienced a "ripple back" effect. This effect is sometimes referred to as "reflexivity." The result is that with globalization, modernization has taken on a new form. The West is no longer simply colonizing the world; the West itself is being "colonized" and changed in the process.⁶

Finally, although the formidable power of globalization tends to flatten and corrode local values leading to a greater uniformity and a self-conscious orientation to the world

⁵ David Schuller, "Globalizing Theological Education: Beginning the Journey," *Theological Education Supplement—Globalization*, 14. (See n. 2.)

⁶ Beyer, 8-9.

as a global whole, it also leads toward various kinds of global protests. Robertson has described these acts of protest against the powerful homogenizing force of globalization and, in the process, coined the term “glocalization” to express the reassertion of the local.⁷ Others have analyzed a range of acts of local resistance ranging from fundamentalism through cultural revitalization to a new ethnification of local culture. These anti-systemic global protests, which Robert Schreiter calls “global flows,” take shape as strong reactions both to what is viewed as the hegemony of Western imperialism (whether political, economic or cultural) and the failure of global systems to live up to their promised benefits. The result is that multifaceted battles are declared locally against every kind of cultural, religious, economic, and national interdependence, against every kind of artificial social cooperation or against any move toward cultural homogeneity from outside. This reassertion or retribalization of the local is, however, not anti-global but anti-systemic in nature. Its protest is very much included within the overall movement of globalization.⁸

In summary, globalization is a recent, complex, world-wide social phenomenon which encompasses two opposing forces of “homogeneity” and “particularism,” forces which Benjamin R. Barber labels “McWorld and Jihad” and which Arjun Appadurai names “global flows” and “modern colonies.” These forces are working simultaneously all over the world in the same places and at the same times. In short, the planet is falling precipitantly apart and coming reluctantly together at the very same moment. Both forces represent the dialectical dynamics of globalization: the one re-creating various kinds of local borders through parochial concerns from within, the other making borders porous by univer-

salizing markets, ideas and technology from without.

Globalization can thus be briefly defined as “a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding” (M. Waters). Globalization is the compression of the world into a single place and culture, and the intensification of our consciousness of this compression (R. Robertson). Or more succinctly, “Globalization is the compression of time and space under the forces of reflexive modernity.” (R. Schreiter).

The church’s response to globalization

The recognition of globalization as a cultural force raises questions about the future of this social development world-wide and how the church’s mission will respond to it. What will be the consequences of this global movement on local cultures—their extinction or re-assertion? Does globalization mean a progressive homogenization of all cultures so that, two or three centuries from now, only “global culture” will exist? Or does globalization merely change the context in which particular cultures exist, implying transformation but not the disappearance of separate and recognizable identities? (P. Beyer) The answer to these questions will greatly define how contextual theology and mission are perceived and practiced in the 21st century.

⁷ See the collection of essays in R. Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage Publications, 1992).

⁸ Beyer, 104ff. See also J. Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (California, 1994).

Like culture, therefore, churches face serious challenges in the wake of globalization. What are the main challenges globalization poses to the church's mission?

Peter Beyer suggests in his book, *Religion and Globalization*, that globalized culture brings to every society not only homogenization but fragmentation, an ever increasing functional differentiation at every level. Thus, as any society becomes more complex and differentiated, it likewise becomes more fragmented. The specificity of this fragmentation, which functions in the same way as stations on a factory assembly line, has advantages in regard to the efficiency, development, and management of each system within global culture, e.g. the economy, business, politics, education, science, etc. Globalized culture's greatest disadvantage in regard to specificity is, ironically, the isolation of the systems it creates. Each of the systems tends to function autonomously, independent of any overarching schema or *telos*. What ties together these systems in society as far as meaning and purpose? How should society respond to and judge between all the divergent "global" claims made by each of its systems (e.g. economy vs. politics vs. science vs. religion)?

The church can make three general responses to the fragmentation of globalized culture: a traditional, a prophetic, or a revisionist response. The church can play the traditional role of "giving meaning" to the whole; as that social system which describes a culture's overarching *telos*. In a globalized society, where fragmentation between systems (science, technology, education, politics) becomes more evident, the church can try to play its traditional role by giving universal meaning to all of the global systems and, in general, "tying life together." Second, the church can accept a prophetic critical role, exposing society's ills or its

lack of meaning or *telos*. As prophet, the church addresses the problems created by global culture, questions the global systems cannot or will not resolve (e.g. liberation theology, ecological theology, womanist

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theology). The church can also try to humble other systems (e.g. politics, science, or economics) which elevate themselves within global society and are made to stand for the whole. Third, as a revisionist force, the church can completely reject global culture and return society, or at least a remnant of society, to a pre-globalized ideal state of existence (e.g. fundamentalisms).

The church's response to globalized society, whether traditional, prophetic, or revisionist, faces the additional hurdles of religious individualism and religious relativism. These forces are particularly debilitating because they have a direct impact on the church's public influence within global culture. Because globalization is a form of the modernization process, its influences on religion are those of modernization: both a continuing relegation of religion to the private and voluntary sphere, and the relativism of religious values and beliefs.⁹ As "faith" becomes more privatized and individualized, its ability to function as a public

⁹Beyer, 70-110.

discourse between global systems becomes weakened. The church's public power is further diminished when its values and beliefs are viewed over against the backdrop of all of the world's religions and value systems. Its voice can no longer unite because it is merely one voice among many. Under the impact of globalization, therefore, the church's influence as a religious system will tend to be diminished and relegated to the margins, and its responses to global movements and problems (traditional, prophetic, and revisionist) can be reduced merely to local movements and to private spheres of influence.

How then should the church's mission respond to these forces of globalization? How does contextual theology function in a "glocal" world which is becoming simultaneously homogeneous (McWorld with global flows) and localized (modern religious ghettos with their fundamentalisms), and which is increasingly being marked at the same time by religious individualism, relativism, and fragmentation in society?

Globalization and mission

In one sense, the church has outpaced modern society in response to globalization. The church has had a global vision since Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28. The missionary expansion of the church in the 19th century and the ecumenical orientation of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches in the 20th are recent evidences of this growing global posture. In addition, most churches in the West embrace the global cultural values of progress, equality, and inclusion as well as the global system values of progress, efficiency, technical rationality, and functional differentiation (e.g. specialization and professionalization of ministry). As mentioned above, many theological schools have already emphasized

the need for the globalization of their theological curriculum. In response to globalization, therefore, five missional areas of the church are usually listed: mission and evangelism, ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, cross-cultural ministry, and peace, justice and ecological issues.

However, the church, especially the church in the West, must increasingly learn how to be the church within a worldwide global process which is radically changing the context for mission at home and abroad. How does globalization as the context for mission change how the church goes about doing mission? For example, how can the church balance the vitality of new emerging local theologies (e.g. the particularities of liberation theologies, feminist theology, Minjung theology, eco-spirituality) with the classical claims to universal truths in church dogma (doctrinal homogeneity or confessional compliance)? Can Christian worldwide mission and evangelism, as widely practiced until the mid-20th century, be sustained in an unaltered form when constantly challenged by the truth claims of all the world's religions? And given the crisis in global economy, global ecology and global politics, can the religions of the world unite to create a global ethic?

As a part of a massive re-contextualization of theology and mission under the impact of globalization, a few important themes will surely emerge as central to Christian mission. I suggest that these themes will not so much be new theological categories as a rethinking of traditional ones. These broad themes are: (1) the global responsibility of the church; (2) the defining of the human amidst the forces of globalization; (3) the naming of God (distinguishing between the Triune God and all the global gods); and, most importantly, (4) the confessional and missional implications of the church's catholicity.

Global responsibility: dialogue, witness, evangelism, justice, and mission. Globalization will certainly foster global protests by local Christian churches against the movements and injustices of global culture. Such protest might tempt the church to “flee the world.” However, globalization must also foster an acceptance by churches of global responsibility and mission. Instead of fleeing, the church must become more enmeshed in the world. This will demand that the church practice solidarity with those who suffer under the forces of globalization: e.g. the poor, the environment. Ultimately, Christian mission can never flee the world for too long. Churches must embrace both anti-global protests as well as global culture as such in order to serve the world and reflect Christ’s missional presence in it.

Global anthropology and global crises. One cannot easily escape the awareness that global crises have the potential to cause enormous trauma and social conflict both at home and abroad. One is also conscious that crises contain not only danger but also opportunities. So as the problems of ecology, sexuality, gender inequality, race, the sustainability of life, nuclear power, world order, and poverty are debated, one must likewise question the definition of humanity, the true vision of the *humanum*, which is being sought as the global community approaches these problems. Just as the new insights into the individual dramatically influenced the theologies of the 16th century, how will globalization’s effect on the present anthropological sensitivities mold theological responses to both local and global definitions of the human situation?

Global gods and the Triune God. As the twentieth century merges into the twenty-first, the global village includes more than five billion religious people. The religions are not dying out in global culture; they are

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pervasive, powerful, influential, and growing. This sets the scene for dialogue about God and salvation. How will God and God’s work of salvation be imaged in global culture, or even re-imagined? How will this imaging take place not only within Christianity itself but also in dialogue with all the world’s religions? Religious pluralism poses its greatest challenge to Christian mission in the area of translating the name of God, and naming God’s salvific work. Can Christianity’s exclusive affirmation of salvation “in no other name” be balanced with its inclusive desire to discover the *logos spermatikos* everywhere; i.e. God’s presence and saving truth in every culture, religion and place? The naming of God in global culture and the doctrine of the Triune God will certainly take more prominence in Christian mission theology as the unity and diversity of God’s persons are more closely reviewed in reference to God’s mission in the world.¹⁰

Catholicity and global confessionality. Robert Schreiter suggests that the universalizing (dogma) and particularizing

¹⁰ David W. Shenk, *Global Gods: Exploring the Role of Religions in Modern Societies* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995).

tendencies (local theologies) felt within the churches as part of global culture may make "catholicity" the term theologically equivalent to "globalization." In terms of the four marks of the church confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, different ones have been especially significant at various points in church history: oneness in times of schism, holiness in the Donatist controversy, apostolicity at the time of the Reformation. Perhaps the time has come to reexamine and expand our understanding of catholicity, both in view of what Christianity has become and the world in which it is taking place (R. Schreiter).

Conclusion

What globalization will mean for the future of Lutheran missiology is not yet clear.

Nevertheless, as the dynamics of "globalization"—and its Christian counterpart, "catholicity"—become clearer in describing both the context of our world and the church's mission therein, Lutheran missiology must make sure that its understanding and praxis of mission reflect truly a global confessionalism; that is, a confessionalism which can unite the church in and for "glocal" mission in response to the various forces of globalization around the world. Such a confessionalism much be inherently contextual in nature, responding to all the forces of both global and local cultures; it must be relevant to both global culture as such as well as the various local protests which emerge. Such a challenge appears daunting. Its alternative, however, would be a denial of the church's apostolic call and the catholicity of its mission.

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