

RESPONSE TO DR. STACKHOUSE'S ADDRESS

By Dr. R. Bruce Douglass

Max Stackhouse makes two major claims in this lecture about the relationship between Christianity and globalization. One is historical, and it has to do with the role Christianity (especially in its Protestant forms) has played in bringing about the process we now characterize as globalization. The other is prescriptive, and it has to do with the merits of the Christian religion (again, especially in its Protestant forms) as a resource for dealing with the challenges the peoples of the world now face as a result of having been subjected to globalization. I want to focus my attention here on the latter claim. I agree with almost everything Stackhouse has to say in the historical part of his analysis, and I think that part of the lecture demonstrates clearly just how much a perspective that takes seriously the role which religion plays in people's lives has to offer to people who are trying to make sense empirically of how the world actually works. But I cannot say the same about the other part of his argument, and I want to take this occasion to explain why that is so, in the hope of eliciting some further comments from him on the relevant issue.

My concern about his claim that the Christian religion is “the most valid faith available today to humanity” is not, I hasten to add, that he is expressing a view that is disrespectful of other religions, much less that he is advocating intolerance. I think it is clear from everything he says that he is not guilty of sins of that sort, and I like the fact that his own respect for other religions does not prevent him from entering directly into a comparative analysis of their merits, which is something that is bound to occur whenever inter-religious dialogue gets serious. What I don't like, however, is the basis on which he makes his case for Christianity. It seems to me that his case is built all too simply on the premise that modernization is unambiguously a good thing, which I do not believe is the case. I recognize that modernization brings great benefits, but I think any fair account of its consequences must also acknowledge that it has brought great evils, such as the awful tyrannies and wars of the 20th century. And I don't think that is an accident. Even when people's lives are modernized, they remain sinful creatures, and that manifests itself in the way they use the opportunities modern life brings. So I think it is wrong to suggest that globalization is unambiguously the fruit of divine providence; it is a reflection of our persistent tendency to **resist** the sovereignty of grace as well.

At the risk of exaggerating the significance of my point, let me add that I do not think Stackhouse is alone in identifying modernization a bit too neatly with God's grace. For all our talk about original sin, this is something we Protestants—and especially those of us who count ourselves as Reformed—do all too easily.

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