



**RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE
AND COOPERATION**

**РЕЛИГИСКИ ДИЈАЛОГ
И СОРАБОТКА**

Бр.8/2026 Година VIII
No.8/2026 Volume VIII

GLOBALIZATION AND CHRISTIANITY'S GREAT END

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Abstract: *This paper explores the dual impact of globalization on Christianity. It argues that globalization may serve as the ideal vehicle for achieving Christianity's ultimate goal of worldwide conversion through improved communication and travel, succeeding where past empires failed. Simultaneously, however, globalization presents an existential challenge to "modern imperial Christianity," characterized by its triumphalism and claims of superiority, by fostering a dynamic exchange of competing religions and worldviews. There are two main Christian responses to this shift: a smaller faction that violently resists globalization and a larger group that seeks to adapt and reform its theology for the new global reality. Ultimately, this paper suggests that globalization signals the end of imperial Christianity and necessitates a fundamental reformulation of what it means to be Christian in a global world.*

¹ President, Two Cities Press, alex@twocitiespress.com. This article is in memory of the late Max Stackhouse, my ethics professor and tennis partner.

Introduction

I will state an essential, but inconvenient and, for some Christians, an embarrassing truth: the unequivocal goal or end of Christianity is nothing less than the complete conversion of the world—“so that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Jesus commanded it (Matt. 36), Saint Paul declared God wills it (1 Tim. 2:4), and the Church has tried to fulfill this sacred mission for exactly 1,700 years. A mission that quickly became entangled, some say corrupted and coopted, with imperial power, and now advanced through missionaries and soldiers. Christianity was the religion of European imperialism—whether in its Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox forms. Mistakes were made.

Christianity now seems ideally positioned to fulfill its divine mission in this new age of globalization. Advances in communication, amplified by the limitless potential of artificial intelligence, could expand the reach and influence of Christianity to the most distant, hostile, and remote peoples. In addition, the unprecedented ease of travel and the rise of diaspora communities in “Christian” nations provides more opportunities for local and international face-to-face evangelization than ever before. Thus, globalization appears to be the most effective means for fulfilling the Great Commission, the chief end of the Church. Globalization could very well achieve what empires failed to accomplish through conquests, proselytizing missions, and forced conversions.

However, at the same time, globalization could accelerate the decline of modern imperial Christianity—marked by its evangelical mission, triumphalism, religious superiority, and unique privileged space of power and influence in personal and public life. The fundamental challenge of globalization to modern imperial Christianity is that unlike imperialism, which facilitated a unidirectional spread of Christianity as the one true and superior religion, globalization fosters a dynamic exchange of religions and worldviews. In this new world, anyone with internet access can discover that Jesus may not be the only way, the only truth, and the only life, and that Christianity is just one of the many religions that claim religious superiority or supremacy. In many ways, globalization has provided an equal “playing field” for all religions and ideologies to compete for adherents and influence. What happens to Christianity and its followers when it must “compete” with other religions and beliefs—when it no longer has the power to compel belief?

The concrete reality and normalization of religious diversity as a fundamental quality of global civil society poses an existential challenge to traditional Christianities. Some factions will resist these changes, but the majority will have to reinterpret Christianity for this new age. Ultimately, this marks the end of modern imperial Christianity, perhaps for the better.

This paper explores globalization as both the ideal means for achieving Christianity’s ultimate end and the end of imperial Christianity.

Challenges of Globalization

At present, Christianity is the most popular religion in the world, but not for long. Pew Research Center estimates it has three more decades until Islam surpasses it (Pew Research Center 2015). Christian numbers are declining and its influence receding from public life and personal faith. Globalization has contributed to this decline and will ensure that Christianity will never again enjoy its privileged place of power and influence.

There are two main Christian reactions to the fundamental changes: the first is to resist and fight it to various degrees and passions. They see globalization as evil and Christianity under existential threat from this new world with all its diversity. Some within this group could react with violence—in

rhetoric and action. A lot of American Christians own a lot of guns, and some, hopefully a miniscule number, are prepared to use them to “Keep” America Great Again.

The second reaction is to embrace and defend (apologia) globalization to various degrees and passions. It sees globalization as primarily good, with some even claiming it is providential. Within salvation history, God created globalization for Christians to adapt and use to advance God’s kingdom on earth.

Most Christians will settle on the latter reaction and come to a peaceful resolution (some would say compromise) with globalization— tailoring/adapting/changing/reforming its theology to the new reality and to the needs of its adherents. This approach does not

receive much attention precisely because it seeks to be in harmony and to participate in society, not to stand outside or in opposition to society (Niebuhr 1975). Peaceful transitions and changes do not elicit news coverage when the world is on fire.

The predominant concern for America and the rest of the world, and rightly so, seems to be focused on the former reaction: on a small but growing segment of Christians who are opposed to globalization or any change or progress. Once too marginal/extremist/fringe to be mistaken for mainstream Christianity, they are becoming the face of American Christianity.

Under the shade of the MAGA umbrella is the cry to “Make America Christian Again.” They want to bring back to American life: the Ten Commandments in government courthouses, the Holy Bible in public schools, and Christian prayer in every classroom. When America was great (prosperous, joyous, peaceful, and free), America was “truly” Christian. It is of course a delusional nostalgia for a blissful pre-global, pre-multicultural, pre-DEI, and pre-Woke Christian society that never existed.

The growth in numbers and influence of these once fringe Christian groups could very well mean that the future of Christianity in the West could be defined by Christians who were once too radical and extreme in their beliefs and political convictions to be taken seriously or welcomed by mainstream Christians and the average American.

There have always been Christian resistant to any changes: abolishment of slavery, Women’s Rights, and Civil Rights. Today it is fundamentalist Protestants, Right-Wing Nationalist Orthodox, and conservative Vatican I Catholics. For such Christians, globalization actually exists (unlike global warming), and for many of them globalism is the modern-day Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). Within that movement is a growing number of Christians prepared to fight it—literally. The loosely affiliated network of this Christian movement is open to violence—that by any means necessary, with all violent acts justified by a militant God and inspired by an imperial theology, America will return to the days of freedom when America only had one religion (NPR 2018). Such rhetoric is not new in America, but after the Civil Rights Movement, it was exclusively associated with fringe and extremists groups, such as the KKK. The “Unit the Right Rally” in Charlottesville, Virginia reflects a new image of white supremacy that appears less “White-trashy” and more “suburban middle-class.”

While the threat from extremists should never be underestimated and rightfully, we should fear their growing numbers and influence, nonetheless we have governments and institutions that protect us from such threats.

The greatest existential threat to Christianity is the inevitable and necessary reformulation of Christian theology because it goes to the heart of what it means to be a Christian in this global world. This marks the transition from imperial Christianity to global Christianity.

Modern Imperial Christianity

Jesus lived under the authority of the Roman empire; he was legally killed by Roman soldiers following orders from a Roman governor within the borders of the empire. For the next three centuries, the Church grew slowly, was persecuted sporadically, and despised universally as the religion of the poor and foolish. This small Jewish sect would have likely died out along with other fringe Jewish groups that struggled to survive in the turmoil of first-century Palestine.

Earliest Christianity in this context was marked by evangelism, persecution, and expectation of the imminent arrival of Jesus. It could not imagine partnering with the state to achieve the Church's Great End. After all, it was the religion founded by the humble and poor Nazarene, the good shepherd, the sacrificial lamb of God.

Then everything changed in the year 312. Constantine wins unexpectedly, some say providentially, when his last remaining opponent for the throne drowns after the bridge collapsed under him (Van Dam 2011). Constantine then held a council of Christian clergy at Nicaea, in modern day Turkey—1,700 years ago to this month, at his summer imperial palace. What he wanted seemed simple enough: he was the one emperor, ruling over the one empire, and so he wanted one faith and one Church.

With this new relationship, a new image of Christ emerged to fit within this new world for Christianity. A world ruled by emperors, but with everyone unified under the name and authority of Christ—visualized for Orthodox Christians as the Pantocrator you see in every Orthodox monastery or church. Who rules over the entire world? Christ! A Christ that reflected and affirmed an imperial world.

This Imperial Christianity has lasted to the present time in different forms for different periods: Ancient to medieval imperial Christianity (Church and state in competition for the same power and privilege) to pre-modern and modern imperial Christianity (although emperors and empires declined, imperialism remains).

Modern Imperial Christianity is the Christianity that spread throughout the modern world and was defined by its evangelical mission, triumphalism, religious superiority, and privileged space of power and influence in the world—which was centered in the West and spread outward in one direction.

Throughout this period, there was an emphasis on the moral, ethical, ecclesial, and theological obligation of Christianity to convert the world, and the world was ready to be “saved.” Christ and his Church would prevail, and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. They were guided by a supreme confidence in their own religious superiority and the unquestioned inferiority of other religions, but also the enjoyment of privilege and power as the world came increasingly under the control of their empire, their religion.

Threat and Grace of Globalization

Globalization marks the end of imperial Christianity. Globalization fosters a dynamic exchange of religions, worldviews, and lived experiences that undermines the very foundations of empire. What happens when one finally acknowledges the full humanity and dignity of the Other to be the Other—a non-Christian, no longer an object in need of conversion and subjugation by a foreign power but just another human subject.

The interconnected world that globalization creates will lead to the end, not of Christianity, but of a particular and dominant form of Christianity: modern Imperial Christianity. Whether this form of Christianity is a genuine development is an open question.

While some view globalization as detrimental to Christianity, some see it as providential. The latter theory was advanced by Max Stackhouse of recent memory in his last book, *Globalization and Grace* (Stackhouse 2009). Stackhouse saw the influence of Christianity on globalization and saw the potential of globalization to create and enrich relations that transcend national, cultural, ethnic, economic, and religious borders. This new world of relationships requires guidance from a universal ethic, locally interpreted. Stackhouse imagined a global civil society with core Christian values and articulated a clear and reasoned argument for the need of a global public theology and provided an outline for it. However, it could be argued that Stackhouse's ideal global society is just another manifestation of the imperial model of Christianity. In a truly global society, can one religious tradition dictate or guide ethics for everyone?

Max was an optimist and was confident the next generation of theologians, many of whom he trained, would continue the work of interpreting the Gospel for the new age. He recognized early on that this new world requires a new theology.

Conclusion

How can Christianity remain authentically Christian while being authentically global. How can every knee bow and every tongue confess "Jesus Christ is Lord" in a world full of Lords? The answers of imperial Christianity are no longer appropriate, effective, enforceable—they do not fit our Zeitgeist. Gone are the days when people were forced to bend their knees and confess Jesus is Lord.

Globalization could be the divine tool to fulfill the ends of the Church, or it could mean the end of the Church, at least in its present imperial form.

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ISSN-2671-3594