

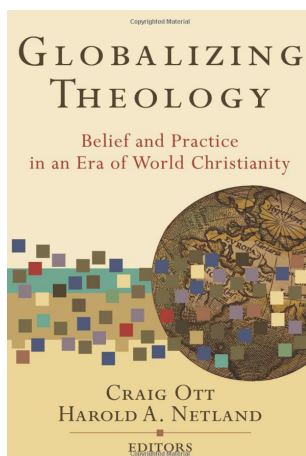
Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity

Edited by Craig Ott and Harold
Netland

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The implications of the shifting centre of world Christianity are many and far-reaching. As practitioners from all over the world, we rejoice to partner together, and we consider how best to reflect this reality in our life and ministry. Recently, I attended our regional conference where, for the first time, colleagues sent out from a base located *within* our region were present. To meet, worship, and dream with these close-culture colleagues was a great moment of rejoicing, and the conference organisers had obviously considered ways in which these partners could be welcomed: we sang songs in not-English; conversed in not-English; welcomed speakers to the stage who didn't present in English. It was truly an exciting time!

Structural frameworks, such as conferences, can be reconsidered to reflect these global shifts in the church. We rejoice and are excited by this! Are we, however, less excited, reticent even, to reconsider our theological frameworks? The essential premise of *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* is to explore the theological implications of the shifting centre of world Christianity.

The book is comprised of papers presented at a 2004 conference titled, "Doing Theology in a Globalizing World" (12). Whilst this book could be considered as an older contribution to this subject, its strength and importance lies in the combined scholarship of the authors. We hear from a diverse selection of eminent scholars in this field, from Andrew Walls to Vinoth Ramachandra and, although still in the minority, the voices of female scholars are present. The essays address searching questions to thoroughly address this topic, "But will not self-theologizing result in the proliferation of local theologies and thus the relativization of theology?" (Netland, 29); "How are we to avoid syncretizing the gospel?" (Meneses, 244). In exploring and answering these questions, three themes are repeated between the various authors. These themes highlight significant points of overlap between the conference presenters and are summarised here.

First, the authors go to significant lengths to define both theology and global theologizing. Tite Tiénou (39), Chair of Global Theology and World Christianity at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, simply expresses that theology enables Christians to "think and live Christianly." Andrew Walls (81) agrees, "Theology does not arise from the study or the library It arises from Christian life and activity, from the need to make Christian choices, to think in a Christian way." How are these Christian choices made? How can we live Christianly? The authors speak unanimously: through reflection and action based on the Word of God (e.g., Netland, 30; Vanhoozer, 106 – 107; Van Engen, 175; Hiebert, 306).

Global theologizing is a novel sounding term for something that is quite normal. If theology arises from our need to make Christian choices,

then we need to exegete the Word as well as our contemporary world, the arena of our life (Netland, 17). What happens when we pair this understanding with the realisation that the centre of gravity has shifted in the worldwide church?

The largest fields of Christian life and activity are now appearing in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and we may expect, and indeed are already beginning to see, crucial theological issues arising there. This is where acute situations requiring Christian choice will be constantly arising, and new questions will be posed as the biblical materials interact at deeper and deeper levels with the cultures of Asia and Africa (Walls, 81).

At its most basic, global theologizing is the acknowledgement that Christians must actively *do* theology as “an act of *faithfulness* in living out the gospel in a people’s unique cultural context” (Ott, 312, emphasis added). A fuller definition is provided by Netland:

Globalizing theology is theological reflection *rooted in God’s self-revelation in Scripture and informed by the historical legacy of the Christianity community through the ages, the current realities in the world, and the diverse perspectives of Christian communities throughout the world, with a view to greater holiness in living and faithfulness in fulfilling God’s mission in all the world through the church.* (27, emphases added)

Secondly, the authors unite to emphasise the fact that a globalizing theology requires the interdependence of the worldwide church. Ott (320) masterfully quotes biblical scholar Carson to highlight this:

... we will recognise that not all of God’s truth is vouchsafed to one particular interpretive community – and the result will be that we will be eager to learn from one another, to correct and to be corrected by one another... The truth may be one, but it sounds less like a single wavering note than like a symphony.

This interdependence allows us to experience the “translation and transposition” of theological concepts (Walls, 74). In his characteristic style, Walls traces how the Christian understanding of certain biblical concepts was enlarged as it crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries. Van Engen, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, agrees, commenting that “each ‘translation’ of the gospel offers the possibility of discovering something about God as revealed in the Bible that no one has previously seen” (175).

Is there a danger that this can lead to relativism? This brings us to the third point in which the authors find unity. In a particular strength of the book, the authors discuss with wisdom and nuance the tension that, “although there is one church, there are many churches, and although there is one Bible, there are many readings of Scripture” (Van Engen, 175).

Never in the book is there any disregard for Western theology simply because it is “Western.” There is, however, criticism of importing “Western” theology as normative for new context as an alternative for actively *doing* theology there. The veteran Ghanaian theologian, Bediako, is quoted as saying, “Western theology was for so long presented in all its particulars as *the* theology of the Church, when, in fact, it was geographically localised and culturally limited, European and Western, and not universal” (cited in Vanhoozer, 88, emphasis in original). Western theological formulations are affirmed as being,

no less true in Africa or Asia than they are in Europe or America. However, they are not necessarily equally relevant, understandable, or adequate in all contexts. Nor are such formulations exhaustive. Here is where theological insights from non-Western perspectives hold so much promise. They open the door not necessarily for *alternative* but rather for *fuller* theological understanding. (Ott, 315, emphasis in original)

We have arrived again at the observation that, as a worldwide Church, we are interdependent on one another and the others who have gone

before us in history to fully understand the gospel of the God who created and redeemed the cosmos (Walls, 71).

Globalizing Theology is an invitation to step out of our theological parochialism, the lingering feeling that we can “see through the glass darkly” better than others, and into the breadth and combined clarity of world Christianity. As we respond to this invitation, we are challenged as cross-cultural practitioners in several ways. Here are three.

Language

“The use of English as the de facto language for international theological scholarship can only reinforce the dialogue of the deaf” (Tiénou, 49). Are we willing to use our linguistic skills to encourage globalizing theology? For example, a new publication – من تاريخنا المنسى (‘From Our Forgotten History’) by H. Halasah (2020) is of immense importance in placing Christianity within the pre-Islamic history of the Arabs. This is a message for Christians in the Middle East primarily. However, as a worldwide Church we need this message too in order to affirm and (re)discover the true picture of *our* history and *our* legacy. This may not be published in English soon. Are we willing to be ambassadors for this research to those who don’t speak Arabic?

Discipleship

Africa is already revealing the limitations of theology as generally taught in the West. The truth is that Western models of theology are too small for Africa Since most Africans live in a larger, more populated universe, with entities that are outside the Enlightenment worldview, such models of theology cannot cope with some of the most urgent pastoral needs. They have no answers for some of the most desolating aspects of life – because they have no questions. (Walls, 75 – 76)

For many of us working with different peoples across the world, these words will resonate with power. Western theological training does not often cover the theology ('how to live Christianly') that disciples in different contexts require: "How do I honour my father (who doesn't know about my faith in the Messiah) when he summons me back home for an arranged marriage?"; "Do I remain faithful to my husband despite him taking on a second wife?" These Christians need a theology which directly asks these questions and sets forth creative answers.

We also need to resist the temptation to think that this applies only outside of the West. As contemporary Western culture becomes increasingly secular, new questions need to be asked for Christians in the West to "live Christianly" in the midst of gender redefinition, to give but one example.

Church Planting

Globalizing theology within the worldwide Church requires an interdependence, as mentioned above. Van Engen points out that this "glocal" reality (global and local) should affect our church-planting strategies: "Church planting becomes an invitation to those who do not yet know Jesus Christ to become disciples of Jesus, ambassadors of the kingdom of God, *and members of the glocal church – brothers and sisters with one and a half billion others who profess a similar faith*" (179, emphasis added).

Do our church-planting strategies allow room for this interdependence? Do they allow for conversations to take place between Christians in different contexts? Do they allow for Christians to be introduced to members of their "personal family tree" (Ramachandra cited in Ott, 334) down the centuries? Do they foster the DNA that would encourage participating within a global "theological community ... with a sense of mutual accountability" (Ott, 331)?

In conclusion, *Globalizing Theology* strongly sets forth the case for globalizing our theology while not shying away from the challenging

questions posed by would-be critics. As described above, it provides insights and challenges for cross-cultural workers in several different ministry contexts and roles. In doing all of this, *Globalizing Theology* is written in an academic and, depending on the author, sometimes dense writing style which requires time and effort. However, there is an option of selecting chapters of particular interest. For example:

In “*One Rule to Rule Them All?*” *Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity*, American theologian Kevin Vanhoozer outlines his persuasive model of “Theology as Faith Seeking Theodramatic Understanding”(109-122). He shows how “doctrine develops as the church encounters new challenges and seeks to say and do what is theodramatically fitting [to the canon of Scripture]” (120). This is essential reading for those fearful of the perceived relativism of local theologies.

The closing sections of *The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing* (Hiebert, 288 – 308) notes that “missionaries belong to two or more worlds ... they become, to some extent, insiders [in the new culture]. But they never fully become one with the people. They are *outsider-insiders*” (300, emphasis original). Do you feel disadvantaged and discouraged with never feeling really “one with the people” among whom you are ministering? This section provides an encouraging perspective of how we can utilise this as a benefit to the worldwide church.

Finally, four chapters are set “in context,” providing case studies from different locations which may be of specific interest to those living in or ministering with people from these contexts:

- *Creeds, Confessions, and Global Theologizing: A Case Study in Comparative Christologies* (Strauss, 140 – 156) looks at issues arising within the Ethiopian Coptic Church.
- *The Challenge of Economic Globalization for Theology: from Latin America to a Hermeneutics of Responsibility* (Daniel Carroll R., 199 – 212) explores the specific reasons that the “worldwide church needs Latin American and other troubled regions for its own theological health and faithfulness” (211).

- *Globalization, Nationalism, and Religious Resurgence* (Ramachandra, 213 – 230) touches on the compromise of mission in an age of colonialism, with specific reference to India.
- *Bearing Witness in Rome with Theology from the Whole Church: Globalization, Theology, and Nationalism* (Meneses, 231 – 249), discusses how “American Christians must not fail to be Christians first and Americans second” (246).

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Published by Pastor Afeef Khalil Halasah.

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