MISSION IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Globalization is one of the defining characteristics of our world today and elicits strong reactions—both positive and negative. It is taken for granted that this is a development unique to the modern world and largely the result of the development of modern transportation and communication systems. Globalization is assumed to be a secular development.

I wish to challenge this view on several grounds. On biblical and theological grounds I will argue that central to the biblical narrative is a comprehensive or global perspective that calls the people of God to maintain a bi-focal view of the world by holding in tension the particular and the global. The biblical narrative models this stance. From a historical point of view the popular facile interpretation of globalization as uniquely western and modern overlooks the multiple forms and stages in the development of globalization over a long period.

1. Globalization and the Biblical Narrative

God: Creator and Redeemer. The Bible opens with an account of God as creator of all that we call "the world." The Genesis 1 account of creation culminates with God making "humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (1:26b). The Creator's design has an unmistakable unity of purpose. Indeed, it is this providential purpose that is temporarily thwarted by human action in rejecting the Creator's instructions (Gen. 3). From this point forward the scriptural narrative is dominated by God's initiative to redeem creation and restore it to its original purpose. The *missio Dei* is the essential dynamic and focus. The narrative moves dialectically with God acting and humankind reacting. At times people respond positively to God's initiative; frequently, men and women rebel and reject God's interventions on their behalf. The line of development does not unfold smoothly.

At Babel, in a rush of hubris, the people "said to one another, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). Geographical scattering and linguistic diversity are presented as ways of overcoming the centralization and concentration of economic, political and cultural power. It wasn't that

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human unity was not a good thing but that an empire built on willfulness and pride was idolatrous.

Jesus the Messiah: The Great Commission. The redemptive mission of Jesus the Messiah, servant of Yahweh and suffering servant (Isa. 421-4; 49:1-9; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12) foretold by the prophets is to restore the unity and harmony (shalom) that is at the heart of God's creation. Jesus sets out to do this in a way that is entirely consistent with the messianic tradition portrayed by the Old Testament prophets. The new initiative of Jesus the Messiah is addressed to all humankind. Following the resurrection Jesus gives the mandate to his disciples to continue his ministry, taking it to all peoples everywhere. Thus, the Great Commission marks the next step in the developing biblical narrative.

The Great Commission extends the ministry and witness of Jesus. His style of ministry and example are normative for his disciples. He began his earthly ministry proclaiming that the reign or kingdom of God had begun and by demonstrating what it meant to live under God's rule by rejecting all power except love. He confronted evil but suffered rather than retaliate with violence. The Great Commission can be carried out faithfully only by rejecting all attempts to ally the kingdom of God with a particular nation, race, class or economic-political power. This is the *original* globalization. It offers a clear contrast with all other attempts at globalization, which all too often is but another name for empire building.

To summarize: the globalization prefigured in Jesus the Messiah has as its goal nothing less than the redemption of creation. To accomplish this goal the gospel is to be announced to all people for God wills to redeem the world through the redemptive action of the Son. From the example of Jesus the Messiah (Phil. 2:6-11) we know that God's redemptive action is based on God's gracious love and is, therefore, uncoerced. Rather, God extends an urgent and compassionate invitation to all humankind to be reconciled to Godself and to one another (2 Cor. 5:11-21).

Witness of the Early Church. According to Acts the original apostles immediately began carrying out their Lord's mandate. Luke's account in Acts shows with great clarity the way the gospel raised a range of new questions about tradition, religious practices, and attitudes toward the Other. The gospel compelled the apostles to break with familiar religio-social traditions that had served over the generations to separate and marginalize people. But the issue is not culture per se. As Pentecost demonstrates, the Holy Spirit legitimates all cultures and cultural-linguistic diversity. Religio-cultural diversity is juxtaposed with unity. Luke emphasizes that there was a strong sense of unity among these new believers that relativized ethnic and linguistic differences. Some of the disciples, including Peter, who were still tied closely to their Jewish roots found this new kind of unity difficult to accept for they had been indoctrinated to believe that unity requires uniformity. Paul steps forward and leads the church in a theological and ecclesiological revolution. A crucial barrier was crossed so that the gospel could be taken to the non-Jewish world. During the first three

centuries the church continued to fulfill this mandate of witness to diverse peoples without dependence on social, economic, political or military power.

2. Globalization and Empire

Empire. Historically, empires have been the primary means of pursuing globalizing *intent*.[1] The Christian movement arose in the early phase of the Roman empire and has never been far removed from imperial reality. Following the assassination of Julius Caesar in 27 B.C. Caesar Augustus succeeded him as emperor of the Roman empire. This empire reached its high point after 150 years and was dealt a decisive blow in 410 C.E. when the Goths sacked Rome; but it finally collapsed in 517 C.E.

Successive emperors kept expanding the empire by adding territory so that at the death of Trajan in 117 C.E. it included the entire Mediterranean world, Europe as far as northern Britain, the Black Sea, and Mesopotamia. Hadrian, who succeeded to the throne in 117 C.E., recognized the mounting military and economic strains on the empire to maintain control and ended the policy of territorial expansion

Throughout history empires have been established as an expression personal ambition or quest for enhanced national power and wealth. This was achieved by using military force to overrun another people and seize their territory. A subjugated people are inevitably resistant and restive. Empires are unstable and can be maintained only by a permanent military presence and constant surveillance. Occupation forces are an onerous burden and stir tension and resentment on the part of the subject people.

Constantinian Shift. A decisive change in Christian identity took place in the fourth century. Emperor Constantine I issued the Edict of Toleration in 313 C.E. that recognized Christianity as a legitimate religion. Later in the century Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the official state religion. The Edict redefined the status of Christianity: people no longer needed to fear converting to Christianity; the emperor's smile caused others to treat the church with respect, and the emperor went out of his way to bestow special favors on the church.[2] Indeed, after 375 C.E. conversion was compelled, resulting in many people being added to the official church register who were hostile to Christianity. They brought into the church their pre-Christian customs and practices. This had enormous influence on the way the church was understood.

Empires require a religion or ideology to lend legitimacy and enhance their power.

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[1] Empires do not necessarily have as their primary goal total world domination; but the logic of empire has consistently led to expansion by conquest of territory and subjugation of other peoples. What finally curbs this expansion is that the means of building an empire are finite. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, 9-11) observes that up to 1800 it was nation-states that created empires of globalizing influence. During the next two centuries major corporations were the driving force in globalization. Since 2000 new technology has empowered the individual to play the leading role.

[2] Ramsay MacMullin, "Christianity Shaped Through Its Mission," in Alan Kreider, ed., *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2001), 97-117.

The evidence suggests that Constantine I evidently was convinced that Christianity was more efficacious than other religions and set in motion actions that would lead to Christianity becoming the state religion of the Roman Empire. To fulfill its role the church had to embody the spirit of empire. The church's pre-Constantinian ethos was replaced by one of domination and control sustained in cooperation with the state. The journey from the Galilean hinterland to official religion of the Roman Empire had drastic consequences. The church no longer practiced the politics of Jesus but that of the empire. This can be shown in two ways: (1) means of gaining adherents, and (2) attitude toward other religions.

(1) *Evangelization*.[3] The Constantinian shift led to a new state policy with regard to evangelization. The state had a large stake in insuring that all citizens be church members. Refusal to convert to Christianity was an act of civil disobedience. All people living within the Empire must become Christian.[4] It took several centuries to implement this policy fully but it was pursued with diligence. The rise of Islam in 622 C.E. and its rapid growth presented a major challenge. Both Christendom and Islamdom considered territorial conquest to be integral to the spread of the faith. Both depended on military power to carry out "evangelization."

From the viewpoint of Christendom, it finally achieved its goal of complete mastery of Europe in 1492 with the expulsion of the Jews and Muslims from Spain. This year also marked the beginning of European exploration and conquest of territories in other continents. This empire-building project was conceived as an extension of Christendom and to be carried out under Papal authority. The Christian mission to non-Western lands was thus co-opted by European empires to fulfill their imperial purposes.

(2) *From religious variety to religious monopoly*. At the time the Christian movement emerged, the Roman Empire was rife with religions and the fact of religious plurality was taken for granted. This surely must have something to do with the fact that the New Testament does not attack other faiths. It challenges idolatry and the worship of false gods and asserts the Lordship of Jesus the Messiah. The early church fathers did discuss the relationship between Christianity and other faiths as a theological concern.

One consequence of the Constantinian shift was to create a society in which the kind of religious diversity that had been commonplace in the first several centuries after Christ was no longer acceptable. Of course, the sweep was not accomplished quickly and it was never complete but a decisive change took place. Theologians increasingly focused their attention on issues internal to the life of the church. Discussion of the relationship of Christians to people of other faiths largely disappears. Although vestiges of the pre-

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[3] See Kenneth Scott Lataourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity: The Thousand Years of Uncertainty, A.D. 500 to A.D. 1500* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), 308-42, for a comprehensive account of "The Counter-Advance Against Islam."

[4] Jews were the exception; yet they typically were forced to live in ghettoes and suffered social and civil disabilities.

Christian religions of tribal Europe persisted right into the twentieth century, officially only one religion was recognized and Christendom became a culture where religious difference was not tolerated.

It is important to observe the differences that developed early between the Eastern and Western Churches with regard to their relationship to government. The collapse of the Roman Empire created a power vacuum and the Western Church played a substantial role in stabilizing society. In the West the popes frequently saw themselves as rivals, and certainly equals, of temporal rulers. The Eastern Church never achieved the same power vis-à-vis governments; it had to be more deferential toward government. The Byzantine Empire took on the challenge of Islam and sought to curb Islam's influence. Whereas the Western Church regarded force as the main means of winning adherents, and intolerance of non-Christians increased over time, the east took a less bellicose attitude and sought to establish a modus vivendi. This is reflected in the contrasting responses to Islam. In the Byzantine Empire Christians and Muslims engaged in debate and Christians developed an apologetic literature. Christians sought to answer the claims of Islam by asserting their counterclaims for the authenticity of Jesus, attested by the Old Testament prophetic tradition and the miracles he performed. The Muslims sought to answer these Christian claims with the charge that the Christian scriptures had been fabricated to suit a propaganda scheme.[5] But these exchanges did not lead to armed conflict.

The Crusades, launched in response to a sermon preached by Pope Urban II in 1095, were a Western Church initiative. The pope called for a crusade to regain control of the holy places in Palestine but this purpose was quickly eclipsed when the crusades became a series of Christian military campaigns against Muslims with the goal of repelling the Muslim threat. By the thirteenth century sober-minded theologians began to argue that the Crusades were proving to be ineffective in dealing with the Muslims. The most influential theologian of this period, Thomas Aquinas, "maintained that the infidel has rights, as the heretic does not, that war can be waged against him only to prevent him from hindering the faith or persecuting Christians" but an unbeliever cannot be forced to believe.[6]

During the period 800-1150 C.E. only Muslim scholars carried out inter-religious studies. Tabarī (838-923) prepared a study of the Persian religion while Mas'udī (d. 956) wrote on Judaism, Christianity and the religions of India. Alberūnī (973-c. 1050) wrote a book about Indian and Persian religions. Shahrastānī (d. 1153) pioneered by writing the first-ever history of religion in world literature. *Religious Parties and Schools of Philosophy* is a systematic treatment of the religions of the then known world, including China.[7]

Two initiatives by Christians demonstrate how meager was the Christian interest

[5] Latourette, 319.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (LaSalle, Il.: Open Court, 1986, 2nd. ed.), 11.

in other religions. Roger Bacon, a Franciscan, developed a typology of religions in the thirteenth century, but his work was only published 467 years later. Peter the Venerable sponsored a translation of the Qur'an in 1411 for the purpose of encouraging a positive view of Islam. But these exceptions proved the rule. From the Christian side Islam was regarded as a serious threat. The period from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries was dominated by the Crusades and few Christians were in a mood to study other religions. When Europeans began their voyages of exploration and trade after 1492, the dominant attitude toward other people of other faiths was generally negative.

3. Globalization and the Modern World

July 20-22, 2001 the leaders of the G-7, or Group of Seven major industrial nations, met in Genoa, Italy. This select group, more recently joined by Russia, has been meeting periodically to discuss the world economy. The economies of the G-7 account for two-thirds of the world's economic output and wealth. In 1800 two countries accounted for two-thirds of the world's economic output and wealth: China and India. The question that arises: How did this massive change occur? For the past two centuries the ready answer has been: "The rise of the West."[8]

Revising Historiography. The historiography of the modern world is in ferment. Historians have long assumed European exceptionalism and wrote their histories of the modern world accordingly. Critics like Edward Said attacked the fact of Eurocentric bias but this did not immediately result in a reorientation. Now a new generation of scholarship is emerging that is reconceptualizing the historiography of the past fifteen hundred years. Kenneth Pomeranz has pointed out that the careful empirical studies on which this reinterpretation is based simply did not exist prior to 1975 and much of this new scholarship has become available even more recently.[9]

The essential argument is that the world has always had a certain level of inter-cultural relationships so that cultural borrowing, exchange of goods, and imitation has marked the human experience throughout history. Modern scholars have been preoccupied with the singular role of the West—especially the significance of modernity and industrialization—and have not bothered to acknowledge and examine this far more complex history.

Historical development is mediated in a variety of ways. This can be summarized in terms of three things: conjunctures, contingencies, and accidents. Historical *conjunctures* occur when a particular development in one part of the world makes an unexpected impact in another. Take the example of China. For reasons of its own in the

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[8] Robert B. Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield, 2002), 1.

[9] Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

fifteenth century China decided to switch to silver as the basis of its monetary system. But as new sources of silver dwindled China had to look to other countries to purchase additional quantities to meet its needs. By the seventeenth century the profitability of silver mining in the Americas was declining but the Chinese demand for silver drove the price up enough to keep the mines operating. This conjuncture enabled European colonials to keep their mines in operation.[10]

Second, taking account of historical *contingencies* forces us to view the world more broadly and acknowledge the forces at work in it.[11] Around 1000 C.E. China was the dominant economic power in the world. Its population and economy were growing. China's influence was felt across the whole of Eurasia through the export of new food crops and manufactured goods. Between 1400 and 1800 China again played the role of the main supplier of manufactured goods to the rest of the world. The assumption that it was inevitable that Europe would emerge as the dominant force in the world cannot be sustained in the light of contingent influences that were at work.

The third influence on historical development is *accidents*.[12] For example, the "Little Ice Age" that devastated Europe and other parts of the world in the seventeenth century could not have been predicted. It was a serious blow to the economies of Europe and a drag on progress for some years. The fact that Great Britain had great quantities of coal, in contrast to the Netherlands and China, gave the British an important advantage in launching industrialization.

Trade in the Pre-Modern World. In the thirteenth century the "world" economy was comprised of eight interlinking trading zones (see attached map).[13] These eight zones were further grouped into three regional sub-systems or spheres. This system linked most of Eurasia and the north of Africa. Three trade routes, each of which terminated in the eastern Mediterranean, linked the sub-systems. The northern trade route went north to the Black Sea, thence via the Mongol Empire to China. The central trade route went via Bagdad and the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean and then by ship to India and Southeast Asia. The southern trade route ran south to Cairo, overland to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Robert Marks points out that most historians are ignorant that such a trading system existed for they have assumed that such a far-flung system was not possible prior to the emergence of the modern nation-state.[14] Indeed, it is remarkable that this trading system functioned without any central control or dominant power guiding it. It was a system attuned to a polycentric world and was consisted of a series of regional systems, each with

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[10] Ibid, 32.
[11] Marks, 10.
[12] Ibid, 12.
[13] Reproduced in Marks, 34.
[14] Ibid, 33-36.

its core that held it together and a periphery that supplied the needed raw materials. The world remained polycentric until the eighteenth century when European colonialism began to take shape, thus paving the way for the modern global system.

It might be quibbled that this thirteenth century world system was not a truly comprehensive global system. After all, the Americas and Australasia were not included. Yet it was the largest system then known.

The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). When the founder of the Ming Dynasty died in 1398, he arranged that the son of his deceased eldest son would succeed him.[15] But the emperor's ambitious younger son overthrew his nephew and became emperor in 1402. Whereas the founding emperor and the grandson had a vision of China that focused inward with special emphasis on the land and its cultivation, the Prince of Yan as emperor saw the need to turn China outward. He relocated the capital to Beijing, strengthened defenses and established Chinese hegemony in the region. He attempted to annex northern Vietnam. But his boldest move was to build the largest fleet of ships that the world would see until 1900. The building of this new fleet of ships had major impact on the national economy. Between 1404 and 1407 1,681 ships were built. "So much wood was required to construct the fleet that much of the coast was deforested, and timbers had to be floated a thousand miles down the Yangzi River to the shipyards."[16]

Admiral Zheng He was made commander of this great armada. The fall of 1405 300 ships with a crew of 27,000 men sailed from Shanghai. The fleet traveled south to Indonesia and then westward into the Indian Ocean. Their destination was Calicut, a major trading center on the southwest coast of India. Among the emperor's goals were (1) to encourage the Chinese to turn outward to the rest of the world and demonstrate that China was the preeminent civilization, and (2) to promote international trade. The emperor wanted to generate new revenues for the state and bolster the national economy.

Between 1405 and 1433 the Chinese carried out seven expeditions of two years each. They sailed as far west as Mozambique, into the Persian Gulf, and southeast to the Spice Islands (Indonesia). On the fourth voyage the Chinese began establishing diplomatic relations with Muslim countries and these countries sent their ambassadors, on the Chinese ships, to China. These expeditions ended in 1435 but Chinese merchants continued to trade with India and other countries accessible by sea.

As a part of his overhaul of China's government and economy, the emperor reorganized the monetary system. He abandoned the old system based on paper, which had gotten out of control due to inflation, and ultimately introduced silver as the basis of the monetary system. This resulted in the reopening of China's silver mines. When the domestic supply of silver proved insufficient, China began importing silver from abroad. *Eurocentricism in Historical Perspective*. The preceding fragmentary paragraphs give

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[15] This section depends on Marks, chapter 2.
[16] Ibid, 47.

glimpses of developments in pre-modern history that challenge us to revise our assumptions about the world prior to the so-called "rise of the West." We do well to heed the words of Eric R. Wolf, in his conclusion to *Europe and the People Without History*: "This book has asked what difference it would make to our understanding if we looked at the world as a whole, a totality, a system, instead of as a sum of self-contained societies and cultures; if we understood better how this totality developed over time; if we took seriously the admonition to think of human aggregates as 'inextricably involved with other aggregates, near and far, in weblike, netlike connections.'"[17]

No one will deny that something important happened when in 1492 Christopher Columbus and in 1497 Vasco da Gama undertook their expeditions of exploration of other continents. But the results of these new initiatives were not evident for quite some time. Until around 1800 the most developed nations of the world—including China, India, Japan, and western Europe—were more or less on par with each other.[18] This parity changed rather rapidly when the British discovered coal and the industrial revolution took off. The industrialized nations have dominated the world economy since 1800.

The myth of Western superiority was widely accepted by the eighteenth century. The foremost critics of capitalism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, did not question that the expansion of Europe to other parts of the world would be the means of helping them share in "progress." In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Marx and Engels asserted:

> The [European] bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most backward, nations into civilizations. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the underdeveloped nations' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world in its own image.[19]

A combination of events in the twentieth century—world wars, ideological conflict, the cresting of modernity and emergence of postmodernity—has dampened enthusiasm for the dream of unlimited and unending progress. But vestiges of the myths of progress and Western exceptionalism are still visible.

4. Conclusion

The environment in which it is set has always shaped the Christian mission. For

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[17] Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), 385. The quote within is from Alexander Lesser, "Social Fields and the Evolution of Society," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 17:42.

[18] Marks, 156.

[19] Quoted in Marks, 4.

most of the past two millennia, empires and global systems have defined the terms of the social, political and economic environment in which missionaries have worked. In the first two centuries Christians understood their mission to be clearly counter-cultural. By the time of Constantine a shift was under way and the relationship, with a few exceptions, becomes one of mutual support between mission and state. Buoyed by increasing Western power and self-confidence, Christians often merged mission with the diffusion of Western knowledge and influence throughout the world. It is always a mistake to take for granted that a particular regime is mission-friendly and, therefore, it is safe to enter into alliance with the state. The global vision given to us in the Great Commission is the only appropriate framework within which to critique mission actions as well as the socio-cultural environment in which the missionary is working. Because we have generally spiritualized the Great Commission, we have failed to see it as a radical resource in creating God's new order.