Book Review: GloboChrist

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No longer is religion making such expectations of its adherents, Twenge and Campbell allege; it has merely become a means to fulfill one's dreams. Such is the sad indictment upon those who ought know better.

The authors must be applauded for being plucky enough to prescribe a chapter-full of suggested treatments for narcissism, "the fast food of the soul" (p. 259). Briefly, one must avoid the epidemic, cut off the spread, and quarantine the disease. Humility, Twenge and Campbell aver, is the opposite of narcissism, and they recommend "religion," where values such as love, compassion, community, and forgiveness are espoused—elements sorely lacking in a narcissistic world. One of the refrains encountered in this book is that the home is the primary locus where the epidemic may be nipped in the bud. In addition, education itself must be reformed with the elimination of the emphasis on self-esteem, and media must change with the projection of community values, and with priority given to humility and not on self-exalting, on saving and not on consuming.

Twenge and Campbell confess, "We realize that this level of change is probably a pipe dream" (p. 292). It probably is. On the other hand, Christians, particularly those who hold to the inspiration and inerrancy of the Word of God, have a greater responsibility in this matter and stand a better chance of realizing positive change. When the secular press points an accusatory finger at self-centeredness and its threatening consequences, pastors, teachers, and laypeople of every stripe would do well to heed its warnings. Not that we, who were exhorted millennia ago not to look out for our own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Phil 2:24), needed any goading. Resisting the progress of this epidemic is crucial, lest a greater implosion of character and culture take place. May the words of Paul ring in our ears: "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment... Do not be haughty in mind" (Rom 12:3, 16). Wise words, indeed.

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Carl Raschke’s latest book, part of Baker’s The Church and Postmodern Culture series, is offered as a wake-up call for the American Evangelical church. Raschke calls on his American Evangelical readers to move beyond parochial battles and provincial visions of mission and evangelism, so as to embrace a more powerful vision of the living, growing body of Christ in our postmodern, postsecular, and globalized world. The term “GloboChrist” is Raschke’s way of referencing the truly global reality of the church, both as it has always been and as it is becoming more and more visible in today’s world. The book attempts to convey an accurate and attractive sense of the body of GloboChrist by mapping the rapidly changing territory of the “globopomo” world, and by describing what the church might look like as it also becomes globopomo in fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Thankfully, Raschke does not handle the postmodern turn in exclusively epistemological terms, as many popular Christian authors have been prone to do. Instead, he develops a much broader picture of the postmodern turn, following the Russian political scientist D. A. Silichev in treating it as principally an issue of the emergence of “global polycentrism” (p. 27). In other words, for Raschke, postmodern culture is not the result of some kind of trickle-down economics of ideas, from the French university system to
American politics and pop culture. Rather, for Raschke, following Silichev, postmodern culture is what one gets when patterns of globalization develop into “a world community minus a world state and world governance” (citation of Silichev; p. 27). This global reality might very well entail certain shifts in epistemological theorizing, especially for those rooted in the Western intellectual tradition. More significantly, however, global polycentrism involves reconfigurations of political, economic, technological, social, and religious patterns (to name but a few), even for those who have never even heard of epistemology. If Silichev is correct, and the postmodern condition is a function of globalized social and political conditions, and not merely a set of esoteric philosophical theories, then Raschke is correct to observe that “no one can refuse to be postmodern any more than one can resolve to live completely as people did in the seventeenth century” (p. 27).

In other words, postmodern culture must be understood as the unavoidable reality within which contemporary Christians must figure out what it means to be faithful incarnations of Christ.

To do this, Raschke is convinced that we must understand and be able to navigate the emerging global plurality, and this requires that we come to grips with the ways in which religions are proliferating in our increasingly post-secular times. The mavens of enlightenment have always assumed that cultures would gradually outgrow the need for religion, finding, as they become enlightened, that needs once met by religion are better satisfied by robust participation in global free-market economies and democratic political systems. As such, the prophets of secularization have said, religion will come to play less and less of a role in both national and global politics, economics, and culture making. But, Raschke notes, while it might have been possible for some to entertain such hopes even as late as the 1990s, the first decade of the twenty-first century has decisively demonstrated that religion is not going anywhere anytime soon. Indeed, religions are proliferating, growing in not only in number, but also in numbers of converts and in influence in global affairs. Both Christianity and Islam, for example, are growing globally at a rate faster than global population growth (p. 36), and religion is now an integral part of the responses of indigenous peoples to the global spread of consumer capitalism. As people in local cultures feel threatened by the homogenizing and Westernizing forces of globalizing capitalism, many cling ever more tightly to local and traditional customs, languages, and styles of dress, art, and food. And they often return to, or entrench themselves more deeply within, indigenous or non-Western religions. Thus, it seems that as the global and the local collide, it is actually the secularist outlook that is called into question, not religion. The postmodern world is increasingly religious and post-secular.

For Raschke, this fact should cause the American evangelical church to reassess both its “fateful alliance with consumer culture” (p. 107) and its ongoing battle against secular humanism as the main enemy of the church. He thinks that the primary challenges facing today’s global church will come not in the form of a battle with the forces of secularization, but in the form of a global “clash of eschatologies,” between Christianity and Islam, as Islam is increasingly seen as the religion of choice for many of those who wish to resist the imperialist spread of Western consumer culture. To meet this challenge effectively, the American Evangelical church must break loose from its consumerist attitudes and values and begin to embody the fact that Christianity is more than just a cultural export of the West, like McDonalds, Coca-Cola, and Disney. The American Evangelical Christian church must become globopomo, an active participant in the global church, a part of the worldwide body of “GloboChrist.”

The body of GloboChrist, a truly global postmodern Christianity is, according to Raschke, decentralized, deinstitutionalized, and indigenized. As such, it is also radical, relational, revelatory, and rhizomatic. The global postmodern church is decentralized in that it is not rooted in the West, with a centralized American/European church sending
missionaries to the global South and East. Instead, the radical church grows from a root commitment to God’s revealed word, a word that is shared by all the church and is not the exclusive property of any particular culture or tradition. This means that the global postmodern church is deinstitutionalized and relational, in that it functions as a multidirectional network of relational connections, communication, and mutual benefit across national, cultural, linguistic, and denominational boundaries. This network of connections is not centrally managed or organized, but develops rhizomatically, spreading like crabgrass in a decentered, interlinked pattern of connections between multiple unique individual growths. Raschke argues that the global church will be marked by diversity, not uniformity, and will grow by way of multiple, diverse connections made possible not only by channels of global capitalism, but also, and perhaps primarily, by pathways within local, indigenous cultures. The rhizomatic church will thus be an indigenizing church in which a multiplicity of cultural differences is preserved and redeemed, not eradicated and homogenized. Indeed, says Raschke, the doctrine of incarnation “entails a constant ‘translation’ of who God is into seemingly disparate and incompatible cultures. Christianity has no culture itself but belongs to all cultures. Incarnation is translation . . .” (p. 66). But the church’s indigenizing “translation” of the gospel into a plurality of cultures is not a relativistic “have it your way!” approach in which anything goes and everything is up for grabs (an attitude which Raschke calls “Burger King Christianity”). This is because the global postmodern church is also revelatory, which is to say that, because it is radically rooted in God’s revealed word, the church constantly and boldly calls for repentance and humility, a fundamental reorientation of individuals and cultures toward the revealed reality of the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom of God is far from relativistic, as it is grounded exclusively in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Raschke believes that Islam is also developing globally along rhizomatic lines, albeit with a radically different eschatology than that of Christianity. It is for this reason that he sees a “clash of eschatologies” looming on the horizon as both Christianity and Islam spread rhizomatically across the globe. As such, he urges those in the American Evangelical church to throw off their passivity and privatized sentimentalism in order to become active participants in the global postmodern church, suggesting that “the kind of radical, relational, and incarnational Christian witness that a postmodernized Great Commission entails would have the ferocity of the jihad and paradoxically also the love for the lost that Jesus demonstrated” (p. 131). Indeed, he suggests, nothing short of a passionate postmodern “church militant” (without a literal military) will have any hope of counteracting the global spread of Islam.

It is on this basis that Raschke ends his book by chastising both proponents and critics of the emerging church. He urges both parties to forsake their increasingly narrow focus on debates that have “degenerated into just one more skirmish in the ongoing culture wars” (p. 158), and he rightly points out that many of the topics which consume those involved in these debates have little relevance beyond the American and European contexts.

To those flirting with what he calls “Burger King Christianity,” those who might be uncritically equating a “new kind of Christian” with a more open and inclusive, less judgmental, less doctrinally rigorous, and easier-to-get-along-with kind of Christian, Raschke points out that such an attitude is simply a capitulation to the secularizing forces of globalized consumption, “which promises anything anytime to anyone so long as it is enjoyable, satisfying, and undemanding.” But, says Raschke, “to be incarnational in the most radical and eschatological sense . . . is diametrically opposed to Burger King Christianity” (p. 163). “The challenge,” he says, “is to be able to frame the non-negotiable truth of the Christian witness in terms that will have a genuine, planetary impact, where Christ will become GloboChrist once and for all” (p. 148).
To those who react strongly against the emerging church, Raschke points out that the litany of charges typically leveled against postmodernism and the emerging church seems to be nothing more than a repetition of the charges brought by cultural conservatives of prior generations against secular humanism and existentialism. Raschke suspects that such charges have little to do with “postmodernism as either a philosophical or cultural development,” but instead stem from a fundamentalist outrage that “their view of religiosity is shared less and less by the public at large, that they have failed to persuade anybody except their own minions, and that non-Christians are allowed to immigrate and believe whatever they want without constraint or coercion” (pp. 155–56). In response to such fears, Raschke challenges the assumption that relativism is on the rise or is a real threat to the church. Instead, he encourages those who fear postmodernism to follow the lead of those in the early church, who, filled with the love of Christ, waded fearlessly into the relativistic pagan culture of their day and boldly confessed Jesus Christ as Lord, apparently without feeling anxiety about the influence of relativism and apparently without feeling the need to argue against relativism as a prolegomena to Christian witness (pp. 153–54).

To both sides of the current debate about the church and culture, Raschke has this to say: the church today “must no longer take its cues from the twilight broodings of the West or from American culture wars. It must become the incarnational church that knows no cultural boundaries. It must become the global body of the GloboChrist, the shining bride waiting on her groom and standing fast in the promise ‘until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time’” (p. 167).

Whether or not readers agree with Raschke’s specific claims or with his overall apocalyptic vision of a “clash of eschatologies,” his book is a valuable challenge. The series of which this volume is a part is designed to answer questions such as “What does postmodern theory have to say about the shape of the church? How should concrete, in-the-pew and on-the-ground religious practices be impacted by postmodernism? What should the church look like in postmodernity? What has Paris to do with Jerusalem?” (from the Series Preface; pp. 8–9). Raschke’s book certainly does spur us to think in fresh ways about these kinds of questions, and no small part of its value is found in the fact that he treats the postmodern turn as something more than just an epistemological issue. That alone makes the book a necessary and valuable contribution to contemporary evangelical discussions of postmodernism, as Raschke issues a desperately needed call to American Evangelicals to move beyond the culture wars and to stop chasing the red herring of epistemological relativism.

But I think that the main value of GloboChrist is not to be found in its response to the question “What has Paris to do with Jerusalem?” because Raschke’s references to contemporary theorists such as Derrida, Deleuze, or Vattimo, or to disciplines like semiotics, are simply not developed enough to be of any real help to the reader. To be sure, the ideas of a good number of contemporary thinkers do indeed lurk behind the scenes of this text. But for readers not already familiar with these contemporary writers, the disciplines within which they work, and the jargon they employ, the traces of their writings visible in Raschke’s text are just too sketchy, and the theories themselves are too complex and nuanced, to bear much fruit in a short work like this one. Rather than looking to GloboChrist for this kind of benefit, I would contend that we should instead read it for the value of his answers to the question “What has Jakarta (or Seoul, or Mumbai, or São Paulo) to do with Jerusalem?” That is to say, Raschke’s book can serve as a catalyst to readers to explore further the ever-changing face of the global church, pushing us beyond ill-informed and culturally-constrained ways of thinking about the church. With passion and clarity, Raschke guides his American Evangelical readers into a bigger picture of God’s work in the world, and in doing so, he helpfully introduces his readers to important thinkers like Vinoth Ramachandra, Lamin Sanneh,
and Philip Jenkins, who have been working in recent years to help readers in the West develop a more accurate picture of the global church. If any reader of this book is inspired to pick up works by these writers, or others like them, then Raschke’s purposes will have been accomplished at least in part, as his work will have helped to form new rhizomatic connections between Christians around the globe.

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