

The Second Century is Closer than You Think (Part 1 of 2)



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History has changed since I first began studying it more than fifty years ago. And this is not simply because now there is half a century more of it. (Most of us have heard the story about the caveman saying to his son, “Joey, how can you have failed in your history class? After all, there is only one page of it!”) It is true that in the last fifty years many important events have taken place, and that these too must now be included as part of history. But the changes to which I refer are much more profound.

Just to give an example, when I first read the second-century writings of Ignatius of Antioch, I was directed to ask what he said about the incarnation, about the Lord’s Supper, and the like. And that was what I found in his writings. Then, many years later, when I was interested in the manner in which the early church dealt with matters such as poverty and physical need, I found an Ignatius that I had not noticed in those early readings.

When I entered my first course on church history during seminary in Cuba almost fifty-four years ago, I was under the impression that the goal of history was the objective telling of the past. I soon discovered that, as modern historians read their ancient counterparts, they did so with a critical eye, taking into account the perspectives, biases and agendas of those ancient historians. Thus, for instance, I was soon told that when Eusebius wrote his *Church History* he was trying to prove that, just as God’s purpose in giving the Law and the Prophets to Israel was to prepare the way for the advent of Christ, and just as God’s purpose in giving philosophy to the Gentiles was to open their way to the gospel, so had God given the Roman

Empire as a preparation for a new order in which the Empire would join the church —as was happening in Eusebius’s time.

But we were told that this was a matter of times past, before history had developed as an objective science. Now we supposedly had standards and criteria by which to achieve an objective rendering and interpretation of history. The books we were now studying were scholarly, objective, pure uninterpreted facts.

In a certain sense, this was true. At that time, we had two textbooks —both in English, even though only two of us in the entire class could read English. Our main textbook was Kenneth Scott Latourette’s *A History of Christianity*, a volume of fifteen hundred pages in relatively small type, and packed with names, events, and dates. As a briefer backup, we had Williston Walker’s *A History of the Christian Church*, a book about a third the size of Latourette’s, but even more densely packed with names and dates. Surely, this must be about as objective as you could get! All I had to do was to read those books and I would know just about all I needed to know about the history of Christianity . . .

Slowly, however, I came to the realization that things were a bit more complicated. Both of those books —Walker’s more than Latourette’s— were written as if North-Atlantic Christianity, and particularly Anglo-Saxon Christianity, were the goal and culmination of the entire history of the church. Walker’s book began with the church in the East —as it obviously had to— but then, as East and West drifted apart, the East was generally ignored, with a bit less than two pages devoted to the Eastern churches in the Middle Ages, and another seven pages toward the end of the book. On the period of the Reformation, out of a total of 120 pages, nine

were devoted to the Catholic Reformation. And, after the Reformation, nineteenth-century Protestant theology in Germany was given more space than the entirety of Roman Catholicism.

But I did not notice all of this until much later. What I soon noticed was that my church and I, and the Christianity I knew, did not seem to be part of the story. And it was not only the relatively small island of Cuba, where I grew up, that was ignored. There was not even a mention of Brazil, Mexico, or Argentina —countries where even at the time when Walker wrote there were more Christians than in Germany or the United States.

In this respect, Latourette's book was much better. After all, he was also the author of a monumental *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, in seven volumes, and much of that history had seeped into his history of Christianity. Later, when as a graduate student at Yale I came to know him as "Uncle Ken," it was obvious to me that he had a passion for Christianity beyond the confines of the North-Atlantic —and particularly in China, where he had served as a missionary. But even so, his book still gave the impression that the most important events in the history of the church were those leading to Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, and then to its spread throughout the world.

In reading these two books, I became at once enamored and disgusted with church history. I became enamored with it, because it helped me understand so much of who I was and how my church had come to be what it was. And I was disgusted with it because it marginalized me and my church, making us an unimportant offshoot of the really important trunk and branches.

This was the reason why —as I have often retold— I approached my professor of church

history begging him to write a history of the church from our perspective, that took our issues into account, and that did not make someone else appear to be the true culmination of Christianity. He simply threw his arm over my shoulders and dejectedly told me that the conditions of the market were such that this would never be done.

The reason why I am retelling all of this is simply to make a point: The great change that has taken place in the field of church history in the last fifty years is not so much in its content as in its view of itself. Now we acknowledge that, while factual accuracy is important, total objectivity is not possible. History is not just the telling of the past. It is the telling of the past from the historian's perspective.

To put it bluntly, history is not written from the past, from beginning to the end, but also and even more so from the present, from the end of our experience, to the beginning. This should be obvious but needs to be emphasized lest we forget it. I am interested in the history of Christianity because I am a Christian. And something similar is true of every historian, both secular and religious. Someone studies the history of the pharaohs of Egypt because he is interested in that subject. And someone else studies Mayan history because she is interested in the Mayans. These interests are not absolutely objective. Were it so, then everyone would have the same interest in Egypt and in the Mayans. At some level, conscious or not, there is something in each of these historians that connects them with the past —one with the pharaohs and the other with Mayans. Perhaps the one who studies the Mayans is fascinated with the mystery of their abandoned cities, or perhaps she is interested in astronomic observations and their connections with religion and architecture. Perhaps the Egyptologist is

interested in the religious significance of mummification; or perhaps he is interested in the social order of ancient Egypt. But one thing that neither of them can be is disinterested. No matter how much they strive to see Egypt or Chichén-Itzá as they were, they cannot see them with total detachment. Somehow their present —their likes and dislikes, their questions about the meaning of beauty and of life— are inseparable from their historical research.

All of this is to say that, as I now study the history of Christianity, I am aware that this is history as seen from my perspective and from that of the community of which I am a part. It is not a purely objective account of events —even though I hope that for the most part it is a factual account. My study of that history cannot be disinterested. It is indissolubly connected with my present-day commitment to the gospel, to the church, and to its mission.

This is what stands at the root of our subject for these days, “The Second Century is Closer than You Think: Resources for the Twenty-First.” I have long been interested in the second century. But my interest in the second century has widened through the years. At first, when I thought of history as essentially a series of objective facts, I was interested in the second century as a way to open up the first century. In this context, I was —and still am— interested in the second century as a hermeneutical tool that could help us see new and different dimensions in the New Testament. In this sense, much of my interest in the second century was somewhat derivative, for its real focus was on the first century.

Now I am looking at past centuries with a different interest. Now as I look at any century in the past, I am profoundly aware that I stand in the twenty-first and that the questions I ask of the past are shaped by my present and by the future for which I hope —or which I fear.

This view —which many present-day historians share— has led to changes in the history of the church that are nothing short of cataclysmic. Just to give two examples, let us look briefly at the sixteenth century and at the nineteenth.

First of all, the sixteenth century: When I first studied church history, it seemed obvious that the great importance of the sixteenth century was in the Protestant Reformation and, to a lesser degree, in its Catholic counterpart. This was certainly the view of the two textbooks I have already mentioned. The Protestant Reformation was so important for Williston Walker that he devoted almost a fourth of his entire history to this one subject —to this one-and-a-half centuries out of nineteen.

Today, as I look back at that sixteenth century that I studied as part of church history, I cannot set aside the fact that the very same sixteenth century of the Protestant Reformation was also the century of Hernán Cortés, and of Francisco Pizarro, and of Francis Xavier. In 1521, Martin Luther stood before the Diet of Worms and pronounced his famous words, “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.” In that same year, Hernán Cortés took the city of Tenochtitlán and destroyed the Aztec Empire. Protestant historians writing in the North Atlantic did not consider this fact important for the history of Christianity.

And yet, today as we look at those two sets of events —the Protestant Reformation on the one hand, and the conquest of the Western Hemisphere and missions to the Far East on the other— we have to declare that the jury is still out as to which of these was more important for the later history of Christianity. Indeed, it is quite likely that by the end of this century most historians of Christianity will say that the most significant event in the sixteenth century was the

great missionary surge that took place in connection with Spanish and Portuguese colonial expansion.

Something similar has already happened with the nineteenth century. When I first studied church history, what drew most of our attention in the nineteenth century was the work of a series of Protestant theologians and philosophers, mostly German, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher and moving on through Hegel, Ritschl, F.C. Baur, Strauss, and Troeltsch. Such was certainly the view of Williston Walker, and the view reflected on most theological curricula. But already Latourette's book ("Uncle Ken's") gave indications that there were other events taking place that probably were at least as important as the work of those great theologians. In his monumental *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, he devoted three out of a total of seven volumes to the nineteenth century —which he called "the great century."

Today, as I look back at the twentieth century from the perspective of the twenty-first, it seems obvious to me that, great as those philosophers and theologians were and prevalent as their influence may still be, the event of greater consequence for the subsequent history of Christianity was not their work and the debates that took place among themselves, but rather the unprecedented expansion of Christianity, which has radically changed the world-map of Christianity.

Something similar has happened in my own view of the early centuries of church history. In earlier times, it was the fourth century that I found fascinating. This was a time of enormous changes in the life of the church, which in the course of that century went from being a persecuted minority to being the official religion of the Roman Empire. It was the time of the

great councils that shaped our Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead. It was the time of great Christian leaders such as Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzen, Macrina, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and many others.

I still find that century fascinating. I still believe that it deserves our attention, for much of what we are was shaped in those years. I still insist that we must know it, lest we fall into some of the same pitfalls into which many at that time fell.

But even so, I am becoming increasingly convinced that, given our present-day situation, we would do well looking more closely at the second century, for there is much in it that may help us understand the evolving condition of Christianity in the twenty-first and that may even give us some direction as to what our response may be to some of the most serious challenges of our time.

I thus invite you to look with me at the second century, and to do so, not out of idle curiosity, but rather thinking about our own century, how it is similar and how it differs from the second, and what lessons and resources we may draw from the experience of our Christians sisters and brothers of that past time, apparently so different, and yet not really so distant, from ours.

As we look first at the background in which Christianity moved in the second century, the first characteristic of that time that immediately comes to mind is its cosmopolitanism. Until a few centuries before the advent of Christ, the ancient world, particularly in the Mediterranean basin, had been one of the city-states. Egypt, on the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean, was the only large state. The rest was divided among a number of relatively independent

city-states, some more powerful than others, and many of them vying for hegemony over their neighbors. (In Homeric times it was Mycenae and Troy, then Sparta, Athens, Thebes, Syracuse, Tyre, Sidon, Carthage, Rome.) Several of these cities founded colonies along the coast of the Mediterranean, all the way to the Straits of Gibraltar, but still the basic unit of government was the city, and many former colonies eventually became independent city-states themselves. Then, in the fourth century B.C., Alexander the Great set out to conquer the world. As is the case with every imperialistic enterprise, Alexander has an ideological justification for the course he was taking. He would bring the benefits of Greek culture and wisdom to the benighted lands of the “barbarians.”

Significantly, however, the one element of Greek civilization that he could not export was the very notion of the city-state, for his enterprise required that the city-state be abolished in favor of a global empire that would rule the conquered and lead them in the process of Hellenization. Thus, the world that resulted from Alexander’s conquests was marked by its cosmopolitanism. But this is a word that needs some explanation, for in our common parlance being “cosmopolitan” means being sophisticated, unprejudiced, blasé. Etymologically, however, “cosmopolitanism” means a condition in which the civil and political order –the “polis”– has become the entire world –the “cosmos.”

It has often been remarked that Alexander’s career was meteoric and, like all meteors, ephemeral. But the impact of his conquests was felt long after his death. Politically, his empire was soon dismembered. But his influence was long lasting, for the city-state was never revived, and the cosmopolitanism born out of his conquests continued in the various kingdoms into

which his empire was soon divided. Centuries after the death of Alexander, at the time of the advent of Christianity, Greek was still the lingua franca of most of the Eastern Mediterranean. In Egypt, the land of the pharaohs, the ruling classes spoke Greek rather than the Coptic language of old. Even our own New Testament was written in Greek as a result of Alexander's military campaign.

The process of cosmopolitanization did not cease as the various Hellenistic kingdoms founded by Alexander began to wane, for their place was soon taken by the expansion of Roman power. The last of the Hellenistic monarchies came to an end with the death of Cleopatra in the year 30 B.C. Her great Roman rival, Octavian, commonly known as Augustus Caesar, still reigned at the time of the birth of Christ. Thus, as Christianity came into the picture the earlier cosmopolitanism of the Hellenistic kingdoms was being replaced by the new cosmopolitanism of the Roman Empire.

Even so, for a long time Rome remained fascinated by Greek culture. Since I have just mentioned Cleopatra, it may be well to note that her great attractiveness for both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony was not due only to her physical comeliness but also to the manner in which she combined, in her own person, both the ancient authority of the pharaohs and the glories and culture of Greece.

As a result of all this, the world of the second century was marked by its cosmopolitanism —today we would say, its globalization.

Many saw in this cosmopolitanism, and in the political and economic order connected with it, a great blessing to all of humankind. In the year 143 —and therefore right in the middle

of the second century– Aelius Aristides, a young orator from Smyrna, spoke the following words in the Roman Atheneum:

Praise to your city all men sing and will continue to sing. . . . You have everywhere appointed to your citizenship, or even to kinship with you, the better part of the world's talent, courage, and leadership, while the rest you recognized as a league under your hegemony. . . . Thus like an ever-burning fire the celebration never ends, but moves around from time to time and people to people, always somewhere, a demonstration justified by the way all men have fared. Thus it is right to pity those outside your hegemony, if indeed there are any, because they lose such blessings.

And many later historians would agree with him. Among them, Edward Gibbon, the celebrated author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, would say:

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed between the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman Empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom.

(As an explanation, one should note that Domitian was assassinated in the year 96, and Commodus came to power in 177. Thus, the period that Gibbons considers so glorious is precisely the second century.)

Yet not all was well in this cosmopolitan world. There were many who felt excluded from its glories and its benefits. One of them, a Christian by the name of John, was writing on the small island of Patmos practically at the end of the first century and addressing among others the church in the very city of Smyrna, the birthplace of Aelius Aristides. He saw the city of Rome, the center of the blessings that Gibbon praised, as a harlot seated on seven hills and drunk on the blood of the martyrs. And he gleefully announced the hope which he shared with

his readers that someday an angel would proclaim: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.”

The cosmopolitanism of the early Christian era did not include in its benefits all the subjects of the Roman Empire —much as today’s globalization does not include all in its benefits. To begin with, the rural population was generally excluded from any such benefits. Following the Greeks, the Romans were convinced that the greatest of human inventions was the city. Their own ideological justification for their imperialist policies was that they were called to “civilize” the rest of the world, which even etymologically meant that they were called to “citify” it. The land and the people who worked it —the *pagani*— were there to be exploited for the benefit of the cities and their rich dwellers. While the latter had all sorts of tax exemptions, the tax burden on the peasantry constantly increased —as did the exactions from the military. One result of this situation was that peasants left the fields.

Some fled to remote places to live beyond the reach of the global economy. These were called “anchorites” —that is, fugitives. They fled from the oppression of the existing economic order. Somewhat later, they would be joined by others who were fleeing, not from taxes and oppression, but from what they considered the perils of a world where being a Christian had become too easy. They, too, were called “anchorites,” and thus the term came to have the meaning it has today, of a hermit who withdraws from society.

Others moved to the cities, there to scratch out a living from odd jobs and the public dole. Thanks to the dry climate of Egypt, sufficient documents from the time have survived to make it possible to trace the demographics of the area under Roman rule. It is clear, first of all, that there was in Egypt a highly stratified society, with the Romans at the top, those of Greek

descent below them, the Jews below the Greeks, and the Copts or native Egyptians at the very bottom. There were detailed and strict laws punishing Copts who attempted to pass as Greeks or Romans. A Copt's place was on the land, to work it for the benefit of the city —where most Romans, Greeks, and Jews lived. One way to keep them on the land was to establish strict racial divisions. Another way was to pass laws determining where Copts were allowed to live, particularly excluding them from Alexandria, and pushing them to the edges of the city, from where they could enter the city only to serve the needs of legal urban dwellers. Such laws were enacted repeatedly, and in ever harsher terms. But the very need to pass such laws is proof that they were constantly disobeyed, and that the Coptic population of Alexandria grew. Even though they were there illegally, the very economic order of the city required their presence there, no matter what the law said.

From the rest of the Empire, records are more scant. But there is ample proof that under the Roman Empire there was a population explosion in most major cities. Already at the beginning of the period I am considering, Tacitus complained about the changes that were taking place. Tacitus himself was not a Roman, but what we today would call a “naturalized citizen.” He had prospered under Roman rule to the point that in the year 97 he had become a consul —about the highest rank in the Roman social and civil order. Yet, when he wrote his memoirs, he declared that through immigration Rome had become “a cesspool for all that is sordid and degrading from all over the world.” Tacitus himself had benefited greatly from the new economic order. But he did not see the connection between the flow of riches to Rome and the flow of population in the same direction.

One final example of the consequences of the new cosmopolitan order comes from the book of Revelation. For centuries, the region of Asia Minor had been one of the richest in the Mediterranean world. It's fertile land more than sufficed to feed all its population. Now that the territory had become part of a larger economic order, rich Roman senators and other investors began buying up the land, so noted for its fertility. Soon these investors discovered that land devoted to vineyards and olive orchards produced much higher revenue than the same land devoted to wheat and other cereals. The resulting profits were often reinvested in more land, which was also turned to the production of wine and oil. This came to such a point that late in the first century emperor Domitian attempted to limit the acreage devoted to vineyards and olive trees. But the uproar from the landowners and other special interests was such that the Emperor was forced to back down. It is against this that the voice in Revelation 6:6 protests: "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive tree and the wine." From what we know of the normal price of wheat and barley, the voice is protesting over a rate of inflation of 800% for barley and of 1,200% for wheat.

Such economic protests against the new economic order were often paralleled by unrest against the political order. Despite the much-vaunted *pax romana* —the Roman peace— the second century saw bloody revolts in Judea, in Egypt, in Syria, in Gaul, in Spain, and in North Africa.

The political order, however, was not purely one of outside oppression. As Aelius Aristides would say to Rome at the middle of the century, "You have everywhere appointed to your citizenship, or even to kinship with you, the better part of the world's talent, courage, and

leadership.” In other words, the Roman Empire was not sustained only by Roman legions marching through all its provinces. It was also supported by people in each province —often people of the nobility of the provinces themselves— whom the Empire appointed as its surrogate rulers. The case of the Herodians in Judea is well known to us. In a sense, they were people of the land, but in truth, they served the imperialist power from beyond.

No wonder then that, precisely at the end of the first century, a man standing on the island of Patmos could look westward at the sea from which came Roman governors and Roman edicts, and speak of a beast that rises from the sea. And he could then look eastward, towards centers of Roman administration such as Ephesus and Pergamum, “where Satan’s throne is,” and speak of a beast from the land that serves the beast from the sea.

But enough about the political and economic order. Let us turn first to the wider cultural conditions of the time, and then to how this affected religious life.

On the matter of culture, Hans Jonas has stated the trends of the period quite succinctly. According to him, the Hellenistic age may be divided into two periods:

. . . the period of manifest Greek dominance and oriental submersion, and the period of reaction of a renascent East, which in turn advanced victoriously in a kind of spiritual counterattack into the West and reshaped the universal culture. We are speaking of course in terms of intellectual and not political events. In this sense, Hellenization of the East prevails in the first period, orientalization of the West in the second period, the latter process coming to an end by about 300 A.D.

Note that Jonas places the end of this second period of Hellenism at 300 A.D., that is, precisely at the end of the second century. What took place during the first and second

centuries was a rebirth and a reaffirmation of ancient cultures that for some time had been submerged under the flood of Hellenism. Alexander had succeeded in conquering Egypt, and for some time that ancient land was flooded by Hellenism. But by the second half of the first century, and certainly by the second century, ancient Egyptian culture and religion were reaffirming themselves. Osiris was not only resurrected, as the ancient myth asserted, but he and his wife and consort Isis now set out to invade the rest of the Mediterranean basin. Even earlier, under Judas Maccabeus, Judea had reaffirmed its ancient traditions. Although the revolt was eventually quenched, not only did the reaffirmation of Judaism continue, but Judaism also became a proselytizing religion, it, too, seeking to invade the rest of the Roman Empire. Out of Phrygia came the worship of Attis and Cybele, which was introduced in Rome as early as 191 B.C. From Persia came Mithra, who soon gained the adherence of many in the Roman legions. Thus, Jonas is quite right in speaking of a “spiritual counterattack” of the East—a counterattack culminating in the year 300, that is, precisely at the end of the second century.

But this counterattack was shaped by the new circumstances, and particularly by the other side of the coin of cosmopolitanism: individualism. Paradoxically, as the world became more cosmopolitan, it also became more individualistic. In the small world of an ancient city-state, language, culture, traditions, rites, and religion were not a matter of choice for the individual. Before Alexander’s conquests, the language, culture, traditions, rites, and religion of individuals were generally determined by their place of birth. If you were an Egyptian, your religion was that of Isis, Osiris, and Horus. If a Roman, your gods would be Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, and their cohort. If a Jew, the Lord God of Sabbath, the sole God whose very name is

sacred. If an Athenian, Athena, Minerva, Zeus, and their company. This was simply as things were, and you had little choice in the matter.

But now, with the new global order, people, ideas, and gods travel from place to place. You may be an Athenian, but you now live in Rome. The prevailing ceremonies around you, and even the entire calendar by which your life is ruled, are Roman. Next to you lives an Egyptian who worships Isis and Osiris. On the other side, your neighbor swears by the blood of the bull killed by Mithra. Across the street, a Jew who tells you that he worships none of these gods, but the sole God of the universe. Which of these options you follow, and how you combine them, is up to you. Your ancient religion, no matter what it might have been, is no longer self-evident. You must make a choice. That is the nature of the individualism of the early Christian era.

Such individualism affects not only the people who have to choose among the various religions, but also the religions themselves. The worship of Isis and Osiris that spread throughout the Mediterranean world was no longer the same as the religion of the pharaohs. It was now a religion that one followed by choice, and not by birth. The same was true of Attis and Cybele, of Mithra, and of all the rest. The Judaism that spread throughout the Mediterranean was no longer the ancient religion of the Temple, led by priests and centered on sacrifices. It was more like the religion of the Pharisees, centered on the Law and on obedience to it. And—in another new incarnation of Judaism—it was the religion of Christians, who claimed that they too were descendants of Abraham, not by flesh, but by faith and baptism.

Yet such individualism presents an even wider array of possibilities than those listed above. Another possibility—and the one most commonly followed by people in the second

century— was to combine elements from various religions according to one's tastes and interests. Of all these religions available to people in the second century, only two demanded exclusive adherence to them: Judaism and Christianity. The rest, precisely because they were polytheistic, had no serious objection to a cafeteria-style approach to religion, where one could choose what one liked, and combine it with whatever else one liked.

Typical of the time was the novel by Apuleius of Madaura, *Metamorphoses*, also known as *The Golden Ass*. The protagonist of this strange work that combines the satirical with the picaresque and with the philosophical goes through life collecting bits of various religions as well as secrets of magic and of witchcraft, all of which is combined with a heavy dose of Platonism. Clearly, the hero is not satisfied with the religions of his ancestors and sets about combining it with whatever bit of wisdom —true or not— that he can glean from the various religions and beliefs he finds along the way.

This sort of syncretism was the dominant religion of the Roman Empire in the second century. The old gods of the Greek Olympus and of the Roman Pantheon still survived and often received official worship. But even they were now enwrapped in bits of wisdom from here and there. In terms of religion, cosmopolitanism took the shape of syncretism.

It was in this syncretistic, cosmopolitan world that Christianity was seeking to witness to Christ. Tonight, we shall see how the church responded to the challenges this presented. But before we do that, it is important that we see some of the parallelisms between that time and ours.

There is much in ancient cosmopolitanism that is similar to what today we call

globalization. There certainly are differences between the two —history does not simply repeat itself. In the first place, compared to today's globalization, the cosmopolitanism of the second century was a relatively localized phenomenon. It was far from being truly global, for it was limited to the Mediterranean basin and the areas near it. Secondly, the means of communication of our day are unparalleled, not only in the second century but even last year. If the cosmopolitanism of the ancient world was aided by Roman roads and by seas cleared of pirates, the present-day globalization has been aided first by older technological breakthroughs such as the steam engine, the telegraph and the telephone, air flight and jet engines; more recently by the internet, by e-mail, YouTube, MySpace and Facebook, and next week, who knows? And, thirdly, the present-day globalization has ecological implications that the earlier cosmopolitanism did not have. Today's globalization involves uncharted ecological perils and may even lead to global extinction.

But despite such differences, there are parallelisms worth noting. Today's globalization is producing untold riches. It is not unusual for a software guru or a cyberspace company to rise meteorically into the billions of dollars. In countries until recently considered extremely poor, industry is developing, and exports are bringing enormous financial gains to some. This is parallel to what was happening in the second century throughout the Roman Empire. But, just as the cosmopolitanization of Asia Minor brought wealth to some and misery to many, so does the present globalization bring unprecedented wealth to some and greater misery to others. Nicaragua may boast of the great amount of meat it exports, Colombia of its carnations, and the Philippines of its pineapples, but this has also resulted in less land devoted to crops to feed the

local population.

Just as in ancient times, the present globalization is also resulting in great migrations of people from the rural areas to the cities —not because there are so many opportunities in the cities, but because there are even fewer in the farmland.

Just as in ancient times, laws are constantly being passed all over the world to prevent the movements of people, to close borders. And, just as ancient times, many of those who abhor the migrations and who pass laws against it are benefitting from the very conditions that cause people to migrate —the use of land for export crops, the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few owners, the cheap labor provided by immigrants, etc.

And the parallelisms between the cosmopolitan world of the second century and the globalized world of the twenty-first can also be seen in the field of religion. The encounter of religions which today we take for granted was not a feature of the early twentieth century. I do not think I met my first Muslim, my first Hindu, or my first Buddhist until I was in my late teens. Today, all I have to do is go to the nearby market and I meet people of twenty different religions.

And what about syncretism? A few years ago, my wife and I were in Mérida, Yucatán, near the famous ruins of Chichén Itzá. It was the time of the equinox, and the city was crowded with people from all over the world who had come to witness the famous phenomenon of the feathered serpent descending from the pyramid of the sun. Some wore magic bracelets; others carried magnetic stones; some read astrological charts; others sat on the sidewalk chanting “ohm”; some carried images of Catholic saints; and some performed what seemed to be ritual dances.

This is the religion of many in our day. It is a jumble of supposed ancient mysteries with astrology, with elements from various religions, and with a sprinkle of Christianity added for flavor. It is a religion very similar to that of Apuleius and *The Golden Ass*.

Finally, as a clear sign of the parallelism between the second century and ours in matters of religion, allow me to refer first to a graffitus in Rome, and then to a recent experience in Atlanta.

In Rome, sometime between the end of the first century and the middle of the third, an unknown person drew a graffitus on a wall. We do not know who he was, but we do know that he must have had an acquaintance by the name of Alexamenos, who was a Christian. On that wall, this unknown artist drew a cross on which a man with the head of an ass was crucified, and below it he wrote: *Alexámenos sébete theón* —Alexamenos worships God.

Clearly, this unknown artist had heard about Christ and about the crucifixion. But he had also heard that Christians worshiped an ass. Beyond that, he does not seem to have known much about the religion of his acquaintance Alexamenos.

In the middle of the cosmopolitan and supposedly sophisticated conditions of the second century, Alexamenos, and many others like him, had to find ways to witness to a world that had little idea what Christianity was all about, and did not even seem to care.

Now back to the late twentieth century. Just a few years ago, in Atlanta, right in the middle of the “Bible Belt,” a woman went into a jewelry store to buy a cross for a friend. When she asked to see a cross, the salesclerk asked her, “Do you want one with the little man, or without the little man?”

It would be funny if it were not so tragic. This young clerk, born and raised in the Bible Belt, had no idea who it was that hung on the cross. She knew that some preferred a bare cross, and others a crucifix, but she had no idea why, and apparently, she had not even bothered to ask.

It is to this clerk that we are called to testify as to who it is that hangs on the cross for her. It is to this globalized, individualistic, syncretistic world that we are called to testify.

This is not an easy task, and in order to meet it we shall have to draw from a variety of resources.

I submit to you that some of those resources may well be found in the almost forgotten second century. Perhaps the church that had to find its way in the midst of a pre-Christian society will help us find our way in the midst of a post-Christian society.

That is the subject for tonight.

The logo for AETH features a stylized 'A' composed of several overlapping triangles in shades of yellow and pink. Below the 'A' is the word 'AETH' in a large, light purple, serif font.