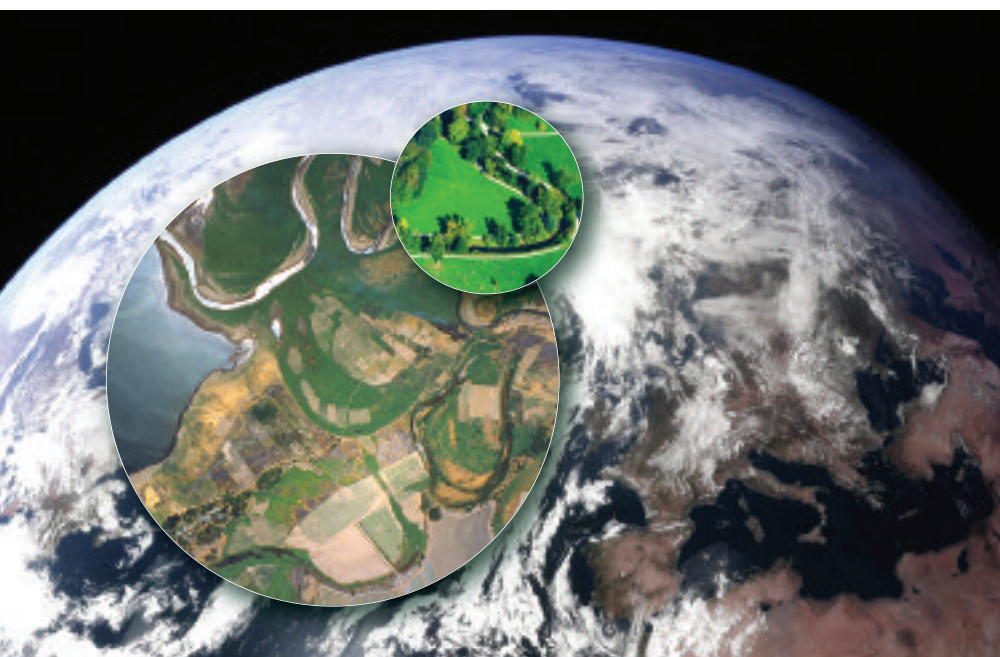


THE GOSPEL AND GLOBALISATION¹

AUTHOR ERIN G. GLANVILLE

The implications of globalisation stretch far beyond economic concerns. Erin Glanville examines globalisation in the light of Christianity, and asks how Christians can harness its potential for good.



good news announced by Jesus Christ as *the* clue for understanding our world. We recognise that many in our secular world find this odd and simply dismiss the whole notion of seeing any connection between religion and the processes of globalisation. However, if what Jesus announced two millennia ago is true—and his claims could, of course, be rejected on the basis of another, more decisive clue—then we have no option other than to start with this message as the clue to seeing the world aright.

Jesus made the astounding announcement that God was acting decisively and climactically through him for the renewal of human life and the whole creation. This proclamation came as part of the long story of the Old Testament, the story of a God who brings creation into existence, who rules all nations and governs history—guiding it to its climactic goal. This story of his historical action to rescue the creation from the evil and misery stemming from human rebellion is, in the language of 19th century historiography, a universal history, or in the more recent language of postmodernity, a metanarrative (by which we mean something like a true story about the meaning of the world and history as a whole). Jesus claimed that in him this story had found its centre and its meaning. God's promised restoration, the *telos* of universal history is revealed and accomplished in his person and work.

If this message is true, then its significance bursts the bounds of that



Erin Glanville is completing a PhD in English and Cultural Studies through McMaster University, Ontario, Canada; she is currently based in Sydney.

If Christians want to live faithfully in the world they need to ask: What time is it? Where are we at in our culture's story? What are the most powerful dynamics and forces that are shaping our world today? Perhaps three words begin to answer these questions—at least for those of us living in the West: globalisation, postmodernity, and consumerism.

Numerous volumes have appeared on globalisation since the mid-1990s, indicating that globalisation has become one of the key terms employed to understand the spirit of our times. Robert Schreier suggests that 'globalisation, for better or for worse, is the single most adequate way of describing the context in which we work today'.² If Christians want to live faithfully in this time, being instruments of the *shalom* and justice of God, they must take time to gain insight into this significant phenomenon.

The Gospel as starting point

Every analysis of globalisation depends on certain clues in seeking understanding. Christians have a commitment to the



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private sphere called ‘religion’ (something we value for our worship and personal ethics). Rather than being an entertaining tale it becomes a ‘secular announcement’ or ‘public truth’ for all people in all times.³ It is concerned with the whole human

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situation and not only some area called ‘religion.’ The message of Christ thus offers a comprehensive understanding of the world and of history. Jesus’ invitation to repent and believe is nothing less than a summons to accept his remarkable claims and to inhabit the world of the biblical narrative as the true story of the world. It is an appeal to take the person and work of Jesus Christ as the *fundamental* clue for interpreting the rest of the world.

In interpreting the realities of globalisation, starting with the gospel, raises important questions, coalescing around three themes:

1. How is this dynamic of globalisation rooted in God’s intent and design for creation and for history? Is the unfolding of culture across territorial boundaries in the processes of globalisation part of God’s original plan for creation?
2. How has globalisation been corrupted by human rebellion? How has cultural development been twisted by idolatry —perhaps of a technological or economic type?
3. In light of the hope we have in the promised final restoration, are the processes of globalisation as they exist today open to healing and renewal?

To establish a framework for globalisation from the standpoint of the gospel means approaching the topic with these kinds of questions.

But, of course, we cannot remain at a general ‘theological’ level. We must connect these basic affirmations to a plausible understanding of contemporary globalisation that accounts for the realities of our global world and engages the diverse theories of globalisation. We need a biblically-directed account of historical development that discerns God’s original creational purpose for the unfolding of various cultural institutions and societal forms. Globalisation can be understood

as the continuing development of cultures in such a way that they cross territorial boundaries and connect various peoples into an interrelated whole. Hence, globalisation could be a source of mutual enrichment for the common good through increasing global interdependence. However, the beneficial potential of global interconnectedness has often not been realised. Rather, poverty and environmental damage seem to trail in the wake of the global market. And so we must probe the question of what is hindering the common good. What are the powers and structures that thwart the possibilities of enriching global interdependence? Rather than finding

ourselves always stuck in the ruts of celebration and crisis, we must move in the direction of ‘globalisation for the good’.⁴

Religion—a missing piece in globalisation studies

In the exploding literature on this topic, the word ‘globalisation’ is used in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most common approach is to reduce globalisation to *economics*. Globalisation then refers to an alignment of political, technological and economic factors that produce a global market. This, it is argued, results from relaxed trade barriers, developments in information and communication technology, the ease of air travel, the rise of multinational and transnational corporations and, perhaps especially, global financial capital. It is the spread of global capitalism around the world.

Rebecca Todd Peters offers a typology of four competing theories that currently dominate globalisation discourse:⁵

1. The ‘neoliberal’ approach points to an integrated global economy promoting economic growth and increased trade, best facilitated by free markets and economic competition.
2. The ‘social development’ approach is indebted to John Keynes and critical of the invisible hand of the market in the first theory (and thus supportive of government intervention). This approach is as committed as the first to the economic opportunities of capitalism, looking to it to produce global economic development and growth.



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3. More critical of the global spread of capitalism and the emergence of a global market, ‘localization’ or ‘earthiest’ approaches are primarily concerned with earth justice, seeking *shalom* amongst people, the land on which they live, and the creatures with which they live.
4. The ‘neocolonial’ (or ‘postcolonial’) approach addresses the powers of globalisation that destroy life for the dispossessed and marginalised peoples of the world. This approach is more concerned with discovering the political power necessary to challenge current dynamics in globalisation.⁶

Peters’ typology helpfully maps many of the voices speaking about globalisation today. Yet its primary focus is globalisation as an economic dynamic. The fact that

has significant advantages. On the one hand, it reflects the fact that globalisation is a multi-faceted and interlocking phenomenon involving more than economics. If globalisation involves cultural development and interdependence beyond territorial boundaries, then it will touch every area of human life—including the social, the political, the economic, the cultural, the technological, the judicial, the aesthetic, and the ethical. On the other hand, it directs our attention to the social and cultural implications of the inflated significance economics has acquired. Education, the arts, and social relationships, for example, will be affected by the globalisation process as it is led by economics.

Nevertheless, what is missing from almost all of the available literature on globalisation is a detailed analysis of the

Further, since Christianity has so profoundly shaped the West and set into motion various dynamics affecting globalisation today, to ignore its Christian roots and continuing influence is to fundamentally misunderstand globalisation. Yet such is the blindness of secular scholarship today on the topic of globalisation.

The religious core of western culture?

Stackhouse correctly believes that religious faith ‘shapes the public ethos of civilizations’.⁹ He defines faith ‘as confidence in a comprehensive worldview ... that is accepted as binding because it is held to be, in itself, basically true and just’. This religious faith or worldview ‘provides a framework for interpreting the realities of life in the world, it guides the basic beliefs and behaviours of persons and it empowers believers to seek to transform the world in accordance with a normative ethic’.¹⁰ When a ‘religion becomes widely shared, it shapes an ethos that gives identity to a particular culture and tends to promote a social ethic that fosters distinctive public institutions. It molds civilisations’.¹¹

Religious faith is not one aspect of human culture among others. It is a formative and unifying power underlying the various social, political, cultural, economic, technological, and ethical dynamics of a culture. To overlook the role of religion in globalisation is therefore a major omission! This understanding of religion puts Stackhouse in company with a number of theologians, worldview scholars and missiologists who see religion as *the* formative core and directing centre of society.¹²

Alongside the Christian story, two of the most potent religious forces in globalisation today are Islam and the commitments shaping Western culture. It is precisely at this point that Stackhouse falters. He believes that the sociocultural forces most commonly associated with globalisation in the West ‘were formed in societies fundamentally stamped by

What is missing from almost all of the available literature on globalisation is a detailed analysis of the role of religion.

the preponderance of literature on globalisation points to the global spread of capitalistic economic processes alerts us to two very important features of globalisation. In the first place, the block of Western capitalist nations—led by the United States—is a powerful player in the global process (perhaps *the* most powerful player). Of course, it is not the only player; Islam and China are also major forces. Second, the economic sphere has come to play an exaggerated role in western culture. The economic vision of Enlightenment thinkers like Adam Smith flowered in 20th century Western culture and is now a major force in globalisation. Yet we must push our understanding of globalisation beyond the economic. In their book *Global Transformations*, David Held and his co-authors open up the multi-dimensional nature of globalisation. They successively treat political, military, trade, financial and business globalisation as well as global migration and cultural and environmental globalisation.⁷

A more capacious view of globalisation

role of religion. Stackhouse summarises: ‘The neglect of religion as an ordering, uniting and dividing factor in a number of influential interpretations of globalisation is a major cause of misunderstanding and a studied blindness regarding what is going on in the world’.⁸

There is something absurd in the fact that the role of religion remains unrecognised by secular scholarship at a time when it is playing such a major role in global affairs, both for good and bad.



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Christian theological ethics'. Thus, his project is to identify and recover the Christian roots of globalisation as resources to shape it more justly.

It is true that the West has been deeply shaped by the Christian interpretation of history. Moreover, it is also the case that that story can offer important resources to shape globalisation in a more equitable way. The problem is that there is *another* significant and long-term formative power at work in the West—the 'religion' of secular humanism. Indeed, we would argue, it is the more powerful.¹³

Early 21st century secular humanism has taken a liberal, capitalistic form in which economics plays a dominant role. Indeed, one might even speak of the *totalitarian* influence of economics. Thus, alongside the distorting effects of economic idolatry upon the processes of globalisation, we can also expect to see reactions from both within and outside against the deformity it produces. If this is so, it will be important to observe the distortions secular humanism has undergone in its current capitalistic form as one of the powerful dynamics at work in globalising processes today.

Creatures from a small place —a hopeful transformation of globalisation

The distorting effects of Western economic idolatry are not hard to see. In the sphere of international mobility, for example, there is obvious unevenness. Tourists can reap the benefits of the 'global experience' offered by globalisation, enjoying ready access to the world's 'small places'. Whose Facebook news feed has not been overwhelmed by pictures of friends on vacation in Cuba, Jamaica, or the Dominican Republic? Pictures featuring smooth white beaches separated from a bright blue sky by a clean line of ocean water multiplying endlessly. And these pictures can tug at deep desires within us: to escape the stress and busyness of work, to be pampered by people to whom we owe nothing, and to indulge in sensuous experiences.



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But the perspective of the native population is often far different. Jamaica Kincaid's acerbic essay on tourism in Antigua, 'A Small Place', opens by evoking the excitement of a North American tourist at a Caribbean resort:

That water—have you seen anything like it? Far out, to the horizon, the colour of the water is navy-blue; nearer, the water is the colour of the North American sky ... Oh what beauty! ... [Y]ou have never seen anything like this. You are so excited. You breathe shallow. You breathe deep

But Kincaid's insider perspective jars against this: 'since you are on your holiday, since you are a tourist, the thought of what it might be like for someone who had to live day in, day out in a place that suffers constantly from drought, and so has to watch carefully every drop of fresh water used

Her blistering critique of privileged tourism as an integral part of globalisation challenges us to become more sensitive to voices from small places.

... must never cross your mind'. Kincaid's book is balanced by a strong internal critique of Antiguan society. But for Christians in the West, her blistering critique of privileged tourism as an integral part of globalisation challenges us to become more sensitive to voices from small places.

And yet a Christian response to globalisation may not simply come from either the celebration or the crisis camps.

For Christians live as part of their culture and this global world as prophetic voices—as *critical participants*. The prophets of the Old Testament not only denounced the idolatry of Israel and the nations they also shaped a new imagination for how one might live faithfully in a world dominated by idolatry. Likewise, the church does not stand outside the world, but within it as a cultural player, seeking to shape it in a more just and sustainable way. The critical participant finds it necessary to distinguish between dynamics of globalisation that may be liberating and enriching and ones that may be oppressive and unjust. We must join the Jamaica Kincaids in decrying the present distortions of globalisation that arise from economic idolatry. We must also cultivate an alternative, more hopeful imagination as we pursue a transformed

globalisation shaped by good stewardship, justice and equity.

The stories of refugees in Canada that Mary Jo Leddy records in her book *At the Border Called Hope: Where Refugees are Neighbours* provide a compelling example of this. Taken as a whole, the stories that Leddy has recorded can feel heavy—the numerous tales of unjust global processes, bludgeoning national structures, and horrific results

for refugees in Canada begin to compound. People looking for refuge in Canada have had a difficult, and often impossible, time communicating their experiences to civil servants at all levels of government (let alone ensuring their claims are considered thoroughly and with timeliness). Though they reside in a relatively powerful nation, their voice still comes from the 'small place' of their citizenshiplessness. They may be able to find expensive fruit in the supermarket that comes from their

anything for a price. It may even call us to live out of that vulnerability rather than try to consolidate power at any number of levels—personally, ecclesiastically, nationally, globally.

Contemporary globalisation produces the 'small world' where foreigners splash about in the water and natives carefully conserve their drinking water. It also produces the 'small world' that tourists inhabit, where you can speak with someone in church one Sunday and the next week see them in

Being displaced has a way of making us dependent on and aware of our dependency on others.

home countries, but their own value as civic participants is not acknowledged.

Yet the heaviness of Leddy's refugee stories does not stick in the throat if the stories are savoured, rather than consumed in one sitting. What is most surprising and most hopeful in the stories Leddy tells is the way in which her faith perspective underwrites a quality of hope that might not seem a natural outcome of the circumstances. While her readers are called to anger and celebration, they are more importantly called to sit at the border of hope, listening, bearing witness to what they hear, and advocating for those who come from small places. This, more than any other response, requires significant selflessness and acknowledgement of the interdependent world we live in.

Being displaced has a way of making us dependent on and aware of our dependency on others. Leddy's book tells story after story of refugees who realised their own vulnerability and were then moved to act on behalf of others. This is one of the insights refugee stories gives us into globalisation: that the world *is* a small place, deeply interconnected in a way that makes all people vulnerable. In such a world, we are all potential refugees. Taking on this view requires an about-face for jet-setters who think we can consume

the Caribbean on Facebook. But globalisation, understood rightly, has the potential to create a third 'small world', to which Leddy's stories point us. Being part of a globalised world can foster in us a sense of the interconnections in God's one, small world. It can give us a sense of both our dependency on others and also our status as creatures. What we learn from refugee stories is that the world *is* a small place—not because it is so easy to get from one place to the next and not because we often meet people who know people we know halfway across the world, but because it is one broken, fragile creation, dependent on God's daily provision and interdependent in the way he created it to be.

Imagine the generative potential for globalisation if Christians in the West began to think of themselves as creatures again—as creatures and not only consumers, as creatures and not only tourists—not primarily as people with the ability to visit 'small places' for pleasure but as people *from* the small place which is God's good creation. ©

END NOTES

1 Portions of this article appear in the Introduction of Michael W. Goheen and Erin G. Glanville, *The Gospel and Globalisation: Exploring the Religious Roots of a Globalized World* (Vancouver: Regent College Press, 2009).

2 Robert Schreiter, 'Major Currents of Our Times: What They Mean for Preaching the Gospel', in *Catholic News Service*, 31, 11 (16 August 2001). It can be

found on-line: <http://www.dominicans.ca/providence/english/documents/schreiter.htm> (accessed 7 May 2009).

3 The language of 'secular announcement' and 'public truth' is that of Lesslie Newbigin who used these terms to make clear the universal validity of the announcement of the gospel. See *The Finality of Christ* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1969), p48; *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

4 See Peter Heslam, ed, *Globalisation and the Good* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

5 Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalisation* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2004); 'The Future of Globalisation: Seeking Pathways of Transformation', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 24.1 (2004), pp105-133. See Max Stackhouse's critique of Todd Peters which he believes is simplistic because she misses religion as a causative factor—in *God and Globalisation. Volume 4: Globalisation and Grace* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2007), p37.

6 Both 'localization' and 'postcolonial' theories are resistance movements against the devastating results of a global economy, such as environmental destruction, growing poverty, unjust and oppressive business practices, the displacement of peoples, cultural imperialism, and more.

7 David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt, and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

8 Max Stackhouse, *Volume 4: Globalisation and Grace*, p57.

9 *Ibid*, p7.

10 *Ibid*.

11 *Ibid*, p8.

12 E.g., Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology III* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), pp100-113; *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp1-9; Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization. Second Part: Specific Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1948), pp129-133; Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), pp67-71; James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp122-133; David Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp267-274; James Olthius, "On Worldviews," *Christian Scholar's Review*, XIV, 2 (1985), pp153-164; J. H. Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), pp45-62; *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1960), 169-190; see Paul J. Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck [1895-1964]* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), pp136-183, 282-293; Harvie M. Conn, "Conversion and Culture," in John R. W. Stott and Robert Coote, eds, *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp147-172; Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp1-20.

13 We are thus in agreement with Jonathan Chaplin's verdict on Volumes 1-3 of *God and Globalisation in Political Theology* 5.4 (October 2004), pp499-500.