Champions of the Poor: The Economic Consequences of Judeo-Christian Values
Barend A. deVries
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Champions of the Poor is a book I am glad to have read. It is written by Barend deVries, formerly chief economist and Director of Creditworthiness Assessment for the World Bank. He, and his wife, Margaret Garritsen deVries (a retired economist and historian for the International Monetary Fund), are a high-powered team. I would compare them favorably with Milton and Rose Friedman, although the deVries do not share the Friedmans' suspicion of virtually all government. One of the deVries' advantages as a team of professional economists is that they don't mind vigorous disagreement. In fact, I think they thrive on some intellectual sparring. However, they do so for deeply founded reasons, which have little to do with esoteric modeling by late twentieth-century economists, and everything to do with the concerns of our profession's founding fathers and mothers, like Adam Smith and another husband-wife team, J. S. and Harriet Taylor Mill. All these writers are keen to assert a normative litmus test for national and international economies—namely, that they should be vehicles for improving the lot of the common people, and particularly responsive to the needs of poorer citizens.

Not having been party to their breakfast discussions, I can only imagine the disagreements which likely arose between Barend and Margaret over the time during which he worked on this book. I am sure they agreed about his decision to dedicate a significant portion to the particular setting and needs of people in the developing world. Having spent their careers working for the cornerstone Bretton Woods institutions, the deVries strongly support the work of the IMF and the World Bank. Barend is critical about the modest size of funds which member countries authorize these institutions to raise and allocate for stabilization and development. He also argues for special attention, by both institutions, to the measures recipient nations should take to reduce the burdens of stabilization borne by the poor. While Margaret likely shares this view, she can also be very clear about the limitations of both organizations and their different comparative advantages.
It is a difficult assignment that Barend deVries gave himself with this book. He wanted to review what Jews and Christians (particularly in the U.S.) have said about economics—the goals of economic actors, the strengths and weaknesses of markets, and the best directions for public policy. This he does by presenting summaries of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century social-economic documents produced by the Catholic Church (here and at the Vatican), the Presbyterian Church, the Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America, and several evangelical organizations and conferences. In addition, he also describes the writings and active roles Jews have played (e.g. through the Central Conference of American Rabbis) in defining and advocating for social justice. Barend is even-handed in his treatment of all these strains of religious social-ethical thinking. He identifies many of their common themes, such as: God’s concern for the poor; a call to care for the earth’s resources as an inheritance intended to benefit all people; and the continual need for human reconciliation with our God and our neighbors. Finally, deVries articulates the deep, Biblical roots of ethical teachings by all these groups—not just those who would call themselves “evangelicals.”

DeVries devotes a chapter each to poverty in America, the poor of developing countries, women, the environment, the burden of military spending, and the management of foreign debt. In each of these he provides an economist’s overview of the issues, followed by specific discussion of ethical dimensions as advanced in Judeo-Christian thought. In the second half of the book, deVries surveys the social justice documents of several Christian and Jewish traditions. He pays special attention to their historical development, their influence on each other and upon American public policy, as well as to their shared core and unique perspectives.

I found deVries’ blend of economic analysis and ethical commentary to be helpful—partly because I am not familiar with all the church documents that he mines. I agree with the importance he attaches to Catholic social teachings. He generally awards them high marks for Biblical warrant, economic good sense, and a consistent theme—namely, the human community’s responsibility to respect human life and to find various ways to assume our “family” responsibilities toward disadvantaged citizens.

DeVries is most convincing when he is describing issues surrounding Third World development. This is not surprising, given his lifetime of professional inquiry and service at the World Bank. He takes on some common myths about development, coming from both the right and the left. Thus, he affirms the need for growth, against a lay assumption that justice is all a matter of redistribution. He asserts the vital importance of sound economic reforms, while also urging a facilitating role for aid and debt relief through international mediating institutions. At various points, deVries plays the economists’ theme song: “the mutual benefits of exchange,” arguing against those who would blame the rich for causing poverty. He explains why governments have a vital role in laying the foundations for development, but not in dictating the allocation of resources. Furthermore, he affirms the more recent policy emphasis on making good use of markets, even for the financing and delivery of infrastructure. It would be worth the cost of the book just to make such a balanced view intelligible to the average religious layperson.

Nevertheless, deVries’ aim is much higher than making economics simple. He also wants his readers to see that no person belonging to the Judeo-Christian tradition can meditate on scripture, and look out on our world, without sensing a call to advance justice toward those who are especially vulnerable—including the poor, people living in fragile environments, and those facing discrimination. The responsibility is personal and collective, he argues. I don’t find any radically new suggestions here about how economic policy should be shaped. His emphasis on
ensuring more widespread access to education, training, and health care is surely correct. He is also right in urging Jews and Christians to more actively address the world’s “rich.” They (actually we) need to help each other rediscover freedom from the materialist idolatries of our day.

There are some weaknesses in Barend deVries’ book. Occasionally the data he presents are old, for instance when his sample of unemployment-related data is drawn from a recession year, 1992; or when he chides the authors of a mainstream development text for not addressing environmental issues (now rectified in the 1996 edition). I want to stop him at various places, such as when he speaks favorably about Europe’s food production policy reliance on support prices, or when he fails to mention that Europe’s more generous social assistance may be a key factor augmenting the high long-term unemployment levels there. I also wish that having written, “Integration of the United States with the global economy is working against the interest of the poor” (p. 258), he had gone on to explain that the remedy is not protectionism.

We—specifically the Association of Christian Economists—can be grateful that one of our members is calling our attention (in the book itself) to the need for a broader representation of Christian ethical teaching and political economy in our ranks and our Bulletin. One last thought. Several years ago, the deVries were invited to Hope College as visiting scholars and speakers. I remember well their ability to inform and challenge us. I would recommend them as speakers to other Christian colleges; and Barend’s book to persons and groups seeking to understand economics and to be faithful in economic life. ■