MISSION IN THE POST COLD WAR ERA
CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE 21st CENTURY

Laurenti Magesa

The paradox of the last quarter or so of the 20th century, which seems sure to continue well into the 21st, appears to involve two distinct but related areas in the socio-cultural life of humanity. One observes, on the one hand, a heightened sense of awareness and strong sensitivity among peoples of their cultural and religious identities or even distinctiveness. This feeling may not be articulated clearly in each and every case, but it is easily noticeable. On the other hand, however, and almost diametrically opposed to this, are the forces in the contemporary world that attempt to collapse together world cultures and attitudes into one uniform system of living and outlook on life.¹

This is the fact that contemporary men and women have to face: we are living in a time when, surely as never before in the history of human existence, the world has been brought together by science and technology into something like a single household. 'The global village' is now more a reality than just a figure of speech. It is hardly possible today to conduct politics or economics, or to live out one's religious belief, for that matter, or even to lead one's person's own private life without being influenced in some way or other by the global reality. Every human being today, either individually or corporately, must willingly or unwillingly interact with other larger realities than the family, the village and the nation. We may call this larger reality simply as 'the outside world', the world outside the narrow confines formerly characterized by these social groupings and organizations.

Accordingly, the movement in the political, economic and cultural areas to constitute the world into a global village has correctly been called 'globalization'. As E.S. Atieno Adhiambo explains it:

¹ For a discussion of this process from a theological and cultural point of view, see Robert J. Schreiter, The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local, Maryknoll/New York: Orbis Books, 1997, esp. chapters 1 and 4, 1-27 and 62-83. For an understanding of the dynamics of culture, see also the entry by Tomoko Masuzawa in: Mark C. Taylor, (ed.) Critical Terms for Religious Studies, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, 70-98. The list of suggested readings and references at the end of Masuzawa's article will be found useful for a deeper understanding of this issue.
As a discursive trope, globalization has become a term of fact, a catch-all phrase that recognizes the great cross-cultural and tricontinental commotions marking the beginning of the twenty-first century. The markers are familiar and include at its core, the emergence of a global economy that has become institutionalized through global capital markets and globally integrated financial systems, global trade, and global production networks. The emergence of this global economy was premised on the development of a technological infrastructure regarding transportation and the generation and circulation of information; it has become infrastructurally dependent upon the spread of global communications networks and the systematic use of the radio, telephone, fax, computer and satellite facilities for the generation and dissemination of information. These technical advances have made it possible for the world of advertising to spread the 'Culture-ideology' of consumerism that transforms the public mass media and their contents into opportunities to sell ideas, values, products: in short, a consumer world view.²

This movement is by now pretty much well known to everyone, and its effects are felt by people and analyzed by experts all around the globe. But it is the very phenomenon of globalization itself that contains the paradox we face today. For while as an attempt to homogenize humanity it is growing stronger, there are at the same time emerging everywhere forms of resistance against it which are equally strong, and all too often these assume violent manifestations.

Examples are all around us to show this, so that it is enough here merely to list a few of the most obvious ones. The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an example of violence originating in cultural-religious differences. The ultra orthodox Jews in Israel (and elsewhere) use the Bible to legitimize their political and religious claim on Israel itself and parts of contemporary Palestine, and in the conflict with the Palestinians they often invoke memories of the Holocaust in defense of their political position. The Palestinians, on the other hand, will not give up what they consider as holy sites for Islam, some of which, such as the whole city of Jerusalem, Israel claims exclusively for itself. They especially resent the encroachment on their territory by Israel through the latter's policy of building Jewish settlements on the West bank of the river Jordan. Both parties realize very well that there can be no military solution to the conflict short of genocide, and that they depend on each other for economic survival. But it would seem that before the two peoples recognize sincerely and fully each other's cultural-religious identity and its right to exist as such, there can be little hope of this conflict coming to an end in the foreseeable future.