God and Globalization, Volume 4: Globalization and Grace

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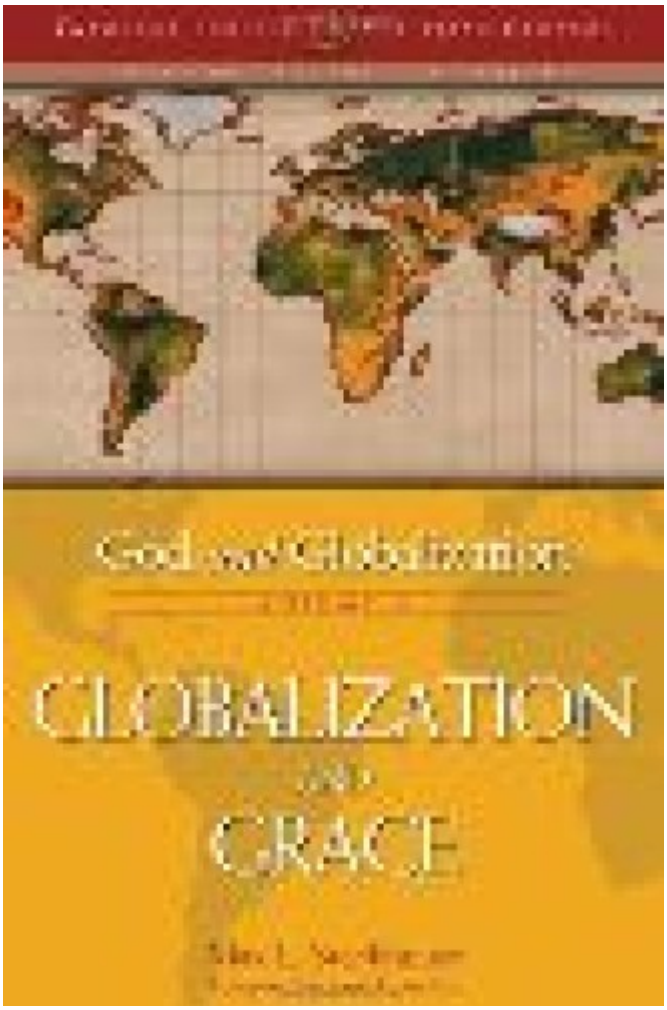
In Review



God and Globalization, Volume 4: Globalization and Grace

Max L. Stackhouse
Continuum

In the first century St. Paul believed that God's divinity was everywhere manifest and nowhere fully heeded. Contemporary believers do well to ask whether God's extraordinary actions are unacknowledged in the 21st century. Max Stackhouse believes that they often are. In *Globalization and Grace*, the fourth and final volume of *God and Globalization*, he argues that God's loving mercy is manifest in globalization—though many seminary professors, pastors and secular social theorists see globalization as a soulless mechanism.

Longtime readers of Stackhouse, who was recently elected president of the American Theological Society, will know that he is an advocate of public theology, which aims to integrate theology, social theory and ethics to comprehend, judge and guide socioreligious and moral life. Public theology consults traditional theological themes but insists on using the nondogmatic idiom of apologetics.

Stackhouse considers globalization an ambiguous dynamic that is nevertheless under the watchful eye of a caring God. In today's intellectual climate—inside universities, churches and taverns—this is an adventurous claim. Stackhouse's judgment about globalization is a considered one, however. Since 1988, he has focused on globalization as something to be understood through theological ethics.

Ten years ago, in a project sponsored by the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton, Stackhouse enlisted nearly 20 eminent theologians, ethicists and social scientists to reflect on the massive changes induced by globalization and to ask whether God has anything to do with them. These investigations, whose results were published as the first three volumes of *God and Globalization*, amassed considerable evidence suggesting that globalization holds unparalleled opportunities and responsibilities for Christian believers and world citizens. In this final volume Stackhouse offers his own conclusions about globalization, maintaining a critical dialogue with those who see matters very differently.

Stackhouse sees globalization as a worldwide civilizational shift, one not reducible to economics. Neither libertarians nor liberationists have understood it. Globalization is creating a new transnational kind of affiliation, a global civil society, that will simultaneously routinize and modify core Christian ideas. It is creating an expanded prepolitical public, a morally enriched domain of free association. Data suggest that globalization already has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty and has created newly empowered middle classes throughout the developing world. It will

increasingly relativize nation-states and manifest social patterns and forms of life that require guidance from universal ethical principles, and it will provide occasion to socially realize those principles. Though globalization is not a panacea, it does lead to new possibilities.

Who is right in the debates about the morality of globalization—the globally inclined public theologians (a diverse group, here championed by Stackhouse), or the neoliberationists, historicists and confessionalists (diverse and numerous as they are)? Should we judiciously participate in globalization, hoping thereby to improve the lot of all God's children, or should we resist the global Leviathan, seeing it as an ongoing crucifixion of Christ? Is God at work building new social structures and novel forms of ethical life, or is God to be found in counterglobalization protest movements, resistance and complaint?

According to Stackhouse, the answers we give to these questions are consequential to all people of faith and to people of all faiths. In ten years—or 200 or 1,500—countless lives may be improved, ruined or lost because of theological choices we make about these issues as they shape the lives and choices of the faithful, and as these open or restrict the lives, choices and contexts of others. The role of religion must be understood, says Stackhouse. The church on Main Street is more important in the long run than the tank in Baghdad. All enduring social structures and dynamics have a religious dimension at their core. Globalization, the evidence suggests, is not an exception to this.

In the first two chapters Stackhouse argues vigorously that Christians are uniquely positioned to understand and creatively shape the forces entailed in globalization because Christianity best grasps the nature and purposes of God's creative love. Some readers may conclude that Stackhouse is too confident about knowing God's purposes, but vigorous argument is a dimension of his public theology. "There is," he writes, "no greater public issue before humankind" than what is at stake in globalization.

He argues that globalization may realize what modernity "promised but could not deliver," namely a cosmopolitan society based on a newly recognized universal ethic facilitating the broadest interchange among people of different cultures, creeds and backgrounds. Whereas modern philosophy promised freedom through liberation—something to which liberationists are still beholden—globalization will require new kinds of commitment and offer new covenantal possibilities. Modernity

ultimately failed because it sundered itself from the pursuit of good purposes. In globalization, says Stackhouse, God is creating a radically postmodern global civil society that has the potential to further the growth and development of countless people.

Stackhouse identifies three “graces” that are essential to globalization: creation, providence and salvation. The discussions here, built upon the methods and definitions of the first two chapters, are the theological core of the book. The primary mental maps of globalization, Stackhouse argues, rely on the idea of a discernibly shared public order. This idea is the “protological” ground of “normative inclusiveness,” which is ultimately rooted in the notion of God’s creation.

Stackhouse expresses core Protestant convictions about God’s creation by arguing that “creation is not nature.” Nature does not offer a fixed code of meaning but is open to transformation by grace; creation involves a note of transforming grace, the free gift of God lying outside causal explanation. A most important implication of this is the application of technology to shape nature.

Stackhouse identifies allies both near (such as John Courtney Murray and Jacques Maritain) and far (like nontheistic Buddhists and Confucianists) to explain the importance of a common (graced) order for global inclusiveness. The broadness of this range of allies results in rather thin portraits that some readers may find tendentious. More complete views, however, are to be found in the earlier volumes of the series. Stackhouse’s defense of the distinction between creation and nature will satisfy the already convinced but probably not the skeptics. Still, this duality is central to his argument and points to the need to articulate theologies that can embrace and qualify the natural and social sciences. Only some can.

Stackhouse accents a second important Protestant position: he introduces the notion of sin and the distortion of divine purpose into the discussion of creation. Though he has profound affinity with and sympathy for the Catholic natural-law tradition, ultimately his notion of sin leads him to depart from it. His most analogous treatment of natural law is to be found in his discussion of the universal moral law, which has both voluntary and ontic dimensions and is essential to the development of a global civil society. Distortions introduced by sin are powerful, but God’s plan for creation continues to reside in and under sin’s distorted manifestations. These distortions of creation point to the graces of God in providence and salvation.

In his treatments of providence and salvation Stackhouse convincingly mines the biblical narrative for its capacity, especially as appropriated by public theology, to guide and morally regulate complex civilizations. The biblical tradition's "mythic" resources have deep potential to nurture civilizational development of worthy and reliable institutions. Though history is filled with missteps, it ultimately presses in directions intended by God because of the work of God in providence. Arguably, the key categories of history are covenant and vocation, for they show that in spite of our distortions and sin human beings can form communities under God that mediate gracious possibilities. These profound theological ideas help communities resist vicious exclusivism and make common cause under God.

Globalization represents a profound expansion and universalization of the covenant concept. In Stackhouse's view, however, history does not fulfill itself. Our participation in God's purposes always falls short. Still, it is important not to belittle God's grace by insisting that there is no light. The concept of salvation, Stackhouse argues, shows that God meets all people in Jesus Christ, an idea that reverberates with social potential. Salvation is not limited to the soul. Stackhouse suggests that it expands to global civilization itself, a public square of worldwide scope.

In the conclusion, Stackhouse holds that the central question about globalization resides in the nature of history. Readers will need to decide whether his public theology has correctly discerned the work of God in history. I am persuaded that Stackhouse's cosmopolitan view offers more promise than does sectarian withdrawal. I also am convinced that constructive engagement with globalization is required for Christians who wish to remain committed broadly to history, God's creativity and the goodness of the created world.

I also worry that we may experience protracted countercosmopolitan, antiglobalization revolt. And I worry more than Stackhouse appears to about nihilistic possibilities—about a destructive upsurge of the demonic—and I believe that these might thwart God's historical purposes. An evil on the scope of the Holocaust continues to seem possible. Believers, therefore, should pray for God's kingdom as never before. Stackhouse, this book shows, agrees.