

**IMPERIAL GLOBALIZATION
AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF SOLIDARITY
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There is probably no other topic that has attained such world-wide diffusion during the past decade as that of globalization. At the same time, we would be mistaken to assume that everyone who speaks or writes on the topic uses the term with the same connotation. For the sake of clarity, the least we can do at the outset of our reflection on the subject is to admit that “globalization” is an ambiguous word and that the phenomenon to which it points in general terms may be considered from differing perspectives.

The globalization with which we are concerned in these lectures is the globalization of the economic system predominant in the world today—the neo-liberal capitalist system, which is intimately related to modern technology and the culture-ideology of consumerism and which has the West, especially the United States of America, as its geopolitical center. This understanding of globalization involves at least two presuppositions. In the first place, that the economic factor plays a decisive role in the shaping of the globalization with which we are dealing. In effect, the net result of the present globalization is that the world becomes a global shopping center controlled by commerce, finance, and production, in partnership with modern technology and the culture-ideology of consumerism.

In the second place, our understanding presupposes that the principal promoter of today’s globalization is the West, paradigmatically represented by the United States. This is not to deny the importance of other centers in the growing interconnectedness of nations; it simply recognizes that at present the West, and particularly the United States, is the most powerful force in the creation of a world dominated by the market. Already, in the early 1970s, Arnold Toynbee stated that

in the course of the past five centuries the Western Civilization has taken the lead, both culturally and politically, in the aggressive penetration of contemporary societies. When in the course of the fifteenth century of the Christian Era, Western European mariners mastered the technique of oceanic navigation, they thereby won a means of physical access to all the inhabited and habitable lands on the face of the Earth; and between that date and the present time this conquest of the ocean has resulted in the establishment of contact, on Western terms, between the West and all other living societies, whether pre-civilizational or civilized. In the lives of all these other societies the impact of the West has come to be the paramount social force and ‘the Western Question’ the fateful issue. As the Western pressure on them has increased, so their lives have been turned upside down; and it has not only been the frail social fabric of the surviving pre-civilizational societies that has been pulverized; the living non-Western civilizations too have been convulsed and corroded by this literally world-wide revolution of Western origin (1972:398).

Since this distinguished historian wrote these words, this process of globalization based in the West has rapidly spread and deepened its influence, and it has become evident that what has been taking shape is, in effect, an imperial globalization with its geopolitical center in the United States of America.

It is not surprising if for many of my listeners the use of the term “imperial” in reference to this country is not acceptable. That is understandable. After all, isn’t this country the most impressive model of democracy that history has known? Isn’t democracy, closely connected with individual freedom, one of the outstanding characteristics of this great nation?

And if it is, how can democratic ideals ever be combined with the concrete reality of an empire?

It all depends on our view of the practice of democracy in the United States and of just what constitutes an empire. In regard to democracy in the United States I will refer my listeners to the investigation entitled *Supreme Injustice: How the High Court Hijacked Election 2000* (2001). In it Alan M. Dershowitz clearly shows that when the Supreme Court—“the most powerful court in the world—the envy of judges in every other country” (3)—declared the triumph of president George W. Bush in the *Bush-Gore* election it sent to the White House the less-voted candidate, in clear contradiction to principles applied in previous decisions. What basis do we have to speak of democracy in a country in which the vote of the majority of the members of the Supreme Court “reflected not any enduring constitutional values rooted in the precedents of the ages, but rather the partisan quest for immediate political victory” (4)? Someone will want to object that what happened in the instance mentioned was an exception. I am afraid, however, that it is simply an example of the way in which democracy is oftentimes practiced in the United States.

On the other hand, several factors that characterize this country justify considering it a true empire, in effect the most powerful empire that has ever existed throughout human history. In the words of Walsh and Keesmaat,

empires are (1) built on systematic centralization of power, (2) secured by structures of socioeconomic and military control, (3) religiously legitimated by powerful myths and (4) sustained by a proliferation of imperial images that captivate the imagination of the population (2004:58).

On the basis of this description of the characteristics of empire, these authors proceed to study *Colossians* in the context of the Roman empire and the imperial realities of the United States. The result is a powerful “remixing” of the Pauline letter that updates its message for today’s world—a globalized world in which

- (1) “Global economic structures reveal centralization of power” (59);
- (2) “Through mechanisms such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, powerful nations in the North are able to dictate the economic terms by which the South is kept firmly ensconced in the cycle of international debt and development aid” (61);
- (3) “The ‘American Empire’ finds salvation in economic progress and global control” (62), and
- (4) “Corporate logos and corporate advertising not only shape the public space of our culture but also permeate our private lives” (63).

This is not the appropriate moment to show the soundness of this description of the U. S. empire—this is something that will become clear as we proceed. Suffice it for now to state that there is enough evidence to claim that present-day globalization is the globalization of a powerful empire—it is *imperial globalization*.

My purpose in these lectures, however, is not to provide a mere description of the global situation under the dominion of United States imperialism. My purpose is to answer a question concerning the role of the church of Jesus Christ in the context of this globalization, the effects of which extend to all areas of human life on both the personal and the social levels. In the first lecture I will try to show the connection between West-based globalization which began five centuries ago and present imperial globalization. In the second lecture I will consider the deadly impact of this imperial globalization on the poor. Finally, in the third

lecture I will attempt to outline a Christian response to the problem of imperial globalization, a response in terms of what has come to be called *integral mission*, with emphasis on God's call to solidarity with the victims of the Neo-liberal economic system.