I close by listing efforts which I deem far more helpful in offering strategic guidance to push this nation towards the Biblically-informed system of assistance desired by the authors of this book as well as this reviewer. We need: (1) more work than is underway at present combing both the nation’s history of moral obligation and the history and tapestry of case law surrounding the church-state problem, so as to pry open the possibility for using religiously-oriented organizations to deliver welfare; (2) examples and models in contemporary context of churches (and deacons’ boards within them) and para-church organizations which are providing effective ministry to the poor; (3) more historical work in the tradition of Olasky which uncovers the socio-economic circumstances in which charity is more or less likely to be forthcoming, such that we develop realistic expectations (and know where and how government structures may be necessary to supplement private assistance); (4) further explorations of how faithful Christians and Jews over the centuries have interpreted the Bible and structured assistance to the poor accordingly, so that we learn as much as possible from faithful followers of Yahweh over the millennia; (5) cooperative efforts with Roman Catholics, plumbing the thrust of their social teaching, from *Rerum Novarum* (1891) through *Centesimus Annus* (1991), especially as this relates to the doctrine of subsidiarity regarding care for the poor.

The time is passing rapidly for continued complaining about the woes of our welfare system. We need to engage ourselves and the broader society in strategic and plausible steps that will lead to the creative and God-pleasing interaction of church and state which will indeed hold out far greater hope of releasing our poor citizens from the bonds that ensnare them and keep them poor.

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**Christianity and Economics in the Post-Cold War Era: The Oxford Declaration and Beyond**

Herbert Schlossberg, Vinay Samuel, and Ronald J. Sider (eds.)


Is it possible for evangelical Christians to arrive at a consensus about the implications of Christian faith for economic policy in the contemporary world? Is working toward such a consensus a useful exercise? What exactly does a Christian Worldview imply about the nature of economic justice, the nature of work, and our relationship to the environment? These and other questions are addressed by this volume of essays which...
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arose as part of the ongoing Oxford Conference on Christian Faith and Economics.

The introductory essay by Ron Sider describes the context in which the Oxford Declaration was drafted. Next is the text of the Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics, which was the result of a conference attended by a diverse group of over one hundred evangelical leaders from a variety of ideological backgrounds. Bankers, theologians, economists, ethicists, business leaders, and development practitioners were included. In the introduction, Sider emphasizes that significant agreement was achieved because everyone shared a commitment to scriptural authority and a desire to carefully consider factual evidence.

Much of the book is devoted to commenting on specific issues raised by the Oxford Declaration and critiquing its underlying premises and conclusions. I can best describe the important points raised in the Declaration by summarizing the important comments made in parts II through IV. Many of the authors summarize and expand on specific points of the Declaration.

The first article in part II, “Work and the Gifts of the Spirit” by Miroslav Volf focuses on what the Oxford Declaration says about the nature of work. It presents a pneumatological view of work. Work is more than something humans do, “it is part and parcel of who they are created to be” (p. 37). A person’s gifts should correspond to the work they perform (p. 41). Work has intrinsic value but it is not the ultimate source of human identity. Work has an eschatological significance in that “humans can make a small and imperfect contribution to the emergence of the kingdom of God” through their work (p. 40).

The next article, “Credit Based Income Generation for the Poor,” by Remenyi and Taylor, provides some fairly specific recommendations on how Christians can better contribute to economic development of the poor in the two-thirds world. A common stereotype of the poor is that they are “illiterate, itinerant, and unaccountable” (p. 46). The authors argue that poverty results from systems of injustice. But they do not accept the simple-minded view that redistribution via government foreign aid is the way to help the poor. Instead they emphasize the importance of working with the poor by lending small amounts to individual enterprises. They present some data demonstrating that the repayment rate on micro-investment loans to the poor is much higher than the repayment rate on larger loans to more established firms. Income of the poor can rise dramatically if institutions are developed which efficiently channel savings toward investment in small enterprises in the informal economy. A free market economy, with relatively stable prices combined with peer group acclaim, support, and discipline is needed for this to work (p. 51).

Beisner’s chapter “Justice and Poverty: Two Views Contrasted” draws inferences from scripture passages, particularly those describing the character of God, to argue that justice requires impartiality. He is critical of a view of justice, presented in the Oxford Declaration, which “focuses on love, inclusion in the community, and meeting people’s needs” (p. 58). The article includes a careful study of scripture passages and concludes that distributive justice requires that each person should get what is deserved according to formal rules. He argues that justice involves “definable, unchanging standards” from God’s moral law. Thus alleviating “absolute poverty,” providing “basic education” and other material and social goods which can only be defined in vague, general, and culturally relative terms cannot be a part of justice (p. 60).

Mott responds to Beisner in the next chapter. He argues that Biblical justice is both partial and impartial operating on the premise that the impartial treatment of all members of the community requires special attention to the groups in society that are most needy” (p. 84). Justice does
not require that all people be treated alike in all respects but that they be treated alike in terms of certain criteria, so that differences in treatment are not arbitrary. The problem with the liberal view of justice presented by Beisner is that it views individuals as separate entities, while the Biblical view assumes that people are social beings so that their relationship to one another in the community also matters.

P.J. Hill argues in the next chapter that differences among the participants of the Oxford conference are more at the level of perceptions of the consequences of different policies, rather than over fundamental values. He argues that poverty cannot be overcome merely as a result of policy based on good intentions of either the wealthy or the poor. A poor country can become wealthy only as a result of appropriate institutions combined with “a specific set of cultural attitudes toward work, risk, savings, and personal responsibility” (p. 103). He emphasizes the role of incentives that lead to wealth creation, and the effectiveness of markets in generating and communicating information about priorities. Collective action to successfully remedy injustice requires a large amount of information that might not be readily available. It follows that standards of justice can best be applied by those who have the best information, which may often involve those closest to the individuals involved such as family members or a local community of believers. Attempts by governments to achieve particularized justice, could lead to “injustices of even greater magnitude” (p. 105).

In “Destroying Poverty Without Destroying Poor People” Herbert Schlossberg emphasizes what he sees as a neglected theme in the Oxford Declaration and similar evangelical statements about poverty. Widespread prosperity can only be achieved through wealth creation resulting from investment of capital in productive enterprises. He tempers his criticism with praise for the study of income generation by Joe Remenyi, as summarized in the Remenyi and Taylor chapter. He issues a caveat to their study, noting that small scale “income generating projects can become the same destructive panaceas that foreign aid has been” without changes in cultural mores and in the legal environment to make it easier and more acceptable to start and operate a profitable business.

To those interested in specific economic issues, the chapters in part III are somewhat less interesting than those in part II. Their main contribution is to reflect on other Christian documents on economics in comparison with the Oxford Declaration. The first chapter, “Toward an Ecumenical Consensus,” discusses the similarities between the Oxford Declaration and Centesimus Annus, the encyclical letter from Pope John Paul II, written in May 1992.

The second chapter in this part provides some insightful criticism of the Oxford Declaration by comparing it with the World Council of Churches (WCC) document Christian Faith and the World Economy Today. One weakness of the Oxford document is that while emphasizing how the state may hinder investment in small business that could help the poor escape poverty, it neglects the way large multinational corporations may reduce the viability of small locally based enterprises through competition. The author, Rob van Drijmelen, also is concerned that the Oxford Declaration fails to consider the environmental consequences of free trade or whether there are limits to economic growth as emphasized by economists such as Herman Daly.

The next chapter by Donald Hay, compares the WCC study document “Economy as a Matter of Faith,” Centesimus Annus, and the Oxford Declaration. All three give warnings “against treating the market as an idol that can solve all society’s problems and against the culture of selfishness and consumerism” that markets can promote (p. 154). As might be expected, the Oxford Declaration gives greater weight to scriptural...
A weakness of the Oxford Declaration is that it has no program for action by the churches, and it does not have any authority in evangelical denominations.

authority, while Centesimus Annus emphasizes tradition, and the WCC study document emphasizes the primacy of reason. Since they have a clear and authoritative basis for social ethics, the Oxford Declaration and Centesimus Annus are more rigorously developed and argued than the WCC document. A weakness of the Oxford Declaration is that it has no program for action by the churches, and it does not have any authority in evangelical denominations. By contrast the WCC study document has a “concluding section detailing how it thinks Christians should respond to economic issues,” and papal encyclicals are authoritative for Roman Catholics (pp. 156-7).

The chapter “Stewardship in the Nineties: Two Views” contrasts a statement by the World Council of Churches entitled “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” (JPIC) with the Oxford Declaration. JPIC argues that we must make a radical departure from existing modes of Christian ethics because we have created a crisis leading to the brink of economic and ecological apocalypse. Chapter authors Lawrence Adams and Frederick Jones are very critical of this statement. It reflects a theological orientation that denies human uniqueness, dilutes God’s sovereignty over creation, and equates “redemption with renewal of the earth while neglecting personal atonement” (p. 164). Human cultivation and development are assumed to be an “intrusion into the sacred earth.” The orientation of JPIC “ensures that thorough and balanced economic and political analysis will receive little account, and that worst case scenarios will rule the day” (p. 165). While praising the theological orientation of the Oxford Declaration, the authors suggest that the Oxford participants could learn from JPIC’s sense of urgency to address specific issues of public policy.

In the final chapter Skillen argues that the Oxford Declaration doesn’t deal adequately with the notion of economic institutions and why they developed in creation. Another problem “is that the statement allows important differences in economic judgment... to be covered over by general confessional statements” (p. 177). Words like justice, and expressions like the generation and distribution of wealth are used without being clearly defined. Where the document tries to be concrete, such as its discussion of sustenance rights, it fails to discuss which institutions should be responsible to provide this, other than saying that the government should satisfy these rights only as a last resort. Skillen would like to see Christians devote more time to considering what role the family, businesses, churches, and other organizations should play in addressing specific needs in society.

The strength of this volume is that it presents a variety of viewpoints on some important economic issues. Its primary weakness is that some of the essays do little more than summarize some aspect of the Oxford Declaration. It is somewhat redundant to include both the Declaration and chapters summarizing its content in the same volume. Those chapters which emphasize weaknesses or limitations are more enlightening. The comparisons with other church pronouncements are interesting and instructive, particularly those that emphasize the contrast between the theological and political presuppositions of mainline protestant churches compared to Catholics and Evangelicals. Development economists should consider the important insights of the Remenyi and Taylor article. The Beisner and Mott chapters, which provide two opposing views of justice, and the Skillen chapter, which emphasizes the limitations of the Declaration, deserve careful reading.