

BOOK REVIEWS

Inequality and Christian Ethics

Douglas A. Hicks. New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. *New Studies in Christian Ethics*, No. 16. 2000. ISBN: 0521-77253-2. \$59.95.

Reviewed by Andrew Henley, University of Wales Aberystwyth, Wales, UK.

New Studies in Christian Ethics is an impressive series of academic theological studies whose aim is to point to the relevance of Christian ethics to secular contemporary debates. An earlier volume in the series on the market economy and Christian ethics was reviewed in *Faith & Economics* No. 37. The contribution of Douglas A. Hicks (professor of leadership studies and religion at the University of Richmond, VA) to the series is concerned with the vexed issue of inequality. I describe it as vexed because for economists it is a topic that, while once of little interest, is now attracting substantial concern, most notably because in both the United States and the United Kingdom income inequality has been rising sharply. While we now understand quite a lot about the processes that are leading to this, we understand rather less about why those processes are at work, and what the appropriate public policy responses might be. Furthermore governments of both liberal and conservative persuasion on both sides of the Atlantic are reluctant to redress the trend with overtly redistributionist forms of direct taxation.

Readers looking for detailed enlightenment on these questions will not necessarily find it in this book. The author is concerned with the rather more fundamental question of "inequality of what?" and, given the answer to this, the wider moral significance of inequality. Despite adopting an interdisciplinary approach to the subject, the book's arguments are presented in largely theological rather than economic language, and so Christian economists may have to persevere as they work through its thesis.

The book is structured into three sections, following a methodological schema to be found in liberation theology: socio-analytic, hermeneutic and practical. The socio-analytic investigation is largely, although not exclusively, an empirical review of inequality from an international and American perspective, and the issues presented here will be familiar to many economists. This section begins with a chapter that addresses the central question of "inequality of what?" To applied economists much work on inequality is framed in terms of income or earnings inequality. Hicks rightly points out that this is one dimension of a much wider purview which might include equal access to basic liberties

(as argued by Rawls) or equal capability to function in the economic and social sphere (as argued by Sen). In much of what follows in the book Hicks acknowledges a correspondence between Sen's capabilities approach to inequality and a possible Christian ethical position on inequality. In particular he returns to a threefold practical definition of inequality that encompasses not only the ability of individuals to function in terms of ability to purchase goods and services (through access to income), but also in terms of health (life expectancy) and education (years of schooling). This widening of the scope of inequality maps onto the methodology adopted by the United Nations Development Programme in its annual *Human Development Report* since 1990. The discussion continues with two further straightforward chapters that review data on international inequality and on inequality within the United States.

The second section of the book, addressing questions of hermeneutics, is the most clearly theological. Here there is perhaps most for Christian economists to ponder, although it is here that they will have to work hardest to engage with the theological language. A first chapter begins by tackling the issue of the extent to which Christian accounts of equality before God can have moral force in a pluralist world. In what sense are Christians egalitarian? Is Christian egalitarianism "merely" an eschatological reality or can it have meaning in contemporary society? If the latter, to what extent can that egalitarianism be applied to the world outside the community of Christian faith? The author reviews a variety of approaches and, in due course, sides with theologian Ronald Thiemann, who argues that public discussion on moral issues should not preclude the religious drawing on their moral convictions. Even if the non-religious are not persuaded by the moral stance of the religious, the process of discourse may at least foster mutual understanding and respect. It is important for the Christian community to display a moral integrity that derives from consistency in speech and action and between speech and action. Christian responses to economic inequality (and of course to any other aspect of socio-economic policy) should conform to these principles.

By way of application, the next two chapters develop this further by considering the consistency of theological perspective on inequality offered by two theologians from very different traditions. The first is the Reformed Protestant H. Richard Niebuhr (less widely known brother of Reinhold), and the second, Roman Catholic liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. Both provide theological and moral arguments for how excessive inequalities obstruct the conditions that guarantee moral equality. Both start

from the truth that all are created equal before God. For Niebuhr our equality as creatures is counter-posed by our equality as sinners. Our equality one with another before God must contextualize our relationships with others, and our shared responsibility for the injustice and oppression that follows from human sinfulness. Christian commitment has "transformative potential," as Christ is our redeemer, and so the task of social ethics is to transform human society with its inequalities towards God's new kingdom. For Gutiérrez sin is structural as well as personal and so the response to inequality must be a collective as well as a personal one. Here the emphasis is on Christ's identification with the poor as one who became poor for our sake. Liberation, as well as having an eschatological dimension, presents a present social challenge to engage with the world and transform it. Both theological accounts lead on to an ethical case for preference for the disadvantaged. The issue of preferential solidarity for the poor is developed in a further separate chapter. Here Hicks ties in Christian ethics with Sen's capabilities approach, by arguing that a focus on human capability can sharpen Christian ethical responses to inequality. However there is an unresolved issue here and it is this: does an ethical focus on the capabilities of the poor necessarily imply sacrifice (preference against) on the part of the rich? What should be the balance in a Christian response to poverty between seeking to improve the lot of the poor by making the "cake" larger, rather than taking the size of the "cake" as given and demanding a personal and, perhaps particularly, a collective response of income and wealth redistribution?

The final section of the book concerns the practical. Here Hicks makes a case for a much broader concept of inequality that shifts economic and policy analysis between productivity and growth to encompass a broader scope of human well-being and a broadening of the comparative examination of inequality. A specific proposal here is drawn from his earlier work published in *World Development* (1997), which makes a case for a generalization of the United Nations Human Development Index to take account not just of comparisons of the average levels of income, longevity and schooling between countries, but also the degree of inequality in each of these "functionings" within countries. On this basis we see a "moral" improvement in southeast Asian economies and a worsening in many Central and Latin American economies. Given the vibrancy of the Christian church in many of the latter compared to the former there is certainly a challenge to prophetic words and action here. We might make the same observation about the United States and the United Kingdom in comparison to other industrialized economies where the trend in inequality has not been so sharply upwards over the last two decades.

This volume represents a serious attempt by a social ethicist to bridge the gap between theological discourse and economic practice. This is not an easy task, but persistence

with and reflection on the argument presented in Hicks' work will prove worthwhile for Christian economists.

Reference

- Hicks, Douglas A. 1997. "The Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index: A Constructive Proposal." *World Development*. Vol. 25, No. 8 (August), pp. 1283-1298. ■

Bulls, Bears, and Golden Calves: Applying Christian Ethics to Economics

John E. Stapleford. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 2002. ISBN: 0-8308-2680-7. \$14.99 (paper).

Reviewed by Tom Head, George Fox University (OR).

Like many of the readers of *Faith & Economics*, I have the privilege of teaching at an institution with a core mission of viewing learning through the eyes of faith. Our university catalog lists ten institutional objectives, but number one on the list is this: "Teach all truth as God's truth, integrating all fields of learning around the person and work of Jesus Christ, bringing the divine revelations through sense, reason and intuition to the confirming test of Scripture." We come to teach at George Fox for a variety of reasons, but this centrally important objective plays a dominant role in hiring decisions and shapes both our teaching and our professional development. Most of us relish this "integration of faith and learning," finding it to be the source of much of our enthusiasm for and commitment to our work. For many faculty members, it is the area in which we are most likely to be doing innovative research and writing, and we thrive on integration papers, presentations and discussions at professional meetings and workshops.

But how does this all look from the viewpoint of freshman or sophomore students in our Principles of Economics classes? Do the advanced and abstract discussions that are so important to our own professional growth really speak to their condition? It is challenging enough to convey the wonders of economic reasoning to our introductory students. How much more challenging it becomes to bring theology into the mix in an explicit and constructive way. In my own Principles courses, I do what I can on my own, but I am very dependent on help from others. One of the best sources for this purpose has been Robin Klay's *Counting the Cost* (1986), but this helpful little book is now long out of print, my collection of library reserve copies is becoming quite tattered, and many of its contemporary examples are outdated and far from my students' experiences. None too soon, John Stapleford has come along to save the day!

In *Bulls, Bears, and Golden Calves*, John Stapleford brings together Christian thought and economics in a manner that students will find extremely useful. His approach