

Otto KROESEN

# From Empire to Globalization and Oecumene

*In present-day discussions about globalization it is often not quite well understood what kind of process we are involved in under this label. Anti-globalists point to the negative aspects such as large-scale pollution of the environment, persistent poverty, and unjust power relationships.*

*Those in favour of the process point to worldwide competitive prices, a global market, progress in China and India, and to the fact that there seems to be no alternative. It seems, however, as if the emerging world society is a huge ship heading towards disaster, and nobody can find the steering wheel.*

*What is the dynamics behind this emerging worldwide market and society? Is it possible that we might find the steering wheel and give it the right direction, if we adopt a larger perspective—even encompassing thousands of years of world history?*

*This article starts with the old empires, like the Egyptian, in contrast with the Biblical story of Moses and the children of Israel, seeking a higher justice. Then follow some aspects of the revolutionary Western history, in which the endeavour began to revive this imperial tradition while avoiding the violence and oppression present in it. Finally, we might have a better understanding of the ambivalent character of the globalization process and a better judgement of what there is to promote in it and what to resist.*

## **Egypt Against the Tribes: The Encompassing Character of an Empire**

If one looks at the images of the Egyptians depicted in the old temples of this empire, they all look the same. Some are bigger than other ones. Of course those were more important. But all of them are depicted somewhat stiffly with their chest towards the observer, not very relaxed, but definitely in function.

These are very stylized figures; even their clothes are stylized, with few marks of individuality, and the one who takes a closer look might be struck by the fact that they show makeup, but certainly no tattoos, on their naked bodies.

Does this forebode the uniformity of our future global society? In Egypt these functionalized bodies without tattoos meant a conscious opposition to the tribal life before the constitution of the Egyptian Empire, in which the tattoos showed to which tribe one belonged.



Compared to this tribal life form, the constitution of the Egyptian Empire is a major achievement. Imagine how the tribes would have lived in the valley of the Nile. Of course these were very fruitful areas, but unexpectedly the river Nile might start rising, often very quickly.

Suddenly, it might cover instead of an area of a few hundred meters an area as wide as thirty kilometres and in this way all the villages where the tribes lived would be drowned. All of a sudden everybody had to leave and it takes little imagination to assume that many conflicts and struggles between the tribes would arise in this predicament.

What the Pharaohs and their priests achieved was replacing the tribal system of ancestor worship and mutual hostilities by the imperial system, in which the Pharaoh reigned instead of the ancestors and in which thousands of people along thousands of kilometres along the Nile were united in one social system, top-down, hierarchical in the literal sense.

The Pharaoh on top was a son of the gods and his priests were at the same time his civil servants. It was as if the state system and the church were fused into one. Of course, it was the other way around.

It would last some thousands of years before the state (as a secular state) and the church would be distinguished from each other and form separate institutions. In Egypt as in all empires the secular order is also the religious order, since there is no other order to obey.

A key aspect of this social system was flood control. In this respect the star Sirius, which roundabout 2700 B.C. appeared in July above the horizon, played an important role. If this star started being visible above the horizon in the morning next to the rising sun, it meant that the river Nile would begin to rise.

With the help of the course of the stars, the Pharaoh and his priests invented the agricultural calendar and from then on people started to live within the confines of a divine cosmos in which the Gods (the *heavenly hosts*) regulated the life of ordinary mortals.

During three months of the year, as long as the flood of the river Nile lasted, the Egyptians would work on the pyramids and other building constructions of the Pharaohs. After that the farmers would start working each on their own little pieces of land, which were divided among them by the priests of the Pharaoh.

Looking at the stars along the river Nile made it possible to obey the same calendar along these thousands of kilometres and turned Egypt into the granary of antiquity even during the Roman Empire.

In reaction to the tribal life in Egypt, tattoos were forbidden as well as ancestral worship. Instead, from that point on the ancestors themselves were supposed to be judged in the afterlife. Thanks to Egypt and other empires, labour division and functional behaviour within large production units became lasting achievements in human history. No wonder that both labourers and civil servants were depicted in stylized functional postures.

From this origin also the Biblical idea of a heavenly kingdom arose. The claim and ambition of the Egyptian Empire, as well as other empires, was to unite all people on Earth. And at the beginning of the Egyptian Empire, when all the tribes along the river Nile were united, one can easily imagine that the people of that time believed that the whole world was there.

It was only later that they discovered the world to be much bigger, after their imperial system was copied and alternative imperial systems developed in many other places. But even to us the term *Empire* still has the ring of this claim in it that eventually it will include and should unite all people all over the world. This eschatological longing is also present in the Biblical term *Reign of God* or *Kingdom of Heaven*.

Looking at it from this perspective, one might already pose the question: what does it mean, that this promise of Egypt which accompanied the empires throughout world history (including the Chinese Empire, which claimed to be universal too), in the XX<sup>th</sup> century is realized by the system of world states, after all remaining emperors were deposed (the German emperor, the emperor of Austria, the Tsar of Russia, the emperor of China, while the emperor of Japan was only left with an ornamental function)?

### **A Closed World: The Prophetic Criticism from Israel**

What started off as a new achievement in world history, as so many times happens, soon became an oppressive force itself. The Egyptian Empire after a while turned all human beings into production units (and consumption units, as far as it went) under central state control.

The eternal problem of empires has been that in the end farmers only existed to be squeezed and that within the hierarchical political system no differences and no dissident voices were allowed.

Sooner or later this made them run into a deadlock, into rebellion and the installation of another dynasty, which was supposed to restore justice. This was not only the problem of imperial China, but also already of Egypt and Babel, as it is also quite acutely shown by the Biblical story of the opposition of Moses and his brother Aaron to the Pharaoh.

As well it is reflected in the story of the Tower of Babel, which was destroyed *by God* (who had to come a long way from Heaven to take a look at this small tower) with the help of the differences in the languages people spoke.

It is striking that the story of Noah tells about a big flood which was overcome by the ark, a ship in the form of a pyramid, into which every human being had to enter in order to survive, but which should also be left exactly after one year (the calendar, dates and times, as well as measurement yardsticks are abundant in the story of Noah).

The message might be that also the prophets of Israel considered the imperial system of Egypt to be a necessary phase in history, but that it should not be treated as the end of all wisdom. After one year (is it a symbol of the great year of 1460 years, in which in Egypt, not counting with intercalary days as we do, the stars would appear on the same spot again in heaven?) everybody needed to leave this system.

Just as Abraham was called upon to leave his city in Babel and look for a justice which was not guaranteed by the agricultural calendar and the stars of Heaven, but which was invisible and yet to come—the promised land.

To Israel the God of justice is the God of the future, invisible in the present, but coming towards us if we prepare the road of justice (Psalm 85). Always the prophets of Israel have criticized the powers that be, criticized their own system of kings and imperial power, which also tried to introduce the agricultural calendar in Israel in the form of the worship of Baal and his heavenly hosts, the stars.

The criticism of the prophets means that the future, which is unknown and unexplored and not experienced yet, has more normative value and should be trusted more and have more weight than the visible powers of kings and emperors alike.

### **Church History: From the Margin to the Centre**

As compared to the tribes and the empires, Israel initiated a new life form, a rather impossible one indeed. Tradition and authority was what counted for the tribes. Those living in the present were still ruled by the deceased ancestors, whom they always tried to reconcile by means of their gifts and offerings.

The cyclical calendar of agricultural life in the empires of Egypt and elsewhere can be considered as an eternal present, repeating itself each year. Both life forms were denied by Israel, taking its inspiration from the future.

The future is not a prolongation of the past. The real *future tense* in human speech is the imperative, as it is also the shortest and maybe oldest form of the verb. The imperative for love and justice is the guiding principle of Israel.

It is an impossible principle and actually not a principle at all. A principle can be guaranteed by princes and authorities, but novelty, new ways of life and a higher justice, do not have any guarantee. They depend on the ones who believe in them.

In a certain sense this leads to a rather negative attitude of the Old Testament prophets. They always point to a future beyond the present by criticizing the injustices of those in power. The synagogue took its position on the margin of history, criticizing and waiting.

After Jesus Christ the New Testament Church took over the heritage of Israel, but from now on the arrow would point in the other direction, *from the margin to the centre*. Instead of criticizing and waiting, the Church puts in action a process of constant change.

The Church looked back from the future to the present in order to change it. The criticism of Israel was transformed into a process of gradual change of the *status quo*. The Jews who joined the Church stopped with circumcision and were allowed into all kinds of professions which were prohibited in the past, but they did not leave these old traditions of tribes or empires unchanged and unchallenged.

It has often been stated that the Virgin Mary replaced the heathen goddesses of fertility and that many saints of the Church replaced the old heroes of tribal life (and gods in mythology), but in both instances the adaptation also meant a change.

A bridge was created between the old life forms of the tribes and empires and the future of justice promised to Israel. This could only be done in a process of constant regeneration and self-denial, always prepared to leave old traditions behind in order to take the next step in the process. It meant a life of self-denial, which was also a life of constant regeneration and rebirth, in the footsteps of death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So many times it has been said that Judaism and Islam constitute a way of life, and then by extension it is supposed that Christianity would merely introduce a belief system. I would contend that Christianity means a way of life too.

It means the constant process of self-denial and rebirth, cross and resurrection, in

which the tension between the status quo and a future life of justice and integrity is turned itself into a way of life.

But it does not seem to be a life form, because it is not static, it gives no identity. What it gives is the constant giving up of a fixed identity. It is always on the move, constantly changing the face of the Earth.

## The Roman Catholic Church and the Nation States of Europe

The very division between the secular and the religious sphere is a creation of this life form. The Church of the Middle Ages introduced a distinction between *temporalia* and *spiritualia*, a division between temporal authorities and eternal ones.

The Church could not do away with the powers of the state, but it took away the religious reverence for emperors and other political authorities by the very name *state*, which is connected to *status quo*, the situation as it simply happens to be.

You might have to accept it, but it does not have the final word. *Spiritualia*, however, meant those things which the Church should not accept, in which change was urgent. The Church of the Middle Ages, for instance, did not accept marriages arranged by the tribes.

They wanted to break the power of the tribes by means of freedom of partner choice for the future couple and administration of marriages by the Church. The tribes resisted heavily and the outcome was a compromise, where the earthly possessions of the future couple would be dealt with under tribal law, but the marriage itself would be bound by the Church and in Heaven.

The separation between Church and state did not start with the French Revolution as it is supposed so many times, but by the initiative of the Church itself during the Middle Ages. Under the jurisdiction of the state those aspects of life would be subsumed which could not be changed for the moment, but had to be withstood.

And it was the business of the Church to change those aspects of life which were at the present moment ripe and open for change. In this vein monks and nuns started to introduce new methods of agriculture, building, education and medical service and all kinds of different civilizing work.

They became so efficient in organizing people that everything beyond the sphere of the military power of the Emperor and nobility finally was in the hands of the Church. In opposition to that the nation states of Europe gradually started to take over this administrative authority of the Church. In this respect the Reformation (Germany), the Commonwealth of Great Britain (Great Rebellion and Glorious Revolution) and the French Revolution were important milestones.

## Unity and Multiformity in Europe

The very distinction between the sphere of the secular and of the sacred or religious is a Christian invention. In a process of constant regeneration the *status quo* always becomes secularized and robbed of its authority.

The future at the same time is always stormed with religious zeal. The peculiar thing is that even the secular revolutions, in which nation states took over the power of organizing society from the Church, were conducted with religious zeal.

This leads and has always led to a dialectic between unity and plurality in Europe. In the Middle Ages the unity of Europe was strived for over and against the dividing powers of the tribes and local warlords.

The Roman Catholic church took the lead in creating this unity, which consisted in a shared quest to bring future justice on Earth. After the Middle Ages the nation states developed a plurality of ways towards that future, which still was the unifying force behind them.

But from that time on the different nation states developed a different national lifestyle, adopting different principles and human qualities, by means of which the future justice should be realized.

In *Germany* the high nobility took the lead. The princes of Germany took over the administration of society, but accepted checks and controls from the side of the Church in the form of the constant advice of theologians and jurists.

Conscious responsibility, discipline, thorough criticism, scholarship and freedom of profession became the human achievements by which the German principalities and cities were organized.

In *Great Britain*, however, the lower nobility took the lead. They gathered in the House of Commons and enforced their legitimate powers upon the King, who could from that point on only make decisions with their consent.

In their opposition against the King (for which the expression the *most loyal opposition* was used) it was important for the Commons to preserve unity. Team spirit, public spirit, trustworthiness, loyalty and tradition became the human characteristics by which Great Britain was organized.

In *France*, at the same time, ordinary civilians took over the lead against both the King and the nobility. From then on no special privileges would be granted, but each individual would have a say only thanks to the authority of her or his own sincerity, naturalness and reason. Public opinion, passionate speech, reason, sincerity and human rights protecting the individual became the historical achievements by which France was organized.

In *Russia* the planning mentality, organizing production by means of totalitarian calculation in order to meet the needs of the masses, became the peculiar characteristic. These characteristics and human qualities were reflected in institutions which supported and maintained them, and these characters and institutions were also inherited by other nations and cultures.

France took over the civil servant system from Germany at the beginning of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, after Louis XIV gathered the rebellious nobility in Versailles. The Western democracies, including the United States, adopted massive state control and economic planning from the USSR after 1930 during the Great Depression.

England borrowed the principles of the French Revolution by means of the Industrial Revolution during the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, avoiding as much as it could that its political system would also be affected by it, in which it did not succeed after all.

All in all we can conclude that the economic and political organization of larger territories in Europe was not achieved merely by totalitarian power seizures, although many revolutionary groups would not have hesitated to do so, if they could.

But instead it was achieved by a plurality of institutions and human types and systems of law, constantly influencing each other and interfering with each other against the background of a shared drive for realizing future justice on this Earth. Globalization is the fruit of this process and should be understood within this perspective.

Compared to the Egyptian Empire, the system of states in the present world has no central authority which would be in control of each and every thing. There is no hierarchy, but rather a plurality of forces, mutually adapting to each other, and in search of a common future.

It is actually the drive forward, the belief in an impossible future, which becomes realized by the mere force of this belief, that has opened up the cyclical imperial system from Egypt to China. This drive forward constituted the revolutionary spirit throughout Western history and initiated time and again new trials and errors as well.

And for that reason also new institutions, new historical achievements and corresponding human qualities were initiated. Because of this thrust forward the plurality within the Western world meant more than just a process of mutual adaptation.

It has always been also a process of mutual interpenetration and recognition, mutual reception of each others' contributions by an often painful dialogue. Painful, because it was not without conflict.

The multiformity of Europe was not the result of tolerance, but much more the result of intolerance. On the basis of a common quest for future justice, however, the struggling parties were forced to listen to what the other one had to say, even if they did not like it. This is the political way of loving *thy enemies* in Western history.

## **Worldwide Economy and Æcumene: The Great Dialogue of Humankind**

Now what do we gain from this historical perspective on globalization? The first thing is that even the deficient worldwide economic and social system of states of our times is the provisional result of the combination of unity and plurality of Western history.

It is undeniable that the present system of states is derived mostly from the West. That does not mean, however, that it is justified that the West dominates the rest. In contrast, it is futile to talk about globalization and about open markets, if in fact only a few big players are in control of the market.

But it still is the thrust forward and the accompanying plurality, which is constitutive and indispensable for the process of globalization itself. This Judeo-Christian drive forward took possession of the whole planet in whatever superficial and distorted form.

But it still is most certain that the different civilizations and nation states will not tolerate each other, if each of them considers its own religious or cultural heritage as the final word and therefore as an absolute.

Only if history is not finished yet and if nobody can consider her or his traditions as an absolute, can civilizations and individuals have something to say to each other, something to which the other should listen too.

The acceptance of the Judeo-Christian thrust into the future as the driving force of civilization for that reason is conditional to any form of globalization and to the opening up of human civilizations and individuals for each other.



Since this thrust is behind the process of globalization, the open market and the system of states, it is not very helpful if people oppose the process of globalization because of the negative aspects of it.

In my view the anti-globalists should not long for a past which has never existed, but instead they should look further into the future as their opponents do. They should not beg for less globalization, but for more.

An open market can only function on the basis of equal rights and equal opportunities, not only for the big players, but also for small ones; and that requires minimum wages and some sort of social safety net and a shared system of law all over the world.

An open society is a society in which a plurality of cultural heritages can enter into the *great dialogue of humankind* in the common search of what is true and human and truly human, a conversation which may not be blocked or controlled by anyone in advance.

It is not true that the system of production or the economy or society in general is organized separately from the cultural values, historical achievements and human qualities which originated in human history.

These historical achievements and human qualities in turn are conditional and constitutive for an economically viable, sustainable, just and peaceful society. In this process, every human quality and historical achievement which has once brought peace in the past, somehow will have also a role to play in the future.

#### **Suggested Reading**

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