

# Reflections on Oxford III

## *Editors' Introduction*

**M**ore than 120 Christian economists, business people, theologians, and relief and development workers met in Agra, India March 1-5, 1995, for the third Oxford Conference on Christian Faith and Economics. Organized by Vinay Samuel (Executive Director of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians) and Ronald J. Sider (Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Evangelicals for Social Action), who served as Chair and Executive Secretary, respectively, of the entire Oxford Conference process, the theme was "The Impact of the Market Economy on the Poor."

The conference represented the culmination of a 5 year process of research and regional conferences around the world initiated after the Oxford II conference in 1990. The widely publicized "Oxford Declaration" (*Bulletin* #15, Spring 1990) that emerged from Oxford II served as the basis for this process, in which research and attention was focused on the issues surrounding the transition to markets in many parts of the world. In the words of the organizers, the purpose of the Oxford III meeting in Agra was "to explore the impact of the market economy on the poor on the basis of biblical principles and a careful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of market economies and to do this in an international forum where the insight from all parts of the world could be mutually helpful."

One clear hope of the organizers was that the conference would produce a new statement—a new Oxford Declaration—speaking directly to the issue of the poor in economies under reform and transition. Toward that end, a draft statement was composed several months before the Agra gathering and circulated ahead of time to facilitate the discussion. (For the record: Stephen L. S. Smith was on the Drafting Committee of this document.) However, in the event itself this draft proved controversial and was dropped by the full group within the first days of the conference. Although participants worked long hours to draft and discuss prospective statements, no over-arching statement could be agreed upon. By the end of the conference agreement had been reached only on a set of general theological affirmations pertaining to a biblical view of economic life. These "Agra Affirmations" will be published in *Transformation* (July/Sept 1995 issue) as the official document of the Agra meeting.

Many ACE members have participated in this Oxford process over the years, and a number were present in Agra. We invited several of the latter

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to share their reflections, which we print below.

One item drafted at Agra but not fully discussed nor acted on there was a "Covenant on Christian Capital." In the month following the meeting Ron Sider, Vinay Samuel, David Bussau, Moss Ntlha, Ruth Callanta and Tito Paredes circulated this short document among the attendees. We reprint it in its entirety following the personal reflections.

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### **Bob Goudzwaard**

*Free University of Amsterdam*

Oxford III could reach unanimous or almost unanimous conclusions in relation to the formulation of biblical principles for the economy. But it could not reach agreement as soon as these principles had to be applied to the concrete evaluation of the effects of the market economy on the poor.

Why not? This question has puzzled me, because at first sight there seems to be no logic behind it. Of course one could say that the main barrier to reaching unanimous conclusions was the presence of different political opinions. But that explanation does not satisfy; if it were true, no agreement would have been reached in relation to the biblical principles. Agreement on the biblical principles, however, demonstrated clearly that no one in the conference was willing to elevate either market or plan as the ultimate compass for the direction of society. Gradually I have come to a quite different conclusion, namely that on a very deep level a whole series of misunderstandings were at work, especially when and where the concept of the market economy was involved. These misunderstandings may be caused, in turn, by the presence of very different world and life views. On the one hand these views may have been colored by different varieties of liberation theology. But on the other hand they were certainly colored and maybe even determined by the foundations of present (western)

economic science. In my opinion these latter worldviews crept through all our discussions, though they may have been unnoticed by most participants.

What do I mean by worldviews which stem from the very foundations of western economic science? We all know that these foundations were mainly laid in the time of the Enlightenment, and were molded from the beginning by the mechanical life and world view. Adam Smith, so says Jacob Viner, applied "to the wilderness of economic phenomena the unifying concept of a coordinated and mutually interdependent system of cause and effect relationships;" which (analytical) system he called "an imaginary machine, invented to connect together in the fancy those different movements and effects which are already in reality performed" (both quotations from Andrew Skinner's Introduction to the Pelican edition of *The Wealth of Nations*, pp. 76, 12). Markets are seen by Smith as resembling the way in which machines work. In them individuals participate as particles, promoting ends which are not part of their original intention. This approach is strikingly similar to the way in which J. J. Rousseau understood the working of the peoples democracy. This machinery starts from the self-interests of the individuals (*volonté de tous*), but becomes in its effect a means for the wellbeing of all (*volonté générale*).

Since then, economists have tended to see markets primarily as working mechanisms—mechanisms which of course need the context of good laws and morality, but which as such are value-free. For a machine can hamper our (moral) categories of good or wrong, but it is as mechanism beyond, or below them. According to this worldview, which is echoed by today's economists, a market as such never can be a cause of evil, such as poverty or abuse! Evil always depends on the way in which persons (individuals) deal with and act in the market. Now if you add to this view the well-known wealth-generating capacity of modern markets, the practical implication is clear: well-working market-

mechanisms can and should be welcomed by every culture and society (though of course you should be aware of possible misuses by some participants).

This view is, however, debatable from the beginning. If you start from a declared neutrality of societal institutions seen from their "mechanistic" side, then you could use a similar kind of reasoning to defend, for instance, the desirability of an overall acceptance of the western model of democracy (as is in fact often done), or even to defend the overall usefulness of the institution of economic planning (as sometimes is done by Christian socialists!). Just make them first "neutral" or "value free" via your conceptualizations! (See, for instance, the first draft of the Agra Affirmations, paragraph 30: "The moral element of the market is external to the bare fact of the transaction...The values are brought into the market from the outside.") However this approach is not only analytically debatable, but also highly questionable from a Christian vantage point. It differs greatly, for instance, from the reformers' view of markets, such as John Calvin. He saw them as God-given social institutions with an inbuilt claim on mutual respect, honesty and loyalty: "an expression of human solidarity and a sign of the Grace of God" (see Andre Bieler, *La Pensée Economique et Sociale de Jean Calvin*, Geneva, 1959, Part II, Ch. IV). Cut-throat competition, the exploitation of fellow-men by withholding grain supplies, the effort to eliminate another's trade or life possibilities: these were not seen by him as possible (though undesirable) uses of a "neutral" market, but a fundamental denial of the very God-given essence and purpose of the market. What a different view, with very different practical implications! For if you hold such a (pre-Enlightenment) view of markets, and if you are still living in a mainly traditional economy (as is yet true for large parts of the South), it may sometimes be better to preserve as far as possible your traditional jobs and your traditionally working markets rather than to surrender

unconditionally to a modern market economy. The latter in its actual existence (not the conception, but the real thing) can be proven to be predominantly accompanied by itself- and God-denying features. For modern markets should of course be seen as more than mechanisms; they not only have a body, but also have a soul, a spirit. They are namely the expression of a modern, western, Enlightenment culture, which in principle accepts individuals and their actions always as they are, accepting them in the pursuit of their own happiness, without bothering about a possible lack of honesty or solidarity in their market behavior.

In this way I can understand why in Agra no agreement could be found even in relation to the concept of market economy itself. The underlying views were too different. But if that is true and as far as this is true, the real discussion has still to begin—a discussion which, however, can only be fertile if we are willing to remember together the words of Paul, that we may not rest until we have been renewed in our whole style of thinking, not sticking to the paradigms and schemes of thinking of the present world (Romans 12:2).

### *P.J. Hill*

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My time at the Agra Conference was one of those bitter-sweet experiences that, upon reflection, occasions a wide variety of memories and responses. First, the positive elements from our time in India. The conference was certainly directed towards an important end, the evaluation of the impact of markets on the poor, and the appropriate Christian response to the spread of market systems to many economies that were previously not as market oriented.

The opportunity for fellowship with 120 believers from around the world was also tremendously enriching and

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uplifting. The worship times were rich and the discussion served well to increase my awareness of the particular concerns of Christians from different societies and backgrounds. I was again impressed with the concern for cultural and economic imperialism by the West, and the fear that economic growth and the spread of markets to many economies will lead to the wholesale invasion of western values, many of which are appropriately viewed as antagonistic to Christian ethics. There was also a deep and heartfelt concern for the impact of the spread of markets on the poorest of the poor, many of whom labor diligently at every opportunity available but still lack the basic necessities of life. We as Christians must be cautious to never trivialize the problem of poverty or to conclude that there are automatic solutions that can easily be implemented. Another thing I learned was that animus towards the West is deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of many people from the two-thirds world, and there is a strong identification of the concept of market economies with western culture.

Despite these enriching and broadening experiences, the overall effort to reach a consensus on a document that all could sign was frustrating and disappointing. The process itself did not work well despite the efforts to prepare for the conference by using regional meetings around the world that involved a wide spectrum of people and then feeding the reports from these meetings into a drafting committee that presented a document for our consideration before we arrived.

There were enough deep-seated divisions among the participants that it was impossible to use the drafting committee's document as an effective first step, and thus the conference basically convened itself as a committee of the whole to attempt to draft, in five days, a statement about the impact of markets on the poor and the responsibility of Christians to interact and to judge particular institutions. All 120 delegates would meet

in plenary sessions and make suggestions as to appropriate revisions, then a drafting committee would meet until early in the morning to attempt to present a new version, which would then be debated, edited, and refined during the next day. Because there were so many substantial disagreements as to exactly how the world works and the relative importance of different goals and the best means to achieve them, it was almost impossible to achieve consensus on any part of the document. Anyone who has served on a faculty committee can imagine the difficulty involved in 120 people sitting together and trying to write a document.

As an example of the difficulties we faced, one of the statements in the third draft was that "God measures societies by what they do to the 'least of these.'" That statement, written sometime during the night of March 4, was presented to the plenary session on the morning of March 5. Twenty minutes was spent arguing about whether to re-word the statement to say "God measures economies *in large measure*," "for the most part," "to a significant degree," or whether to leave it as originally stated. Since this draft had twenty pages of single-spaced statements about the Christian faith, market economies, and the poor, it is easy to see why no consensus was agreed upon after five days of action.

For many participants it was quite important that a document be issued, and I sympathize with their feelings of frustration at not being able to reach agreement and provide the Christian community with a formal outcome from our deliberations. However, I believe that the process of trying to secure such agreement was inimical to honest dialogue among the participants. Because we knew that we were striving for agreement on a statement that would be a matter of the public record, people tended to stake out positions with regard to particular wordings. There was always the fear that a certain phrase or even the omission of a particular perspective would provide

intellectual ammunition for one's ideological opponents at some future point. Thus, more time and effort was spent in defending one's arguments than in honest listening to those one disagreed with. In many cases we were not really able to determine what the grounds of differences in opinion were, whether in theological reasoning, biblical exegesis, or empirical economics.

The process was also hampered by the reality of attempting to build upon a document that was approved in 1990 at the Oxford II conference. The assumption of the Agra gathering was that the participants agreed with the Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics, and that the Agra Affirmation was to deal with issues not covered in that document. However, in a world of dynamic change with considerable alteration in personal circumstances and institutional responsibilities, it was unrealistic to bring together the same group of people who attended Oxford II. Thus, many of those who signed the Oxford II statement were not at the Agra conference, and there were also a substantial number of delegates who came to Agra who were not at Oxford. The Oxford conference did serve well to build trust among those in attendance, and the Declaration could have served as a good starting point for additional discussion. However, since many people present in Agra did not know each other and had not worked together, and since not all delegates agreed with the Oxford Declaration, that document did not serve the desired purpose of being a building block for our discussion.

Of course, the final question is what lessons can be gleaned from the Agra experience? I find two major ones. First, we must continue to search for opportunities to interact with Christians from a wide variety of backgrounds and ideological positions. The opportunities presented by something like the Agra gathering are immense, and I am convinced that God can use such a coming together to further his purposes. We need the exposure to

people of different perspectives and backgrounds in order to more completely understand what is going on in the world and our responsibilities as Christians. It is easy for North Americans to be quite insular in that we have a wealth of opportunities for interaction within our own professional and our Christian circles. Thus, it may take real initiative on our part to step outside our comfortable boundaries.

Second, I am more convinced than ever that Christian economists must continue to do good economics. We need to read, teach, publish, and refine our arguments. Much of the disagreement at the Agra meeting was over matters where economics truly has something to say. For instance, there was considerable debate about the impact of economic growth on the poor and the relative importance of the lowering of trade barriers to the creation of wealth. There was also substantial disagreement about exactly what we mean by market economies and the effect of various deviations from our standards. Also, there was discussion about the processes of transition to markets and the costs and benefits of such moves. Thus, there is ample reason for Christian economists to be good economists, to both advance the field and to understand the research that others are doing. Our work must be informed by a well-developed biblical world-view, but we also must not use the excuse of being "Christian economists" to keep us from doing the hard work of standard economics. Many of the questions raised at the Agra conference will only be resolved by continuing to work diligently, by seeking to understand the viewpoints of others, and by carefully articulating our own perspective on the way the world works.

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*Roger D. Johnson*  
Messiah College

As I look back at my experiences at the Oxford III conference in Agra, India, I can

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see that my perspective has been largely shaped by two factors. The first factor was my experience at the earlier Oxford Conference of 1990 held in Oxford England. The second factor, quite strangely, was my participation in a three week cross-cultural study tour with twenty Messiah College students. The tour took us to Costa Rica in the month of January, just prior to the Oxford III conference.

In regard to the first, the experience of the earlier conference left me with a sense of optimism regarding this new conference. Even in hindsight, the agenda of that earlier conference certainly seems more daunting than that of Oxford III. The Oxford Declaration, while recognizing certain strengths of the market system, had also admitted to the fact that markets were not perfect and could often marginalize the poor or have untoward effects upon social structures. The idea of then evaluating the impact of markets upon the poor seemed doable.

I had approached attendance at the 1990 conference with a spirit of extreme skepticism about the possibility of reaching any form of consensus whatsoever, and thus was completely amazed by the outcome. I had thought that we would merely arrive at a list of points upon which we disagree. What struck me as truly exciting about that conference was the genuine spirit of conciliation and willingness to listen. I have never seen this type of attitude at any secular gathering, and it is most often absent even among fellow Christians. There seems to have been genuine effort to learn to communicate and even learn from one another. From my perspective, the only people who appeared to be marginalized at that earlier conference were those individuals at the extreme polar ends who came with fixed agendas. There appeared, however, to have been few participants from the extreme left or liberal perspective in attendance. As a consequence, it was mainly the participants from the extreme right who were disenfranchised by the Oxford Declaration. Those on either side of the center seemed to coalesce and seek consensus. It

certainly was possible that this same pattern would continue in Agra.

My optimism coming to this third conference was perhaps also conditioned by the fact that I anticipated a strong returning coterie or nucleus of participants who would be able to build upon not only the conclusions reached but also upon the personal relationships established. Much to my chagrin, the dynamics of this conference were far different. What appeared to happen was a coalescing of interests among those mildly to the right of center with those on the more extreme right who had been somewhat marginalized at the first conference. More than once, I heard comments that seemed to caricature any questioning of market systems as reflecting a desire to return to previous statist regimes. As pure conjecture, one might attribute this attitude to the intervening universal "victory" of capitalism and a resulting triumphal spirit. Who after all could question the truth and legitimacy of this new reality? Those on the right might no longer have felt a compelling need to seek compromise or conciliation as all the trends were in their favor. Perhaps, on the other hand, the organizers of the conference were themselves too optimistic and thus failed to push as hard to seek conciliation. I did notice that the pace and intensity of our dialogue felt much slower at the beginning and only seemed to reach a degree of fervor near the end.

Perhaps another factor was some turnover in the make-up of the participating body. I have not attempted to calculate the exact percent of new participants but it did seem to be significant. I also often felt that our worship experiences lacked enthusiasm. Jet-lag and the process of moving in and out of the plenary session may have taken their toll. Sometimes the worship session began with fifteen or twenty people, and then others gradually trickled in to the service. What did seem most obvious to me was a general lack of ability to communicate and get past some of the rhetoric and jargon. I was astounded that such a well educated and well traveled

group appeared so incompetent in cross-cultural communication. This is where my Costa Rican experience enters in to the picture.

As part of our preparation for the trip to Costa Rica, the students were required to read several books, one of which was *Ministering Cross Culturally*, by Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers. I am treading on somewhat tenuous ground here, as I am merely sharing how my perspective was shaped and not attempting to defend the particular paradigm set forth by Lingenfelter and Mayers. Nor do I pretend to be an expert on cross-cultural communication.

Among the many points the authors make concerning how cultural differences affect the communication process, one point in particular hit home as I observed the process at Oxford III. Lingenfelter and Mayers note that generally individuals from western cultures think in very dichotomistic patterns. They tend to want to develop clear categories of right and wrong and specify all the particulars. Other cultures throughout the world tend to take a much more holistic approach. As I then listened to the conference participants debase one another, it was almost like watching a group of people playing out this dichotomistic versus holistic pattern.

There were frequent calls from the defenders of markets to delineate the nature of markets. Presumably by first laying out the characteristics of the ideal, we would then move toward implementing the ideal. These same individuals found it difficult to accept the way in which many market skeptics used scrip-

ture. The question was thus raised to me by a strong market advocate as to why these market critics refused to do "good" analytical exegesis of the scripture. Presumably this individual meant extended word studies and tightly constructed deductive analysis.

Many of those with a more skeptical attitude toward markets, in contrast, used the rubric of "markets" in a very generic form, lumping together all variants of efficient and inefficient markets. They wanted to talk about markets in the real, imperfect world rather than the ideal. At the same time, when they used scripture they tended to appeal to broad themes rather than demanding specific, well established textual proof. If the scriptures repeatedly made reference to God's compassion for the poor, then we didn't need to analyze the word meaning or derivations. The scriptures could be taken at their face value. The end result, to use a well worn cliché, was like having two ships pass in the dark without ever seeing each other.

What conclusions or recommendations do I then have? At this point I feel somewhat pessimistic about the ability of another such meeting to accomplish anything significant. I do see an opportunity for the existing leadership core to find ways to foster communication among the participants. There is certainly a need for an established communication network among Christians who are involved in various forms of ministry to the poor. Perhaps, with a great deal of grace and a dose of humility, we will be more successful in communicating cross-culturally through more formal channels than we were at the personal level. ■

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