

# Bible and Mission

## Christian Witness in a Postmodern World

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### 3. The biblical story and economic globalization

One response to the postmodern rejection of all metanarratives is to point out that, like it or not, we live in a global world and to do so responsibly we surely need to think globally.<sup>11</sup> Globalization, according to Anthony Giddens, Director of the London School of Economics, 'is the way we now live'.<sup>12</sup> The reality of our world is not the end of grand narratives, but the increasing dominance of the narrative of economic globalization. Here again we return to a notion I introduced Chapter 1. By economic globalization I refer to the global spread of free-market economics and the culture it entails, consumerist individualism, all dominated by the multinational corporations with their bases in the United States and other western countries. This is the new imperialism, an economic as distinct from the political and economic imperialism of the past, and representing, in fact, the domination of politics by capitalist economics. Globalization as an ideology has grown out of the older idea of progress but differs in that it reduces progress to economic growth, which is supposed to bring all other goods in its train. We can quite appropriately call it a metanarrative because it entails a worldview, a notion of the human good (the American consumerist dream of wealth and glamour), and because it tells a story in which the universal dominance of unfettered capitalism is both

<sup>11</sup> T. Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> A. Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives* (London: Profile, 1999), p. 19.

irresistible and beneficent. It is also readily susceptible to the postmodern critique of metanarratives as ways of legitimating oppression. There is no doubt that globalization has made the rich countries richer and the poor poorer (while also widening the gap between rich and poor within each country). Its ideology, while purporting to benefit all, serves the interests of the rich and powerful. This is surely inevitable with an economic system oriented to the maximization of profit and the accumulation of wealth rather than to the meeting of basic human needs.

To substantiate the point that the gap between rich and poor countries has widened as a result of globalization, the following figures speak for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

#### 3.1 Share of global income over time

Year	Richest 20%	Poorest 20%	Ratio of Rich/Poor
1960	70.2	2.3	30:1
1970	73.9	2.3	32:1
1980	76.3	1.7	45:1
1989	82.7	1.4	59:1
1997	90.0	1.0	74:1

Christians must not be seduced by the enticing notion that economic growth as such is self-evidently a prime good for humanity. We must probe the facts behind this glib assumption and ask questions about who and what is benefited or damaged by the actual economic growth

<sup>13</sup> W. Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 101.

that we are considering. About economic growth we should be asking at least three very testing questions: (a) Does it benefit the poorest people? (b) Does it destroy the environment? (c) Does it destroy other (traditional) values which are at least as important as economic prosperity? Not only on the first but also on the other two counts economic globalization as it has recently occurred and is currently occurring is surely blatantly guilty of impoverishing and vandalizing God's world.

It is interesting how analyses of the world system of economic globalization show that world-pictures which have a centre and a periphery may not after all be so outdated. Morris Berman, for example, speaks of a so-called core of privileged countries and a periphery of exploited countries:

Core countries are those in the privileged regions of the Northern Hemisphere such as the United States and Western Europe. It is in these regions that financial, technical, and productive (usually industrial) power is concentrated, power that is controlled by an elite. The periphery, on the other hand, contains the exploited regions that sell their resources and labor to the core without ever having access to the latter's wealth. The enrichment of the core is structurally dependent on the impoverishment of the periphery.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of globalization is the new imperialism.<sup>15</sup> It continues the kind of oppression that modern meta-narratives of progress have always legitimated, but now implemented by the modern media and modern information technology. It has to be said that the western

<sup>14</sup> M. Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture* (London: Duckworth, 2001), p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. R. Biel, *The New Imperialism: Crisis and contradictions in North-South relations* (London/New York: Zed, 2000).

postmodern critique offers no cogent or effective resistance to it. Its relativism is too easily assimilated to economic pragmatism. (As Peter Selby comments, 'Relativism is frankly more profitable.'<sup>16</sup>) What do we really need in order to recognize and to resist this new meta-narrative of globalization? Surely a story that counters the global dominance of the profit-motive and the culture of consumption with a powerful affirmation of universal values? But the Christian metanarrative can adopt this role only if it resists becoming a tool of the forces of domination.

Can Christianity sufficiently detach itself from its own undoubted collusions with the oppressive meta-narratives of western imperialism and progress to remain, between modern grand narrative and post-modern relativism, something else? One would think it should be easier for the church to distinguish itself from the forces of economic globalization than it used to be for the church to distinguish itself from western colonialism and cultural imperialism. After all, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries western culture really was more Christian than it is now, and so it was all too easy to confuse witness to Jesus with exporting western 'Christian' culture. Now that western culture is increasingly post- and even anti-Christian, the distinction should be easier to make and to show.

It may well be that, only if Christianity in the west becomes a movement of resistance to such evils as consumerism, excessive individualism and the exploitation of the global periphery, can Christianity in many other parts of the world be credibly distinguished from

<sup>16</sup> P. Selby, 'The Silent Word Still Speaks: Globalization and the Interpretation of Scripture' in C. Reed (ed.), *Development Matters: Christian Perspectives on Globalization* (London: Church House, 2001), p. 103.

the west's economic and cultural oppression of other cultures and peoples. Recall what I said in Chapter 2 about the biblical narrative as a movement that reaches all only by way of the least. Without international solidarity with the poorest of the world's poor the church's mission in any part of our globalized world is not only compromised but simply invalidated. It has departed from the biblical contours of God's way with the world.

— Argentinian evangelical theologian René Padilla has called economic globalization 'the greatest challenge that the Christian mission faces' at the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>(17)</sup>