THEOLOGY ENCOUNTERS GLOBALIZATION

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(Received 24 August 2013, revised 1 October 2013)

Abstract

Although specific terminology referring to issues and phenomena commonly associated with the process of globalization has been used in theological literature for almost three decades, consistent theological responses to, and interactions with, it are scarce and varied. As such, systematic reflection on this topic has become necessary. After assessing briefly how theologians have related to globalization and/or the social changes associated with it, this study argues that a 'prophetic' assessment of globalization is the type of response most congruent with the theological task.

Keywords: globalization, Hebrew prophets, prophetic speech, identity, communication theory

1. Raising the issue

In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* [1], one of the more popular discussions of globalization published a decade ago, the basic question that has prompted the present study – what has 'theology' to do with 'globalization' – is incidentally brought into view. While being enthusiastic about globalization and its possibilities, particularly about free-market capitalism, all of which are metaphorically portrayed as a Lexus automobile, Thomas Friedman, the author of the book, also tries to impress on his readers the importance of remembering things such as the traditional stability of home, family and religion, in spite of how peculiar they may sound to the contemporary ear. Nonetheless, he metaphorically calls these traditional concepts 'olive tree', by this alluding to the fact that they are incompatible with what globalization is and stands for – as incompatible as an olive tree would be in a Lexus automobile. The dilemma thus described by Friedman is what I propose to address below. Can there be any meaningful interaction between theology and globalization? And if yes, what such interaction entails?

There is more than one way one could go about to fulfil the task set in this paper. For instance, one could choose a descriptive approach, whereby a comprehensive survey of writings on the topic under scrutiny would provide the lessons to be learned and eventually serve as a springboard for exploring further possibilities. Or, one could choose to select eclectically and present

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only examples that support a preset point of view and neglect those that differ from it. However, I deem both of these approaches unsatisfactory. Although temptingly comprehensive, a descriptive approach lacks the necessary systematization and brevity that would make it useful as an analytical method and, in the present context, the resulting study would undoubtedly exceed the space allotted. As for the second alternative, although perhaps more focused, an eclectic selection of examples gives an incomplete picture.

A better alternative, I suggest, is to create a theoretical framework suitable for mapping out what 'theology' and 'globalization' are, how they function, and subsequently draw from there a few conclusions in regard with how they may relate. It seems to me that such an approach has two advantages over the alternatives mentioned earlier. First, a theoretical framework has both a descriptive and a prescriptive role, since not only it describes what the case is, but it also suggests what the case might, and even should, be. Second, by conceptualising the discussion, a theoretical framework becomes a simplifying device, useful in helping one decide which facts matter and which do not, and therefore what should be accounted for and what should not. What I hope then to accomplish below is exactly that – to formulate such a theoretical framework and hopefully contribute in this way to elucidating the 'Lexus vs. olive tree' dilemma spelled out by Friedman.

2. Attitudes toward globalization

Anyone undertaking to research and write on a given topic, by doing so also admits to the fact that their study does not appear in a vacuum. As such, although reviewing past work is not the way in which I will answer the question of this essay, it seems necessary at least to prologue the argument made in this paper with a short note on the two prevailing attitudes toward globalization I have observed while browsing theological literature on this subject. This, I hope, will help point out the need for a fresh set of eyes to look at the issue raised and the existence of a methodological niche that may at least help pose questions differently.

2.1. Divergence

As the title of this section indicates, one possible position theologians have adopted vis-à-vis globalization was resistance to the logic underlying the developments it represents and rejection of assumptions made by its promoters. Such an attitude is usually the result of one's belief that economic and social norms associated with globalization enter in conflict with ethical principles accepted within one's particular faith tradition. The most common expression of such an attitude is invigorated allegiance to one's religious beliefs, accompanied by an emphasis on cultural distinctiveness and the promotion of national or ethnic autonomy, over against primarily economic trends within the global society that may pose a challenge to those beliefs.

Examples of theologians' resistance to globalization, where globalisation is associated with neo-liberal economic growth practices and evaluated as a negative development, are available in the theological literature of the past decade [2-4]. For instance, such dismissal is evident in the definition of globalization given by Kimaryo: "Globalization is a system by which the rich nations through their multinational companies continue with their systematic tactics of exploiting the poor countries, ... [is] the latest attempt by the Western world to control the poor countries, ... [is] a post neo-colonial economic system that is based on free market and goes beyond frontiers, ... [is] a profit oriented system that seeks material gains and pushes the human person from the centre to the periphery." [5]

In addition to the above, some associate with globalisation other negative developments worldwide. Expressed differently by different people, such critique generally includes observations regarding the existing financial and economic discrepancy that leads to extreme cases of poverty, observations regarding environmental collapse resulting from an unwise management of the planet's resources, socio-political analyses of a world ripped apart by violent conflicts, and comments on moral decadence and religious relativity (see for instance, the excellent evaluation of contemporary North-American society given by W. Brueggemann [6]).

Evidently, this is but a small sample of the kind of response to globalization one may expect in this type of approach. To be fair, it should be pointed out that such unenthusiastic depictions of globalization abound in the theological literature of the past two decades. Nevertheless, however popular resistance to globalization might have been or however attractive it may seem, I suggest that complete dismissal of it is an inadequate reaction. Responses to globalization such as the above are erroneously assigning moral value to a process that in and of itself is neither good nor bad (on the moral neutrality of globalization [7]). As the definition offered later in this essay indicates, it is one's attitude and the actions made possible by globalization that are prone to qualitative categorizations and value judgments and not the processes and developments it entails. Given these, it seems to me that a more nuanced approach, one which permits a balanced assessment of each aspect of globalization, is called for and will be advanced below in what I termed a 'prophetic' response to globalization.

2.2. Convergence

The alternative labelled here 'convergence' is the polar opposite of the divergence model discussed above. Within this model globalization is perceived and embraced as a positive phenomenon. For instance, Max Stackhouse epitomizes this type of understanding when he enthusiastically describes globalization as a "new kind of postmodernism" that: "... opens the door to a new cosmopolitan vision without imperialism and colonialism, ... that recognizes that issues of human rights, ecological sanity, international

trade and finance, and world-wide communications ... lock us into a new interdependence beyond the presumed incommensurability of our local traditions and confessions, ... and [a postmodernism] that could contribute to the formation of a new global society where learning can flourish more widely, life can become more graceful, [and] justice can be more widely spread" [8].

Even more, besides considering globalization to be a positive phenomenon, some of those adopting the convergence model are actively involved in promoting and advancing values and developments associated with it. For instance, consider the attitude shown by the North-American Association of Theological Schools. As early as 1980 this organisation commissioned a team of researchers to study the phenomenon of internationalization in theological education. The work of this team at a later stage prompted the establishment of the so-called 'Task Force on Globalization', a steering committee whose sole purpose was to coordinate the efforts of the Association of Theological Schools related to the issue of globalization.

Although laudably aware of new socio-political and economic global realities, an approach that uncritically and comprehensively endorses globalization is problematic as well. It seems to me that such a position faults theological reflection by stripping it naked of any critical dimension, the result being a compromising embrace rather than constructive dialogue.

Admittedly, not all that would fit within the 'convergence' camp have embraced globalization all the way. Rather, many have taken a more tempered approach and have emphasized the necessity for adaptation, that is, either adapting theological discourse and practice to fit within this "new brave world" of globalization or working toward shaping the emerging global civilization to fit Christian values. Examples of both types of adaptation are available in the theological literature. Regarding the adaptation of theological discourse and practice, according to Berling [9, 10], the North-American Association of Theological Schools is a good case in point. As for the alternative, the four volumes published under the leadership of Max Stackhouse and Don Browning entitled *God and Globalization* should be mentioned [11]. The question guiding the work of the contributors to these volumes is whether God is involved in, or perhaps supportive of, globalization in any substantive way. The answer these authors give includes an urge to pay attention to 'holy possibilities' within the process of globalization and a call to work toward defining, redeeming and celebrating such possibilities.

At first glance such call for adaptation may seem to work better than the exclusive embrace of globalization noted earlier. However, in reality it still lacks in terms of critical evaluation. If the key word is 'adaptation', to what extent should one take such reshaping of her theology? And if the intention is to 'redeem' globalization, how can one avoid giving birth to new forms of exclusivist discourse? If we say, as Stackhouse and Brown do, that God is involved in a positive way in the process of globalization (a process which, we need to remember, is often perceived as something originating in the 'wealthy

west' and foreign to the majority world), are we not repeating the mistakes of the past in lending support to new forms of imperialism? Aren't we in danger of transforming Christian mission in a process of forced civilizing? For if we are, we would be better off condemning and rejecting globalization and whatever processes it entails. I propose that the work of theology should take us a step further. Below I call for a 'prophetic' alternative, one that takes into account what doing theology, or theologizing, is all about and is informed by the Old Testament model of prophetic activity and discourse.

3. Globalization and Theology: what are we talking about?

The first and most important step in the conception of a theoretical framework is the formulation of definitions. As such, this is the task that will occupy most of the reminder of this essay. If one is to determine how Theology and globalization relate, it stands to reason that one must first decide what 'theology' and 'globalization' stand for, particularly within the context of the present essay. Of course, although not excluding the possibility of a more general applicability, the narrowing of the discussion to match the specific needs of the case in view is necessary; this is the way in which description is replaced by definition. To explain, as evidenced in the available literature, describing comprehensively concepts as complex as the ones under scrutiny here would be a lengthy and difficult process; for such description would entail a listing of all parameters and characteristics, of all elements that constitute 'theology' and 'globalization'. Alternatively, if attempting the formulation of definitions, lengthy descriptions can be replaced by a minimum necessary of information, that is, by a presentation of only that which identifies a concept as unique. Admittedly, even definitions, in order to be useful, need to be comprehensive enough to offer a distinctive image of what is being defined. However, the emphasis in definitions is not on the completeness of the information given but rather on precision and, preferably, concise summarization. As such, the discussion below is limited to introducing concepts considered relevant for this study, without attempting to be the final say on any particular matter.

3.1. Globalization

Even a summary look at the literature on globalization will reveal how multifarious, ever changing and, at the same time, vague a phenomenon we are tackling (for further reference, on 'globalization', see [12-24]. It is quite common, for instance, to discuss globalization in terms of trends or developments taking place worldwide. Most definitions of this type equate globalization with one such trend or development. Some examples are: economic neo-liberalism [25, 26], a kind of unified world political economy [23], a global system of social communication [27], and the consciousness of a unified world [14]. Less commonly the definition is more comprehensive and

globalization is viewed as a process of interconnectedness that brings about a single social world [28], that is, a multifaceted phenomenon that includes various economic, social, political, and religious developments that together contribute at incorporating the peoples of the world into a single, unified global society [19, 29]. Given the complex nature of globalization I suggest that the last option is preferable. Thus, I would describe globalization as a process of transformation, presently ongoing worldwide, that touches upon all areas of life and is characterised by: pronounced economic change, technological advancement particularly felt in the development of various modes of global communication, the emergence of a more homogenous global culture as cultural differences between nations and social groups begin to dissolve, and the apparition of a pronounced risk culture whereby manufactured risks (e.g. pollution, AIDS, international terrorism) begin to surpass natural risks (e.g. natural calamities).

The definition thus far, being focused on changes taking places within the global society, shows globalization to be an ongoing process that shapes the multifaceted context created by and within which humans live. The effects of this process can be both negative and positive, and are in fact perceived as such depending directly on where (negative or positive) the experience one has can be placed. However, to be more precise, it is in fact one's attitude and human actions making globalization possible and made possible by globalization that are prone to qualitative categorizations and value judgments and not the processes and developments globalization entails. Given this, I suggest that an adequate definition of globalisation must also say something about the agents involved in effecting, and at the same time being affected by, it: the contemporary generation. Particularities notwithstanding, it seems to me that characteristics applicable to the contemporary generation on a global scale should be taken into account. These characteristics, I propose, encompass thinking and behavioural patterns specific to our 'postmodern condition'. This phrase, first coined by Jean-François Lyotard in his *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* [30] to refer to an attitude of "incredulity towards meta-narratives" [30, p. xxiv], has become a more inclusive term by which one makes reference to ideas and changes associated with postmodernism in various disciplines and areas of life. I refer here to four traits adapted from Harry Lee Poe [31] and Charles Lemert [32]:

- A focus on the personal with all that it entails: hunger for relationships, awareness of 'the other' and need for wholeness understood as elimination of personal anxiety.
- Rejection of traditional authority and of any overarching truth claims.
- Distrust of knowledge acquired through reasoning and empirical observation and the embrace of the intuitive and the contradictory.
- Acceptance of the reality of the spiritual without however accepting also the absolute value claims traditionally related to it.

It is these characteristics, these patterns of thinking and behaviour, I suggest, that result in decisions leading to globalization. As such, the study of

globalization entails both an assessment of the process continuously reshaping the socio-political and economic realities of our world and an accounting for the human agents making the process possible while at the same time being influenced by it.

3.2. Theology

The concept of theology was first used by Plato [Plato, *Republic* 2.377e-3.386a] to speak of a rational conception of the divine in contrast to poetic myths about the gods. A similar understanding, most times justified etymologically, seems to prevail in some language dictionaries. In these theology is described as reasoned discourse about God and religion, as the discipline whose objective is to study and pass on information about the divine by means of enunciating belief systems [33-36]. In order to be useful, however, this definition should be expanded and reformulated to include an experiential dimension. As Karl Barth, arguably the most influential theologian of the twentieth century, has put it in his address given at the meeting of the *Goethegesellschaft* in Hanover on the 8th of January 1957, theology is '*the commerce and communion between God and man*' [37]. The implication of this definition is clear – theology entails some kind of exchange taking place between God and man (commerce) within the context of divine-human fellowship (communion). The advantage such a perspective offers is that it shifts the emphasis from Theology as conceptual analysis of divine matters to an understanding of it as dynamic, relational practice.

In addition to the above, I propose to expand the discussion by introducing two new elements. First, it should be emphasized here that this relational practice is primarily linguistic in nature, for unavoidably theology takes form in written and oral discourse. Given this characteristic, I suggest that Barth's '*commerce and communion*' may be further described as communication. The benefit of introducing such terminology is defensible when taking into consideration what communication is and how it works.

It is quite common to assume that a definition of communication will have something to say about the transmission of information concerning ideas, attitudes and/or emotions from one entity to another, primarily done through linguistic means. Within such an approach an adequate analysis of any instance of communication must identify and describe the constituent elements of that particular occurrence of transmission of information (for instance, Denis McQuail & Sven Windahl [38] identify eight such elements: "a sender, a channel, a message, a receiver, a relationship between sender and receiver, an effect, a context in which communication occurs and a range of things to which 'messages' refer"). Limiting the description to 'transmission of information' however does not do justice to the complexity of the processes involving communication. Rather, one should take into consideration the fact that entities involved in communication influence each other by doing all of the following: they act on each other, they interact with each other, and they

react to each other. As such, communication is better defined as a practice of social interface involving two or more entities who, beyond being informed, are also transformed in the encounter with each other. Thus, an act of communication is not only the means by which one expresses personal ideas and attitudes. Rather, it is the means by which we define social relations, create solidarity and maintain social cohesion [39, 40]. Seen in this light, communication is the engine that drives an ongoing process of identity formation and identity transformation.

It follows from the above then that rather than a theoretical enunciation of doctrines, theology is best described as a process of communication by which a relational knowledge of the divine is developed. Consequently, theologians in this view are not those who merely analyse and speak rationally about God but those who know God relationally. As such, a definition of theology from this perspective cannot and should not ignore the entities that are part of this process of communication. In other words, the focus expands here from a concern with the study of God and God's attributes to include a concern with theologians within their contexts, with the identity of theologians as expressed in their attitudes and discourse. In fact one could go as far as to state that theology from this perspective is as much about the theologian as it is about his or her divine interlocutor.

Having said these, it is already clear that the second notion which should become part of this discussion is 'identity'. Of course, due to its complexity and the various ways in which it has been studied and defined, if introduced as a broad category, the concept of identity would complicate rather than simplify the argument. However, as I have argued elsewhere [41, 42], and as the discussion above implies, within the framework of communication it is possible to conceive of identity primarily as a relational category. As such, the three facets of identity given by Amin Maalouf [43] – the 'personal', the 'religious', and the 'ethno-national' – which reflect this relational character of the concept, provide an adequate paradigm for discussing its specific place in the present argument. I suggest that Maalouf's threefold definition of identity sharpens the present argument by indicating the three distinct dimensions one must account for in a description of theology as communication: the personal, the ecclesial, and the social.

Specifically then, given all the above, theology may first be viewed as a personal endeavour whereby one's faith convictions and practices are in focus. In such a case doing theology is an isolated act; it may mean privately carrying out a particular task or performing a particular ritual as a way of reaching out to, or communicating with, the divine in order to achieve personal spiritual enrichment. Second, theology may be viewed as an ecclesial act, whereby one's encounter with the divine is part of a collective experience. In such a case doing theology becomes a communal activity that takes place in the context of a particular religious tradition. Any ritual it may entail is done for the benefit of, within, and together with, a faith community. Third, when one's quality as a member of society is in view, theology is also a public endeavour.

Within this dimension its primary modes of manifestation are proclamation and critique – proclamation of a particular message within and to the society and critique of conduct and ideologies that contradict that message. Of course, the activities related to these three facets of Theology may not be in play all at once. In fact, it is quite likely that the emphasis shifts from the personal to the ecclesial or to the social facet depending on who does what, where and why. Nevertheless, in order to be complete, any assessment involving Theology must take all of these into account.

To conclude then, when talking about theology, or theologizing, we are not talking about a particular scientific discipline but about a way of living out a relationship with God. Furthermore, since this relationship is a dynamic process of communication, doing theology is necessarily a contextualised activity: it involves specific entities and it takes place within a specific context, being shaped by it and at the same time influencing it. As such, the study of Theology entails both a consideration of the relational process involving God and the believer, and an accounting for the human counterparts of this relationship within their contexts.

4. Engaging globalization: a 'prophetic' alternative

It should be evident by now that the definitions of globalization and theology offered above indicate the human agent as point of commonality. Regarding the former, it has been concluded that it is the way human agents shape, and respond to, contextual realities that is prone to value judgments and consequently determines whether a process associated with globalization is positive or negative. Regarding the latter, it has been shown that it is the threefold identity specific to the human agent that provides a structure to the theologizing. As such, I suggest that engaging globalization theologically is not done from a position of independence. One can neither exclude itself from the context and therefore assess globalization as if it were from a neutral position, nor can she meaningfully adopt a theological stance towards globalization without also being fully involved in the relational process of divine–human communication which describes the doing of theology according to this author's opinion. No such dichotomy between one's faith and one's social role can be true.

In seems to me, in fact, that meaningful evaluation of globalization is necessarily self-focused, for it starts out with an examination of one's own actions, attitudes and reactions to the context. However, it does not and cannot end there. If theologizing is a process that pertains to more than the personal dimension of one's faith, so must a theologian's encounter with, and response to, globalization move from self-evaluation to endorsing a specific community ethos (on the social role of the Church [44] to being a voice in the public square that promotes that which is valuable and positive and speaks against that which is incongruent with her ethical vision.

This was the role played by Ancient Israel's prophets, who were members of the Israelite society of their time, preservers of community values matching Israel's covenantal obligations, and also challengers of social, political, economic and religious realities that were incongruent with Israel's theological discourse and therefore disconnected from practical ethical living. As for the characteristics of their message, these were: awareness of the fallacies inherent to context in which they lived, evaluation of Israelite life and practice from the perspective of a covenantal set of values, an emphasis on justice understood as dealing away with the consequences of social inequality and a call to repentance and restoration of the nation to proper covenantal relationship with God. These summarize the conclusions of several studies on Old Testament prophecy [45-50].

Such practice of prophecy can serve as framework for addressing globalization theologically. It is contextualised, it encompasses the three-dimensional model of theologizing suggested here and it is aligned to the standards implicit in the covenantal relationship between Israel and God. As for the message itself, given the contemporary context, it would entail:

1. an emphasis on personal ethics that begins with the transformation of each social agent. Such ethics would be characterised by an acute sense of social responsibility, the practice of justice at all levels, a regard for truth, honesty and integrity in business and the loving treatment of the other, including protection of the disabled [51].
2. an emphasis on the idea of brotherhood and the promotion of common welfare.
3. an emphasis on assuming global responsibility, leading to dialogue and the formulation of a global ethic that will be accepted and respected by all regardless ethnic, racial, religious, social, economic, political, or other differences. In this regard, Hans Küng [52, 53] suggests three principles and four irrevocable directives: *principle 1* – global order must be accompanied by a global ethic; *principle 2* – every human being must be treated humanely; *principle 3* – any work towards a global ethic requires transformation of personal and community consciousness; *directive 1* – commit to, and promote, a culture of non-violence and respect for life; *directive 2* – commit to, and promote, a culture of solidarity and just economic order; *directive 3* – commit to, and promote, a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness; *directive 4* – commit to, and promote, a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.

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