

**Globalization and Grace: A Christian Public Theology for a Global Future**

Max L. Stackhouse. 2007. Volume 4 in *God and Globalization: Theological Ethics and the Spheres of Life*. New York: Continuum. ISBN 978-0567114822, \$39.95.

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This is a coherent, engaging, assiduously rooted treatment of Christian theological aspects of globalization, the capstone to a four-volume series overseen by the author.

Portions of many chapters have appeared earlier and elsewhere, and Stackhouse co-edited and contributed 145 pages of introductory synthesis to the first three volumes of the series on God and globalization.<sup>1</sup> Here the master allows all his prior scholarship and that of his school for scholars to “rise,” to marinate, to season. Stackhouse then blends it into a *pièce de résistance* for life.

That is glorious in the sense of fruitful culmination. And glorious also as a survey of the ethics-of-globalization field. It may perhaps dismay only critical readers who want this volume alone to persuade—those readers need at least the first three volumes as preparatory courses.

Why should disciplinary economists place this volume toward the top of their to-read stacks? After all, Stackhouse’s conception of globalization is expansive, and economic “powers” are only a sibling to familial, political, and cultural powers, *all* of which are experiencing globalization. And economics is not even a favored sibling or the one on whom modern destiny is shining. A first answer is that economics is disciplined and bounded, perhaps even humanized, by the other powers in Stackhouse’s treatment, without which it becomes idolatrous, even cannibalistic, even demonic (the author’s words). A second, more precise answer is that the familiar institutions of economics—the modern corporation, innovation, market inter-dependence, enforceable contracts, and laws such as those banning coercion (slavery)—all depend on an “ethos” that already embodies centuries of Christian teaching, thinking, experimenting, and re-thinking. So Stackhouse argues.

So economists should listen up! If you are just beginning to integrate faith and discipline, think first of those “spheres” of life that should be normatively insulated from economic incentives, distortions, and temptations. If you are further along, think deeply

about distinctively Christian institutions that could embed grace, creativity, forgiveness, hope—for example, bankruptcy or micro-lending circles. For both groups, the book is a perfect primer, and Stackhouse is a caring, constructive coach with infectious exuberance.

Stackhouse's style is refreshingly literary. Bridging material appears at the beginning and end of each chapter to remind the reader of the "mental map" that orients the argument. Opening and closing chapters of the volume do the same, inclusio-like.

But the content is rigorous, logical, and often familiar to economists.<sup>2</sup> Stackhouse argues, in a broad causal chain, with duly acknowledged roots in Max Weber, that religion affects culture and culture in turn affects institutions. Then he sharpens and tightens the causal logic: Christian doctrines affect contemporary culture, and contemporary culture in turn has shaped institutions—institutions like constitutional democracy, human rights, freedom of assembly, pluralist civil society, firms and markets—that we unreflectively take for granted as "givens." Then he speculates that Christian doctrine could do the same for cosmopolitan culture and global institutions.

And he posits that it should! This is Stackhouse's normative argument, springing from this causal account. There is common grace in these institutions, creative, providential, hope-full grace (his words). Of course there is also corruptibility. Yet careful theological reflection on nourishing the graces and starving the corruptions should undergird an applied social ethics—he nests his position in the broad "public theology" movement—that will have universal appeal. The institutional results of these charismatic ethics will be themselves a globally common grace, birthing an ordered cosmopolitanism, a "new public" for the new world.

The theology underlying this hope and its companion logic is striking, and it will be less familiar to most economists. Theology fills the middle two thirds of the volume, beginning with a chapter describing the nature and history of "public theology." Notable first in this chapter is Stackhouse's conviction that an expansive global public theology can be deliberated and shaped to guide and discipline the growing global civil society, to then baptize it with an "ethos," and by grace, even a civilization. Though the deliberation would involve the core of all the world's major faiths,<sup>3</sup> Christian theology would have a natural leading role in the deliberation. This second and controversial assertion is explained and defended at

length in the chapters that follow.<sup>4</sup> Third, and especially notable for economists, Stackhouse raises the “economic public” to the same level as the religious, political, and academic publics in critically reflecting on the deliberation and institutionalizing its consensus.

Though hope-filled and charismatic, there is no dreamy romanticism, no fuzzy ecumenicism anywhere in this volume. Stackhouse precisely characterizes each of his important conceptions and uses them consistently throughout his discourse (genetically-axiomatic economists will be delighted). He links transcendent and other interpretive traditions in a magisterial synthesis of the common, providential graces of covenant, vocation, and critical evaluation (“wisdom”), and then argues (in a penultimate chapter) that in Christ all of those graces are renewed and re-energized in (the grace of) hope. The hope lies for this globalizing world in preparing for the next, but differences among faiths in eschatology will not impede the development of a globally relevant social ethics for the global here and now.

Stackhouse is merciless (intellectually) toward fellow theologians and social ethicists who are unschooled in history, oblivious (“studied blindness”) to the Christian roots of alleged devils like globalization, and syncretistic (e.g., in fashionable radicalism and older Marxian class analysis). He dismisses opportunistically constructed civil religions as illegitimate (p. 55), and post-modern theological posturing on globalization as “notorious ... thin on data, and [drifting] toward Gnosticism” (pp. 83-84, 195-196).

So what are the volume’s weaknesses? There are not many. Exemplary coherence insures some repetition and some loss of cogent pithiness. Exemplary scope involves some anomalies: Judaism is treated only implicitly in all four volumes as Christianity’s “mutually [influential] ... sister faith” (p. 55), and there is only the most fleeting reference to the globalization of crime (p. 198). For economists there is inadequate illustrative detail, e.g., on the likely profiles of the new institutions of his “[evangelizing] social gospel ... of globalization ... [as] the new form of missions” (pp. 201, 246, *passim*).<sup>5</sup> The volume’s index is haphazard and lean, perhaps one eighth of the length it should be. And some weakness is just unavoidable. For example, Stackhouse finished just prior to the bursting of the Euro-American financial bubble, the ensuing crisis, and the ongoing “Great Recession.” The reader will wonder what, if anything, Stackhouse might alter with the hindsight of these last few

years.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the author himself rises from these pages as sharply as his ideas do. This incarnation is more than a curiosity. He means for his graces to be institutionally incarnated. In urging them on the reader, Stackhouse reveals himself to be a consummate scholar and public intellectual, an irenic blend of theologian, historian, social psychologist, and lifelong pastor of the Christian gospel. Who would not want to listen? It is impossible to come away from this warmly polymathic tour de force without awe. The most fruitful awe is the reader's conviction of how demanding is the personal preparation for comprehensive and definitive scholarship that integrates faith and discipline.

It has been a number of years since I have so enjoyed a book of contemporary scholarship. Those of you who think of me professionally as impatient and irascible should take due note. Others, too, should read and ponder this volume as a fitting tribute to Max Stackhouse and his lifework, embodied boldly here.

### **Endnotes**

1. These were published in 2000, 2001, and 2002 and have been reviewed by Chaplin (2003). The bulk of volume 3 is devoted to chapters on globalization and Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and tribal religions. Volume 2 is devoted to the increasingly global professions ("authorities"): education, science, and technology; medicine and health care; law and human rights; ecology and environment. Volume 1 is devoted to fundamental "powers" of society — family, government, culture, and commerce. Unlike Stackhouse's own volume 4, under review here, William Schweiker's theological chapter in volume 1 is anguished and economically-uninformed.
2. Among books by economists, both style and content remind me of Nobel-Prize-Winner Robert William Fogel's *The Fourth Great Awakening & The Future of Egalitarianism* (Fogel, 2000), though Fogel's purview is American.
3. With characteristically wry ambiguity, Stackhouse references the "deep continuity of religious belief among most populations of the earth" and that secularized "skeptics are shocked!"
4. The middle three chapters describe the three "graces" of Creation, Providence, and Salvation. Here are familiar theological

themes, such as grace common to all humankind in the image of God, created-for-creation (the cultural mandate), but fallen into distortion and dysfunction. Here is a breathtaking hermeneutical exposition and application of Genesis 1-11 to the quest toward a contemporary ethos for global civil society, elegant and persuasive, with a bit part even for the division of labor. Here is a discussion of the prevalence in all major religions of covenant (as distinct from contract or constitution), of common vocational “callings” (prophet, priest, politician/king, professional sage), and of the remarkably overlapping “wisdom” scholarship that interprets and refines the institutions of covenant and vocation.

5. Illustrative detail would season the stew of phrasing like “‘principled pluralism’ ... [of] covenanted communities of discipline, entrustment, excellence, and responsibility ... in federated dialogue” (p. 212).
6. And the first three volumes were finished just as “civilization clash,” as famously forecast by the late Samuel Huntington in the mid-1990s, became apparently real before our eyes. Stackhouse wrestles better with this, devoting almost half of this volume’s chapter 1 and much of chapters 5 and 6 to why Christian hope trumps civilization clash, in principle and practice.

### **References**

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