

Globalization, Christian Identity, and Frontier Missions

by Todd M. Johnson

In compiling the recently published *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910–2010*, it became clear that there was much to be said regarding globalization and Christian identity, and their impact on frontier missions. I noticed in ever-increasing detail two developments across the demography of Christianity and frontier missions: 1) Numerically, Christianity has shifted to the Global South. 2) Amidst all the global migrations and increasing proximity of once distant peoples, Christians have maintained limited contact with Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. These and several other significant trends have been mapped, graphed, and analyzed in the Atlas, with its special focus on religious traditions, religious freedom, religious diversity, and religious affiliation both at the global and provincial level.

Trend 1. Christianity Shifts to the Global South Demographically but Not Culturally.

At first glance there has been little change in the status of global Christianity over the past 100 years. For the entire 100-year period, Christians have made up approximately one-third of the world's population. This, however, masks dramatic changes in the geography of global Christianity. While 66% of all Christians lived in Europe in 1910, by 2010 only 26% lived there. By contrast, fewer than 2% of all Christians lived in Africa in 1910, skyrocketing to almost 22% by 2010. The Global North (defined as Europe and Northern America) contained over 80% of all Christians in 1910, falling to under 40% by 2010.

Unfortunately, Christians of the Global South—to their dismay—have “discovered” that their forms of Christianity are largely Western. Moonjang Lee notes with irony,

it was through the modern missionary movement that Christianity became a worldwide phenomenon, and in that process Christianity came to acquire the image of a Western religion. The subsequent globalisation of the image of Western Christianity poses a problem for non-Western Christianity. Though we talk about a post-Christian West and a post-Western Christianity, the prevailing forms of Christianity in most parts of the non-Western world are still dominated by Western influences. (Johnson and Ross, 104).

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Trend 2. Christians Have Little Significant Contact with Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists.

Recent research reported in the Atlas reveals that as many as 86% of all Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists do not personally know a Christian. This is surprising in light of the more than 200 million people who are now on the move across national borders—putting diverse peoples in closer proximity. In fact, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists are increasingly found living in ‘Christian’ lands but, apparently, increasing access has not generated closer relationships. This lack of contact has to be viewed negatively in light of the strong biblical theme of incarnation that is at the heart of Christian witness. Christians should know and love their neighbors! In the 21st century it is important to realize that the responsibility for reaching Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists is too large for the vocational missionary enterprise. While missionaries will always be at the forefront of innovative strategies, the whole church needs to participate in inviting people of other faiths to consider Jesus Christ.

Globalization and Christian Identity

I’d like to take a step and suggest that these two trends can be examined from the perspective of globalization and Christian identity. Manfred B. Steger’s excellent little treatise *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2004) is helpful in understanding these dynamics. Steger is concerned that “narrow accounts often leave the general reader with a shallow understanding of globalization as primarily an economic phenomenon.” This reductionist tendency can ignore or confuse our vital concern for Christian identity amidst vast demographic shifts. Steger is helpful in his insistence that “globalization is best thought of as a multidimensional set of social processes (economic, political, cultural, technological, and

ecological) that resists being confined to any single thematic framework.” It is this complexity in globalization that has strong implications both for Christian identity and for frontier missions.

Steger suggests we use the term *globality* to signify a *social condition* of interconnectedness. Conversely, the term *globalization* should be used to refer to a set of *social processes* that are thought to transform our present social condition into one of globality. Steger further defines globalization as “a multidimensional set of social



processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant.” (8–13) At its core, then, globalization is about shifting forms of human contact.

Defined this way, globalization impacts both of the trends I have identified earlier. First, increasing contact between Christians around the world sparks reflection on identity. Christians see ways in which they differ (ethnicity, language, denomination) as well as ways in which they are the same (practice, core theology, creeds). Second, lack of contact between Christians and non-Christians hinders the frontier mission enterprise because crucial information on the latter’s lives and religions is not widely understood or discussed.

Characteristics of Globalization

Steger further defines some tools for understanding global Christian identity (or identities) by presenting four distinct qualities or characteristics of globalization:

1. Globalization involves the *creation* of new and the *multiplication* of existing social networks and activities that increasingly overcome traditional political, economic, cultural, and geographical boundaries.
2. Globalization involves the *expansion* and *stretching* of social relations, activities, and interdependencies.
3. Globalization involves the *intensification* and *acceleration* of social exchanges and activities.
4. Globalization involves the subjective plane of human consciousness. Thus, globalization refers to people becoming increasingly conscious of growing manifestations of social interdependence and the enormous acceleration of social interactions. In the last case, Steger states, “Their awareness of the receding importance of geographical boundaries and distances fosters a keen sense of becoming part of a global whole. Reinforced on a daily basis, these persistent experiences of global interdependence gradually change people’s individual and collective identities, and thus dramatically impact the way they act in the world.” (12)

In global Christian relations we see each of these four characteristics at play. The global Christian community has seen an increase of communions and networks for relating both within and outside their traditions. Many of these networks have expanded their activities through deeper and broader cooperation. At the same time, relations have become more intense and conflicted, producing a staggering amount of ecumenical documents in the past two decades. Finally,

Christians of all traditions have been challenged to think more broadly of their own identity as a follower of Christ.

In Christian–non-Christian relations we also see these dynamics at work. People of different religious backgrounds are forming new social networks to relate to each other. These networks are taking on broader mandates in international relations. They are also intensifying as peoples live in closer proximity in both the Global North and the Global South. Finally, many religionists are sensing commonalities across the religious spectrum based on universal human experiences and challenges.

Globalization Is Uneven

There is always the human tendency to see the experience of globalization through our own ethnocentric grid. Steger is quick to point out that

Globalization is an uneven process, meaning that people living in various parts of the world are affected very differently by this gigantic transformation of social structures and cultural zones. Large segments of the world's population—particularly in the Global South—do not enjoy equal access to thickening global networks and infrastructure. (16)

For global Christianity this means that many Christians (especially in the Global South) lack an awareness of the broader body of Christ. This is especially noteworthy because so much of the growth in Christianity has been where networks are the thinnest (i.e., where contacts are few). In frontier mission situations, where contacts can be very significant, there is little potential for interaction between Christians and non-Christians. Christians in thin networks are even less likely to be interacting with their non-Christian neighbors.

Same and Different

Does globalization make people around the world more alike or more different? Steger identifies “pessimistic hyperglobalizers” as those who

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argue in favor of the former. They suggest, Steger says, that

we are not moving towards a cultural rainbow that reflects the diversity of the world's existing cultures. Rather, we are witnessing the rise of an increasingly homogenized popular culture underwritten by a Western ‘culture industry’ based in New York, Hollywood, London, and Milan. (70)

“Optimistic hyperglobalizers” agree that cultural globalization generates more sameness but they consider this outcome to be a good thing. (73)

At the same time, some assessments link globalization to new forms of cultural expression. Sociologist Roland Robertson, for example, contends that global cultural flows often reinvigorate local cultural niches. “Glocalization” is a complex interaction of the global and local characterized by cultural borrowing. The resulting expressions of cultural “hybridity” cannot be reduced to clear-cut manifestations of “sameness” or “difference.” The contemporary experience of living and acting across cultural borders means both the loss of traditional meanings and the creation of new symbolic expressions. Reconstructed feelings of belonging coexist in uneasy tension with a sense of “placelessness.” Cultural globalization has contributed to a remarkable shift in people's consciousness. (Steger, 75)

Ethnicity and Language

Ethnicity and language are two of the most significant features in both sameness and difference. While these characteristics often separate people, there is also potential to bring people together (e.g., a separate language but a unifying lingua franca). Artificially airtight twentieth-century taxonomies of race and language have been rightly deconstructed by the academy, revealing weaknesses and frightening

implications (such as eugenics). But today it is appropriate for a modest project of reconstruction—building taxonomies that recognize both differences and similarities.

Globalization and Global Christian Identity

This interesting assessment of globalization can naturally lead to the question, “What is world Christianity or global Christianity?” In describing the history of Christianity, Andrew Walls utilizes the tension between an *indigenizing* principle and a *pilgrim* principle. He acknowledges that Christianity can and should go deep within each culture of the world but at the same time is never fully at home in any particular culture. It's in this dynamic between the particular (indigenous) and the universal (pilgrim) that we can better understand global Christian identity. Steger states,

Indeed, the tensions between the forces of particularism and those of universalism have reached unprecedented levels only because interdependencies that connect the local to the global have been growing faster than at any time in history. (6)

As stated earlier, globalization tends to make one more aware of both the particular (by contrast) and the universal (by commonality).

The emphasis in the study of world Christianity to date has been almost exclusively on the indigenizing principle, or “the particular.” Thus, compendiums on world or global Christianity contain case studies from different cultures around the world, emphasizing their differences from Western Christianity. Of course, it is vital to understand the trends that have left us with a “post-Christian West” and a “post-Western Christianity.” But some scholars go as far as defining “world Christianity” as “Christianity

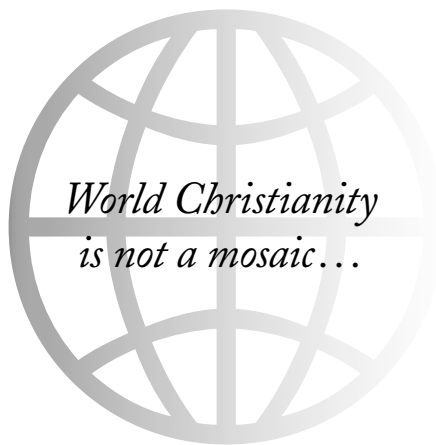
in the non-Western world.” There is also an increased use of the term “Christianities,” as in the recent *History of Christianity* volumes published by Cambridge University Press (2006–2009). In this context, it is critical to emphasize also the pilgrim principle, or universal side, of world Christianity.

In one sense, I am arguing against an overemphasis on “the particular” that can lead to what in other disciplines has been called *atomism*: any theory that holds that an understanding of the parts is logically prior to an understanding of the whole. I am advocating “the universal” that emphasizes *holism*: the theory that whole entities, as fundamental components of reality, have an existence other than the mere sum of their parts.

Recent reflections on world culture, global culture, and globalization can certainly help us to better understand the unifying or universal aspects of world Christianity. But it’s vital to understand that these unifying forces do not diminish cultural differences. Cultural globalization is a double process. On the one hand, it differentiates. On the other hand, differences play out within a common framework. Guided by global ideas and norms, Christians become more similar in the ways they identify themselves as different (e.g., Africans and Asians identifying themselves as non-Western). World Christianity helps us both to articulate and to bridge these differences.

A useful parallel can be found in world music. In his *World Music: A Very Short Introduction*, Philip Bohlman examines the inherent tension between what world music tells us about human diversity and what it tells us about human similarities. Neither tells the whole story. Bohlman tries to strike a balance in his description of world music by emphasizing difference as one feature and similarity as another. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma takes this a step further. He also recognizes the way in which

world music is, at the same time, both local and universal. For him, the next iteration of classical music posits Western and non-Western styles, as well as classical and vernacular traditions, on equal or near-equal footing. It mixes popular and folk music with Eastern and Western art-music structures, tonal and atonal. This music appeals to younger audiences whose iPods are loaded with an astonishing variety of sounds from past centuries and from every spot on the planet. He further utilizes the ecological concept of the “edge effect”: where



two ecosystems meet one will find the least density but the greatest variety. Ma has actively promoted this effect in music by inviting musical strangers (from different cultures) to meet each other and to compose music together. Ma writes,

As we open up to each other, we form a bridge into unfamiliar traditions, banishing the fear that often accompanies change and dislocation. In other words, when we broaden our lens on the world, we better understand ourselves, our own lives and culture. We share more in common with the far reaches of our small planet than we realize.

Steger also recognizes this process of “hybridization”—the mixing of different cultural forms and styles facilitated by global economic and cultural exchanges.

I believe we find similar dynamics in world Christianity. There is enormous difference at the same time as

clear similarity. This is true even in the larger categories of “North” and “South” that frame most discussions on world Christianity. In the North, French, American, and Russian Christians are very different from each other. In the South, Nigerian, Chinese, and Papua New Guinean Christians are profoundly dissimilar. And yet, Christians from all cultures are part of a global unified body of believers. When these differing forms of Christianity meet (especially in conferences and compendiums), an “edge effect” is apparent. Interaction between Christians adds an important dimension to world Christianity.

Defining World Christianity

With this parallel to world music in mind, and borrowing language from the literature on global citizenship, it is possible to consider what world Christianity is *NOT*:

- World Christianity is not simply the sum of the thousands of local expressions of Christianity.
- World Christianity is not created by stirring old ideas into a melting pot; it represents something new over and above previously existing forms of Christianity.
- World Christianity is not a mosaic, since that metaphor conveys a picture of neatly juxtaposed and unchanging cultural forms of Christianity. Instead, differences are fluid and relative when they are caught up in ever-shifting global interactions.
- World Christianity is not an alien global force suppressing difference; as long as global symbols are freely appropriated, they can be anyone’s authentic Christian experience.
- World Christianity is not the opposite of diversity; rather, it harmonizes diversity. Far from hovering abstractly above the planet, world Christianity provides ideas and symbols, concepts and models that seep into daily

life and thereby add a layer to a Christian's local experience.

Uniqueness and diversity are not lost in these metaphors. Piet Hein stated, "We are global citizens with tribal souls" (Dower, 11). The Christian parallel could be "we are global Christians with unique cultural locations." With that in mind, world or global Christianity might be defined as the interaction and sharing between local Christianities. More fully, world Christianity is a world-cultural fellowship comprising norms and knowledge shared across ethnic, linguistic, temporal, and political boundaries, practiced and extended by churches and parachurch organizations, enacted on particular occasions that generate global awareness, carried by the infrastructure of world society, spurred by market forces, driven by tension and contradiction, and expressed in the multiple ways particular Christian groups relate to universal ideals (adapted from Dower).

Globalization and Frontier Missions

Let me finally address how these tensions between the particular and the universal within world Christianity are relevant to frontier missions. Contact between humans is the foundation of mission. Therefore, the lack of personal contact between Christians and non-Christians identified at the beginning of this paper should be of great concern to the missions community. Globalization often increases contact between humans, with a resulting tension between the local and the global. Frontier missions exists to bridge the possibility of a fully indigenous form of Christianity and one that is tied into the whole of Christianity around the world and throughout human history. Somewhat obvious is the fact that lack of contact will not allow either. Each new form of Christianity then contributes to our global understanding of Christ, Christianity, and the gospel. In this sense, our de facto lack of contact with Muslims, Hindus, and

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For Christians these ideas are not recent inventions of our globalized world context. Sixteen hundred years ago, Augustine wrote in his *City of God*,

This heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained, but recognizing that, however various these are, they all tend to one and the same end of earthy peace.

With the recent expansion of Christianity around the world and the anticipated spread of the gospel into all peoples, we can hope to realize the beauty of both the particular and the universal in a truly global Christianity. **IJFM**

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