

Max L. Stackhouse, Diane B. Obenchain (Eds.), *God and Globalization: Christ and the Dominions of Civilization* (Theology for the 21st Century), Continuum International Publishing Group - Trinity Press, 368 pp. (February, 2002) (ISBN: 1563383713).

This is the third volume of an intriguing series called *God and Globalization* sponsored by one of the most important centres of theological reflection, which is located in Princeton. The first volume was entitled 'Religion and the Powers of the Common Life', while the second was called 'The Spirit and Modern Authorities', and they both were edited by Max L. Stackhouse, Professor of Christian Ethics for more than thirty years at Princeton Theological Seminary, and prolific author, and active member of Amnesty International. His co-editor for this volume, Diane B. Obenchain is an American scholar in comparative study of religions, distinguished throughout a comprehensive teaching experience in China (see her forthcoming book *For China: Essays on Moral Leadership*). The book that they published in 2002 is a kaleidoscopic collection of studies discussing the status of religious discourses and practices within the context of globalisation, focusing especially on the Christian reception of the manifold problems fertilised by the ongoing encounter of the world civilisations.

The book starts with an incisive introduction by Max L. Stackhouse, who shows that many of the contemporary scholars concerned with the phenomenon of globalisation tended to concentrate their attention especially on the political, economic and cultural (including the biophysical) transformations that changed the shape of the world stage in the last decades.¹ Yet, such approaches are intrinsically biased and captives of categories specific to the Western cast of mind, which regard human culture as a cluster of meanings in segregation. Yet, the separation of these spheres of life cannot be easily done when we look at any civilisation, which did not reach our almost redundant level of technological sophistication. Functionalist analyses of the process of globalisation fail to grasp the organic constitution of the worldview of billions of people, who do not understand who economics, politics, and culture could be discretely dissociated one from another. But what makes this very blend of meanings and attitudes possible is what we call, by a contentious convention, religion. Even when it is seen as a mere factor (betraying, thus, the still self-centred Western understanding of most of the worldwide issues), religion received very little attention. A famous book published by a group of British scholars (David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt, and Jonathan Perraton) was called *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). To our surprise, there are not more than two pages, in which the role of religion is somehow assessed. Stackhouse pleads for an alternative approach, which must undo the oblivion of those scholars whose interest in global ethical issues (most relevant in politics and business) is divorced from any concern with the theological claims of their own ex-Christian culture.

361

Let us reflect for a minute on this situation in which religion, as practice and discourse, is understood only as a supplier of moral values. Since the early days of the Enlightenment, it became very popular to envisage religion, and especially Christianity, as the emanation of a "dark age". Whether with reason or not, the Christian Church was seen as the agent of intolerance *par excellence*. Church, and not just Christianity, began to be depicted as an instance of backwardness, and a ferment of social and intellectual fanaticism. Subsequently, the modern scholars proved to be exceptionally good in pinpointing the intrinsic limitation of religion (in general, and not just Christianity) in the construction of a public sphere of debate and plural identities. One cannot help noticing the sheer amount of evidence, which history provides for telling this story over and again. Plethora of books have been written on each formative age of Christendom with the clear intention of proving that, in fact, the Christian Church is guilty almost in every respect for not having fulfilled the modern liberal

¹ Of course, this is not always the case. It is also uplifting to remark that the global interplay of religious cultures has become the object of academic debates for intellectuals from Eastern Europe, too. A Summer School on „*Religion, Globalisation, and the State*” (30 June – 11 July, 2003) has been organised at Central European University from Budapest, and it benefited from the participation of international scholars such as Dru C. Gladney (Hawaii University), Peter van der Veer (Amsterdam), or Robert P. Weller (Boston University).

demands for freedom and equality. Scholars have aptly proven to what extent Christianity was able to marry, or at least to accommodate, almost any sort of discriminatory ideology. Truly, the Church did assist the tyrannical dreams of power of many Caesars, from Charlemagne to Louis XIV, and other less known but equally vicious despots. The same Church was able to prop up crass forms of coercion and tribal nationalism, or corrupted politics. In short, the traditional Churches of Europe appear smeared with all the sins of any other public institutions: they passively tolerated slavery, cast divisions, and ignored pogroms against Jews, making space for ethnical, social, cultural and sexual discrimination. Whether they are Christians or not, liberal citizens of the North-Atlantic culture share the same horror, and not just fear, against this massive capital of violence which the Church is accountable for. However, one crucial question is being skipped over, when the dark files of history (from the Latin Crusades to the Holocaust, from the Spanish *Reconquista* to the Soviet Gulag) are opened. Why should be violence regarded as wrong, and the war on the helpless nations a repugnant evil? In what language did we, people of the North-Atlantic culture, learn that murder of innocent people is bad, just as sexual abuse of children, or incestuous relationship is sin? How is it that we have an undisputed agreement about the status of violence in the public and the private life of every men and women on the earth? Why, to retune the same question, do we think that coercion, let alone molestation, or cannibalism, are rather monstrous than mere contingent happenings of human life? One should prompt the answer immediately. It is because the North-Atlantic culture is, even despite our will, the legatee not of the Aztec culture, which celebrated human sacrifice and other appalling acts of violence, but of the Gospel of Christ. It is because we *learned* the difference between the prayer of Abraham, Moses, or Jesus to their God, and the worship of the goddess Kali or of the god Moloch, that we are able to spell out subtler forms of social injustice. We cannot simply ignore that the call for equality, in our societies, stems from an implicit acceptance of the biblical narrative of creation (*pace* the anthropological scheme of evolutionary theories), and of the Pauline teaching about the eschatological citizenship (*politeia*). Adam is for Christians the generic term for 'humankind', while 'the human rights' spell out man's intrinsic dignity derived from being 'made in the image and the likeness of God'. Hence, the title: 'Christ and the Dominion of Civilisation'.

If everybody seems to agree that the virus of what we call nowadays globalisation was brewed within the cultural matrix of Europeans, one has to ask what is the contribution of Christianity to it. Stackhouse is at pains to show to what extent our self-critical reading of the horrendous historical past, in which Europeans were responsible for many atrocities inflicted upon other civilisations, is itself shaped by a Christian ethos. We could not possibly be concerned so much with the endemic failure of Christianity to bring peace among those tribes and cultures it conquered, unless who had an understanding of what should be the real measure, or the right interpretation of the Gospel. To assume that there is such a measure, from which the historical Church fell, more than once, short of a mark, is equal to say that one cannot get rid of the concept of theological orthodoxy even when just a simple social critique of religion is attempted. This paradox is more startling when we apply it to religions other than Christian, filtering our understanding of what is right and wrong through the canons of the modern ideology of tolerance, as stated by the treatises of Westphalia, which brought to an end the 'religious war' in Europe². It is because religion was constitutive part of a process of violence that we understand it, nowadays, almost exclusively as source of legitimisation and power for other ends than those specifically religious (as seen in worship or contemplation).

As we have already suggested, this modern picture of Christianity is muddled in conceptual inconsistencies and based on selective empirical evidence. If the latter aspect is more or less obvious, the first one still begs for some more clarification. The main question is what do we lose, and what do

363

² Europe made its truly first experiment of religious toleration in Transylvania, before the peace of Westphalia in 1648 (the 24th of October). In 1568, the King John Sigismund proclaimed to the Diet of Turda an edict of religious tolerance and freedom of consciousness. "For faith, said Sigismund, is the gift of God and this comes from hearing, which hearings is by the word of God". This edict remained valid for the Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists and Unitarians; the Orthodox Christians, Romanians in their vast majority, were still not recognised as a religious group, despite its predominance on the social scale. For a critique of the common understanding of the European history of the 'religious wars', see William T. Cavanaugh, 'Beyond Secular Parodies', in J. Milbank, C. Pickstock, G. Ward (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 182-201.

we gain by subordinating our understanding of religion to some more visible aspects of the social complexity of human life? How could we eschew this apparent but almost unavoidable danger of unilateralism in interpretation? What do we need to avoid this hermeneutic escapism? In providing an answer, Max Stackhouse seems to be the close adept of the phenomenological method. Going back to the things themselves, and putting aside for a while the judge values will help us to acquire a different view on how power, in its basic religious terms, relates not to the horizontal play of authority within the social fabric, but to the dominion of one Lord. Whether religious people respond to the commandments of the Lord Jesus, or of the Lord Krishna, Master Kong (Confucius), Lord Buddha or the Prophet Muhammad, they all benefit from an 'organising principle or central reality or personal agent by which the world has come into being' (*op. cit.*, 17). The immediate effect of this centrality is that the whole sphere of life decisions that people are taking is shaped holistically, and not fragmentary. The language of interests and choice is inappropriate with respect to the religious reality, which people from traditional societies live in. The problems, which modernisation and globalisation bring in these previously compact and self-enclosed units of practice and discursivity, could be termed as 'the clash of the principalities'. On the one hand, there are the forces and the urgent drives cultivated by the consumerist worldview of the West: silky, cheap and little gods that, through advertising and other similar mechanisms of cultural colonialisation, shake the foundations of the old temples of the traditional believers with the inherently nihilist question: 'why not'? The revisionist and anti-foundationalist character of modernity is styled by this popular question, which already encapsulates legions of experimental answers. On the other hand, we assist at the collision of the great Lords of the time-honoured religious traditions, coming from East and West. They meet in the great supermarket of religions, displayed nearly everywhere in bookshops, libraries, universities, ecumenical gatherings, on the internet, in newspapers and TV journals. Some religions, holding universalistic and realistic claims about truth, will want to dismiss the subversive language of choice and suitability, which the idea of market conveys. Some other religions would see this encounter in more relaxed terms, since their pantheon tolerates plurality and embraces more easily theological syncretism.

This volume is about how this encounter between different Lords shaping the open or closed universe of various religions can meet in the increasingly global context of our lives. On behalf of the educated people in the West, the encounter of 'the other' cannot remain limited to some extravagant culinary experiments. Reciprocally, for the representatives of the Eastern religion (Islam included), the true challenges posed by the Western culture and society must go far beyond its caricature of promiscuity and consumerism. In order to establish a true encounter, and not an opportunity for distant labelling and offensive triumphalism, religious people of various backgrounds need the kind of reflection gathered in Stackhouse's volume. For this purpose, Diane B. Obenchaim sketches an important survey of the history of the concept of religion in the modern Western tradition ('The Study of Religion and the Coming Global Generation', 59-109). Her view is that the 'highly rationalistic' patterns of thought promoted by Western academics in the study of religion must be revised, given its commitment to the early modern project of secularisation. (The lemma of this ideological approach is that a good body for the study of anatomy must be always dead. To put it otherwise, objects of research cannot be trusted if they are alive.) Scott Thomas deals with 'The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Changing Character of International Politics' (*op. cit.*, 110-138). By enquiring into the secular forms of construing the identity of the collective and individual entities, Thomas argues that the ethical principles of the Western mind crumble when they have to take seriously the religious diversity. We also need to know, which could be the great channels of communication among the great religious traditions, when big ethical issues are at stake in international politics. John S. Mbiti writes on 'tribal religions and globalisation' and his essay is funnily entitled 'When the bull is in a strange country, it does not bellow' (*op. cit.*, 139-172). Mbiti studies the impact globalisation has on the tribal and indigent communities, affected by illiteracy and great economic vulnerability. Sze-kar Wan discusses 'Christian Contributions to the Globalisation of Confucianism (Beyond Maoism)' (*op. cit.*, 173-212). This is a very interesting reading, from a Christian perspective, of the Chinese religious heritage, with particular emphasis on the possible establishment of ecclesial communities within the

Confucian framework of thought. The author discusses also the problem encountered especially by Protestant Christianity in the difficult political circumstances of the communist China. Wan assesses also the challenges, which the orthodox view of the Church pose against both the traditionally Confucian and the contemporary totalitarian understanding of community in the Chinese context.

Chapter five moves us into India and deals with 'Hinduism and Globalisation', again from a Christian theological perspective (*op. cit.*, 213-238). Defining Hinduism in terms of 'geo-piety' and 'bio-piety', namely as a religion for which geographical location and ethnic/biological determination are crucial, M. Thomas Thangaraj explains what are the contemporary confrontations of Hinduism with the modern life-style across the globe. From Swami Vivekananda to Mahatma Gandhi, there were many attempts to revise the very premises of the traditional Hinduism and to pack them into a more universalistic message. This inevitably shifts the customary emphasis laid on ritual performances (for which reference to local deities is constitutive) towards doctrinal debate. (This tendency was always part of the Vedanta Hindu tradition.) Thomas Thangaraj discusses in some depth the current situation of Hinduism in the modern India, in the light of the constitutional rights for freedom of expression guaranteed democratically to any other ethnic or religious minority³. Both home and abroad, therefore, Hinduism feels the urgency of revising its public discourse in an attempt to gain legitimacy and to preserve its millenary religious settlements. Kosuke Koyama discusses "Observation and Revelation" (*op. cit.*, 239-271), attempting to envisage the premises of "a global dialogue with Buddhism". There are two different ways of approaching historicity in Christianity and Buddhism, respectively, although they both aspire to reach the universality. As it is often the case in comparisons of this kind, the common ground between Christianity (the way preached by 'the Anointed One') and Buddhism (the way preached by 'the Awaken One') is thought to be a strong defence, on both sides, of a non-propositional concept of truth, the wholeness of which can be discovered only through ethical commitment. In one of his *Songs of Innocence* (1789), William Blake (1757-1827) put it thus: 'all must love the human form / in heathen, Turk, or Jew / where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell / There God is dwelling too'. Knowledge is in both cases a matter of participation, though Christianity remains bound to 'the scandal of particularity' (the revelation in Christ). There is a sense, Koyama suggests, in which both Christianity and Buddhism criticise the Western epistemology promoted in the modern age as the reflection of the greedy instincts that through man in the shadows of the illusory pursuits of the good life. Consequently, these two great traditions meet inevitably in the critique of the Western civilisation as an enchanting 'system of power distribution.'

365

Finally, in the last essay, Lamin Sanneh discusses 'Muhammad in Muslim Tradition and Practice. The Crucible of Faith and the Spheres of Dominion' (*op. cit.*, 272-308). By contrasting the Western biographical literary tradition with the Muslim hagiography of the Prophet, Lamin Sanneh – honorary research professor in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London – points to consequent difficulties which non-Muslims have in appreciating the biography of the Prophet as it emerges both in the *haddith* ('tradition'), and the *sunnah* ('devotional customs'). Sanneh discusses in detail the role played by the *sunnah* and by the Prophet's *haddith* in the establishment of the Qur'an exegetic tradition (*tafsir*). The Muslim scholar Abu 'Abd Allah Al-Shafi'i (born in 767, Arabia - d. 820, al-Fustat, Egypt) has stated the main rules that were to be followed by the interpretation of Qur'an, strengthening among the Muslim community the sense of unity and common belonging to the same divinely inspired tradition. Al-Shafi'i and another Muslim scholar, Imam Malik (d. 796) from Medina, were responsible for the first 'systematic globalization of faith and obedience' (*op. cit.*, 287). There is an impressive sense of uniformity, which this decision has enforced throughout the Muslim community. The methodical attempt to reach out the public awareness by appeal to the undisputed text of Qur'an and the subsequent *sunnah*, has been one of the most recognisable attributes of the Islamic religion. By its foundational call to obedience and submission to the authoritative call of God through his Messenger, Islam developed quite naturally an over-arching view of how mankind's response should look like. On the other hand, Westerners always expected that their essential

³ For this point, an indispensable reference is made to Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), and more recently P. van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

scepticism, seen as the first gift of a learned mind, would eventually shake the faithful engagement of the educated Muslim towards the religious tenets of their ancestors. Yet, the critical method of historical investigation of the sacred texts is not implemented within the Muslim world of scholars, and especially the theological schools resist it. It is not so much the Western secularism that the

Muslim scholars refuse to embrace, but, as Lamin Sanneh suggests, a certain understanding of the historical objectivity, and its underlining metaphysical premises (truth as '*adequatio res ad intellectum*'). If for the Western mind history becomes suspicious when it is accounted not so much as chronology, but as narrative, the Muslim prefers another approach, by emphasising the iconic character of the hagiographical account, and its transparency in relationship to God's epiphanies. 'Islam is truth with witness' (*op. cit.*, p. 298). Because of this comprehension of truth and revelation, in where there is little room for the Pauline appeal to oblique knowledge and the eschatological reserve (I Corinthians 13, *ad finem*), one can understand better how in fact 'Muhammad combined in his own person the functions of Paul and Constantine' (*op. cit.*, p. 299). Consequently, the Islamic theology cannot be but political, because of its 'super-heated conception of revelation and of God as white-hot majesty' (H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, London, 1938, p. 221). Sanneh's article ends through a series of interrogations, which all refer to the status of Islam within the secular societies of the ex-Christian West, and calls for an instrumental understanding of politics in relationship to the primordial calls of religion. However, the most serious question is how this theocratic dream of presumably every faithful Muslim, can be implemented within a context dominated by multiculturalism and lack of consensus with respect to the individual and the communal values. On this point, the author shows very little concern and eschews to tackle the major issues of concern for the political philosophers of the West in the last decades (from J. Habermas and J. Derrida on the continent, to Charles Taylor and A. MacIntyre in Canada and the United States).

This is an important contribution to an ongoing debate, which should probably invite more voices in the current concerto of religious ideas hosted by the free societies West. Christianity gets in this book a very small representation from its more traditional parties (e.g., the Roman-Catholic theologians, let alone the Eastern-Orthodox). The essays gathered *ensemble* by Max L. Stackhouse and Diane B. Obenchain aren't equally valuable, but the topics envisaged deserve attention and should be certainly carried out for further reflection in the public arena. The editors have provided also a helpful bibliography, though the absence of any reference to the works of Ernst Benz, R.C. Zaehner, Henri de Lubac or Ninian Smart counts rather as a disappointment. Despite these minor shortcomings, *God and Globalization* represents a notable series and offers an excellent opportunity for Christian theologians and scholars of religion alike to engage in conversation, listen and respond critically one to another. In a time when academia seems to favour the separation of these two parties ('divinity' and 'religious studies'), their encounter cannot be but highly instructive and commendable. By making this meeting possible, we remain Professor Max L. Stackhouse (the main editor of the series) in great debt.

Mihail NEAMȚU
King's College, London