

Globalization and the Good

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The editor of this volume, Peter Heslam, directs the U.K.-based Capitalism Project, which aims to develop a multi-disciplinary response to the theological, ethical, social and economic issues raised by globalization. He is a theologian by training, but, it should be added, one who has a fairly sophisticated understanding of both the opportunities and challenges associated with economic globalization. He believes, like I do, that there is room in the debate, indeed a need, for perspectives that reflect religious and moral starting points (p. xv). This book is an attempt to introduce some of those perspectives. It includes contributions from theologians, ethicists, economists and other social scientists, with an equally wide range of theological perspectives. Most of the contributors are Europeans, and many of the contributions reveal a leftward ideological bias. Much like most edited volumes, this book contains some interesting and worthwhile essays, but the eclectic authorship also makes it difficult to identify any central area of concern, outside of a general concern for “justice,” or any uniquely “Christian” position on any of the most difficult questions facing policy makers today.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I looks at the contours and potential of globalization; Part II is a critique and discussion of alternatives to the present form of global capitalism; and Part III is said to be a discussion of practical steps forward. Overall, I found the book to be light in the areas of “potential” and “steps forward,” and heavy on the “critique” side.

Political science scholar David Held starts the volume off with an overview of the economic and political trends that are commonly associated with globalization. He notes that the increasing interconnectedness has given rise to complex and multilayered systems of governance that national governments “can barely monitor,” much less command (p. 8–9), and calls for a more “cosmopolitan” approach to governance, one that “registers and reflects the multiplicity of issues, questions, processes and problems that affect and bind people together...” (p. 13). Such a system, he maintains, would be more transparent, accountable and just, and he points to the European Union as a possible model. This reader was left unconvinced by his argument that a global system of multilateral governance patterned after the E.U. would be any more efficient, accountable or just than our

current system of national-multilateralism that is facilitated by the U.N.

In Chapter 2, one of the more specific and helpful essays in the book, Brian Griffiths begins by identifying five aspects of Christian teaching regarding globalization and poverty: globalization must be inclusive; Christians have an obligation to respond; the poor are not statistics, but real people; poverty must not be defined solely in economic terms; and finally, a Christian response must be holistic. He follows this with a call for a “Marshall Plan” of sorts for Africa, one that includes a combination of trade liberalization, debt relief and domestic economic reform. What distinguishes this essay from others, such as Jeffrey Sachs’ recent book *The End of Poverty*, that make similar proposals, is its overtly Christian perspective, and its concluding reminder that Christians should also be mindful of the spiritual dimension of poverty, and specifically, that “the good news of the Christian message, which offers hope to everyone regardless of material circumstance, [should] be at the heart of the reform process” (p. 28).

In contrast to Chapters 1 and 2, which take a macro-level view of the globalization challenge, Chapter 3 takes a more micro-level perspective by looking at the question of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This essay, written by Clive Mather, chairman of Shell U.K., will be of interest to those who follow the CSR debate, and particularly to those who have some background knowledge of the controversies surrounding Shell. Not surprisingly, Mather defends Shell at every turn, and makes a strong case in favor of political reform through economic engagement rather than sanctions and boycotts. Curiously, he mentions his Christian faith twice, but says nothing about how that faith informs his decisions. On the contrary, he makes it quite clear that “we are not embracing a commitment to sustainable development out of the goodness of our heart” (p. 33), and that Shell sees CSR as something that will help the company “optimize current business and gain new business opportunities” (p. 31). If this is true, and I have no reason to doubt it, then the fact that Mather is a Christian would seem to be irrelevant. The more cynical readers will wonder why he mentions it at all, if not merely to generate sympathy from his audience.

Part II (critiques and alternatives) begins with a thought-provoking essay by World Bank development expert Michael Woolcock that attempts to integrate a theology and theory of economic development by examining the epistemological assumptions underlying development theory. He does this by first making a biblical case that healthy social relationships bring glory to God, then showing how social relationships have been treated

in past and present theories of development. Specifically, he argues that social relationships have been treated either as obstacles to be overcome (modernization theory), as exploitive (dependency theory), as overly romanticizing and liberating (communitarian theory), or as irrelevant to development (neoclassical theory). In each case the relationship between development theory and theology has been, in his view, incongruent. This is changing, however, as he believes development theorists and practitioners are now recognizing the importance of “getting the social relations right” (p. 49). This opens up many promising opportunities for dialogue, he argues, between people of faith and development theorists.

Chapter 5, written by Ann Pettifor, director of U.K.-based Jubilee Research, is at the same time thought-provoking and surreal. Pettifor is obviously passionate about her concern for the plight of highly indebted countries, and her proposals, while controversial, are reasonable—an international bankruptcy system that is similar to what individuals and corporations enjoy in many countries, and purely flexible exchange rates that would give nations more freedom to pursue their own economic priorities. However, the author’s tone and conspiracy-laden diatribes against central bankers, the World Bank, the IMF, and other institutions that “overemphasize price stability” (p. 55) and “facilitate the extraction” (p. 55–56) of wealth from the poor to the rich were difficult to endure. That being said, however, this essay may prove useful for classroom purposes, as it is provocative, and filled with many elements of truth that could serve as springboards for lively discussions.

I am less sympathetic with Chapter 6, by Michael Schulters, which claims to be a critique of global capital markets, but is more aptly called a criticism of interest and limited liability, both of which, the author claims, are flawed because they undermine personal relationships. He claims that, in addition to being patently unbiblical, interest-based finance has been “a major factor in the...breakdown of community because it does not require strong relationships to work” (p. 70–71). Indeed, “a transaction can occur with minimum knowledge of the other party” (p. 71). Statements like these left this reader speechless, and amazed that a Cornell-trained agricultural economist with extensive experience in Africa could believe that exchanges with higher transaction costs are morally superior to those with lower costs. In the second half of the essay he explains why limited liability suffers from similar failings. As always, there are elements of truth; the Bible does indeed place a premium on relationships, and the Enron debacle exposed many failings in our system of corporate governance that have troubling moral implications. But overall, the essay does not

contribute in any meaningful way to the globalization discussion.

Timothy Gorringer's essay in Chapter 7 is loosely based on the apostle Paul's reminder to the Ephesians that our struggle is "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, authorities, powers and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). In today's context, he argues, this means struggling against western imperialism (which is to say, globalization), the exploitation of the poor by the rich (by rich nations as well as multinational corporations), and the homogenization of culture (by multinational corporations). He raises concerns, which I share, about the "idolatry of growth" (p. 89), and calls for a return to a more diverse, "localized" economic system, one that is more ecologically sustainable.

In Chapter 8, which leads off Part III (practical ways forward), Cynthia Moe-Lobeda sees in the teachings of Luther a call for radical resistance to "neo-liberal globalization." She claims that the "economic structures and practices denounced by Luther...also undergird economic globalization in its dominant form today" (p. 97). These practices include such things as excess profit (anything above what is "needed" to earn an "adequate" living), allowing prices to be determined by the market, and allowing other forms of unregulated economic activity. Clearly, this author is no friend of capitalism. Indeed, she sees capitalism as destroying "earth's life-giving and life-saving capacities" (p. 101), and claims that, at least in the United States, "we have become so addicted to our economic ways that we close our eyes to the death and destruction required to sustain them" (p. 102). Besides her general call to "resist" globalization, however, no practical guidance is given as to what should be changed or how.

Chapter 9 was refreshing, if for no other reason, because Michael Taylor acknowledges that there are decent, Christian people on the pro-capitalism and pro-globalization side of the debate. What separates the pro and con sides is not a moral question—we are all against injustice—but rather a technical one—how to achieve a more just world. Some believe firmly that the solution lies in making market capitalism work for the poor, and others believe that capitalism is the source of the problem. But we can all agree that God has a special concern for the poor, and that it is our duty as Christians to seek justice for the poor. He claims that, ultimately, self interest is at the root of our differences, and that some are in stronger positions to pursue their interests than others. This power imbalance, then, provides the rationale for Christian action: the Christian, he maintains, should work towards a more equitable balance of power. How does one get self interested people to agree to share power? By "frightening people to death" (p. 113) about the consequences of an ever-increasing gap between

rich and poor, and our insatiable appetite for oil that is turning “God’s earth into a conflictual wasteland” (p. 115). Only after we have been “instilled with a quite proper and well-founded fear” of global catastrophe that will “not just terrify but consume us all,” will powerful people recognize that their self interest lies in finding “a more attractive alternative to a global rat-race” (p. 113).

In Chapter 10, James Wallis challenges the church to assume a role of prophetic witness in society, arguing that “lobbying for small incremental changes is not enough” but rather, what is needed is a change in one’s “whole perception of things” (p. 117). How specifically this is related to globalization is left unanswered, as are any specific policy implications. Rather, we are encouraged to “raise our voices” (p. 126) like the prophets of old against injustice. It is hard to disagree with such high-sounding rhetoric, but I found myself dissatisfied with the ambiguity of the challenge.

Peter Heslam concludes the book with a short, balanced essay about the connection between biblical stewardship and sustainable development. He begins by making three arguments based on scripture: the “creation mandate” of Genesis 1:26–28, properly understood, involves nurturing and caring for creation; that humans are relational beings created in the image of God, which is a direct challenge to the view of humans as utility-maximizing automatons; and lastly, that God established limits from the very outset, which challenges our modern, unfettered pursuit of economic growth. If left unchecked, he argues, “global capitalism will eventually be dismantled by ecological forces” (p. 131). The solution can be found, at least in part, by ensuring that all ecological and social costs are factored into prices and investment decisions, a proposal that most economists will find to be entirely reasonable.

I appreciate the intent behind this book—to stimulate a coherent, faith-based and cross-disciplinary discussion of globalization. This is no easy task, given that within the Christian faith alone there is tremendous ideological and theological diversity. I regret, however, that there was not more attention given to the enormous potential for *good* that globalization represents, which is especially curious given that the word “good” appears in the book’s title. (This point reflects my own bias towards optimism, as can be seen in Rundle [forthcoming] and Rundle and Steffen 2003). Indeed, if someone untrained in economics were to read this book they would likely conclude that there is nothing redeeming about capitalism, much less globalization. That would be a pity.

My other complaint is that there was not more discussion of actual policy dilemmas, a discussion that would benefit greatly from careful theological reflection. Let me explain. Some day, when I have the opportunity to

talk directly to Jesus, I plan to ask how he would have handled some of the knottiest moral dilemmas of our time. Take immigration reform, for example. In the West, we enjoy generous social safety nets whereby the government takes care of those who cannot take care of themselves. I imagine Jesus would approve. Such a system is only sustainable, however, if those same countries control the number of new immigrants. Thus, strict immigration restrictions have become the norm in our post-New Deal society. These restrictions, however, have also contributed to the increasing gap between rich and poor because, unlike capital, which can migrate freely and seek the highest returns, labor, particularly the low-skill variety, cannot. How would Jesus handle this? Ethicists and theologians could add some valuable insight here.

Similarly, what would Jesus' stance be on outsourcing, which is creating thousands of jobs for people who until recently had little prospect of ever having any disposable income to spend on such things as education, health care, a refrigerator, and so on? Would Jesus support measures that discourage foreign direct investment, as many Christians in the West would like to see done? Would Jesus support agricultural subsidies in the interest of protecting family farms, or the re-imposition of quotas on Chinese textiles in the interest of protecting textile workers in Bangladesh, Mexico, and South Carolina? Questions like these, and hundreds more like them, are usually not as simple as they are portrayed. They often have multiple dimensions, each of which, when carefully explored, have undesirable consequences for real people somewhere. A multi-disciplinary dialogue on these moral dilemmas would be far more useful and interesting, in my opinion, than one that merely reworks old debates about the benefits and failings of capitalism in general. That being said, however, I commend Peter Heslam for his attempt to move the discussion forward by bringing together scholars from a variety of disciplines. The book stimulated my thinking in many places and gave me a better understanding of what Christian scholars in Europe are thinking.

References

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