

*God and Globalization, Vol. 1: Religion and the Powers of the Common Life*

Edited by Max L. Stackhouse with Peter J. Paris

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Reviewed by Gary Waller

Professor, Northwest Nazarene University

*God and Globalization: Religion and the Powers of the Common Life* is the first in a four-volume set that claims to be a dialogue between theology, ethics, and social theory.

The issue of globalization raises significant theological and ethical questions. The contributors to this inaugural volume confront both types of questions in their attempt to provide at least a lively discussion of the issues related to globalization.

Several factors raise their heads when we begin looking at the issue of globalization. These are: culture, mores, economy, social issues, and religion. It is the position of the writers of this volume that ethics and religion must confront these factors and be allowed to speak in every context with which external values are placed. The work of this volume is to talk about the role of religion in the transformation of human character, social systems and cultural ideas.

Max L. Stackhouse in his extensive introduction outlines the scope of the project' which is a hefty one. The task is to look at the issue of globalization from a theological/ethical point of view. The primary task of theological ethics is to discern the ethos of a particular location or area of study. Stackhouse defines ethos as "the subtle web of 'values' and 'norms,' the obligations, virtues, convictions, mores, purposes, expectations and legitimations that constitute the operating

norms of a culture in relation to a social entity or set of social practices” (10). Also, theological ethics involves a second task: the assessment of whether what is going on ought to go on.

Stackhouse identifies “powers, principalities, spheres, dominions and authorities” that impact the particular ethos of a given society. The challenge of the authors of this work “will be how Christian theology and ethics does, can, and should develop its own resources to face these complex issues”(51). Finally there will be an attempt to argue for one final consideration: “no viable society within a civilization—has developed without a dominant religion at its core, and it is unlikely that a globalized civilization, or the structures of civil societies likely to populate it, can develop in creative directions without one either” (52). It seems that for Stackhouse religion is more than a key player in the ethical life questions that arise. It is the primary player.

The remainder of the volume contains six chapters. I will seek to give a brief summary or snapshot of each chapter to stimulate your thinking and preparation for reading.

Chapter one, is entitled “Globalization and the Future of ‘Traditional Religion.’” The author Roland Robertson contends that the “homogenization-versus-heterogenization” dispute is the core feature of most discussion of the issue of globalization, and that this discussion for most is primarily an economic one. However, his bias is that globalization is not merely an economic issue but rather more often than not a clash of traditions. “Globalization in and of itself entails and accelerates the promotion of traditional culture” (58). Because tradition is so important cultural clashes and tensions are an inevitable feature of globalization. Proponents of globalization would seek for homogeneity or sameness but for Robertson that is not preferred. He says, “(w)e should not think that traditional culture or religious traditions are disappearing, for in certain ways they are being enhanced” (67). His point is that globalization is a complex

issue...“we all live in a heavily compressed world of *difference within sameness*” (68). The challenge will be how to cope?

Chapter Two, “Philosophy and the Prospects for a Universal Ethics” by Yersu Kim speaks to the issue of a crisis in values. Everything has ethical orientation, issues such as: global sharing, the dramatic extremes of wealth and poverty, business and finance, to name a few. Kim believes that while “the twentieth century was a century of social sciences, the twenty-first century will be a century of ethics” (92). His chapter discusses several movements, agencies, and groups who have spoken into these issues. The key for Kim is to search for common values between peoples and cultures and begin there in any attempt to solve world problems and deal with issues of globalization. The task is to take the problems and needs and then work with common values and principles so as to provide a positive future for world living.

Chapter Three, “Responsibility in the World of Mammon: Theology, Justice and Transnational Corporations” by William Schweiker is a chapter scrutinizing issues around wealth and its accumulation. A key thought centers around the idea of the disconnect between radical consumerism and the unjust disparity of wealth among certain societies. Economies must serve the human good. Transnational corporations are cultural and value setting forces. It is the responsibility of ethics to encourage them to respond with human enhancing values rather than simply economic enhancing ones. Human dignity revolves around issues of human labor, fair distribution of goods, and just relations of exchange. Christians and ethicists must speak out when injustice is evident. Christian “convictions are about what is good, right and virtuous” (133). The Church is called to be an instrument of justice.

Chapter Four, “The Taming of Mars: Can humans of the Twenty-first century contain their propensity for violence?” is written by Donald W. Shriver, Jr. Maintaining a balance between

threat and promise is much like walking on a guy wire, one slip either way and you are lost. Shriver convincingly addresses our human propensity toward violence. Survival is an important ethical construct. The question: “why care if humans survive?”, becomes an important plum line in a movement away from violence. Murder if viewed from the heart of God is in actuality an assault against God. Hope rather than optimism becomes a theme for taming violence. Shriver provides intriguing and challenging reading with questions like: “is there a religiously legitimate role for the *use of violence in preventing or curtailing violence?*”

In Chapter Five, “Faith, Feminism, and the Family in an Age of Globalization,” Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen “seeks to assess the global spread of modernity on gender and family relations, within a Reformed world- and life-view and also mediated by the second wave of feminism, which has increasingly become one of many forms of ‘reflexive globalization’” (184). In a wonderfully written essay, Van Leeuwen examines a variety of issues relating to feminism and the family and argues that these are no longer simply relegated to a western mentality but have far reaching influence in many cultures worldwide. The degradation and dissolution of the family has taken on global proportions. Van Leeuwen argues for the recovery of the family as an important sphere of influence in an ethical world. Families are held together by commitment and integrity, these are issues that can have wide appeal globally. She calls for a “hermeneutic of hope” where equality, partnership and lifelong monogamy become the foundation for successful and happy families.

The final chapter is, “Public Theology, Hope, and the Mass Media” by David Tracy. His task is to give “examples in which a particular social-scientific perspective is helpful for theological concerns” (231). Ultimately this essay is a call to reject a drive for sameness. Tracy gives a call to “let go of the hope of any totality system. We should focus initially on the explosive, marginal, saturated, and, at times, auratic fragments of our heritages” (253). He believes that

modern communications with “its genius at images” could really help in breaking down totalitarian systems of thought.

This book, “God and Globalization, Volume 1” was a challenging and exhilarating read. At times I found myself bogged down in minutia only to be shaken, awakened, and challenged to examine some of my previously held ideas. This book is an excellent read for anyone who is interested in exploring some of the key issues surrounding globalization. It set out to challenge the status quo in our thinking and it did that. It did not give easy or pat answers since in reality there are none. At times this is disappointing because it would be nice for someone to solve the dilemma. However, stirring the pot may produce in us opportunity for dialogue that will get us closer to a “real” solution in the end.