

Living Faithfully in a Rapidly Changing World

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The word or name "CPJ" always rings a bell for me. It gives me somehow a warm feeling. I like its engagement for those who are poor and its concern for the environment, now for many years. And all that without putting self-interest first. For that is perhaps the heart of each deep Christian social and political commitment, it is about justice and not just us, as my dear friend Gerald Vandezande chose so nicely as the title of his challenging book.

You and me, we have not met or seen each other for many years! And that brings me to talk about some important recent changes in the world of today and that includes some disturbing developments. We are all committed Christians, and so feel the urgency of dealing with what now happens in the world and in Canada from a joint Christian point of view. What to think, for instance, about the economic crisis here and now, what about changes in globalisation, and what to think about the revolts in so many Arab countries? Is there perhaps some kind of a link between all of these processes?

But let us try not to make it too complex from the very beginning. My suggestion is to ask ourselves firstly the question of which important changes are taking place within the process of globalisation itself. Then we can easily add some other developments to the picture.

Globalisation is not at all a static phenomenon. It is, so to say, in perpetual motion, constantly on the move. And that confronts us all here tonight with the puzzling question of globalisation's current direction. To what, where is it heading? Is it a breeze or a hurricane? Is it a direction which we can also applaud from a Christian world view?

If we restrict ourselves to developments since the turn of the millennium, I think that it is possible to describe the most relevant changes shortly in terms of five characteristics. The first is the role of newly emerging powers. The second is the phenomenon of the growth of new worldwide scarcities, considering also the context of climate change. The third is the recent remarkable process of a new Arab awakening, which collides to some extent with the process of globalisation itself. Fourthly there is the role of a worldwide growing indebtedness, and finally the growing role of money in our societies.

Then we have surely enough material to draw some general conclusions, which I hope are inspired by an unbroken Christian sense of hope and faith.

1) Emerging Powers

The emergence of new global markets and new economic powers is no doubt a very important change in the present world economy. Think of China, India and Brazil; some also add Russia because of its huge natural resources. Together these are the so-called BRIC countries. Their power is on the rise, while

others, like the US economy and also Europe, are to some extent losing their present economic and financial dominance.

This process of emerging and declining powers is one that should interest us. It looks a little bit like the story of changing empires in the book of Daniel. Our whole concept of a so-called "third world" is, for instance, now shattered by this new pattern of emergence and decline. You can no longer put China and Zimbabwe in the same category. The "third world", if we still want to use the term, is now more suitable for the dimension of deepened and still deepening poverty which we now find in almost every state in the world, even the richest ones.

Globalisation has many features. But one feature - that of a more equitable distribution of income and wealth - is still entirely missing. According to the latest statistics world poverty is once more on the rise.

2) Bilateralism and Growing Scarcities

A second characteristic change in the processes of Globalisation is far less known, but no less important. It is the rise of two-sided bilateral relations between countries in response to newly rising worldwide scarcities. Of course, all of us have heard about the growing deficits of resources, the shrinking usable part of the environment and shortages in the energy sector. On the one hand this is caused by a rapid growth in world demand because of the world's population growth and the rise of per capita consumption. But on the other hand the needed supplies are not growing at the same pace. Peak oil is of course a prominent example of this. But there is also a rapidly growing divergence between demand and supply in the food sector. New shortages are already being reported with sharply rising prices. A growing number of countries have become aware of this, and they are trying to secure their future supply of food. It is a process that goes across the entire globe. Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute in New York recently gave interesting examples of this trend:

- The Philippines, a large rice importer, has negotiated a three-year deal with Vietnam;
- A delegation from Yemen travelled to Australia for a long-term wheat contract;
- Egypt has recently reached a long-term agreement with Russia for the import of more than three million tonnes of wheat each year.

What does all this mean? Two things. Firstly, we can say that there is now a growing awareness of the future limited availability of food and fossil energy with not always peaceful consequences. Consider the growing tensions between Canada, Russia and the USA about oil under the ice (or water) of the North Pole. Scarcity-conflicts and deals between nations are now substantially growing, with the poorest countries almost surely the big losers in the future.

Secondly we learn that national self-interest has found a new way of pushing itself to the fore. The underlying message is this: in no way will we ever accept any constraint of our vital interests, especially not of the interest to secure for ourselves a high degree of economic growth. For that goal is sacrosanct.

3) The revolt in Arab Countries

Perhaps you think, hearing this: hey, Bob, all those revolts in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, they are no doubt important, but are they also a part of changes in globalisation? Yes, to some extent they surely are! Did you for instance not observe that young people are now involved in these protests, and that they all communicate via SMS and websites on internet? Without the global dispersion of modern western technology all these protests would not have grown as widespread as they now do.

But what will all these young people choose? Will they also choose democracy? An even more intriguing question is if they will also adopt an anti-globalistic and anti-Western attitude. Three wars are or have already been fought in the Muslim world by Western powers to safeguard their future energy-supply: the Gulf War, the Iraq war and now the Libyan war. Will the young Arab generation continue its support for the West, like Saudi Arabia does, or now follow another, more critical line? And what will then be the consequence for the energy supplies and the energy prices in the West? Even the Canadian tar sands could then become a very tempting asset in the coming worldwide conflicts over energy.

4) Growing Indebtedness

A fourth change that we encounter in globalisation's characteristics is growing indebtedness. This is especially the case for and also within the richest nations. Since 1980, an enormous rise of consumption took place, for instance, in the USA. But that enormous rise was not achieved by a corresponding rise in wages. No, it was facilitated by an explosion in credit.

Household debt rose from \$680 billion in 1974 to \$14 trillion in 2008. The average American family has, at this moment, now no fewer than 13 credit cards. \$14 trillion is also the amount of the enormous public debt of the US government. How long can this endure? Christian Hedges draws in his book *The Empire of Illusion*, draws the only possible conclusion. I quote:

America seeks to perpetuate prosperity by borrowing trillions of dollars, which it (however) can never repay. (Hedges, p.143).

This kind of money-oriented enrichment cannot continue indefinitely. And not unrelated to this, poverty in the US is also growing rapidly. There are now more than 36 million Americans who have to cope daily with hunger, a rise of 3 million since 2000.

5) The Lordship of Money

Above, I used the term "money-oriented enrichment", and that brings me to my fifth and last characteristic of changes within globalisation. It is the growing lordship of money in our economies.

The creation of more money should of course serve the real economy. But it now looks as if it is just the other way around. The real economy of goods and services has become more and more dependent on the whims and volatilities of money and money markets.

A critical analysis of the global economy over the last five years leads inevitably to the conclusion that it is now money in the form of huge financial markets which sits on the throne of the global empire, and implements its lordship over the real economy. Joseph Stiglitz explains in his most recent book *Free Fall*

how in recent years the big banks easily took the lead in injecting an enormous amount of speculative money into the economy, and so caused the present financial and economic crisis. It was their greed which to a significant extent brought on the crisis. But remarkably these large banks were also the first to be saved by the government! And now they have been brought back to their throne, and try to regain their dominion over the real economy via, for instance, hedge funds which infringe directly on the control and management of several industrial corporations only on the basis of loans given to them by the major banks.

Let us now for a moment try to summarize what we have found. The five changes which I outlined are remarkably all about the ups and downs of dynamic economic growth. Growth is the heart of the emergence of new economic powers, but its continuation is also a matter of deep concern for the richest nations, leading them to bilateral policies and, if needed, military conflicts. Growth is moreover paralleled by a severe increase of indebtedness and has also led to a delegation to banks of a leading societal role. These are changes which might seem distinct but of course have a lot to do with each other.

And here we enter another level than the level of current processes. It is the level of changing *cultural* patterns and attitudes. There are two common major characteristics that I would like to distinguish. Perhaps they together can bring us to a deeper understanding of what is really going on.

First common characteristic: globalisation hardens

Firstly, it is inevitable to conclude that globalisation has apparently begun to *harden*. At first it seemed to hold out a prospect of fluid development. But now it becomes, more and more, a power struggle and a hurricane in which the poorest groups and countries are very easily pushed aside.

But what is behind this hardening of almost all international relations? I think the major factor here is fear, especially on the side of the richest nations. They see the threat of the rise of new power-blocks in the world challenging not only their power, but also taking away a lot of their employment. As well, the rich countries also seem to be on the losing side in their access to future scarce resources. No wonder that fear begins to reign. And fear surely contributes to an overall hardening. Fear, for instance, about the possibility to continue their high standard of living in the richest nations based upon a continued high economic growth rate. This goal is so essential for them that they are indeed willing to fight for it and to push for it by all means.

Second common characteristic: the growing power of illusion

But there seems to be even more at hand than this process of hardening. There is also a second element, the growing significance of *illusions*.

Illusions can take on great significance especially in times of fear and deep insecurity. For illusions allow people and nations to believe what they like, instead of taking reality seriously. In his book, which I already mentioned, *The Empire of Illusion* Chris Hedges convincingly defends the thesis that the distinction between illusion and reality in our time is increasingly blurred. We live in a culture of

entertainment of illusions, which, as Hedges underlines, is a matter of utmost seriousness. For a culture that can no longer distinguish between reality and illusion dies. Even more interesting for us is his final conclusion, I quote:

The cultural retreat into illusion is a form of magical thinking. It turns worthless mortgages and debt into wealth. It turns ... destruction ... into an opportunity for growth (p. 190).

Magical thinking? Could it be that indeed magic plays a growing role in our time? Like Faust dealt with in Goethe's great drama of Doctor Faustus, who sold his soul to the devil, just to be able to rule the world via the power of self-created money?

Money is indeed a strange thing and an almost magical item. Money represents value, but only as far as we collectively believe in it. It can indeed create the illusion of continued progress and of growing power over others. And it was that illusion which played a crucial role in the outbreak of the recent global financial crisis. The banks, the speculators, they simply believed in the endless growth made possible by money.

Monetary greed and illusion, illusion and growing indebtedness are moreover very closely related. Debts form the illusory path along which we can perpetuate our desires, even if it is in fact a perpetuation of what is no longer possible! Our desires will prevail right until the moment that money breaks down on harsh reality.

Illusion, the cultural base of an endless continued money creation, still exists, especially in the USA. China is still willing to buy US treasury bonds and debt-papers, but for how long? It is not imaginary that sooner or later the US dollar will go down and even further down. Remember how Germany, at the close of the First World War, also became involved in rampant inflation, followed by state bankruptcy.

Two cultural trends I have tried to sketch for you, the trend of a continuous hardening of international relations and the trend of still growing illusions. But there is of course the real risk, and it is a serious risk that these two trends will go further hand in hand. The two trends which I mentioned can go on working together and strengthening each other right up until the moment of an abrupt and massive collapse. The main problem of our time seems thus not its lack of idealism, but its lack of realism. Of understanding our own history in this, God's world, in a mature, responsible way.

But what is a truly Christian view and response in times like these? That of course is the crucial question which we now find before us. Are we indeed confronted with a new inevitable course, a fate as unavoidable as a falling night or a powerful hurricane over a beloved country like Canada?

The Last Dimension

To take that question seriously we have to add one other dimension to our picture. It is the almost forgotten dimension of religion, faith, and ideology.

At first sight it may seem as if religion has nothing to do with all these trends or common characteristics. But almost nothing is less true. Do you think that the power of illusion, just like the power of magic,

simply stand on its own? And do you think that the unlimited pursuit of one's own material happiness is just a neutral attitude? Of course it is not. But I also hope that you see that views, goals, and attitudes formulated in this way also look like goals and attitudes of last resort and thus may be seen as expressions of obviously living ideologies, while continued illusions have always had something to do with narrowing views which so easily originate from serving idols. Did not John Kenneth Galbraith already say several years ago: "A rising standard of living has become an article of faith in Western societies"? Winning the whole world but at the same time losing one's own soul looks now to be a crucial message which is not only valid for persons, but also for nations on the brink of losing their power and leadership.

Let me say it otherwise. A deep relationship seems now to develop between an increased hardening of policies and what René Girard, the French Christian philosopher has called a growing worldwide hurricane of desire. A hurricane which can catch you alive, and from which there is almost no possibility of escape. Somehow Western society has already fallen into the grip of its self chosen gods. If it does not awake, they will be allowed to feed further illusions and can bring us to the madness of fighting for all that we want to have and to maintain at all costs and by all possible means. Self-chosen gods will however depart, as idols always do, at the precise moment when we are most vulnerable.

That is no doubt a hard kind of diagnosis, with also a hard message involved in it. But do you also share the common belief, that there is no longer a way out of the present impasse, and that the world is now inevitably nearing its own abyss? No, of course I hope not. Please let us also observe the message of hope and perspective in this hard message. Indeed, illusions can take us into captivity and idols can leave us at the most critical moment. But we can also decide to leave them, say goodbye to them, and break through the power of deeply unrealistic illusions. We can remain childish, but also become culturally, economically and religiously mature!

There is not a fate working here. But I have to add that this insight of true hope can only be expressed and maintained if the richest nations, and that included us, somehow come to their senses by seeing and confessing, that all these alarming developments find their utmost base in a false religious background.

René Girard, as I noted already, compares our present global situation to a hurricane of desire and greed, going across the world, seducing all nations. But each hurricane, he suggests, has also an eye, has a centre of silence, blue sky. What is this centre? He uses two flashing words to describe it. Firstly it is *love*. For in real love the inter-esse, the goods between us as persons and nations which so easily lead us to envy the other, just fall away. Love makes room for what the other needs, leads to sharing. And his second word is: *following*. That is a deeply religious word, related to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But it is used by him in contrast with the lust to endless imitation of other persons and nations in their quest for more material richness.

The willingness to follow sets us free from those desires. Indeed, nations can make room for other nations' basic needs, instead of endless imitation and rivalry. In Psalm 2 the rulers of the nations are summoned to bend to the Lordship of the Messiah and to follow His rules of justice, and stewardship *for*

their own good. That is parallel to what Girard says here. The obedience to the Son of God sooner or later has to replace the endless imitation which is implicit in the hurricane of desire and greed.

To be captivated by illusions is indeed extremely risky. But we should never forget that illusions are never as strong as reality itself. God is the Lord of reality and He is still present in it. The gospel of John, Chapter 16, gives us a strong picture of this presence. It is in the court of human history that the Holy Spirit is continually testing and judging nations and civilizations. There is still today an element of judgment present in world history, moments of judging the aggressors and oppressors. Judgement is not far away from nations which find their lust in oppressing others, in serving money as their god and violating God's creation.

But there is, happily, an opposite side. Philip Potter, the previous secretary of the World Council of Churches, called it once 'God's own globalisation'. The biblical reference is what Paul once wrote to the church of Ephesus about God's own administration of times (the Greek has here for "administration" a derivative of the word economy). Our living God is still active to prepare the world for the coming of his Messiah-King. It will be a Shepherd-King who will stand at the end of world history. But we all know that a Shepherd does not rule according to survival of the fittest. He rules according to survival of the weak.

We have to live out that future now, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted. We have to share our bread with the hungry now, and abstain from the bitter fight to reserve the world for ourselves. Money should not be allowed to guide us and to govern us, for only Jesus has the right to rule over our lives. So, my final conclusion is, that In Him and in His pastoral rule of the world the nation of Canada can still find its realistic and hopeful escape.

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