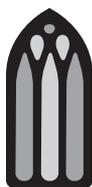


GloboChrist



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GloboChrist

*The Great Commission Takes
a Postmodern Turn*

Carl Raschke



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To the memory of Douglas Strube,
whose inestimable friendship, missionary heart,
unflagging loyalty,
and heroic but unsuccessful struggle against cancer
inspired me to write *GloboChrist*

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Series Preface | 8 |
| Series Editor's Foreword | 10 |
| Acknowledgments | 14 |
| Introduction | 15 |
| | |
| 1. Globopomo: The Planetary Postmodern Moment | 23 |
| 2. De-Signs of the Time | 47 |
| 3. Utter Holiness or Wholly Otherness: Finding Fidelity among the Infidels | 74 |
| 4. A Closer Look through the 10/40 Window | 94 |
| 5. Radical Relationality: The Church in the Postmodern Cosmopolis | 116 |
| 6. And Then the End Will Come | 134 |
| 7. A Concluding Unacademic Postscript | 151 |
| | |
| Index | 171 |

Introduction

We must be global Christians with a global vision
because our God is a global God.

John Stott

If future historians ever decide on what book from present or recent times most compactly epitomized the rise and fall of the postmodern world, it will be probably be Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*.¹ Published in 1992, Fukuyama's well-known work prophesied that the collapse of Communism certified the world historical triumph of liberal democracy and global capitalism. Fukuyama borrowed the phrase "end of history" from the nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel had regarded history as a struggle, or dialectic, between opposing ideas. The struggle between systems of ideas—or ideologies—had defined both the twentieth century's war against fascism and the Cold War.

Now that this ideological tousel was over, the world could gingerly but confidently stride into this new neoliberal millennium. The next century, he insinuated, would be a time when individuals the world over would be at last free to cultivate, express, and

1. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (repr.; New York: Free Press, 2006).

develop themselves as individuals and to achieve the kind of recognition that authoritarian and totalitarian political structures since the beginnings of history had denied them. It was their natural right to do so. Not only was deadly conflict at an end but also history itself, Fukuyama assured us, insofar as by “history” we mean the repeated dashing of deep desires, dreams, and hopes on the part of the human species by the machinelike apparatus of state violence and counterviolence. In many ways Fukuyama’s prophecy, which turned out to be false, also constituted a false dawn. Looking back we can say that it betokened a false promise that the End—not just the terminus but the goal—of history would be as peaceful and easy as the bloodless events of 1989–91, and that the fulfillment of myriad natural longings and ambitions—the presumed purpose of liberal democracy—consisted in the end of human existence itself.

For many at the time, the early 1990s amounted to what in this book I will call the “postmodern moment.” It was the moment when all the past convictions and ideological certitudes had been deconstructed by what Hegelians themselves came to term the “cunning of history.” In the decade that followed this, neoliberalism, riding on the postmodern wave of the new history that Fukuyama had called the end of history, seemed unstoppable. The wave itself, which came to be known as globalization, brought in its wake unforeseen and unintended consequences. One of these consequences was the fostering of a new world disorder resulting from massive migrations of people, the proliferation of local wars and failed states, and stark contrasts between rapid economic growth in some regions and among certain populations, and appalling poverty and misery among others. It was not a neoliberal utopia, as Fukuyama had predicted, but a kind of dystopia, with a different set of descriptors and predictors.

In the early 1990s two major intellectual figures had the first inklings of a different vision of the new globalizing world. They were the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the architect of postmodernist thought, and the American political scientist Samuel Huntington. Derrida talked about the “return of religion.” Huntington envisaged what he termed “the clash of civilizations.” Huntington’s description was drawn from a clash of global value systems anchored in conflicting religious belief structures. After 9/11 the world woke up to realize that it had achieved the new, and perhaps true, postmodern moment. What was at stake was no longer economic prosperity but ultimate truth anchored in the claims of faith.

I have written this book for the world, but its immediate audience is America, especially religious America and the church in America, and particularly the American evangelical Christian church. It is about globalization and how it is bringing about an end of history that no one in the early 1990s could imagine. It is not so much about the clash of civilizations as it is about a “clash of revelations”—an expression that will become less opaque as the book progresses—and what that means for this unique postmodern moment that we are experiencing.

Unfortunately, many in the West chronically fail to connect the dots when it comes to comprehending the drastic social and political upheavals as well as the dramatic global changes that hit the headline news everyday—and that is even more painfully true for Christians in the West. The West’s “dominant culture”—a term often used by those on the left to denigrate the historic constellation of middle-class values and libertarian politics—supplies effective blinders. But the left in the West, increasingly led by antiglobalization and antimilitary activists as well as the green movement, is often unaware that it is wearing the same blinders. Whether it tilts to the left or to the right, the dominant culture of the West since the eighteenth century has been secular and individualistic, convinced that the supreme goal of human life and human history is the private pursuit of happiness and the guarantee of distinct individual political rights.

Fukuyama’s failed prophecy was founded on the giddy assumption, during the immediate post-Communist era, that the spread of democratic capitalism along with burgeoning incomes and heightened consumer options for the world’s impoverished masses would assuage the violence and social conflicts generated in the past by the militant ideologies of modern times. But those who denounced this version of neoliberalism by pointing out its fraudulent utopianism while decrying the social injustices wrought by the relentless march of market economies and international corporate interests were shouting into the wind as well. Even today in the West, progressives and conservatives alike miss the broader and deeper trajectory of events. They scarcely recognize that what Huntington termed “the rest” of the world is in an open and increasingly antagonistic struggle with the West. They also miss the point that the struggle

is not anti-Western per se. It is primarily antiseccular and therefore only anti-Western in the sense that the West has made secularity its dominant culture, displacing, and in many cases renouncing, its Judeo-Christian heritage.

What does the foregoing have to do with postmodernism? The adjective *postmodern*, in its uncounted usages and syntactical peculiarities, has reflected a mood brewing for almost two generations that a once-triumphal secular West, with its mission to modernize the rest of the planet, has been unraveling, if not in its ability to project its money and its might, then at least in its self-confidence about what it ultimately stands for. *Postmodern* is not a word that merely applies to a certain well-publicized, widely celebrated, and generically French company of faddish philosophers and religious thinkers. As a luxuriant popular and academic literature on our postmodern condition makes clear, the expression signifies something epochal and world-defining, something that reminds us, in a paraphrase of Shakespeare, that there is “more in heaven and earth than is imagined in [our] philosophy.”² Our postmodern era also signals the arrival of a *post-Western* era. But “post-Western” does not necessarily mean that the heritage of the West has sunk into the shadows. Much of the globe has now absorbed that heritage. Just as the eclipse of ancient Rome was followed by the rise of a new Roman civilization that was predominantly Germanic but subsequently came to be called European, so the decline of the West will likely lead to a new world that remains Western in character, though no longer in name. Furthermore, in the same way that the new and powerful faith that came to be known as Christianity both survived and transformed the old Roman Empire, so the same faith, contrary to what anyone would have expected less than a generation ago, is both outlasting the West and undergoing a dramatic *global* metamorphosis. This change is due not so much to the abiding influence of the West as to the mysterious power of Christ—that we really mean by *GloboChrist*—that has been subtly shaping and directing human history toward its consummation throughout the ages and, theologically speaking, is traceable back to the promise given to Abraham.

Westerners, especially evangelical Protestants, may be uncomfortable with this way of speaking. After all, doesn't it all come down

2. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 5, lines 174–75.

to the person of Jesus and our relationship to him? Yet in the final analysis it depends on what we mean by the “person.” The Christian God is a *personal* God. His power lies in his personhood, in his capacity for relationship, not just in his action. In that respect one can say, at the risk of misunderstanding, that for Christians the power of our God lies in his *power of relationship*, or the power of establishing, sustaining, and purposefully pursuing relationships. His is a power in this sense, not just an impersonal force. The *GloboChrist* is a theological term we have coined to show how this power is manifesting itself amid the growing anxieties over what is happening under the impact of the force we call globalization and the political, cultural, and religious upheavals that arise in its wake. Christ is showing his power not just among the nations but also for the nations. Christ, as Martin Luther expressed it, is never God “in himself.” He is always God “for us” (*für uns*) and “with us” (*mit uns*). He is *Emmanuel*, meaning the God of relation. This power of relationship is affirmed in the Nicene Creed, the confessional benchmark for all believers. He is one nature (Greek: *ousia*; Latin: *substantia*), three “persons” (Greek: *hypostases*; Latin: *personae*). Far more than Roman Catholicism and Western Protestantism (which has its own Latin origins), Eastern Orthodoxy has stressed the relational character of God, or at least the relationality that is existential and incarnational rather than strictly intellectual and conceptual.

We can discern this difference when we contrast Augustine of Hippo’s formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity with that of Eastern Orthodoxy. In *De Trinitate*, composed in the early fifth century, Augustine undertakes a theological exposition of what his contemporaries considered the mystery of the Trinity by resorting to an analogy from philosophical psychology taken from Neoplatonism. God is best understood as the Great *Nous*, or eternal mind. The components of mind are relational. Thus, Augustine writes, “we find in memory, understanding, and will a triad of certainties with regard to the nature of the mind. They present a single, substantial reality, in differing relations to itself.”³ But in orthodoxy, deriving from the Cappadocian fathers of the fourth century, the emphasis is more on the *energeia*, or operations, of God, necessitating a doctrine of *concrete and dynamic relationality*. All trinitarian talk, as one orthodox

3. Augustine, *Later Works*, trans. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 72.

author puts it, “implies a movement of mutual love.”⁴ As globalization accelerates, therefore, and Christianity becomes less and less a Western religion (which it never was in the beginning), can we not begin to see this dynamic and incarnational relationality of the Trinity in time and history itself? Is not this time in which we are now living full, or pregnant (the implication of the biblical term *kairos*), with God’s profound and hidden purpose? Are there not millions of new Christians around the world—unlike us jaded, oversophisticated, and secularized Westerners—who take this time as indicating the triumph of the church universal to be the manifestation of Christ’s global body? Like Paul, they “consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom. 8:18–19 NRSV). Is that not what is implied in the teaching that the Word became flesh? Is that not just the historical but also the eschatological meaning of “incarnation”?

Relational Christianity *is* postmodern Christianity. Unfortunately, among both proponents and critics alike, the idea of the postmodern has become too easily and almost exclusively identified with the sort of philosophical and theological iconoclasm that has come to be popularly known as “deconstruction,” even though when the term was formulated in French philosophy back in the early 1970s it had a very narrow and technical set of indexes. In Christian circles much of this iconoclasm has been directed against the evangelical establishment and the politics of the religious right, the usual target of scorn among academics. But those ongoing rhetorical barks are starting to lose their bite and perhaps even beginning to bore. The postmodern moment is far more momentous than the cultural spleen and political partisanship that has defined much of Western discourse for nearly half a century.

The first chapter of this book analyzes why this postmodern moment in history is a global one, what I term “globopomo.” It profiles and analyzes the social and historical phenomenon that has been gaining so much attention quite recently—the rise of the “global South” and the way it is totally transfiguring the geography of Christianity as well as its methods of theological thinking and religious practice, particularly the practice of missions.

4. Bishop Kallistos (Timothy Ware) of Diokleia, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 33.

Chapter 2 investigates the new postmodern way of envisioning missions. It ties the new incarnational theology to the work of missions, essentially arguing that missions must become, and is becoming, “missional” in the sense that the word has come to be deployed. It gives some illustrations of how emerging Christians, who have taken up the cause of being both missional and relevant, can start to imagine how they can become both more missional and more relevant in a global context. Finally, it offers a different take on what postmodernist philosophical resources might come into play for taking this incarnational turn. It calls our attention to the work of Gilles Deleuze and the semiotic project as superseding Derrida and the all-too-familiar deconstructionist project.

Chapter 3 discusses how the incarnational turn reflects historic Christianity’s tendency to be semiotically supple and to indigenize the gospel. It argues that Christianity has always been incarnational in this ongoing way. From the first century onward, Christianity was incarnating in the cultural forms and sign systems that it encountered. The incorporation of the language of the Mediterranean mystery religions into the early Christian vocabulary is a case in point. It is similar to what is happening today in the global South. Christianity has become indigenized and hence globalized through its multifaceted, native, and “pagan” expressions. It has clothed itself—and turned that clothing inside out as it did in ancient and medieval times—in everything from spirit healing to demon exorcism and ancestor worship.

Chapter 4, however, delineates where Christianity’s capacity to indigenize runs up against a concrete barrier. This barrier is the Islamic world, which is undergoing a revival of a magnitude not seen since the sixteenth century. Until quite recently Christian missionaries have innocuously referred to this region of the world as the 10/40 Window, indicating the general latitudes between which it is so difficult to evangelize. Yet since 9/11 there has been a slowly growing recognition that the challenge is not simply evangelism, which Islam historically and forcefully resists. The genuine question is how the new globalized Christianity will contend with the new globalized Islam, which is a product of virtually the same historical forces. This book argues that both Christianity and Islam are competing globalizing forces driven by a universalistic faith that commences with the story of Abraham but diverges in its meaning and import. The chapter concludes with an exhortation to Christians to take

their faith as seriously as the jihadists do, becoming the “church militant” in the original sense of the phrase, without the military, and in a postmodern way.

Chapter 5 asks what a reinvented, postmodern, global evangelical Christianity would turn out to be. It outlines four R’s of a Christianity that is faithful to the Great Commission in today’s globopomo cosmopolis. It calls for a Christianity that is radical, relational, revelatory, and “rhizomic”—a word that Gilles Deleuze deployed to characterize the new global, postmodern organizations that the church must emulate. It contrasts the radical relationality of Christianity with the transcendental moral collectivism offered by current globo-socialist visionaries along with Islamism (the new and aggressive form of political Islam) all of which are vying for adherents.

Chapter 6 deals with a subject that is usually scanted by contemporary theological writers—eschatology or the anticipation of the “end times”—even though pop eschatology for some time has been all the rage. In its eschatology the global commitment of a faith is sealed. The chapter contrasts the eschatologies of Christianity and Islam. Eschatology not only frames the motivations of various peoples of faith but also charts the field for the expansion of faith in a global setting. A new eschatology is emerging that envisions the radical relationality of the Christ who is returning, the GloboChrist, one that will reactivate the summons of the Great Commission in this day and age.

Chapter 7 takes a look at both current advocates and critics of what is normally termed “postmodern Christianity.” It finds both versions wanting in key respects, mainly because of their Western parochialism, which can be both overt and subtle. It concludes that to understand the dynamics of future faith, we must truly think globally even if we act locally.