

Globalization and the Common Good: An Initial Response to James K. A. Smith

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In my opening essay, I tried to make a cogent, economist's case that economic globalization serves a sensible conception of the common good. More importantly, I tried to make that case in a way that would constructively engage ethicists, theologians, and skeptics from across the humanities and social sciences. I had hoped to find in Jamie Smith's essay a complementary construction. I had hoped to find there some endorsement, even beginning, of a deeper, yet still commercially-relevant and historically-rooted, conception of the "good" that economic society serves, and of the variety of institutional forms (beyond conventional firms, unions, laws) that might serve that good better; a less skeletal, less abstract distributional ethics than what we see in Pareto, Rawls, and Marxian discourse, and an appreciation of the different distributional ethics necessary for reasoning about sustainability and justice across generations, where markets cannot possibly work well; a hard-headed treatment of the trade-off between the property rights to good ideas (that are necessarily attached to ideas for incentives' sake) and the obvious good that good ideas do widely when they are globally diffused; a tentative consideration of my concern that democracy is among the possible victims of the race-to-the-bottom that economic globalization sometimes foments.

Jamie Smith's opening essay fulfilled few of my hopes. Taken on its own terms, I found Smith's essay provocative in parts, but in general both too broad and too narrow for the original purpose of this symposium. Having worked fruitfully with him on related material,¹ I was baffled.

Smith's treatment was too broad in its sweeping treatment of globalization writ large, not just economic globalization, and of economic structures and institutions writ large, whether global or not. I understood our symposium to be far more finely focused. Granted that the market system is constructed, even "imagined," a "contingent" system in Smith's (and D. Stephen Long's) terms; I understood our symposium to be about the following question: "Is that given system somehow (ethically? Christianly?) more attractive at local scale, national scale, or global scale, and why?" On what conditions (contingencies) might the answer depend

(e.g., does it depend on the presence of democracy, or on some conception of power and who has it)?

Smith's essay summarizes reflections by theologians who intend, apparently, to be prophetic (ecclesial) on broader questions. But his/their treatment was regrettably insubstantial in its refusal to envision, much less detail, alternative economic-globalization architectures for those that it so glibly and censoriously rejects. Like literary criticism by those who have never published literature, it struck me as largely complaint without construction, rant without repair. In my essay, I took the market system and other institutions (e.g., the nation-state, charitable NGOs) as given, and asked the narrow question with which I thought we were charged—what happens when you “globalize” them? Is it “good” or “bad”? Smith, however, expanded on theological scholarship that questions the very existence of these institutions, their social construction. Smith and I are not just on different pages, or different stages (his elegant beginning); we are not just different ships passing. We are in different galaxies (or maybe “spaces,” and “hyper-spaces!”).

Economists are incrementalists by tradition—that is different from being utilitarians, but it is related. The theologians whom Smith surveys are eager to imagine alternative systems, alternative institutions, and alternative paradigms, all inherently non-incremental. Economists can indeed do that with training (the economic historians and the institutionalists do it best²) and with partnership. But we are also pragmatists by tradition. If theologians and others are going to train us to think “bigger” (non-incrementally), it would clarify the goal of the training to have a set of specific alternative (contingent) systems in mind. Parts of Smith's treatment (of William Cavanaugh) made the alternative seem like theocracy; I am sure that was inadvertent. My plea is for theologians to get down and dirty—specific, if they want to help us pragmatic incrementalists.

Ironically, I found Smith's treatment also too narrow—in its cavalier disregard, even disdain, for huge swaths of contemporary and historical theological reflections on globalization, both Catholic and Protestant.³ Missing or dismissed is more than a century of papal encyclicals concerned with economic globalization, along with the millennia of Catholic social thought that undergirded them. Missing or dismissed (most dismissively, Max L. Stackhouse) is the work of Protestant theologian-philosophers over the same era, to say nothing of ample Jewish and Islamic theological reflection and construction. Nor is there any mention of relevant contributions to the ethics of economic globalization by contemporary secular scholars such as Amartya Sen or Peter Singer.

I found the most provocative material in the second and third sections of Smith's essay, summarizing theological reflections by Cavanaugh and Graham Ward. I take Smith's discussion of "liturgy" there to be also a discussion of idolatry, the idolatry of economic globalization. I think we economists pay inadequate attention to the subtle seduction of the materialism on which we specialize today—globalized materialism. Materialism—so sensory, so measurable, so immediate—can all-too-easily strangle the transcendent.⁴ Materialistic excess (what Ephesians in English calls "greed") is all-too-close to economists' maximization reflex. Only a few of us think about the interface between non-material and material values.⁵ Consumerism (Smith's and Cavanaugh's term) is much too restricted a label; the idol is materialism.

Two other reactions and concerns are smaller in scope, and relate largely to the theologians' apparent distrust of organized thinking and observing. They indict it as objectivist, foundationalist, and uncritically neutral, all words with a demonizing flavor and opaque meaning.

1. I would have gained if Smith had added just a little on how theologians see history as a discipline. Is history an account of alternative "contingencies" or "social constructions"? We economists—I am guilty for sure in my essay—use it as a field for narrow disciplinary reasoning, e.g., from 1000-1820 market transactions were not very globalized; recently they are; therefore we can "learn" from history ("wonder" may be a better word, or "propose"—"infer" is too strong).
2. I wondered if theologians have the same trouble and as much trouble with, say, anthropologists doing ethnography, as they seem to have with economists doing measurement? If so, then what scholarly disciplines do theologians respect? If so, then what do theologians substitute for reasoning and observation? If not, then why not?

Theologians will perhaps accuse *me* of demonizing them in these two concerns! But if they have other ways of organizing their thinking and observing than these traditional scholarly disciplines, then I would love to have Smith make them clearer than he does. And if they cannot be made clear and acceptable to non-theologians, then how in the world will theologians ever communicate with others, much less convince *us* to embrace their ideals-and-vision beyond what we see and interpret *now*?

Endnotes

- 1 See Smith (2008).
- 2 For example, Fogel (2000), or Deirdre McCloskey's multi-volume work in process on the themes of our essays (McCloskey, 2006), though neither focuses on economic globalization per se.
- 3 Perhaps Orthodox reflection as well; I am not enough of a scholar to know.
- 4 Mk. 4:19.
- 5 For example, Frank (2003).

References

- Fogel, R.W.** (2000). *The fourth great awakening and the future of egalitarianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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- Smith, J.K.A.** (Ed.). (2008). *After modernity? Secularity, globalization, and the re-enchantment of the world*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press. ■