

<b>Zeitschrift:</b>	Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie
<b>Band:</b>	100 (2010)
<b>Heft:</b>	[1]: Globalization and catholicity : ecumenical conversations on god's abundance and the people's need
<b>Artikel:</b>	Globalization as the context for a theological and ethical understanding of catholicity
<b>Autor:</b>	Segbers, Franz
<b>DOI:</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-422220">https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-422220</a>

#### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

#### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

#### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 12.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

---

## 13. Globalization as the Context for a Theological and Ethical Understanding of Catholicity

*Franz Segbers, Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht*

### Preliminary Observation

In 1999, the WCC assembly in Harare raised the question “How do we live our faith in the context of globalization?” That is the question that governs this paper.

Globalization is this millennium’s axiom. It is a two-edged sword, offering hope as well as despair to every people and nation. It brings opportunities to those who control capital but misery to the underprivileged masses, who are virtually slaves of the global economic system. It divides the globe between North and South, and it divides the nations of the South and the North between the poor and the rich.

The world has become globalized. Everyone senses that fact in his or her personal life. Tea, coffee, and fruit from the entire world are constantly available throughout the year. Supermarkets offer goods from around the world. Around the globe, more and more people can be reached through computers, fax machines, and e-mail. The world appears like a global village with unforeseen possibilities. Globalization is the beginning of a new era. For the first time in history, we can act as one humankind. From a space vessel we view ourselves and our earth as a community inhabiting this beautiful globe.

That fact itself, however, is not what frightens us. It is economic globalization that many find so frightening. For many it is the epitome of unemployment, destruction of the social system, and environmental catastrophe. For an ever-increasing number of people, globalization means a decrease in available jobs. One must therefore distinguish between globalization as a process moving towards the creation of a global community and globalization as a political-economic project. From the very beginning of this process, the World Council of Churches has distinguished between globalization as a multi-faceted historic process and its present form as a political-economic project of global capitalism, making a distinction that is both necessary, given the increased use of the term *globalization* in recent years, and helpful in focusing the debate.

In 1997 the Copenhagen Seminar for Social Progress characterized the distinction in the following way:

Calling the first [understanding] a “trend” is to suggest that the narrowing of physical distances between peoples and the growing interdependence of countries represent both an unstoppable course of history and, moved essentially by the application of human reason to the development of science and technology, . . . a general direction of change that can be navigated by human decision. The “project” is global capitalism, or the application of the ideas and institutions of the market economy to the world as a whole. It is actively pursued by the United States and a number of other governments, and by the economic and financial elites of the world. (Conditions 62)

A few years later Jacques Baudot of the UN’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs added additional thoughts on the question:

The distinction between the trend and the project is difficult to make because judgements as to what is determined by the evolution of humanity and what is subject to deliberate choices differ enormously on both objective and subjective grounds. . . . This distinction, however, is necessary to create space for human thinking and human action. Without it, the “end of history” would be accompanied by the “end of politics”. There would be only one polity and one form of political organisation best serving the interests of global capitalism and leaving governments and societies with little room for manoeuvre. (Baudot 45)

In 2002 the signers of the Manila Covenant of the International Church Leaders Solidarity Summit made the same distinction: “We commit ourselves to look for alternatives to the present dominating neo-liberal globalization.” That pledge means, first, that we must look for alternatives. Second, we must consider not whether globalization is good or bad but instead look for alternatives to the present neoliberal globalization. Third, the problem is today’s dominant neoliberal globalization.

### **Globalization: Blessing and Curse**

Globalization is not a new phenomenon. The roots of globalization on which the modern world is based reach back to the late fifteenth century, when Christopher Columbus left Europe in order to reach America. Ferdinand Magellan managed for the first time to sail around the world, arriving in 1521 in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> The people of the South have thus experienced globalization for a long long time. Giovanni Arrighi notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Historians debate the beginning of the globalization; see, e.g., Wallerstein; Arrighi; Braudel; and Altvater and Mahnkopf.

the way the modern world is an extension of the globalizing patterns of the past:

But the greater scale, scope, and technical sophistication are nothing but the continuation of a well-established tendency of the *longue durée* of historical capitalism towards the formation of ever powerful blocs of governmental and business organizations as leading agencies of capital accumulation on a world scale. (Arrighi 300)

The fifteenth century saw the beginning of a globalized world, establishing from that time on the modern world view: the world is round. For the first time in history, humans have discovered that they are inhabitants of a common earth. The process of globalization has transformed the inhabitants of particular countries into inhabitants of a planet. At the same time the discovery of America, the Philippines, and other countries in the South was for these countries themselves the beginning of a long era of colonization, slavery, exploitation, and dependence.

These people constitute a community with a common fate: they depend on one another. The process of globalization has therefore brought human beings together in a global community. The political, economic, and social life of the human beings on this planet has been interwoven. Globalization furthers the integration of humankind as it removes human, geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries. Globalization is the recognition that, in the words of the Most Rev. Frank T. Griswold, former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, “we are ‘members one of another’ . . . across the world, our global village.”<sup>2</sup> Ecological risks in one part of the earth cannot be contained there but become a risk for the entire earth.

When globalization refers to growing possibilities for genuine co-operation between nations and peoples with opportunities for communication and common action, it has positive connotations. As a process, this kind of globalization cannot be reversed; it is a positive change. Seeing the world as a global society also constitutes a challenge: that the world’s human beings and cultures, with all their differences, find a way of living together. How can such unity in diversity be organized?

The principal difference from earlier forms of worldwide exchanges like those of the Romans, Marco Polo, the Silk Road, or the Crusades is that the homogenization of the global culture according to Western pat-

---

<sup>2</sup> EpiscopalChurch.org, July 16, 2002.

terns is increasing through the ubiquity of the icons of consumption (e.g., t-shirts, jeans, sneakers, McDonald's, and Coca Cola) and the entertainment business in music and Hollywood films (Ritzer). There is, however, also a small counter-movement in the growth of religious and cultural fundamentalist movements.

Just as globalization unites people and their desires and tastes, it also creates mutual connections and leads to the emergence of a worldwide network. Satellites, computers, and other new means of communication lead to an intensification of mutual connections. Communication technologies compress space and time. Events around the world can be experienced in real time. New communication technologies make it possible to communicate around the globe with no loss of time. Air travel has made the transportation of people and goods faster. Just as the multipolar world and the interwoven worldwide economic system have changed people's ways of thinking, so the new communication technologies have affected perceptions of time and space. Boundaries between nations continually decrease in significance. Worldwide, human beings are searching for a place where they can lead a better life. Some are fleeing economic distress or political repression, while others are working as managers or engineers in global corporations.

### **Globalization as Curse: The Political and Economic Project of Neoliberalism**

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, capitalism has expanded globally. This global expansion is a purely political and economic project, which has been enabled and put in motion by decisions of governments and international organizations to liberalize the transfer of capital and to deregulate and privatize the expansion of free trade. These phenomena create what is today called economic globalization.

Neoliberalism is grounded on the following convictions:

- Unhindered competition, unlimited consumption, unbridled economic growth, and accumulation of wealth are best for the entire world.
- Private property has no relationship to social responsibility.
- Financial speculation, liberalization, and deregularization of the market, privatization of public (social) services and national resources, unhindered access for foreign investors and imports, low taxes, and an unhindered flow and transfer of capital create prosperity for all.

- Economic growth and an effective market render social responsibilities, the protection of the poor and weak, and the representation of workers by unions unnecessary.
- Through the free market, the vision of neoliberal globalization is unifying or integrating the world.

Friedrich August von Hayek called his neoliberalism paradigm a “dethronement of politics” (von Hayek, *Entthronung*). Economic globalization and neoliberal ideology mutually determine each other. Globalization is the result of political decisions inspired by neoliberalism. On the other hand, globalization is the instrument for establishing a neoliberal policy. Neoliberalism is the economic and political vision according to which the free market regulates itself and explains the rejection of state intervention. It aims at subjecting all aspects of life to the dynamics of the market and expanding the unlimited transformation of human beings and nature into commodities.

The reality of neoliberalism becomes clear against the following background: neoliberalism seeks to undo the welfare state with all its social achievements. Accordingly, it has revised Keynesian tenets, which anticipated a regulating role of the state in economic development. Neoliberalism is at its core a modernized variant of the economic liberalism of the nineteenth century. Globalization in its current shape and reach would not have been possible without the principal social and economic decisions and their rigorous implementation by the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, the Thatcher government in the United Kingdom, and the Reagan administration in the United States, as well as the establishment of global financial and trade institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization. Neoliberal capitalism is characterized by the elimination of national boundaries and therefore the weakening of national governments’ political effectiveness. Political actors have given up their own power, transferring to transnational concerns the freedom to enforce their interests. Making money and ever more money has become the sole measuring rod for economic success. Bishop Griswold has eloquently described the consequences as “a form of domination whereby others are made to bear the burden of our greed.”<sup>3</sup>

The term *globalization* is factually inaccurate. As far as geographical reach is concerned, the process of economic globalization at the beginning

---

<sup>3</sup> EpiscopalChurch.org, 1 May 2000.

of the twenty-first century is not truly global but focuses mainly on the increase of trade among North America, Europe, and certain parts of Asia.

As a political and economic project, it has three factors:

1. The change from a bipolar to a multipolar world,
2. A worldwide economy built on neoliberal principles, and
3. New means of communication.

These factors make globalization a qualitatively new development.

Since this kind of globalization is not a natural phenomenon that affects countries externally but instead a politically willed and initiated process, one must ask whom it serves, whom it harms, and whether that which has been made by human beings cannot be changed and transformed as well. The 2005 WCC document “Alternative Globalization. Addressing Peoples and Earth,” written in preparation for the 2006 WCC assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, states:

Neoliberalism assumes

- that only those who have property or may participate in contracts have a right to participate in the economy and society. But God’s gifts are for the use of all to live, not for the few to accumulate wealth;
- a world where individuals and corporations are motivated by their self-interest and where society is merely an aggregation of those self-serving individuals . . .
- that everything and everyone’s labour can be owned and traded for a price in the market . . .
- that economic growth through “free” markets is paramount . . .
- that deregulated labour markets are essential to create new jobs and opportunities for workers in a competitive global economy. (AGAPE 10–11)

Since the collapse of East-West polarization, the world has developed on the one hand from a bipolar to a unipolar world and on the other hand to a multipolar world. Militarily, the world is unipolar; the EU and Japan conform to this trend as they also attempt to become interventionistic. As the countries in the global South were drawn into the East-West polarization, they often became the theaters of substitutionary wars. The end of this conflict was also the end of the subdivision of the world into first, second, and third worlds. The countries of the global South were designated as the third world.

Far from being intended as condescending, the term originated at the 1955 Bandung Conference as a self-designation of countries that did not understand themselves as belonging to either the first (capitalist) or second (socialist) world. The newly defined third world wanted to be an alternative to the first and second worlds, to be – like the third estate of the French Revolution – a place of new beginnings, of freedom, self-determination, and independence. The ideas of the conference at Bandung dominated discussions of these countries' development until the mid-1970s. But at the 1974 UN General Assembly, the United States rejected the new economic order that was demanded by the countries of the South.

Since 1989 the world has become economically multipolar as economic globalization has entered into a second phase. Although the end of the second world did not end the power of the North – the former first world is still in power and seeking to secure this power with military and political means – new economic actors have entered the scene in China, India, and Brazil. In East Asia, China has replaced Japan as the economic leader; within a few years it will be the world leader in exports. It is already impossible to miss China's economic and political influence in Africa, and Latin America is more and more entering into China's reach.

Like the political world, capitalism has also become multipolar. New actors have entered the stage. New players, former pupils, have overtaken their former teachers – the United States, Western Europe – in the application of neoliberal practices. Currently, enormous processes of redistribution are taking place, in the course of which the teachers are coming under increased pressure because their economies are not growing fast enough. Apart from the United States and the United Kingdom, China is the country with the highest amount of direct investment abroad.

The world is richer than ever before. Researchers from the United Nations University have come to the conclusion that

Roughly thirty percent of world wealth is found in each of North America, Europe, and the rich Asian-Pacific countries. These areas account for virtually all of the world's top 1 per cent of wealth holders. . . . The wealth share estimates reveal that the richest 2 per cent of adult individuals own more than half of all global wealth, with the richest 1 per cent alone accounting for 40 per cent of global assets. The corresponding figures for the top 5 per cent and the top 10 per cent are 71 per cent and 85 per cent, respectively. In contrast, the bottom half of wealth holders together hold barely 1 per cent of global wealth. Members of the top decile are almost 400 times richer, on average, than the bottom 50 per cent, and members of the top percentile are almost 2,000 times richer. (World Distribution 1, 7)

The globalized world is more and more becoming a plutonomy, an economy of wealth in which the richest acquire an ever-increasing part of the entire society's wealth.<sup>4</sup> The world is split into two blocks: the plutonomies, with economic growth, wealth, and consumption for the few rich and the exclusion of all the others. Globalization functions as what might be called a Plutonomy machine. In times of globalization, the plutonomy is highly effective in creating wealth and concentrating it in ever-larger portions in a few rich people. Wealth is distributed ever more unequally in the countries of the North and the South, not only among but also within countries. Despite all advances, extreme poverty is still rampant, even when the world is richer than ever before.

In November 2009, the World Summit on Food Security, meeting in Rome, issued a Declaration on Food Security:

We are alarmed that the number of people suffering from hunger and poverty now exceeds 1 billion. This is an unacceptable blight on the lives, livelihoods and dignity of one-sixth of the world's population. The effects of longstanding underinvestment in food security, agriculture, and rural development have recently been further exacerbated by food, financial and economic crises, among other factors.<sup>5</sup>

The number of undernourished people in the world set a scandalous new record of one billion in 2009, in spite of a record grain harvest in 2008. Following trade liberalization, many developing countries suffered repeated import surges of rice, maize, powdered milk, and meat.<sup>6</sup>

In Germany, social inequality is on the rise, as in other industrialized countries. The upper ten percent of German households possess 61.1% of the wealth, whereas the lower 50% possess only 0.4% (Frick and Grabka 59). The social division of the world community leads to new processes of migration. The more the third world is excluded from the general increase in economic growth and prosperity, the more pressure develops to emigrate from one's home country and search far from home for means of survival. This movement, naturally, has consequences for the composition of individual societies and the distribution of wealth within them. At the same time, social structures become more labile, and people are

---

<sup>4</sup> According to analysts at Citibank, [billcara.com/archives/Citi%20Oct%202016,%202005%20Plutonomy.pdf](http://billcara.com/archives/Citi%20Oct%202016,%202005%20Plutonomy.pdf); site no longer available.

<sup>5</sup> [fao.org](http://fao.org), acc. 14 Dec. 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. [fian.org/news](http://fian.org/news), acc. 14 Dec. 2009.

forced to become more flexible in their careers as well as more mobile geographically, as it is easier to overcome enormous distances than in former times.

An important background to the process of impoverishment and social polarization is the crisis of labor. In the 1950s and 1960s, 80–90% of jobs were secure in the West, as were around 50% in the South. But today, in many countries of the South people work without a contract, without welfare benefits, and without the protection of unions. “Informal” economy is becoming a “normal” economy (World Employment). As Alejandro Portes has said, “In a situation where the state does not regulate anything because it is at the mercy of market forces, there is no formal economy” (Portes 432). Ever more jobs are being created on the informal labor market. In the countries of the North the uncertainty of the labor market is also increasing, as more and more of the jobs are impermanent and offer no social protection. Ever more people in both South and North feel themselves superfluous and unnecessary. Increasingly two worlds exist: in the one live those who profit from increased productivity and improved technology, and in the other live the ever-increasing number of those excluded from the benefits of that world.

The battle for oil has begun on a global scale. In view of the increased global demand for natural resources caused by the acceleration of the processes of industrialization of China and India, and given the finite supply of oil, there is a danger of international conflict over oil and natural gas. The market prices for natural resources are already rising because of the increased demand for energy from China and India. This development will clearly have negative effects for all countries of the South that do not possess oil.

With the latest presentation of the fourth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), it has become part of global awareness that nothing endangers human development and security as much as the ecological catastrophe that is probably unavoidable without radical changes in policy. The poor will suffer the most from its consequences. The impending disaster demands not only a radical turnaround in ecological policy but also a return from the neoliberal retreat of the state. Governmental regulations with a global standard will be necessary.

Neoliberal globalization creates a global village after its own image – the image of capital. Globalization thus means a globalization of competition and market. Social inequality is the central issue in economic

globalization, as injustices are perpetrated under a system of economic globalization that perpetuates plutocracy.

To resist this kind of globalization we need a globalization of justice, solidarity, and integrity of creation. The term *economic globalization* describes this millennium's prevailing economic system, which brings all nations into one global-market economy. But economic globalization is not a new trading system in the global market. It traces its roots to mercantilism in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It was already underway in the periods of colonialism and neocolonialism, when the industrialized nations divided the world among themselves for their own economic interests.

The 2002 Manila Covenant speaks to the negative effects of globalization:

*The disruptive consequences of globalization*

While developing countries tend to welcome the opportunities afforded by globalization, our experience in the Philippines has alerted us to the disruptive consequences of economic globalization. These consequences are e.g. more impoverishment of the peasants and workers, higher prices for basic commodities such as rice, water and electricity, lack of access to basic social services such as health care and education, the commodification and sexual exploitation of women and children, indigenous peoples having been forced out of their ancestral lands due to incursions of foreign mining operations, forests being destroyed and other natural resources being depleted, while the increase of forced migration for economic survival continues. We call on all people of faith and goodwill to consider the moral imperatives of justice and compassion in the face of increasing globalization and the threat of the domination of the poor that it poses. We commit ourselves to look for alternatives to the present dominating neo-liberal globalization.

*Foreign intervention and War on Terrorism*

The long and painful history of colonial domination of the Philippines by successive foreign powers has made us conscious of national independence, freedom and dignity. While we recognize the anti-human destructive force of terrorism as a threat to world peace, the so-called "War on Terrorism" should not be made into an excuse by powerful nations for threatening the independence and autonomy of other countries and people. The cause of world peace will be best served by upholding the values of mutual respect, sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality.

*The right to restitution from damages caused by colonialism.*

The Filipino people share with all people who have experienced colonial exploitation the need for restitution and renewal of just relationships. We sympathize with the IFI, given that at the time of its formation, it was deprived of property and resources. This has meant that it has struggled to survive during the one

hundred years of its history. We encourage the churches in the regions of the former colonial rulers to work for the public recognition of damages caused during the time of colonialism and for the restitution of all that is right. (Manila Covenant)

### **Ethical, Theological, and Ecclesiological Points of Access**

“You cannot serve both God and Mammon,” says Jesus (Matt 6:24), warning those who think economic globalization is merely a temporal matter that has nothing to do with Christianity.

In the ecumenical movement there are two main streams of theological discourse about globalization. The Reformed Churches use the term *status confessionis*. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches said of neoliberalism at its 2004 general assembly in Accra:

1. In response to the urgent call of the Southern African constituency which met in Kitwe in 1995 and in recognition of the increasing urgency of global economic injustice and ecological destruction, the 23rd General Council (Debrecen, Hungary, 1997) invited the member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to enter into a process of “recognition, education, and confession (*processus confessionis*)”. The churches reflected on the text of Isaiah 58.6 “ . . . break the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free,” as they heard the cries of brothers and sisters around the world and witnessed God’s gift of creation under threat. . . .
3. . . . The cries of “never again” are put to the lie by the ongoing realities of human trafficking and the oppression of the global economic system.
4. Today we come to take a decision of faith commitment.

#### *Reading the Signs of the Times*

... 14. We see the dramatic convergence of the economic crisis with the integration of economic globalization and geopolitics backed by neoliberal ideology. This is a global system that defends and protects the interests of the powerful. It affects and captivates us all. Further, in biblical terms such a system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is seen as unfaithful to God and responsible for preventable human suffering and is called Mammon. Jesus has told us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon (Lk 16.13).

#### *Confession of Faith in the Face of Economic Injustice and Ecological Destruction*

... 16. . . . We believe that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization and therefore **we confess** before God and one another.

The WARC then called for a covenant for justice in obedience to God’s will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and in accountable relationships: “This binds us together to work for justice in the economy

and the earth both in our common global context as well as our various regional and local settings.”<sup>7</sup>

In the era of globalization, Lutheran churches have discovered a second stream of theological discourse about globalization with a new understanding of *communio*. A statement from the tenth Lutheran World Federation General Assembly, held in Winnipeg in 2003, condemned the “false ideology of economic globalization”:

As a communion, we must engage the false ideology of neoliberal economic globalization by confronting, converting and changing this reality and its effects. This false ideology is grounded in the assumption that the market, built on private property, unrestrained competition and the centrality of contracts, is the absolute law governing human life, society and the natural environment. This is idolatry and leads to the systematic exclusion of those who own no property, the destruction of cultural diversity, the dismantling of fragile democracies and the destruction of the earth.

We find negative global effects of economic globalization within all parts of our communion, but particularly in the South and in Central Eastern Europe. Economic globalization has resulted in the following:

- a growing gap between the very rich and the poor that particularly adversely affects women, youth and children
- increased marginalization of Indigenous peoples, excluding them from their right to their land, self-governance, resources, Indigenous knowledge and their culture
- the international debt has become an instrument of domination; the rates of interest charged amount to usury; many of the debts are illegitimate (including “odious debts”); the efforts undertaken by governments and international financial institutions so far have failed
- the globalization of information that connects people in many parts of the world is denied to the majority who lack access to it
- churches have shrinking resources as support decreases because more people are struggling to survive
- unemployment and underemployment are reducing the ability of people to earn a living and are forcing many into dehumanizing activities (e.g., trafficking in women and children, prostitution, criminal activity)
- while capital and goods are freely traded across borders, people left desperate by weakened local economies are often prevented from migrating
- governments are becoming powerless and less willing to safeguard the well-being of their people.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> World Alliance of Reformed Churches, “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth—the Accra Confession,” [warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news\\_id=181&part\\_id=0&navi=1](http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news_id=181&part_id=0&navi=1), emphasis original, 13 Oct. 2004, acc. 27 Oct. 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Lutheran World Foundation, “Message from the Tenth Assembly,” [kairoseuropa.de/english/Message%20from%20the%20LWF%20TENTH%20ASSEMBLY.doc](http://kairoseuropa.de/english/Message%20from%20the%20LWF%20TENTH%20ASSEMBLY.doc), 31 July 2003, acc. 27 Oct. 2009.

## Catholicity and Globalization

What does it mean to be catholic churches in a globalized world? As catholic churches we could enrich ecumenical reflection about globalization with a third stream of theological discourse about globalization: a new understanding of catholicity in the era of globalization (see Segbers, *bis ans Ende*). The concept of catholicity is an ecclesiological concept that is suitable for formulating a theological perspective on the relationship between the global and the local in the worldwide church (see Schreiter). Knowing that one lives in a global and globalized world can fulfill a key role in the development of a new understanding of catholicity. For this to happen it is necessary to view globalization in a closer connection with ecclesiology by taking globalization seriously as a context, without allowing one's ecclesiology to be determined by it. How does a new catholicity further equality, difference, and pluralism?

### Theological and Ecclesiological Starting Points: Catholicity as Fullness, Wholeness, and Exchange

Catholicity is one of the *nota ecclesiae*. It is understood as meaning 'fullness' and 'wholeness'. In the context of globalization, these two aspects can be expanded with the aspect of conciliarity, like worldwide exchange. This new aspect reacts to a multipolar understanding of globalization while also presenting a countermodel against the imperial inheritance and polarization of the existing project of globalization. This countermodel is that of a "polycentric catholicity,"<sup>9</sup> with the following components:

- *Unity through mutual complementation*: A theological proposal for universalism would be the theme of reconciliation echoing God's reconciliation of the world. Reconciliation is a theme that is sufficiently encompassing to recognize the division of the world and the fragility and suffering of humankind as it has been caused by the compression of space and time. Reconciliation shows itself in vanquishing the worldwide polarization that leads to the creation of globalization's winners and losers. This division does not remain outside the churches. The intensity of cultural contact heightens the need for differentiation: human beings fight for a place in the world.

---

<sup>9</sup> The term *polycentric catholicity* was created by the Roman Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz; see Metz, *Im Aufbruch*.

- *Wholeness*: Territorial boundaries are replaced by boundaries of difference. The new catholicity needs to be present between those who reap and enjoy the benefits of the process of globalization and those who are excluded from them and are thus oppressed. The boundary is not between North and South but between the poor and the rich in the North and South. The two aspects of wholeness that characterize the new catholicity are (a) the ability to come together and to recognize both true and legitimate diversity and (b) the obligation to resist centrifugal powers that oppress cultures. This is wholeness over and against the fragmenting experience of culture: asymmetries of power, forced migration, the risks of an ecologically endangered world. Catholicity needs to lead to sensitivity to asymmetries. Advocacy and solidarity are signs of wholeness.

### **Polycentric Conciliary Catholicity as the Answer to Multipolar and Inherited Globalization**

Can a form of universalism be found that is not dominant in its nature? For the wholeness and fullness indicated by the term *catholicity* to become visible, exchange and communication are necessary (Schreiter). Catholicity should not reflect an imperial and centralistic power structure, but a polycentric catholicity. In times of globalization, this polycentric catholicity connects the local and the global or universal through identity-building connections and structures.

A polycentric catholicity should not ignore its own history and its guilt. Christendom has much too long ignored the longing and struggle of the people of the South for emancipation, independence, and freedom with reference to the notion of catholicity. These cultural, religious, and economic aspects of the history of colonialism have mutually reinforced each other. The observations of the new polycentric catholicity will teach us to view ourselves and our history with the eyes of the victims and to judge it from that perspective. A renewed and expanded concept of catholicity can give an appropriate theological answer to the challenge of globalization. It offers a theological framework out of which the church and its message can be understood in changed circumstances.

If catholicity takes seriously the consequences of this diversity of cultures, it has a prominent place for the interaction of the global and the local. In this way, it may also serve the preservation of the unity and integrity of the church worldwide. Here the concept of synodality and

ecclesiology, which combines unity, independence, self-reliance, and autonomy and which historically came into existence as a counterpart to the imperialistic-centralistic ecclesiology of the Roman Empire, has theological significance for the reformulation of catholicity.

The intensifying economic crisis and people's suffering both in the North and in the South challenge the churches to respond to the imperative of the gospel message. God is not neutral regarding the effects of neo-liberal globalization. He defends the rights of the oppressed and ensures the triumph of the suffering. The people in the North and in the South are suffering the effects of neoliberal globalization. Being catholic churches means working together for justice today wherever we live. In the era of economic globalization, it is imperative that catholic churches build a worldwide community, standing on the side of the struggling poor in pursuing lasting peace and justice in society. This stance will inevitably lead to a new understanding of catholicity and ecclesiology.