

Occasional Papers

PREPARING A NEW GENERATION OF CHRISTIAN LEADERS

*Joerg Rieger, an elder in the North Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, is Wendland-Cook Endowed Professor of Constructive Theology at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, in Dallas, Texas. A member of the Perkins faculty since 1994, he teaches historical and contemporary theologies, liberation theologies, theology and economics, Methodist theology, and theology and religion in its social contexts, among other subjects. Dr. Rieger holds a Ph.D. from Duke University and a Th.M. from Duke Divinity School. He earned an M.Div. degree at Theologisches Seminar der Evangelisch-Methodistischen Kirche, Reutlingen, Germany. He is the author of numerous articles and several books, including *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (2007), *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (2001), and *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (1998). In addition, he has served as editor or coeditor on several books, including *Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition* (2003) and *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (2003). The 2008 Willson Lecture, printed below, was delivered to the board of directors of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry on October 10, 2008, in Nashville, Tenn.*

Globalization, Empire, and Beyond: The Pitfalls and Promises of a Global Church

Joerg Rieger

The term *globalization*, not unlike the term *postmodernity*, has been the subject of public discussion for the better part of two decades, and demands considerable attention even today. These terms have caught on in discussions in the church as well, and new program initiatives are often the result. I am not sure how much of a difference these initiatives are making; but I have a sense that many of them do not yield much and cannot yield much, despite great effort and good will poured into them. Why would this be the case?

The key aspect that is frequently lacking from debates in both church and world is an understanding of matters of power—in particular the tremendous power differentials that define our world today and that undergird both globalization and postmodernity.¹ And so one sees program initiatives that, for the most part, seek to celebrate the global and the postmodern—typically in somewhat tempered fashion—while the skeptics stand by hoping that these fads will pass soon so that things can go back to the way they were. Neither supporters nor critics have shown much awareness, though, that we are up against something much bigger. We are not dealing with fads here but with realities that shape our world from top to bottom, for good or for ill. Fredric Jameson has famously talked about postmodernism as “the logic of late capitalism”; and we might begin our investigation of globalization in similar fashion.

Globalization is the dominant logic of our world as it plays out in both economics and politics. This much we probably know; but are we aware that globalization also is a logic that shapes culture, religion, and even the ways we think and feel as individuals, families, and communities? If globalization is at work on all of these levels, then simple celebrations or rejections are of no consequence whatsoever, unless one’s goal is an easy sell or the kind of attention that goes with raised eyebrows.

Unless we start by analyzing the flow of power in a global situation as it affects all aspects of life, religion and the church included, we are bound to become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. In other words, unless we muster the courage to address the problem head-on, none of our proposals about how to make a difference will be of much

value. I develop my argument in this essay by following the ancient Latin motto *per aspera ad astra*, which might be translated roughly as “through darkness to light.” We can only come to constructive theological conclusions if we face the real challenges that are before us.²

Globalization and the Postcolonial Empire

A basic definition, one that is really too simple, understands *globalization* as a process of global expansion. The United Methodist Church can be considered to be part of this sort of globalization, because our traditions have expanded from their humble beginnings in England to many locations around the globe. While global expansion is an old phenomenon, it has entered a new phase in our time. Technology, for instance, has made global expansion much easier, particularly with regard to communication and travel. According to those who follow this definition, the key thing that is new today is, in the words of Thomas Friedman, “the degree and intensity with which the world is being tied together into a single globalized marketplace and village.”³ A whole series of ecclesial program initiatives are built on this new phase of globalization, including short-term mission trips to far-away places that would have taken months to reach during earlier periods of globalization as well as the opportunity to disseminate information and even participate in live events in far-apart places via the Internet and live-streaming of video. Nevertheless, what is going on in the church is just the tip of the iceberg. Technology has opened the floodgates for a whole new way of doing business. Trillions of dollars move around the world in cyberspace every day, at the push of a button.

However, defining *globalization* as expansion is too simple. Another aspect of the definition of *globalization* includes the erasure of local difference. As religions, cultures, and political and economic spheres expand, local customs and habits are often leveled; and, in some instances, they are lost altogether. The development of language may serve as an example. The expansion of English as a global language has a leveling effect on other languages. While these other languages do not necessarily disappear right away, they are increasingly shaped by the dominant global language. For instance, open a German magazine and you will find that most advertisers imitate American styles and even use English words to express themselves. Local customs and habits similarly experience a leveling effect. However, even

understanding globalization as erasure of local difference is still too simple.

The most important questions go deeper: What drives globalization and global expansion, and why are local differences erased? What drove Columbus’s caravels across the Atlantic, and what led to the spread of Spanish culture in the Americas? What drove the pioneers across the North American continent, and what led to the erasure of cultures that were thousands of years old? What drove the British East India Company, and what drives the global corporations of today—and, with them, the spread of “business English”? These drives cannot be explained merely by a thirst for novelty and adventure or by economic greed and the effort to turn a quick buck. Something else is at stake; and religion (this is where the issue hits home for us as a global church) is never an uninvolved bystander. Columbus, for instance, was certain that he did God’s will. Later, the pioneers had the Doctrine of Manifest Destiny to back them up on the way westward. They considered it their God-given duty to spread over the whole continent.

Even contemporary global corporations, in particular those with roots in the United States, have their religious side. Books with titles such as *Jesus CEO*; *Jesus, Entrepreneur*; and *The Management Methods of Jesus*⁴ have captured this spirit, just as the gospel of prosperity is spreading around the globe like wildfire. In the process, local differences are erased, whether or not that is stated as the explicit intent. It would be interesting to investigate how much of what we consider the success of Christianity outside the United States and Europe is built on the hope for prosperity. Mainline Christianity is not off the hook here; as our images of the divine often mirror our ideas of success, power, and wealth.

Without giving away the whole story just yet, I will advance a key claim: It seems that globalization is driven by some sort of power that moves from the top down—from those who have more wealth to those who have less, and from those who have more power to those who have less—and religion is somehow part of it. In this context, local differences are obliterated; because those on the top assume that their way of doing things is best.

Globalization in the days of the Spanish conquest was about expanding the reach of the Spanish crown, sanctioned by the pope. Globalization in the days of the westward drive of the United States was about expansion of territory, sanctioned by divine providence. Globalization today is about the aggressive expansion of the free-market economy, driven by a kind of economics

that firmly believes in its God-given freedom to amass fantastic wealth for those on top and the trickling down of its benefits to the less fortunate.⁵ To be sure, today we are more respectful of local differences than in the past, but only in so far as they do not challenge the powers that be. For instance, awareness of local differences is helpful for the advertising industry and for the expansion of the market economy into uncharted territory. Yet in the process, local differences are often reduced to matters of folklore and style that do not challenge the system. Talk about “inculturation,” for example, including talk about the inculturation of the gospel in far-away places in the mission field, does not imply a challenge to the already established versions of the gospel back home; and thus top-down power is not affected. Viewed from this angle, globalization appears to be evolving: While it is still about expansion, it is no longer about the complete erasure of difference—as long as difference remains rather trivial. Here is a parallel to the postmodern appreciation for otherness and difference, which often exhausts itself in differences of taste while posing a challenge to no one.⁶ The result is that top-down power is not only left without a challenge but also increased and enabled to extend its control to ever-farther regions of the globe. “Reaching for the stars” is now no longer merely a metaphor.

It goes without saying that the quest for top-down power that drives much of globalization and the erasure of robust local differences can take on many different forms. It is not only manifest in the hard power of conquest by fire and sword and in the power of military action—today epitomized in its top-down form in the throwing of bombs out of airplanes. Top-down power also works through softer forms, and it appears to be much more effective this way.

For instance, already in the sixteenth century, Bartolomé de Las Casas rejected the harsh methods of the Spanish Conquest but did not reject the interests of the Spanish crown in the New World. His methods amounted to softer forms of colonialism, which did a lot of good as they were able to reverse some of the worst consequences of the Conquest. But, although he acknowledged the basic humanity of the American Indians and their sacred worth, he never gave up the assumption that Christian Spanish culture was superior.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, the nineteenth-century father of modern theology, also promoted a form of soft power, which he felt was superior to hard power. Christ, he observed, works not through coercion but through

attraction. Of course, Schleiermacher harbored no doubts that these forces of attraction would produce results; because he took for granted that superior cultures (such as the Christian ones) are irresistible to what he considered to be lower cultures. The world would have been Christianized already in his time, Schleiermacher argued, were it not for the fact that the missionaries worked through force and coercion and, thus, turned people against them. His take on miracles mirrors an attitude that is still with us today, although perhaps not as blatantly: “[E]ven if it cannot be strictly proved that the Church’s power of working miracles has died out . . . , yet in general it is undeniable that, in view of the great advantage in power and civilization which the Christian peoples possess over the non-Christian, . . . the preachers of to-day do not need such signs.”⁷ In other words, we do not need miracles anymore, because *we* are the miracle.⁸

While we have had our own share of efforts at globalization via hard power in recent history, soft power is the name of the game today. Soft forms of globalization—moving through economic and cultural expansion—have been tremendously successful. One of the great advantages of soft power is that it is a lot less visible than hard power. The most recent uses of hard power by the United States, in Afghanistan and Iraq, have been highly visible and have resulted in a backlash that has turned large sectors of the world against us. In addition, these uses of hard power have not been particularly successful. Soft power, on the other hand, is much more promising. Educators, parents, and pastors probably already know this. Note also that even the contemporary use of hard power is geared toward soft power: Whatever the Bush administration’s plan for Iraq was, it never included the establishment of the hard power of an old-fashioned colony, with viceroy, governor, and formal ownership of the country or its resources. Even the ownership of the oil resources is supposed to remain in the hands of the Iraqi people; the core of the relation is economic, where U.S. oil corporations make their profit through production-sharing agreements whose terms they can determine.

What does any of this mean for the church? you may wonder. The problem with this sort of globalization, in terms of the expansion of power and the erasure (or trivialization) of difference, is that it never stops. It is not just a matter of politics or economics. Instead, it seeks to extend its rule by way of culture and religion, and does not stop until it has reached our innermost selves. The church is, therefore, part and parcel of globalization,

whether we like it or not. Even our most pious and spiritual moments are located in the context of the global expansion of power. The church, from its earliest beginnings, has never existed in isolation; although, this is what we often assume. The same is true for theology, a fact many of us theologians find even harder to believe. In *Christ and Empire*, I talk about these processes of globalization as “empire”; since Christian history begins with the globalizing efforts of the Roman Empire and has been involved in the globalizing efforts of empires ever since. *Globalization*, as we have defined it so far, is ultimately about empire: the ever-greater control of the world and of our lives. For this reason, it is no longer sufficient to talk about “Christ and culture,” as H. Richard Niebuhr did in a book by that title, which is still read in seminaries. Today we need to talk about “Christ plus culture plus power”—that is, we need to talk about globalization or empire.

Alternative Leadership Qualities in the Christian Tradition

Addressing globalization in such a comprehensive way may be depressing. It makes us feel like the disciples as they responded to one of Jesus’ most outrageous statements—namely, that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God: “Then who can be saved?” (Mark 10:26). Challenging globalization may indeed be a bit like trying to push a camel through the eye of a needle. But let us not forget Jesus’ response: “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible” (v. 27). Good news does not get drowned out by bad news. It may become even better news if it dares to stare the bad news in the face, with the courage of Jesus. Exegetes at times have tried to soften the story by arguing that the “eye of the needle” was a gate in the city walls of Jerusalem that made it harder, but not impossible, for camels to enter. It meant they had to get down on their knees and leave behind their baggage. But the shock of the disciples and the fact that Jesus picks up on the impossibility of this act suggest a different interpretation: It is not only difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God; it simply cannot be done. Forgive me for saying it so bluntly, but unless we address the real issues that make it impossible for us to enter the kingdom of God—the sorts of problems of globalization and empire we have discussed so far—the life of the church will be reduced to playing sandbox games.

What is the church to do in this situation? To answer this question, we have to understand that the church is

part of the problem. Globalization as the expansion of power and an erasure of local difference has always included religion and the church. From the beginning, the church has been tempted to buy into power; and this temptation only grew as the church became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine in the fourth century. The church is, therefore, never off the hook. Even our contemporary efforts to “build relationships” with others, rather than to coerce them (Schleiermacher’s method of attraction, rather than coercion), are easily assimilated by globalization as the expansion of top-down power. Even acts of sympathy, such as the learning of other peoples’ languages, can be used for the purposes of expansion of top-down power.⁹ Contemporary mission trips and immersion experiences need to be seen in this light as well. Becoming more kind, loving, and respectful will not necessarily challenge the differentials of power that are so characteristic of our globalizing world.

Our Methodist tradition gives us a first clue about a different approach that has the potential to change everything. John Wesley put it this way: “Religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of men.”¹⁰ No doubt, the power of much of what drives contemporary processes of globalization goes “from the greatest to the least”; and it does, indeed, appear to be of men—of a group of very powerful men who could be named individually and a few powerful women as well.

So, what is the alternative to this power that “would appear to be of men”? What set Wesley apart from the conventional Anglican church of his time was that he came to realize that religion could, indeed, go the other way around—starting not from the top down but from the bottom up, with the “least of these.” This was not just a radical idea of a great mind but the actual experience of the Methodist movement, whose dynamic depended on the response of common people and on whether they would become the multipliers of this message, with the help of a band of rather uneducated preachers. That is the deeper meaning of an understanding of Wesley as *folk theologian*, a term originally coined by Albert Outler. That Wesley could translate complex theological concepts for simple people certainly helped, but the much more interesting question that Outler overlooked is how this connection with common people shaped Wesley’s own theology and how Methodism grew out of this bottom-up dynamic.

In the midst of the globalization going on in his own day, moving from the greatest to the least, from the British

Empire to the colonies, and from the emerging captains of industry to the factory floors, Wesley identified a different process that reshaped his theology and that is reflected in his notion of grace: Meeting God at the bottom, with those in need, rebuilds the life of faith from the bottom up.¹¹ It is for this reason that he ultimately included works of mercy as means of grace. Engaging others through works of mercy becomes a “channel” of God’s grace, a way in which God engages us and transforms us. This movement that is characteristic of God’s grace—from the bottom up, instead of from the top down—has the potential to translate into a process of globalization; but it amounts to an alternative process that might be described as “globalization from below.” Leadership qualities are still needed here; but they are of a different quality, as we shall see.

Once we stop moving from the top down, we still need leaders and leadership; we still need to think about power; and we still need to talk about globalization. Rejecting the topics of leadership, power, and globalization is a fairly common response by those who are fed up with the powers that be; but it will not solve anything. Indeed, it will only reinforce the system already in place. The difference is that, with the sort of reversal that Wesley promotes, we now have a couple of options when it comes to leadership talk, power talk, and globalization talk. Just what are these options, if we do not want to continue moving with the current spirit of globalization “from the greatest to the least”? Might it be possible to move the other way around?

Globalization, in terms of an expansion of imperial power and the obliteration of local difference, was already a problem at the time of the apostle Paul. To be sure, the direction of Roman imperial power was “from the greatest to the least”; and leadership was defined in those terms. “Successful” leaders would somehow imitate the Roman emperor. They would expand the reach of imperial power through their own actions, thereby expunging local differences that could potentially challenge the Empire. As new research has shown, Paul resisted exactly that sort of thing.¹² When Paul called Jesus “Lord,” he deliberately chose one of the key titles of the Roman emperor. But Paul used this title in a subversive way. He saw Jesus as modeling a different sort of leadership and a different kind of power than that of the Roman emperor.

The sort of leadership provided by Jesus as Lord implied a radical break with the globalizing forces of the Roman Empire and initiated a different globalization

process, namely, from below. Whereas the Roman emperor led from the top down, Jesus led from the bottom up. “Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Phil. 2:6-7). Paul thus proclaimed: “Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23-24). This is reflected in the calling of the Christians; since “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are” (vv. 27-28). This is the beginning of a globalization from below.

Note that this form of globalization has nothing to do with the existing model. It cannot be understood as a harmless variation, as merely broadening or enriching the top-down model. It is not about adding the foolish, the weak, the lowly, and the despised to the status quo (which is what we often try to do).¹³ This new form of globalization resists and counteracts globalization from above. It shames the wise and the strong, “reducing to nothing” the status quo and business as usual. All of this is God’s choice—God’s “election,” to use the technical theological term. Christ’s power as Lord decidedly moves from the bottom up and generates a new way of being in the world. This is the power that has proven potent enough to spread to “all nations,” lasting “to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20); and this is the power behind the making of disciples (see Matt. 28:19; and behind our United Methodist mission statement, which now reads, “making disciples for the transformation of the world”). As the image of the church as the body of Christ demonstrates (1 Cor. 12), this power does not demand the destruction of difference; but it does insist on the tearing down of power differentials: “God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member” (1 Cor. 12:24).¹⁴

The difference between globalization from above and globalization from below shows up in the traditions of the early church as well. For instance, the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325) can be read in both ways; and it makes a tremendous difference how it is read. The creed does reflect the top-down process of globalization pursued by the Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Upon becoming sole emperor, Constantine pursued various strategies to unify the Empire. Religious unification was one of them, and it

became a major tool for eradicating local differences. When Constantine called the Council of Nicaea, the church entered a process of globalization that was qualitatively different from what had gone before. After all, the New Testament canon witnesses to the unity in diversity of the early church, rather than to a homogeneous unity. Never before had the church expressed doctrine through the decisions of a unified council—this used to be the way in which the Empire hammered out its decrees. Never before had an emperor directly suggested a key theological solution. Constantine not only called the council, funded the travel and the expenses of the bishops, and presided over the sessions of the council, but also proposed the central theological term of the Nicene Creed: the *homoousia* (essential equality) of God and Jesus, the first and the second persons of the Trinity.

Yet Nicaea can also be understood in terms of a globalization from below. It seems that Constantine realized this too late, and this may well be the reason why he abandoned the Nicene Creed and reverted to Arianism. The key to reading the Nicene Creed from the bottom up is the person of Jesus. It is striking that the creed neglects something that is at the very heart of the Christian tradition: the life and ministry of Jesus. The creed moves directly from the Incarnation to the Cross, as though what happened in between does not matter. (Incidentally, the same is true for the Apostles' Creed.) Here we can observe the cancellation of local difference that is typical for top-down processes of globalization. The Empire is interested in Jesus as a god who matches the principles of classical theism, such as impassibility, immutability, and omnipotence. This means that the “local” differences of the life and ministry of a Jewish peasant called Jesus, who was anointed by the Spirit to “bring good news to the poor . . . and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18), who “healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners” had to be effaced.¹⁵ Clearly, a new leadership model is proposed here that is diametrically opposed to the leadership model espoused by the Empire.

But more is at stake. We are not just talking about what kind of leadership we might wish to see; we are talking about the nature of Godself. What the Nicene Creed is saying is that this Jesus really is God. This is what Arius, the nemesis of the Nicene Creed, feared would happen. He was worried that, once you include Jesus in the Godhead, strange things would happen to Godself; and so he opted for a solution that considered Jesus special but not quite God. With the Nicene Creed, it would no longer be

possible to think about God in top-down terms, as the purely “unmoved mover” of all things. God would now have to be rethought in terms of a relationship of equals. And if the truth were to get out—that Jesus was a character that stood for outrageous programs, such as that “the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matt. 19:30; 20:16)—the character of the Godhead would no longer be the same.¹⁶

Reading the Nicene Creed from the bottom up—that is to say, from the perspective of Jesus—has radical consequences for a globalizing church and, by extension, for a globalizing world. What is at stake is how we understand God—the core of reality, who created heaven and earth. Is God the one who acts from the top down and who backs up the processes of globalization from the top down, as the Christian Roman Empire, and all subsequent Christian empires, believed? Or is God the one who became human in Jesus Christ, who was born in a manger in a stable, rather than in a cradle in a palace, in a depressed area of Palestine called Galilee; who was a day laborer in construction;¹⁷ and who would side with the sick, the outcasts, and the sinners, rather than with the established and the powerful? If we can resist the efforts of globalization that constantly seek to rub out these “local” differences, then a whole new picture emerges—not just of Jesus but also of Godself. This is why the Nicene Creed is so important: Read from the bottom up, rather than from the top down, it reminds us that God is radically different from our assumptions. The conservative theological positions that usually uphold the importance of the Nicene Creed never discuss this; because they mostly move from the top down and, thus, domesticate Jesus, ignoring the “local differences” of his life and ministry. Whether this happens consciously or unconsciously makes no difference. Conversely, the liberal theological positions that seek to leave the Nicene Creed in the past and tone down the divinity of Jesus also forgo the tremendous challenge the creed poses for a globalizing church. The Nicene Creed encourages us to rethink God from the perspective of Jesus, that is, from the bottom up. And so both conservatives and liberals fail to challenge the image of the divine that is at the core of globalization from the top down. And they fail to do what is most needed: to rethink the image of God.

It does not take much imagination to realize that these theological reflections change our ideas of leadership in radical ways. Leaders are now no longer the ones who operate from the top down, telling others what to do. The term *servant leadership*, picking up Jesus'

recommendation that those who want to be leaders must be servants, is used more and more widely these days. The term certainly points in the right direction, although it is not without its problems. The trouble with servant leadership, as it is pursued today, is that it often does not challenge top-down structures. At times, it even reinforces them, as one of the more problematic assumptions about the difference between United Methodist deacons and elders shows, according to which deacons are seen as more closely related to the task of “service” than are elders. Even Wal-Mart now uses the term *servant leadership* in its management philosophy in order to reinforce the top-down power of its managers and top-down models of globalization.¹⁸ We need to remember Jesus’ warning that no one can serve two masters, God and wealth (Matt. 6:24). Read in our context, this claim implies that we cannot have it both ways, that no one can serve both globalization from below and globalization from above at the same time. If we try, one will always win out; and I do not need to tell you which one it would be. What kind of leadership models would be able to turn things around to such a degree that the flow of power from the top down—the norm under the current condition of globalization—is reverted?

Implications for Theological Education

It is my genuine hope that theological education will help us make a difference as we develop new leadership models that are more accountable to the alternative kind of leadership that God has demonstrated in Jesus Christ. Much of this thinking is in the early stages. Some genuine research is just now being done, and much more will have to be done yet. Theological education is not just about the training of new clergy but about the ongoing education all of us need all of the time, at all levels of ministry, including the general boards and their staff and directors, and even the bishops. Moreover, we need to explicitly include the members of theological faculties in this ongoing process of education that is grounded in ongoing research and learning. We are all in this together, and we are all learning all of the time.

These days, some of the dynamics of globalization are addressed in theological education by so-called “immersion courses.” Students travel with professors to other parts of the world or to places in their own country with which they are not familiar—sometimes as close as the inner cities of the places where they reside. Yet there is a very real danger that, by doing this, we are simply

copying the dynamics of globalization as an expansion of top-down power and a further trivialization of local difference, including the particularities of the Christian message that we need so desperately.¹⁹ Once again, nothing will really change, even in the age of theological immersion courses, unless we muster the courage to face the real problems. Theological education needs to develop an awareness of how globalization as the expansion of a particular sort of power suffuses not only the church but the academy as well—the place that is supposed to be removed from it all, the home of “independent” and “critical” reflection.

While theological reflection in academic settings has understood itself to take place on the grounds of critical reflection, we now need to add another aspect: Critical reflection needs to become *self-critical* reflection. Immersion experiences clearly require this new dimension in order to be successful. It is not enough to understand other people, their lives, their cultures, and their histories. It is equally important to understand what all of this means for our *own* lives and our *own* work back home. In a globalizing world, we also need to grasp how we are *already* connected to people all around the world and in our inner cities, through current economic and political structures and through our common histories. There is hardly a place in the world to which U.S. students can travel that would not be substantially affected by present and past developments in the United States and by some sort of common history. Unfortunately, these connections are often not openly visible; and even our own histories are not told in such a way that these connections are revealed. Consider, for example, the ongoing history of U.S. involvement in Latin or Central America. The history of U.S. engagement in these regions is much more openly debated there than here. The fact is, those parts of our history that are hidden to us are not hidden to everyone else. Leadership in this context calls for a much clearer sense of who we are in relation to others. This will require some real listening and some genuine research. Only then can we think about what it might mean to make a difference.

Making a difference as a global church in a globalizing world demands that we make use of our theological resources as fully as possible. A new level of engagement with the biblical sources and the resources of the Christian tradition will be necessary. Where the historical-critical study of the Bible has provided many fresh insights, we now need to investigate what it might mean to study the Bible in what I have called a “historical *self-critical*” mode.

The same is true for the way we study the tremendous resources of the Christian tradition. The work of interpretation needs more “bite”: We can no longer approach it as if we were living in isolation, in an ivory tower—whether this be the ivory towers of the academy or the ivory towers of the church. Once we take into account that we are interpreting these ancient texts under the pressures of globalization, we will begin to recognize parallels between many of the struggles narrated in these ancient texts and our own struggles. We cannot understand Jesus, Paul, or even Anselm of Canterbury if we overlook that they were wrestling with the top-down powers of globalization in their own time. Nor can we get to the challenge of their message for our own struggles in a globalizing world. Yet this is what the historical self-critical method requires.

For instance, how might the life and ministry of Jesus challenge current practices of the globalizing church and world? The question is not merely what Jesus would do (or a better question, what he is doing now), but what it is Jesus would *not* do. What sorts of things would (or does) Jesus *reject*? This is the form that the Beatitudes take in Luke’s Gospel: “Blessed are you . . .”; “But woe to you . . .” (6:20-26). It is also the twofold form of confession used in the Barmen Declaration of the German Confessing Church in 1934, in resisting Hitler and the leaders of Nazi Germany, both political and religious. When we confess Jesus as “the one word of God” and as our leader, as Barmen did, what sorts of leadership do we reject?²⁰ In this way, we are reclaiming an ancient mode of confession that has been profoundly neglected by present-day confessing movements. The question is not merely whether we confess the Trinity or the divinity of Christ. The question is what these confessions mean in our own context of globalization and for the leadership of the church today. For example, what could we learn for our understanding of leadership from the fact that there is no hierarchy in the relations of the three divine persons? Would this not mean that we have to give up all hierarchical models of leadership? If we proceed in this way, systematic and constructive theology will reclaim the sort of “bite” that can be seen in Barmen and at many of the turning points in the life of the church—with a Paul, a Francis, a Sor Juana, a Müntzer, a Wesley, a Barth, to name only theologians of the past. If God is “Wholly Other”—an insight formulated most powerfully by Barth but captured by all of these theologians—then what would this mean for a global church in a globalizing world?

This sort of self-critical reflection changes everything. One example is how we relate to other religions, a challenge that we can no longer avoid in a globalizing world. In this context, a complete rejection of all other religions is no longer an option; but neither is the sort of interreligious dialogue where theologians sit around a table and talk about religious ideas, without considering the differentials of power that continue to shape the interrelation of religion in a globalizing world. In this context, older approaches to interreligious dialogue that sought to identify some underlying values that all religions share must now be understood as part of the problem: They functioned too much in terms of globalization from above and the related erasure of local differences. Interreligious dialogue will be more fruitful for all involved if we begin to deal with it in light of the real-life tensions introduced by globalization. Genuine interreligious exchange requires that Christians develop a self-critical understanding of their own heritage and how it is linked with the dynamics of globalization.²¹ This will help us identify alternative forms of globalization from the bottom up that already exist in our traditions and will enable us to relate to other religions in new ways, many of which have developed from the bottom up as well.

In doing this sort of self-critical work, theological education is not alone. There are old and new tools, developed both in the academy and in the church, that are useful. For instance, the newly emerging field of cultural studies is of interest because it allows us to study not only culture but also how power flows through culture and is perpetuated by it. Furthermore, the field of subaltern studies, an approach developed primarily in India and Latin America, has developed new ways of studying what is going on in the lives of people who are pushed to the underside of society—to the “sub-altern,” the place of most of the local differences that are facing erasure by top-down globalization. The question is not simply how these local differences could be preserved but how they could become sources for renewal, which help us reshape the whole and through which different processes of globalization from below are initiated. Subaltern studies are linked to liberation theologies, which have called our attention to these matters for several decades now. Therefore, theological education, and the leadership it seeks to form, does not have to be developed in splendid isolation but can make use of alternative tools and processes that are developing as we walk down a common road.

The good news is that what I am suggesting here are not just dreams of the future. Much is already happening.

Some immersion experiences have been sites for transformation and conversion unlike anything that I have seen in my own time in theological education (which is approaching a quarter of a century). I have witnessed in the academy self-critical encounters with the Bible and with the Christian tradition that have transformed people in ways not expected outside of the times of great revivals. My own investigations into Christology, going through its two-thousand-year history, have had a transformative effect on my own identity as a Christian theologian and as a leader. Moreover, various interfaith dialogues manifest a new dynamic in religious communities. The interfaith dialogues that are most exciting take place where religious communities work together on specific projects that resist globalization from the top down, such as the Chicago-based Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) and the religion and labor groups that work under the umbrella of Jobs with Justice (JWJ). Here, local differences of faith are not dissolved; but the various resources are brought together in a common struggle that engages the divine for our time. In these settings, theological matters are not bracketed but are being discussed in a new context where religious communities contribute to a different sort of globalization from below.

The ethos of the early Methodist movement points in a similar direction. John Wesley's Methodism was grounded in collaboration with others and in solidarity with the margins, willing to work outside the top-down mode of the establishment. In the words of historian David Hempton: "Methodism often took strongest root in marginal areas, scattered settlements, and new industrial and mining environments where the traditional social cement was weakest."²² In the United States, African Americans who had resisted Christianity for almost a century converted to Methodism after the 1770s.²³ Despite Wesley's authoritarian style, Methodism moved not from the greatest to the least but the other way around, as lay people began to engage in functions such as preaching and holding offices in the church once thought appropriate only for the clergy. This story is not limited to the Methodism of the eighteenth century. My mother, coming to Methodism in Germany from the Lutheran Church in the 1960s, had a similar experience: In a context where there was little opportunity for lay persons—and women, in particular—to assume positions of leadership, the Methodist communities made a real difference. On that basis, church and theology take a different shape.

What does all of this mean for leadership? The most important characteristic of a leader is to stay in touch with the direction of religion that follows God's own direction in the world. The leaders of a global church in a globalizing world are confronted with a choice: Do we continue with business as usual—pursuing the default mode of globalization, which moves from the top down? Or do we pursue a different dynamic, modeled by Jesus birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection? What kind of leaders we become depends on how we respond to the temptation the devil set before Jesus early in his ministry: Do we seek to participate in the top-down control of all of the empires of the world (Matt. 4:8-10), or do we seek to pursue another way of relating to one another? Jesus rejected the top-down way and chose the way of solidarity with the "least of these." His determination was such that the globalizers (not only the Roman officials but also the Jewish high priests, who served at the pleasure of the Roman governors) had no choice but to resort to the death penalty to get rid of them. This shows us who God is and what a genuine leader is.

Of course, some assume that Jesus' life and ministry was only a temporary fix and that the resurrected Christ who "sits at the right hand of God" has joined forces with a different power. The danger with this assumption is that it domesticates Jesus and levels the importance of the Gospel narratives. It also betrays Paul's notion of the scandal of the cross and the paradoxical power that is made perfect in weakness, which he experienced (1 Cor. 1:23-25; 2 Cor. 12:8-9). It further betrays one of the basic themes of the Judeo-Christian tradition, namely, that God takes a stand against the powerful and with the humble and the meek—a position best summarized by Hannah and Mary (1 Sam. 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-56). Would it have been a real temptation had the devil offered Jesus the very same thing his father was to give him a short time later: top-down power over the world?

In theological circles, globalization from above is sometimes justified because it appears to combat relativism. If a small group at the top gets to determine what is true for everyone, then the danger of relativism is held in check. Yet the only thing such arrangements achieve is the universalization of a particular relativity. Relativism cannot be overcome from the top down. By contrast, by pursuing globalization from below, we own up to our own relativity; but we do not remain stuck there. As we negotiate our differences in relation with others, we develop a new form of community—a sort of unity in difference—that points us beyond the traps of relativism.

This is the way the Bible and the Christian traditions deal with relativity. In the Bible and in the Christian traditions, a truly global vision does not mean the kind of unity where everyone says exactly the same thing. Broader perspectives and truly global visions emerge when all of these different voices—the many different books of the Bible written by different communities and authors over long periods of time, and the many voices of the Christian tradition, including the ones that are easily forgotten today—come together and inform one another in light of the struggles of life.

Conclusion

To come to understand the good news of the gospel, we need to confront the bad news. We need to face the current darkness in order to understand where the light is shining brightly. The good news for us as a global church is that there are alternative models to globalization from above; and these models are deeply rooted in our traditions, past and present.

Some may think that all of this is too severe, that there must be some sort of a middle road between the extremes. What if the better part of church leadership in these turbulent times is to lay low, to play it safe, to refuse to get involved? Many church folk like to see themselves as “in-betweeners,” serving between two worlds. Missionaries have often understood themselves in this way,²⁴ including those we now call “missionaries in reverse.” The problem is that *there is no middle road*. No place is safe from globalization as the progressive expansion of power and the erasure of local differences. Globalization affects all aspects of life; no place is safe, neither the ends of the earth nor home. As I explained earlier, we are not safe even in the privacy of our communities, our homes, and our own minds and souls anymore. There is no neutral place in the middle; as the in-betweeners are quickly pulled in the direction of the greater force, for the most part, without ever noticing. Even the “missionaries in reverse” are easily pulled into the system, “enriching” us or “invigorating our faith,” thus shoring up the status quo, without being able to present a real challenge.²⁵ Keep in mind that those who, in past manifestations of globalization, had attempted to pursue the middle road often discovered too late that they were drawn into the maelstrom of the system. The churches in Nazi Germany that tried to stay out of politics and retreated into their own private spheres are among the sad examples.

What is ultimately at stake is our image of the divine. Where do we seek God? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the first

martyr officially recognized by The United Methodist Church, believed that, to find God, we would have to look for God where God preceded us.²⁶ The traditions at the core of the Christian church keep pointing us to the margins and to the bottom. This is where God has preceded us in Christ; and it is from there that the gospel moves into the world and around the globe, to the ends of the earth—a true process of globalization from below that reaches all the way to the top. In this process, local differences are not erased but make contributions to the whole, informing new kinds of leadership. Likewise, those who are pushed to the margins by the current dynamics of top-down globalization—the majority of humanity, including many Methodists—are no longer the passive recipients of the leadership schemes of the status quo. They are the ones who set the stage for a new kind of community and become leaders in their own right; because they understand the profound meaning of the apostle Paul’s insight: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26).²⁷

Notes

1. For an analysis of postmodernity in terms of these power differentials, see Joerg Rieger, ed., *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*. American Academy of Religion, Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
2. This is also the basic methodological approach of my recent book *Christ and Empire*, where I argue that we will be able to see and appreciate the deeper value of the Christian tradition only if we understand how it has always been used and misused by the powers that be. See Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).
3. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, newly updated and expanded edition (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), xvii. While Friedman notes that power is at work in this process—American power rather than British power, which dominated the previous era of globalization—he talks about a process of flattening the world, in which the world comes together “as a single, integrated plain.” For that reason, talk of “First” or “Second” or “Third” World gives way to the “Fast World” and the “Slow World.” (46) Friedman praises what he perceives as leveling processes, such as “the democratization of technology.” (51) This approach is taken as a key insight in the recent book *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World*

- Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). See, especially, the introduction by Netland.
4. Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 1994); Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, Entrepreneur: Using Ancient Wisdom to Launch and Live Your Dreams* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002); Bob Briner, *The Management Methods of Jesus: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Business* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996).
 5. That modern economics depends on faith and often functions like a religion is pointed out by economist Robert H. Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).
 6. See Joerg Rieger, "Introduction: Opting for the Margins in a Postmodern World," in *Opting for the Margins*, 3–22.
 7. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 450.
 8. For background to these brief assessments, see *Christ and Empire*.
 9. Bartolomé de Las Casas is one example of this approach. See my assessment in *Christ and Empire*, chapter 4.
 10. John Wesley, journal entry of May 21, 1764, in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprinted Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), vol. III, 178. This is one of the basic insights developed in *Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition*, ed. Joerg Rieger and John Vincent (Nashville: Kingswood, 2003); see my introduction.
 11. For an interpretation of Wesley's insistence that works of mercy are means of grace and the extraordinary consequences for Christianity and Methodism, see Joerg Rieger, "Between God and the Poor: Rethinking the Means of Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition," in *The Poor and the People Called Methodists*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Kingswood, 2002), 83–99.
 12. See, for instance, Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2004) and John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004). For an overview and an interpretation from a theological perspective, see Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, chapter 1.
 13. Some theologians dealing with globalization have argued, for instance, that "non-Western participants should be full partners in the process." The operative word is "should": "While theologians from the West can be expected to continue to exert considerable influence in this conversation, non-Western participants should be full partners in the process. Furthermore, although the perennial concerns of theology will remain, the specific issues addressed by theologians should, to some extent, be shaped by the new realities of globalization." (Ott and Netland, *Globalizing Theology*, 30) This quotation demonstrates the problem: there is some openness towards others, but the "West" is left unchallenged; its interests are merely broadened.
 14. For a more detailed account of Paul's approach, see Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, chapter 1.
 15. This language, taken straight from the New Testament, is part of the United Methodist liturgy. See "A Service of Word and Table I," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 9.
 16. For a more detailed account, see Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, chapter 2.
 17. See Mark 6:3: *tektōn* is the Greek word often translated as "carpenter."
 18. See "Servant Leadership" on the company's Web site: <http://walmartstores.com/AboutUs/289.aspx>. Servant leaders, we are told, are managers who "don't lead from behind a desk" and, thus, create "wonderful morale." While "listening" is a quality of servant leaders at Wal-Mart, there is no comment about the actual sharing of power. In fact, Wal-Mart opposes the Employee Free Choice Act (H.R. 800, S. 1041) that would allow employees to join unions.
 19. The fundamental reading for courses that are structured in this way used to be literature such as Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, who argues that globalization is inevitable and that we had better get on board with it sooner, rather than later. The problem with this approach is that globalization is seen in one direction only—from the top. Alternative globalizations from the bottom are not even in view.
 20. For an English translation of the text of the Barmen Declaration, see James Y. Holloway, ed., *Barth, Barmen, and the Confessing Church Today* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1995).
 21. See David Brockman, *Turning to Religious Others: Visions and Blindspots in Modern Christian Reflection about Non-Christians*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Southern Methodist University, 2006.

General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
The United Methodist Church
Office of Interpretation
PO Box 340007
Nashville, TN 37203-0007

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Nashville, Tenn.
Permit No. 11

22. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 87.
23. *Ibid.*, 131–32.
24. Ott and Netland, *Globalizing Theology*, 34.
25. I deal with this problem in my essay “Theology and Mission in a Postcolonial World,” *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 21/2 (2004): 201–27.
26. This is how Bonhoeffer’s friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge summarized his theology. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper, 1970), 771.
27. For a further development of this issue, see my essay “Developing a Common Interest Theology from the Underside,” in: *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 124–41.

The Willson Lectures are designed to contribute to the spiritual and intellectual enrichment of people associated with the boards and agencies of The United Methodist Church and to present to them and the Nashville community the scholarly contributions of distinguished leaders in higher education and educational philanthropy.

Copyright © 2008 by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form whatsoever, print or electronic, without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information regarding rights and permissions, contact the Office of Interpretation, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, PO Box 340007, Nashville, TN 37203-0007; phone 615-340-7383; fax 615-340-7048; e-mail hpieterse@gbhem.org. Visit our Web site at www.gbhem.org.