

THE ETHICAL CHALLENGE OF IDENTITY FORMATION AND CULTURAL JUSTICE IN A GLOBALISING WORLD

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Abstract

This article proceeds in three sections: In the first section globalisation is depicted as homogenizing cultural force and usurping power of moral formation. In the second section the ethical challenges posed by globalisation in terms of “cultural justice” are outlined. This is followed by a theological and ecclesiological comment as part of the wider debate on the church in a globalising world.

Key Concepts: Globalisation, ethics, justice, identity

Introduction

The predominant focus of ecumenical literature¹ on globalisation is on the ethical and theological challenges related to the impact of a globalising *market economy*. An emerging theme – and the focus of this paper – is the issue of globalisation as powerful *cultural force*, shaping personal and national identities, social cohesion and human coherence “...at the intersection of transnational forces, cross-cutting the local and the global” (Chidester 2003:vii). Whereas the economic face of globalisation calls forth issues related to distributive justice, the cultural-technological face calls forth issues related to aesthetic justice and identity formation (see Kwenda 2003).

Globalisation as Cultural Force of Identity Transformation

There are as many definitions of culture as there are social scientists. For the sake of our discussion here, two notions of culture will be put forward:

The first is by Clifford Geertz who espouses a semiotic view based on his interpretation that “man (sic) is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun (and) I take culture to be those webs.” Culture is therefore an “interworked system of construable symbols” in which social events can be intelligibly described (Geertz 1975:5,14). These symbols form – through their inter-relation – a cultural map within which people negotiate their identities. In a recent publication on social cohesion, Chirevo Kwenda takes a shorter route and sees culture merely as “our way of life” and “what people take for granted”. In other words: “It is that comfort zone within, and out of which, we think, act and speak. If it

¹ The vast pool of literature is too large to list here. For a summary of statements up to about 1990, see Aart van den Berg: *Churches speak out on economic issues. A survey of several statements*. Geneva: WCC 1990. See also *Christian faith and world economy today* (Geneva: WCC 1992); articles on “technology” and “culture” in the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*; Julio de Santa Ana (ed.) *Sustainability and globalization*, and *The ecumenical review* 52/2, 2000 that was devoted to “economic globalisation”.

is our “mother culture”, we do all these things without having to be self-conscious about what we are doing” (Kwenda 2003:68,69).

Both culture and identity are fluid and hybrid notions: On an individual level, we live in overlapping social territories and migrate amongst different social roles constructed on the basis of who we are and who we are becoming. On a group or national level, this is equally true: Cultures and identities are constantly negotiated between “what is taken for granted”; between what is an assumed network of significance, and a changing environment that might seek to disarrange our symbolic cultural maps.

In an ideal world, such identity negotiations may occur peacefully, in a symmetry of power, and over an extended period, so that natural assimilation and hybridisation enrich this “meeting of cultures” and evolving of identities. But we have ample examples in history and the contemporary world that such processes more than often derail. “We know that for these four words, “our way of life”, people are often prepared to kill or be killed. In such instances, it becomes clear that there is a very small step from “a way of life” to life itself. Thus, a threat to a people’s culture tends to be perceived and experienced as a personal threat” (Kwenda 2003:68).

The dichotomies represented in “Jewish versus Palestinian”, “Hutsis versus Tutsis”, “Catholic versus Protestant”; “Serbian versus Croatian”, “America versus Islamic fundamentalism” are the violent results of derailed identity negotiation coupled with cultural acts of threats and resistance. There are also less violent, but nevertheless intense processes of interchange by Nigerians in France, Turks in Germany, Mozambicans in South Africa, Aborigines in Australia and Hispanics and Chinese in America (and the list can go on and on).

These regional cultural negotiations are both intensified and mondialised (*le monde*: French) by the Janus face of cultural globalization. Like all globalisation processes, this one is equally ambiguous and even contradictory: *The globalisation of culture is on the one hand a huge homogenization process, whilst at the same time fostering a celebration of cultural difference and fragmentation.*

Related to the latter is the hybridization of culture as “a global phenomenon that happens locally” through interesting cultural mixes of music, art, literature and architecture. For example, the post-colonial discourse on “creolization”, ambivalence and multiple identities, is a way of “writing-back” in response to a hegemonic global culture (see Gerle 2000:159) and related to a process of identity transformation.

But the romantic idea of multi-culturalism is betrayed by a globalising process that creates a mirage of differentiation, but in fact is an encompassing force toward “Vereinheitlichung”² (Raiser 1999: 37). This creates a depersonalised mass society typified by “mass communications, mass consumption, homogeneity of patterns of life, mass culture” (De Santa Ana 1998:14). The process is driven by megacultural firms “... based on the commodification of Anglophone culture with the aid of the electronic highway” (Louw 2002:79). Here the economic, technological and cultural intersect in a deadly assymetrical

² Konrad Raiser (1999:32ff) points out three central challenges for the ecumenical church in the 21st millennium: A life-centered vision (*lebenszentrierte Vision*) to replace a destructive anthropocentrism; the acknowledgement of plurality, and facing the inner contradictions of globalisation. He verbalises one of these contradictions as the simultaneous process of “Vereinheitlichung von Lebensstilen und kulturellen Formen” and the “Anstrengungen” caused by a defence of “einheimische Kulturen, religioese Traditionen (und) ethnische und rassische Identitaeten” (Raiser 1999:37).

negotiation: “You can survive, even thrive, among us, if you become like us; you can keep your life, if you give up your identity”. With reference to Levi-Strauss, “we can say that exclusion by assimilation rests on a deal: we will refrain from vomiting you out (anthropoemic strategy) if you let us swallow you up (anthropophagic strategy)” (Wolf 1996:75).

Globalisation – seen in this way – acquires an ideological nature as *la pensee unique*, aspiring to be the only valid view, “...imposing itself as the paradigm to which all other cultures should be adjusted” (De Santa Ana 1998:16). Where previous forms of cultural subjugation were spatially confined and time-bound, the commercial homogeneity of a consumerist culture expands itself with the aid of the newest and fastest technological communication (itself an ambiguous blessing in the 21st century!).

The Ethical Issues

“What is the ethical issue?”, one might ask. In the ebb and flow of history, many cultures and civilizations have come and gone. Globalization is just a new and more potent cultural force that speeds up this process of assimilation, subjugation and eventual extinction. The museumization of “indigenous” cultures of yesteryear is but the same as fossils and mummies kept for the (possible?) attention and curiosity of future generations.

It is not that simple, though. Enough work has been done on the ethical issues related to the casino economy³ of digital capitalism. In this paper, I wish to argue the case for *cultural justice* and outline the ethical issues in the following two broad themes: First the moral significance of cosmological stories in shaping identity and values; second the unequal burden of suspending or surrendering “what is taken for granted”.

Cosmological Stories and Narrative Moral Identity

Let us accept with Peter Berger (1967:152ff), Ninian Smart (1973) and David Tracy (1981:159) that the role of religion is to construct a comprehensive view of the world by framing parts of reality in the context of that which transcends reality, that is, “ultimate reality” (see Conradie 2004). Let us accept with Larry Rasmussen that “we are incurably storytellers” (Rasmussen 1994:178) and concur with Thomas Berry that religious cosmologies are designed to answer identity questions like: Who am I? Who are we? Where are we going? “For peoples, generally, their story of the universe and the human role in the universe is their primary source of intelligibility and value” (Berry 1998: xi).

On these assumptions one could argue that globalisation in its cultural garb usurps and misplaces the role of religion by constituting its own cosmological narrative. What is at stake is not merely the physics of our information age, but its metaphysics, “...its significance to individual and social morality ... and its consequences for the formation, maintenance and alteration of personal identity” (Arthur 1998:3, see Smit 2000:15). Homogenization takes on the proportions of an autonomous force governing the lives of individuals and communities (De Santa Ana 1998:19).

To a certain extent globalisation as encompassing cosmology reflects the moral tendencies of both modernity and post-modernity. According to Zygmunt Bauman, globalisation – as autonomous force against which you apparently can do nothing but to be swept along –

³ “Like any casino, this global game is rigged so that only the house wins.” Fidel Castro in a speech to the South African parliament. See Chidester 2003:10.

does “shift moral responsibilities away from the moral self, either toward a socially constructed and managed supra-individual agency, or through floating responsibility inside a bureaucratic “rule of nobody”(Bauman 1995:99, see Wolf 1996:21ff). But like post-modernity, globalisation creates a climate of evasion of moral responsibilities by rendering relationships “fragmentary” and “discontinuous” (or should we say “virtual”?), resulting in disengagement and commitment-avoidance (Bauman 1995:156).

We have learnt from various forms of narrative ethics (from Richard H Niebuhr to Stanley Hauerwas): *Agere sequitur esse*. What we do, is a result of who we are. And who we are, is determined by the narrative communities in which we are formed. From a moral perspective “it is possible to argue that the real challenges embedded in globalisation concern not so much what we *do*, but who we *are*, who we are becoming...” (Smit 2000:15, emphasis original). The mass culture of a globalising world is a powerful narrative agent that contributes significantly to moral formation. Its values become *the* values, the way things *are*; the way *everybody* acts.

This analysis might provide some clue to the vexing question: Why do societies in rapid transition (e.g, from so-called non-Western cultures – be they Islamic, African or Eastern European – to being “Westernised”) so often exhibit a partial or total value-collapse? The answer might be that societies in transition undergo a collective identity crisis as they move from the known to the “not yet”. It is because they cannot yet adequately answer the question: “Who are we?” that they are unable to exercise responsible and virtuous options.⁴ In a situation of transition a “contraction of time” appears that instinctively cuts off the past (nobody wants to return to an oppressive past), but cannot yet conceptualise the future (“a journey into uncharted territory without safety equipment”⁵). In this way, life is a continual “collapsed present”, driven by emotional, physical and economic survival in which clear moral ideals and ethical visions are difficult to uphold.

It is into this situation of confusion and *anomie*⁶ where people find themselves “in between stories”⁷ and in a situation of *Heimatlosigkeit*⁸ that the globalised consumer culture steps to provide a viable alternative; “the only answer”; *the moral story*. It works so well

⁴ Two distinguishing features of transitional societies are a marked increase in socio-economic inequality, and a massive rise in violence and criminality. This is true of countries as diverse as Russia and South Africa. In the latter case, the new government resorted to a moratorium on the release of police statistics in a desperate bid to restrain the images of a “violent” new democracy. See Addy and Silny 2001:505 who state that in some cases Eastern European areas experienced a 400% rise in criminality over a ten year period.

⁵ A quotation from Addy and Silny (2001:503) to describe the transitions in Eastern Europe.

⁶ This term stems from Emile Durkheim in his groundbreaking study on social cohesion and suicide: “When society is disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions, the collective conscience is momentarily incapable of exercising restraint. Time is required for the public conscience to reclassify men (sic) and things. So long as social forces thus freed have not regained equilibrium, their respective values are unknown and so all regulation is lacking for a time. The state of deregulation or anomie is heightened by passions being less disciplined precisely when they need more disciplining (Suicide, 1897/1951:252-253).

⁷ “It’s all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories.” Previously, with the old story (whether my own or the clear story of an oppressive regime) “we awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime, punish transgressors. Everything was taken care of because the story was there ...” (Berry 1988:123).

⁸ See Fischer’s discussion in a different context of how the mode of knowledge emanating from the Enlightenment enabled humankind to make the world so habitable, so transparent, that it exactly loses its character as *Heimat*. “Der aergerste Feind der Verantwortung ist die Gleichgueltigkeit. Gleichgueltigkeit aber ist die Folge existentieller Heimatlosigkeit” (my emphasis). He then pleads for a process of *Beheimatung* to restore responsibility (Fischer 1992:124).

because consumerism exactly sustains itself by creating constantly changing demands that have to be satisfied instantly, thereby *creating an ever shifting “hedonistic presence”*, closed to both the past and the future.

The notion that what Africa (or Eastern Europe or Latin America or Iraq and Afghanistan) needs is more development aid and physical infrastructure – however important – is fatally flawed and may in practice result in the intensification of resistance and loss of hope in “democracy”. What needs to be restored and cultivated, is a culturally mediated reconstruction of the self in a personal and collective sense. In political terms, the African Renaissance for example is as much about economic development as it is about a post-colonial restoration of cultural pride and selfhood “...to counter the excesses of European modes of being-in-the-world” (Comaroff 2000:80).

The crucial insight – missed by most development agencies – is that restoration of being not only precedes economic restoration, but – at least in an African situation – is *the precondition* for economic survival. Being precedes bread (Balcomb 1998:71). Why? Because in a situation of scarce resources, you need a view of identity that resists economic greed and self-referential individualism. *What you require is a notion of identity as identity-in-community which undergirds redistribution patterns that in turn guarantee physical and economic survival. You need the survival of (the) community instead of the survival of the fittest.*

But then you need a cosmological story and other local narratives to exactly sustain such communities in which moral formation can take shape. If not, globalisation in the name of “development aid” will do the job for you.

Perhaps the following case study – based on actual events – conveys this journey of identity and life “in between stories” in a way that arguments are unable to do:

My brother Sipho and I grew up in a rural village in the Limpopo province of South Africa. My father was a farm labourer and my mother a domestic worker. They were both functionally illiterate, but had a keen sense that the education of their children was of paramount importance. By the time we reached high school age, the whole extended family contributed to send the two of us (one year apart) to a former model C school in Pretoria. After matriculation we both attended university – again with the material and emotional support of the family. This support was not so much a contractual than a familial, moral issue. It was a form of “donation” that everybody tacitly knew would one day return – though in no exact manner like in written contracts – to assist parents in their old age and make the same possible for other siblings after us.

The eventual graduation festivals were huge family affairs with praise singers, pap and slaughtering of goats.

We both were excited to land our first jobs – I with my degree in humanities in the academic administration of the university in Port Elizabeth; Sipho with his BComm. at an international consulting firm in Johannesburg. We never openly spoke, but took it for granted that we send a monthly amount “back home”, and visit at least once a year.

After about eighteen months Sipho’s contributions dried up. The next year he did not return for his annual visit. What is more: When my grandfather passed away, he did not attend the funeral. I took the courage to talk this over with him and soon realised that he had embraced the yuppie life-style of Egoli, the City of Gold: designer clothes (from Carducci to Billabong and Man about Town), a red BMW 318i and a townhouse in Fourways.

He now traverses a different world. He has embraced different values. We feel not so much a sense of betrayal, but of sadness to have lost him. He has become a different person.

Though, in the eyes of most, he is a highly successful person; a sign that the new South Africa is really opening opportunities to create a new black middle class.

And I am not sure that he would ever want to return to our village. Due to its location in the mountains, it is called Tshilapfene, “the place of the baboons”.

Surrendering What is Taken for Granted

In a perceptive essay referred to several times above, historian of religion, Chirevo Kwenda (2003:70), explains the notion of cultural (in)justice as follows:

Where people live by what they naturally take for granted, or where the details of everyday life coincide with what is taken for granted, we can say there is cultural justice – at least in this limited sense of freedom from constant self-consciousness about every little thing. Cultural injustice occurs when some people are forced, by coercion or persuasion, to submit to the burdensome condition of suspending – or more permanently surrendering – what they naturally take for granted, and then begin to depend on what someone else takes for granted. The reality is that substitution of what is taken for granted is seldom adequate. This means that, in reality, the subjugated person has no linguistic or cultural “default drive”, that critical minimum of ways, customs, manners, gestures and postures that facilitate uninhibited, unselfconscious action.

The injustice lies in the unequal burden and stress of constant self-consciousness that millions of people carry on behalf of others without gaining recognition or respect. In fact, they are objects of further subjugation and humiliation that vary from physical violence to subtle body language that clearly communicate that you are stupid and do not know “the ways things are done or said here”.

On a regional and national level, these forms of exclusions (Miroslav Wolf reminds us) range from domination and indifference to abandonment and ultimately elimination. From the “inside” this exclusion results from being “... uncomfortable with anything that blurs accepted boundaries, disturbs our identities, and disarranges our symbolic cultural maps.”⁹

The “fall of the Berlin wall” and the “end of the apartheid regime” are designations of many societies that moved from oppressive political systems to greater civil liberties after 1989. What is sometimes underestimated, is the massive identity renegotiation processes in the “post-liberation” period, often leading to an upsurge in ethnic violence and loss of social stability. Like we saw in the previous section, questions of culture and life-in-community then arise with great urgency. Because it takes tremendous courage and political wisdom to (for the first time?) assert “what we take for granted” and to act unselfconsciously after decades of identity-suspension and suppression.

Shortly after the first democratic elections in South Africa that ended 46 years of minority rule, African theologian Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, made the following incisive observation:

Issues of culture are again acquiring a new form of prominence in various spheres of South African society. *It is as if we can, at last, speak truly and honestly, about our culture.* This is due to the widespread feeling that now, more than at any other time, *we can be subjects of our own cultural destiny...* The reconstruction of structures and physical development alone will not quench our *cultural and spiritual thirst*. On the contrary, the heavy emphasis on the material and the structural may simply result in the intensification of black frustration. We

⁹ Wolf 1996: 78, and note the interesting debate about the wearing of Muslim head scarfs in European schools, as well as the heated debate about “European identity” in the light of Turkey’s possible entrance into the EU. Talk about disarranging cultural maps!

do not just need jobs and houses, *we must recover our own selves*" (Maluleke in Balcomb 1998:70, my emphases).

Whereas the struggle against apartheid or communism or imperialism or Americanism forced and still force a kind of uniformity of resistance, and is aimed at *the right to be "the same"*, the post-liberation struggle aims at a restored subjectivity and agency with *the right to be different*. In the ethical terms of this section: *the right to life unselfconsciously*.

This has been echoed three years later from a different perspective by Miroslav Volf: "In recent decades the *issue of identity* has risen to the forefront of discussions in social philosophy. If the liberation movements of the sixties were all about equality – above all gender equality and race equality – major concerns in the nineties seem to be about identity – about *the recognition of distinct identities* of persons who differ in gender, skin colour, or culture" (Volf 1998: 23, my emphasis).

Let us make this argument about culture and distinct identities more concrete. I found it quite remarkable to see how much emphasis is placed on *language* in the process of identity re-negotiation.

On a first level, language itself plays this exclusivist role. To this I will turn in the next paragraph. On a second level, a "language of exclusion" is created by naming or labelling the other in a manner that takes the other outside "the class of objects of potential moral responsibility" (Zygmunt Bauman as quoted by Volf 1996:76). This does not only justify exclusion, but in fact necessitates it. "The rhetoric of the other's inhumanity *obliges* the self to practice inhumanity" (Volf 1996:76; original emphasis). Like supporters of the linguistic turn, one could state that exclusion is equally language-sated. Words do kill.

But in a more subtle way, language itself – as in "mother-tongue" and "foreign" language – plays an exclusionary role. In a remarkable essay, *Aria: A memoir of a bilingual childhood*, Richard Rodriguez recounts how he grew up in Sacramento, California, in a Mexican immigrant home in a predominantly white suburb. During his first few years in school, he struggled with English, but managed to move between the language of the public (English) and the private language of the home (Spanish). "Like others who feel the pain of public alienation, we transformed the knowledge of our public separateness into a consoling reminder of our intimacy" (Rodriguez 1982:23). He eloquently spells out life in two linguistic and social worlds:

But then there was Spanish: *espanol*, the language rarely heard away from house, the language which seemed to me therefore a private language, my family's language. To hear its sounds was to feel myself specially recognised as one of the family, apart from *los otros* (the others). A simple remark, an inconsequential comment could convey that assurance. My parents would say something to me and I would feel embraced by the sounds of their words. Those sounds said: I am speaking with ease in Spanish... I recognise you as somebody special, close, like no one outside. You belong with us. In the family (Rodriguez 1982:22-23).

But this juxtaposition of a double identity was shattered by a simple request from the teachers (nuns at the Catholic school) that, in order to improve their academic performance, English should be spoken at home. This led to an ambivalent outcome: A growing confidence in public, but a devastating silence at home:

There was a new silence at home. As we children learned more and more English, we shared fewer and fewer words with our parents. Sentences needed to be spoken slowly ... Often the parent wouldn't understand. The child would need to repeat himself. Still the parent

misunderstood. The young voice, frustrated, would end up saying, “Never mind” – the subject was closed. Dinners would be noisy with the clinking of knives and forks against dishes. My mother would smile softly between her remarks; my father, at the other end of the table, would chew and chew his food while he stared over the heads of his children.

What followed was first a “disconcerting confusion” (1982:29). Then, as fluency in Spanish faded fast, a feeling of guilt arose over the betrayal of immediate family and visitors from Mexico (1982:30). Thereafter followed an understanding that the linguistic change was a social one where the intimacy at home was traded for the gain of fluency and acceptance in the public language. “I moved easily at last, a citizen in a crowded city of words” (1982:31).

But the ambiguities remain. This is evident from the end of the essay where Rodrigues describes the funeral of his grandmother:

When I went up to look at my grandmother, I saw her through the haze of a veil draped over the open lid of the casket. Her face looked calm – but distant and unyielding to love. It was not the face I remembered seeing most often. It was the face she made in public when a clerk at Safeway asked her some question and I would need to respond. It was her public face that the mortician had designed with his dubious art (1982: 35).

It was – in the terms set out above – the burdensome face of someone who constantly had to surrender what is taken for granted. You can keep your life, if you give up your identity. You can keep your culture, as long as you hold its values and customs, its “things taken for granted”, with diffidence. This cultural diffidence is a disposition that causes people either to be ashamed of their culture or to simply ignore it as irrelevant in the modern world (see Kwenda 2003:71).

These powerful images from a single life and immigrant family are a metaphor, a simile, a parable of national and trans-national processes of cultural injustice. In *The political economy of transition* Tony Addy and Jiri Silny (2001) reflects on the changes that occurred in the ten years from 1989-1999 in Central and Eastern Europe. They make the interesting observation that the “market Bolsheviks” (economic advisors who advocated the move to a full market economy in one jump) not only harboured a blind faith in policy prescriptions from “the West” to be applied unaltered to “the East”, but also showed “little respect for indigenous knowledge and practice” (2001:503). The rapid privatization of former industries was carried out “in a way which did not respect positive cultural and ethical values within the region. Under conditions of globalisation, the process tended to block creative responses” (2001:505).

In a bizarre example of exclusion by elimination (Wolf), the application of rigid market rules meant the literal closure of what Addy and Silny call “cultural industries”: “For example, rich traditions of film-making were lost and historic theatres, orchestras and other artistic companies were decimated. It would take a great deal of time and money to rebuild such industries and cultural assets” (2001:505).

Would it therefore be justified to include *aesthetic justice*¹⁰ as an integral part of cultural justice? I think so, because the symbols of national identity (statutes, flags, books, artefacts, photographs, histories and language) are normally the first spoils of war. The subjugation of the other is completed with the removal or destruction of identity-confirming symbols. And

¹⁰ This process of being subject to the aesthetics of “the other” is a vivid reality in the lucrative global tourism industry. See the illuminating analysis done by Sandra Klopper in which she highlights the marginalisation effect on local communities of turning the City Bowl area in Cape Town into an international tourist destination. (Klopper 2003:224ff.).

in the context of globalisation, this war is mostly fought without military armourment, in a faceless silence, and in the name of advancement.

Theological Comments

I have argued that globalisation as a cultural force poses two ethical challenges: First, the challenge of a competing cosmological story with its effect on identity and value-formation. Second, the challenge of cultural justice with its effect on community-in-diversity and the freedom of an unselfconscious life. A full Christian ethical response is not possible in the confines of this paper. What follows are a few suggestions – like a good Reformed teacher mostly drawn from biblical¹¹ passages! – of the direction in which our answers might be found.

Globalisation: A Challenge to the Rule of God and Life According to the Law

By constituting a cosmological narrative and providing *the* alternative normative “story”, globalisation enters the age-old realm of the battle of the gods; the battle for the ultimate loyalty; for the ultimate frame of reference from which to interpret the self and life- in-community.

Some argue that the whole of Israel’s history as accounted in the Old Testament was a struggle for fulfilment of the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods besides me” (Ex 20:3). The law as “constitution” of the covenant community had a profound identity-forming role. The transition after 400 years of being “slave-people” to the “wandering people of God” is led by the law given three months after the exodus (Ex 19:1). The transition from “wandering people” to “settling in the promised land” is – according to the Deuteronomistic account of Moses’ farewell speech – led by a repetition of the law (Dt 5). In a pluralist Canaan with her competing gods and alternative cosmic stories, Israel would find her identity in the law of Yahweh, the only God. Therefore the exhortation to parents in Dt 6 to instruct the children and account the history from slavery to exodus and freedom as motivation for the stipulations of the law (Dt 6:20ff).

Some years after the entrance into Canaan, when Joshua needs to restore the covenant and re-dedicate the people at Schechem to the vision of being loyal to God alone, the law is yet again “laid down”. The context is the choice between the Lord on one hand and three sets of gods on the other: The gods served in Egypt, the former gods of their fathers on the other side of the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites in Canaan (Joshua 24: 14-15). The outcome is a re-dedication with an altar of stone as witness to their sole obedience to the Lord.

On their return from the devastating exile around 539BC, the grieving remnant stands amidst destructed national symbols of wall, city, temple, king and tabernacle. An amazing event occurs: Ezra restores their hope and identity by reading from the Book of the Law “from daybreak till noon”. The effect is a return to a life and joy in the community: “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drink... Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength (Neh 8:10).

¹¹ All references below are to the New International Version.

In the meantime the corpus of wisdom literature, summed up in the magnificent first psalm, states clearly: “Blessed is the man ... whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night...”

There can be little doubt: In the cosmic struggle between Yahweh and the gods, the law with its prologue, explication and implementation in a life of wisdom, serves as moral guide and identity-forming story. Insofar as globalising forces assume god-like power and demand ultimate loyalty, we enter the realm of idolatry. No wonder the 2001 joint WARC / WCC-conference in Budapest on economic globalisation chose as theological impulse “Serve God, not mammon”. And no wonder the Eastern European delegates declared that they have a sense of “having been released from the captivity of living under the reign of one false god to living now (after 1989) under a more subtle, but just as deceptive god” (Bloomquist 2001:494).

In an illuminating chapter on the particularities of the Reformed tradition in ethics, Douglas Ottati comes to the conclusion that the heart of this tradition is a “pattern of sapiential reflection” (wisdom!) wherein God’s sovereign reign over the world is decisive: “One may argue that justification is decisive for much of Lutheran theological ethics, and that discipleship lies at the heart of radical Protestantism. But the decisive emphasis in Reformed theological ethics is God’s sovereign reign” (Ottati 1996:54). In a radical “theologizing” of Geertz (without a specific reference, though) Ottati states that “Reformed theologians affirm that all things in nature and history are caught up into an *intricate web* of divine power, presence, and purpose.” In line with the cosmic intent of religion referred to above, he proceeds: “This is what renders the many a *universe*” (Ottati 1996:54, first emphasis mine).

The conclusion is clear: Insofar and where globalisation assumes the character of a religion, it needs to be resisted and confronted with a theocentric ethics. The implication for the people of God is a renewed vision of the law as constitutive for their very existence as a community¹² and as an identity-confirming narrative in times of change and transition. Where loyalties shift to other gods, and “the story of the law” is no longer faithfully transmitted in word, liturgy and (especially) a life *coram Dei*, identity and moral orientation is lost.

Globalisation: A Challenge to Households of Life-in-Communion

Challenged by the processes of globalisation, a very important reinterpretation of *oikoumene* (the whole of the habitable earth) and *oikodome* (building up of community) occurred in ecumenical circles. This came about as the former ethical concerns of Life and Work (“ethics”) and ecclesial concerns of Faith and Order (“church unity”) converged in a number of studies¹³ that emphasise that the core challenge of globalisation is the nature of the household or households we create and belong to.

¹² See Patrick Miller’s discussion of identity and community as well as the actual features of such a community constituted by the ten commandments (Miller 2002: 57ff).

¹³ See for example the publications and later comments related to the well-known “three costlies” emanating from three conferences: Costly unity (Ronde, Denmark 1993), costly commitment (Jerusalem 1994) and costly obedience (Johannesburg 1996). The three final statements were published in 1997 as *Ecclesiology and ethics* edited by Thomas Best and Martin Robra. “The titles (of the three consultations) reflect a progression of ecclesiological reflection and deepening of moral concern: from realising that ‘the unity we seek’ will turn out to be *costly unity*; through recognizing that ‘a *costly unity* requires *costly commitment* to one another’ as Christians and as churches: To admitting that it is, finally, not a matter of programmes and

Whereas the first ethical challenge above relates to the sovereignty of God (and concomitant moral claim of God on our lives through the law), the second relates to the type of community or communities we build amidst the claim that we now live in a “global village.”¹⁴

This is expressed in no uncertain terms by the Johannesburg delegation (see footnote 13):

Moral issues, formerly seen as having to do mainly with personal conduct within stable orders of value, have now become radicalized. They now have to do with life, or the death, of human beings and of the created order in which we live. *Before we can even speak of a 21st century “global civilization” life together on this planet will need shared visions and institutional expressions for which we have few really relevant precedents.* As Christians we speak of an *oikoumene*, or inclusive horizon of human belonging, offered by God in Jesus Christ to the human race. Following the scriptures we call this a “household of life”, a “heavenly city” where justice, peace and care for creation’s integrity prevail (Best & Robra 1997:51-52, my emphasis).

The challenge is for the church to be one such “precedent” or “institutional expression” of a life-centred spirituality and ethics (Raiser 1998:34) and of a moral community known for true koinonia. (To avoid sectarian notions of the church, we need to keep open the vision that the church is smaller than the kingdom and but a sign thereof: Christ is head of the church but also a cosmic king as beautifully depicted in the early Christian hymn, reflected in Colossians 1:15-20).

Let us relate this with our exposition in 2.2 above: How could the church – in the light of cultural injustice and burden of unselfconscious living – be such a moral community? The answer is simple: By following Christ.

One can construe the incarnation as a “linguistic” event: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by this Son ... through whom he made the universe” (Heb 1:1). This is obviously reminiscent of the prologue to the gospel of John (and a reflection on the word-event of creation in Gen 1). When Israel over many centuries (“at many times and in various ways”) could still not “hear” God, God made the magnificent linguistic turn of a word (Word) that became flesh (John 1:14) to speak the human language in multiple senses (1 John 1:1-2) through his sympathy with our weaknesses (Heb 4:15).¹⁵

But this divine linguistic turn is only possible on the basis of a specific attitude: Christ did not cling to his nature of being God and did not grasp on to his equality with God, but made himself nothing in his humble self-donation, even to the death on the cross (Phil 2: 5-8). Those who are in Christ consider whatever was to their profit as a loss (Phil 3:7); they are new creations (2 Cor 5:17); they have been crucified with Christ and no longer live, but Christ live in them (Gal 2:20).

institutions, even ecumenical ones, but of a *costly obedience* to our calling to be one and, as one body of Christ, to serve all humanity and creation” (*Ecclesiology and ethics* 1997:ix, original emphases).

¹⁴ The notion of a “global village” is deeply ambiguous: On the one hand it depicts the reality of a shrunken world through global communication and virtual closeness like you would find in the traditional rural village; on the other hand this village is highly exclusionary (think of the digital divide!) with false senses of belonging, and imbued with assymetrical power relations.

¹⁵ The Pentecost as birth of the earliest Christian community is not without reason described as an event in which the well mannered Spirit in search of cultural justice enabled a speaking in the diverse known languages of those gathered in Jerusalem.

It is only because Christians no longer take their natural identity dead seriously and find their new consciousness in Christ and his self-donation, that a community of (cultural) justice becomes a possibility: Through baptism all have been clothed with Christ. Therefore: “There is neither Jew nor Greek (cultures); slave nor free (classes), male nor female (genders), for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27-28). Theologically speaking, cultural justice is not so much the result of re-claiming minority or indigenous rights, as the vision of a Christ-like household “...where fully realized human identities and values, far from being forgotten, meet in search of graciously shared abundance of life. This household welcomes all the different human cultures, identities, and interests, including our own” (Mudge 1998:140).

This is also the vision of the Belhar confession,¹⁶ borne in a situation of radical cultural injustice; under conditions of pluralism gone wrong; in the face of a suppressive, homogenising socio-political system. Following the teaching of the Heidelberger Catechism about the communion of saints, Belhar believes that, due to Christ’s reconciliation, “the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the variety of language and culture, are opportunities to reciprocal service and enrichment in the one visible people of God” (Belhar confession: Statement 2, my translation).

Here we enter the realm of eschatology and even the apocalypse. I close with two magnificent biblical passages where the idea of the household of God extends beyond the people of God and the church to all of creation:

Under severe depressive spiritual conditions, about 40 years before the fall of Samaria, proto-Isaiah sees the vision of the magnificent kingdom. Divisions and life-threatening enmities based on natural identities (wolf-lamb; leopard-goat; calf-lion) are overcome through a radical transformation of those very identities (lions eat straw and children put hands in the viper’s nest). There will be neither harm nor destruction, “... for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Is 11:6-9).

Under conditions of persecution and a seemingly hopeless situation for the second generation Christians, the apostle John sees the vision of a truly global community (truly global and truly in communion) before the throne of God: “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb... and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst.” (Rev 7: 9, 15).

Whilst we live under the ambiguities of a globalizing world – marvelling at its opportunities, but at the same time despairing at its consequences – we nurture these visions as narratives of a radically other world made possible by the knowledge of the Lord.

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¹⁶ The confession was adopted in 1986 by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church after acceptance of the ecumenically endorsed *status confessionis* on apartheid. For the English text (original in Afrikaans) and initial explication, see Cloete and Smit: *A moment of truth* (1988).

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