Introduction to a Special Issue: Economics and Christian Reflections on Globalization

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The “globalization” of commerce over the last several decades has generated a tremendous amount of economic and theological reflection. Economists have focused, not surprisingly, on the economic effects: the international division of labor, the effect of free flows of capital and labor, the inability of regulatory structures to keep up with the international corporation, the improvement in the material lot of many of the world’s poorest people, and the effect of globalization on the world income distribution. Globalization is more than economic, of course: the effect of global commerce on culture, on the quality of human relations, on the local polis, have been neglected by economists and taken up by others whose lenses of analysis are wider. Christian theologians claim to have this wider focus, and a set of concepts—namely, the insights into human purposes and conditions afforded by the Gospel—which enable them to see more clearly the challenges and promises of globalization.

Conversations between theologians and economists are often frustrating affairs—economists and theologians approach social phenomena very differently, not simply with different conceptual tools focused on different subsets of phenomena, but with different frameworks for analysis. For better and for worse, economists are the children of Bentham, and see the world through the preferences revealed through individual choice; these preferences are given primary place in economic evaluation—markets exist to satisfy preferences. The Christian theologian, on the other hand, begins with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and reflects on its meaning for human community now and in the life to come. There are a host of challenges in taking Christian reflection on the Kingdom and tracing out its implications for life in a worldwide community made up of Christians and others, all of whom are subject to the consequences of the Fall. The challenges are magnified when theologians argue with economists, because neither is fully aware of the priorities of the other, and neither is fully aware of the analytical assumptions he takes for granted when working with his own kind.

To open this issue we commissioned two papers, one from a theologian and one from an economist. Each was given a similar assignment. James
K.A. Smith was asked to write on “What theologians wished economists knew about the theology of globalization.” J. David Richardson was asked to write on “What economists wished theologians knew about the economics of globalization.” After reading each other’s first paper, both authors wrote responses. Finally, after reading each other’s response, both author’s offered final thoughts.

Smith opens the conversation by highlighting the depth of the disagreement between economists and theologians: in reporting on material measures (GDP growth, primarily), on the mechanics of the global economy, on the international division of labor, and on regulatory structure, economists are answering questions that theologians are not asking. Theologians are primarily interested in the quality of human relations and the relation of human beings to God, and material goods are an imperfect (perhaps a radically imperfect proxy) for these ultimate goods. Smith puts this disconnect between what economists analyze and what theologians care about in stark terms: theologians may recognize as good the material improvements in the lives of billions of the world’s poor, but demand something better for the poor. Material improvement is not good enough, and what has not yet been achieved is critical.

Richardson begins the conversation by laying out for theologians a clear economic case that globalization contributes to the common good. Billions of the poor have been lifted out of poverty and positioned for continued improvement. With these improvements have come a set of challenges: the impotence of national regulatory institutions, large scale migration, volatility in financial markets, and the rise of international crime.

Not surprisingly, the responses of the two interlocutors and their final reflections are an attempt to sort through the very different approaches taken in the two first-round papers. Richardson takes as given that the material prosperity which is the focus of economics is the appropriate ground on which to discuss globalization, and Smith argues that the most important problems of globalization are not material but spiritual and cultural. Richardson’s response is to doubt whether Smith can be serious—more of the world’s poor are able to feed themselves, and others are able to move from extreme poverty to something better; surely theologians can agree that this is good news about globalization? Smith responds that we can agree about this, but that this is not the point—it is not even the most important part of the most important thing about life in this world.

In reading these exchanges, I reminded that “life is more than food, and the body more than clothes” (Luke 12:23), and I am sympathetic to the theologian’s challenge, to take the truth about the human person revealed
through Christ and to evaluate human realities in light of that truth. The attempt to take the Gospel seriously, even in ministering to the poor, can lead to jarring judgments. Mother Teresa once took some rice to a very poor family, only to find out a couple of hours later that they had given this rice to another family even poorer than they were. She did not bring more rice to this generous family, because she did not want to spoil the gift they had given their neighbors. My first reaction to this story was that this was a bit severe. Could Mother Teresa have been serious? What harm could have been done by feeding a hungry family? But perhaps even a starving family can fast, and perhaps this fact should enter into our own evaluation of the lot of the poor. At the same time, the discussion of differences in worldview and paradigms of analysis appears to lead to a complete rejection of the economist’s concern to improve the material lot of the poor. I am still waiting for theologians to spell out more clearly the place of material goods and material deprivation within the theologian’s worldview.

The remaining articles in this issue are reflections on recent official theological writings on globalization. S.A. DuPlessis, in “How Can You Be a Christian and an Economist? The Meaning of the Accra Declaration for Today,” offers a critique of the Accra Declaration. The Accra Declaration, according to DuPlessis, is overly ideological, hostile to a perceived neo-liberalism in mainstream economic thought. He argues forcefully that there is no such neo-liberalism in economics, and for a more non-ideological engagement with economics.

Stefano Zamagni, in “Globalization: Guidance from Franciscan Economic Thought and Caritas in Veritate,” provides historical background for the concept of civil economy and fraternity in Benedict XVI’s recent encyclical letter on the global economy. Franciscan economic thought, as it developed from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, offers an account of commerce which incorporates the social nature of human beings, expressed through friendship, into its account of economic activity.

Lord Brian Griffiths, in “Caritas in Veritate: Pope Benedict’s Two Cheers for Globalization,” provides an in-depth review of the Pope’s encyclical. The tremendous breadth of topics addressed in the encyclical are tied together by the Pope’s theological approach, rooted in a “Christo-centric” worldview. Griffiths traces this theological thread throughout the encyclical, showing how the Pope’s reasoning is always traceable back to it, and emphasizing its practical demands on Christians active in the world, in academia, government, or in business. ■