

## The Dark Side of Globalization

Researchers warn that globalization not only introduces new ideas, but undermines good ideas that are regarded as too provincial.

Several years ago readers of newspapers across the country were shocked by pictures of shrouded corpses, each fitted with new tennis shoes absurdly protruding from their dark blue covering. This was the heartbreaking culmination of a ruthless policy of social and physical disruption that had lasted for almost 20 years. These were the lifeless bodies of an unusual group called "Heaven's Gate," a techno-savvy group whose transformed members believed they would be the vanguard of a new humanity and a new age. Sadly, their religious jumble of technology, physical denial and science-fiction salvation led to the death of its 39 members.

But is this the fate for only a few atypical, misguided people? Scholarly researchers don't think so. Sociologist Lorne L. Dawson sees such groups with their "extreme social mobility, through their mastery of the World Wide Web, to their ideological focus on the transformation of the whole human species and its global consequences" as what happens when "globalization" meets new religious movements (Dawson 1998). And if this is the case, more groups like Heaven's Gate will be on the horizon.

To paraphrase author Jan Art Scholte, globalization is the emergence of international or supranational social relations (Scholte 1996). And in the religious world, it is oftentimes the aberrant splinter groups such as Heaven's Gate, that are adapting their message more quickly and nimbly than the church.

Heaven's Gate proliferated because it offered a globalized view of salvation, albeit a salvation that supposedly would come from a cloaked spacecraft hiding in the train of the Hale-Bopp comet. While farfetched to many, the Heaven's Gate belief offered a globalized view of religion, technology and salvation with humanity eventually resuscitated by alien rescuers.

But why hasn't the church been successful in sharing its message in the milieu of cultural globalization. Primarily because for two millennia the church has been adapting the Good News into the language of varying sub-cultures. We have in fact, indigenized the gospel. But now there is arising another culture, a globalized or supranational one, and the church has been slow to change gears. The provincial cliquishness and distinctive of our indigenizing efforts has made us appear to be clannish, constrained and outmoded.

**REALITY IN ACTION POINT:** Church leaders must recognize that contact with a wide variety of varying cultures will introduce a broad range of practices and beliefs. And not all of these practices and beliefs will run counter to the Good News and theological integrity ... but some will. Herein lies the challenge, to transform culture without embracing morally damaging beliefs and practices. Missionary researcher Charles Kraft advocates that "culture, therefore, is seen as corrupted, but convertible, usable, perhaps even redeemable by God's grace and power" (Kraft 1979). For two millennia this has been the duty of the missionary, but with the proliferation of a globalized world-wide culture, this obligation is now the responsibility of every church leader.

The globalization of our economies, through twenty-four hour, round-the-world financial markets; the globalization of our communications through the far-reaching convenience of the Internet; and the globalization of ecological concern due to planetary climate changes; now forces every church leader to think globally and carefully about the best procedure to adapt the

message without compromising the content. Church growth author Eddie Gibbs summed this up best when he stated, “(God) acts redemptively with regard to culture, which includes judgment on some elements but also affirmation in other areas, and a transformation of the whole” (Gibbs 1981).

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