

WEIGHING THE GOOD OF AFFLUENCE: A SYMPOSIUM

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Editors' Note: John Schneider's *Godly Materialism*, published in 1994 by InterVarsity Press, was one of the most controversial and influential books on Christianity and economics of the past decade. Summer 2002 saw the publication of the revised, expanded and renamed version, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Eerdmans, ISBN 0-8028-4799-4, \$24). To mark the occasion, Faith & Economics' book review editor Edd Noell has invited this set of comments and reflections on the new book. In his own comments, Noell responds to Schneider and surveys the current literature on Jesus' teaching on wealth. The symposium concludes with a response by Schneider.

Markets Without Guilt

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Consider John Schneider's *The Good of Affluence* (*TGA*) to be one of the best books I've read connecting the Christian faith with Economics. I thought highly of his earlier book, *Godly Materialism*. This book is even better. If you were going to read only one book about how the Christian faith relates to economic behavior, *TGA* is the one I would commend.

Professor Schneider is a theologian, not an economist. Consequently the tilt of *TGA* is to Biblical studies, not to the discipline of economics. This is not a book about whether there is a Christian paradigm for doing economics, nor is it a study of the Christian faith through the lens of economic theory. It is a book about affluence and following Jesus, or what the author calls "Christian faith and wealth."

Schneider not only develops his own thesis about the nexus between affluence and the Christian life, but (for those new to the topic) he acquaints readers with other views along the way. Economists who read in this topic area will find a familiar cast of characters surveyed, summarized, and critiqued, such as Craig Blomberg, Jacques Ellul, Craig Gay, Barry Gordon, Brian Griffiths, Timothy Luke Johnson, Michael Novak, Ron Sider, Sondra Wheeler, and Robert Wuthnow.¹ Johnson and Sider play particular point-counterpoint roles in *TGA*.

The Biblical themes that Schneider develops are drawn

(in separate chapters) from Genesis, Exodus, the Old Testament Prophets (with Amos serving as the representative) and the Proverbs, the Incarnation, the "Radical Jesus," the parables of Jesus, and (what Schneider calls) the "narratives of wealth in the early church" (drawn from the teachings of Paul and James).

These seven chapters are sandwiched between a stage-setting chapter that develops what the author calls the "New Culture of Capitalism" and an epilogue entitled "Being Affluent in a World of Poverty."

The premise of the book is that it is a mistake (common to those with theological training) to interpret the market system in terms of exploitation and class warfare. It also is a mistake to conclude that participating in the market system, as income earner and consumer, is incompatible with being a Christian. Schneider uses the word "delight" to describe the manner in which a Christian can be affluent in "the culture of capitalism." Participating in this "delight," according to Schneider, neither exploits others nor does it taint the participant with sin. This delight, he contends, "reflects the good created order of God" (hence the title of the book).

Schneider sees in Genesis what many writers about economics and the Christian faith (such as Blomberg, Gordon and Sider) never acknowledge: a God who creates; indeed, a God who created Eden to be a blessing for those He made in His own image; a God who promises material delights to His people, such as a land that would "flow with milk and honey" (i.e., things pleasurable to consume). In Genesis, God invites His people to be co-creators in the development of today's counterpart of milk and honey. Schneider invites scholars to consider that entrepreneurs can derive the same kind of creative enjoyment out of the rigors of fashioning a business product as a scholar can enjoy fashioning a new book.²

I would have thought Exodus was a most unlikely Scriptural source for stitching together the book's thesis. But to Schneider, the Exodus account (unlike the Charlton Heston version) is a theme of deliverance that had an end-game objective of material delight: affluence, for God's people ("properly achieved and enjoyed"). Let me quote

from *TGA*: “the pronounced theme of affluence in the literature that is linked with the exodus is ... vastly more important than Christian interpreters commonly suppose it is” (p. 67). Schneider explains that the evil of affluence is not affluence itself, nor the economic system that enables it. What is evil, is to perceive one’s income as “by my own hand” and not with an attitude of delight and as blessing.³

A word constraint bars me from discussing each chapter of *TGA*. Let me simply report that Schneider finds a common thread throughout the Scriptures that he addresses—and he does not ignore the passages, either from Amos or from Jesus or James, that are pivotal to writers such as Sider (and others) who offer an opposing wealth-negative thesis. An important operative element of Schneider’s thesis is that of “moral proximity.” He argues that our “moral obligations in economic life are greater or lesser in proportion to their moral proximity to us.” This strand also runs through the book and is expanded upon in the last chapter. The principle of moral proximity is Schneider’s answer to what he sees as the utilitarian ethics of Sider (and others) which he contends, ultimately, offer no clear guidance about the redistribution of one’s wealth.⁴

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Lest the theme of *TGA* be misconstrued, let me add that in his critique of the wealth-negative premise of many Christian writings on economics, Schneider’s book is not an endorsement of the “health and wealth gospel” (or what he calls the “prosperity gospel”). He is crystal clear that “we cannot predict with certainty that faith will bring material flourishing and delight. Nor may we say with confidence that unrighteousness will always be punished by poverty” (p. 112). While generally critical of liberation theology, Schneider considers its “solemn moment of truth” that the circumstances of the fall can be so powerful that “what should be the sign of good instead marks the presence of evil and vice versa” (p. 112).

While I shall not summarize the entire book, I found particularly informative Schneider’s development of the teachings of Jesus regarding wealth. I was reminded that many of those who were around Jesus during His teaching ministry did not find Him to be “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” Schneider reminds his readers that the Lord hung around with tax collectors, whores, and other sinners, which scandalized the religious leaders. He attended parties and was the provider of wine. The Pharisees did not see Jesus and His followers as ascetics. Indeed, they complained about His eating and drinking.

I learned much from Schneider’s consideration of those who “followed Jesus from afar” (who often had homes, businesses, and yet also were considered His followers). At the same time, the book does not neglect analyzing Jesus’ teachings to those who “left everything” to follow Him. Particularly informative to me, on the subject of Christianity and wealth, was the emphasis placed in *TGA* of Jesus’ relationship with Zacchaeus. Schneider credits Walter Pilgrim (1981) for first contending that the story of Zacchaeus is the most important part of the gospel of Luke regarding the proper use of one’s assets. In the “improbable example of Zacchaeus,” Schneider explains that Luke “puts forth to all wealthy Christians” “the disposition and principles” of becoming an “influence for good” such that “the improbable example of Zacchaeus forever embodies, in cultural form, the ancient truths of the creation, the exodus, the prophets, the books of wisdom, and the Incarnation” (pp. 165–66).

There is so much more that I found new in *TGA*. Schneider’s explanation of Jesus’ parable of the pounds, the divestment of property in the book of Acts, Paul’s commending of the collection taken for believers in Jerusalem: all receive treatment that is put against the backdrop of commentators who have offered different viewpoints.

In the book’s epilogue, “Being Affluent in a World of Poverty,” Schneider outlines the moral connection that exists between affluent Christians and the poor in distant nations. He does not deny the obligation of the rich to the poor, but he denies that the obligation is of the “theologically ultimate and prophetic kind, as is so commonly argued.” Schneider also contends that most of the theological thinking about global poverty is muddled and adds that much of the thinking from Christians is “fundamentally wrong in economic terms.”

Here Schneider deviates from his usual focus only on Scriptural sources (and Biblical commentary). *TGA* commends Hernando de Soto’s work as an antidote to those on the theological left who badly misunderstand “the nature and causes of the wealth of nations.” Following de Soto (2000), Schneider does not laud the market system so much as explain the prerequisite of a system of private property rights in poor economies, so that capital can move to more highly valued uses and affluence in these nations has a chance.

Schneider does not profess to be an economist. But in his epilogue, he might have credited the path-breaking work of economists such as Peter Bauer (particularly) and Basil Yamey who first explained that massive aid transfers from wealthy nations to poor nations can be counterproductive and do not generate sustainable wealth unless institutions that support Adam Smith’s “obvious and simple system of natural liberty” are in place (see Hancock 1989). The best means of “aid” that affluent Christians might “give” to poor

countries is evangelism: pastors and missionaries who “make disciples of all nations” (see, for example, Sherman 1997).

As a further inducement to study this book, let me add that Schneider is a clear writer. I never found myself thinking: I wonder what he means by *that*? At times, the writing goes beyond being clear to being pleasing as well. Often, when I found myself wondering, “but what about?” Schneider inserts a parenthetical indication that this topic or issue would be addressed later, a practice I found reader-friendly.

This has been a congenial season for good books connecting economics and the Christian faith. William C. Wood (2002) has authored a “plain and simple Christian guide” to managing home economics and personal finances. John Stapleford (2002) offers a framework for discussing Christian ethics applied to economic organization. Samuel Gregg (2001) brings the economic way of thinking to those whose thinking is informed by theological training.

TGA serves a related market at the intersection of economics and religion. Schneider’s book offers a perspective on the Christian faith and wealth that is Biblically based, reader-friendly to non-theologians, and of very practical significance.

Endnotes

- 1 While the book does not purport to be a survey of the literature, names such as Calvin Beisner, Douglas A. Hicks, D. Stephen Long, Adolpho Lindenberg, John D. Mason, Peter H. Sedgwick, and John E. Stapleford are missing.
- 2 I was taken by Schneider’s insight into the contradiction of those who laud asceticism as a Christian ideal and yet argue that the governments of affluent countries should redistribute income to the poor. Schneider sees those who deny that God designed people to enjoy the abundance enabled by market economies as modern day Pharisees.
- 3 Schneider’s exegesis of the Jubilee passages in the Old Testament was, for me, worth the book itself. Unlike wealth-negative writers who have lauded the Jubilee concept, Schneider shows its limitations, and explains how the Jubilee, if applied, would not always help the poor. Rather, the families of original affluence would eventually continue in landed wealth whether they deserved it or not.
- 4 I would welcome more thought on the moral proximity principle. It seems to me that increased communication and micro-enterprise development programs may shrink the “proximity” between affluent Christians and poor Christians, making the concept of proximity as a sorting device less transparent.

References

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Affirmation of Affluence, or Awkward Ambivalence?

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The overall argument of John Schneider’s book is that the kind of affluence enjoyed by many in modern, prosperous, capitalist societies is something that Christians can (at least under certain circumstances) affirm. As he rightly argues, this perspective is in marked contrast—indeed, diametrical opposition—to that of most Christian comment on such matters:

For both Roman Catholic and Protestant intellectuals of all varieties to this day, the response to the spirituality and morality of consumption in affluent societies is most often instinctively suspicious and world-negative rather than world-affirmative (p. 28).

Schneider is of course well aware of the various arguments deployed by those who are “suspicious,” and on the whole he engages with them seriously. Some of those arguments are spiritual—“enjoyment” of wealth all too often means greed and hedonism, which take people away from God—and others are ethical (e.g. capitalism is unjust in its practice, and fosters poverty and inequality). Schneider’s case, at heart, is that the God of the Bible wants all people to enjoy a good life, and that this includes enjoyment of material things. Further, to the extent that modern capitalist societies enable this goal to be a reality—whilst avoiding the spiritual and ethical dangers—then