

Global Ethics for the Global Market

BY WILLIS JENKINS

Should we welcome the global market or resist it? Does globalization threaten or empower Christian community? These four books—one overview and three anthologies—can help frame discerning conversations about the changing global realities.

Globalization can appear so full of paradox, so given to contrary perceptions and responses, that even organizing a meaningful discussion seems difficult. And yet globalization names new shapes of economic power and deprivation so dramatic that to give up on interpreting it would amount to moral failure. There is at least the stark outrage of global wealth and global poverty, a stumbling block to humanity and a scandal to Christians. We need guides for starting and framing the discerning conversations that can lead Christian communities into socially astute and ethically reflective engagements with global realities.

For potential guidebooks we do not lack. The sheer number of new titles evaluating the globalizing market highlights its contemporary moral urgency. Their variety, however, can make us despair of working out a coherent response. Does an emerging global market offer hope for alleviating world poverty, respecting our common humanity, and working out a stable international peace? Or does it organize and mobilize the forces which impoverish, dehumanize, and destabilize our world? Does globalization threaten or empower Christian community? Should we welcome the global market or resist it—and what would either gesture really mean for our everyday lives?

The following four books—one overview and three anthologies—offer resources for starting those conversations. Each is quite different from the others, and with three collections of essays, they proliferate frameworks of

interpretation and call for multiple, incommensurable responses. However, even in their plurality, these books operate with two important background assumptions that make for a shared context of responsibility.

First, nearly all the essays say or imply that globalization is not an inevitable process, but something shaped by human choice and political institutions. It is therefore accountable to our shared moral reflections and susceptible to reform. Second, by focusing on ethics, the books ask us to consider how globalization is changing and challenging our moral and spiritual lives. They are books written primarily from and for a context of global privilege, attempting to sort out the moral responsibilities of global north-erners in the face of disparities in wealth, power, and opportunity. And in that sense, they all implicitly refuse to let the specters of globalization inculcate helplessness or apathy – the attitudes that would let us escape responsible engagement.

PROVOCATIVE PROPOSALS

Manfred Steger's *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 168 pp., \$9.95) does indeed offer a concise way into the subject. Part of the Oxford series of "very short introductions," Steger's volume comes with the summary sidebars, illustrations, and readable prose you would expect. But this is no blandly neutral overview; Steger teaches the reader to look out for the way analytical descriptions of globalization easily interweave with an ideological "globalism" – the propaganda that the world market is inevitable, accountable to none, and universally beneficial. Critically suspicious of neo-liberal economic policies, Steger emphasizes that the present market is in fact the product of ongoing political decisions and social institutions. We could, if we chose, have a globalizing human society with increased interdependency, accelerating exchanges of information, and freely immediate contact – and *not* have the sort of economy we have today with its distressing consequences.

Steger devotes chapters to historical, cultural, and political dimensions of globalization in order to describe processes of globalization that interact with the market but are not reducible to its logic. Steger draws on one of those processes, the growing awareness of deepening connections among once-distant people, in order to present suggestions for reforming the market process. On his list: a "Marshall Plan" for the global south, a tax on international financial transactions, and dramatic new commitments to development.

INADEQUATE MORAL FRAMEWORKS

Steger's introduction is intentionally provocative and his action list invites debate. So how might we conduct that debate? What reasons do we have for redirecting the market to such social goals? What reasons do the wealthy have for assisting those far outside our usual communities of moral concern? Deen Chatterjee's anthology, *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and*

the Distant Needy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 304 pp., \$27.99), gathers a group of renowned philosophers and political theorists to consider how the resources of western philosophical ethics can address those questions.

A dozen rigorous essays later, the collective exercise leaves the reader sensing that those resources may be inadequate or at least underdeveloped.

When our culture's most reliable ethical frameworks seem inadequate to the task of mobilizing a decent response to the shame of global poverty, what witness will the churches give?

A majority of the essays address themselves to improving one of two organizing positions in the field: Peter Singer's utilitarian imperative to consider all suffering equally, and John Rawls' theory of political justice, which works out rules of formal equality among reasonable citizens.

Peter Singer has in recent newspaper columns

publicly called upon the rich and the comfortable to give reasonably to the poor and has suggested percentages (he asks, "Why not try the tithe?"). Singer opens the volume defending his claim that we should not give preferential treatment to those near to us simply because they are near. As usual Singer's utilitarian argument shames the privileged (let alone the Christian privileged) with the amount of suffering our selfish decisions allow to exist. And as usual Singer fails to quell worries that his brand of utilitarianism offends against our intuitive commitments to family members, neighbors, and fellow citizens (despite some roundabout allowances).

Other contributors, sometimes using the philosophy of Rawls, therefore attempt to restore our intuitions about moral distance while still caring for the distant needy. However, by the time partiality has been restored to those of our own blood and soil, the obligation to do something for the global poor seems so weakened that we are again at peril of Singer's rightful outrage. Three contributors seem to note this frustrating return, and they suggest that global poverty just outstrips the West's ethical capacity since we face basic, intractable human problems of harming others, selfishness, and political incompetency.

It should be noted, however, that missing from the anthology is engagement with the much-discussed "human capacities approach," which supplies the normative groundwork for the United Nations Human Development Reports, and thus directly guides much of governmental and non-governmental response to global poverty. (For an introduction to this promising approach, see Douglas Hicks' article "Global Inequality" in this issue.) Still, that so learned a group should find it so difficult to articulate

responses to the intuitively obvious shame of global poverty just underscores the difficulty: our most reliable ethical frameworks seem inadequate to the task of mobilizing a decent response. The lesson drawn for Christian churches lies in how clearly the world needs to hear and see hope in its confrontation with global poverty. What witness will the churches give?

COMPETING THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Perhaps the most helpful of these four books for stimulating Christian conversation is the anthology edited by Peter Heslam, *Globalization and the Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004, 137 pp., \$20.00). The book arose from consultations held by the Capitalism Project at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, and includes contributions from corporate leaders of Shell Oil and Goldman-Sachs, along with organizers from faith-based justice campaigns, academic theologians, and development experts. All the participants reflect on globalization from the perspective of Christian faith. The collegial background and shared faith makes the book's diversity striking, perhaps disturbing, because its contributors respond to the global market in dramatically different ways, all with explicit reference to biblical values and Christian ethics. If we needed proof that Christianity might lend itself to different conclusions on the global market, here it is.

The most dramatic difference lies where one would expect, between the corporate and the academic contributors. This volume is especially refreshing for including two essays from business leaders, and these from leaders representing a group most often pilloried by those worrying over globalization: transnational corporations. The two leaders articulate how they understand their corporation's ethical responsibility, and do so by talking about how their own biblical faith animates their concern for the poor. We should not look for evil in nefarious corporate boardrooms, both articles seem to say, for the wealth-production of the global market bears promise for alleviating poverty, especially if aided by more liberal markets and more development funds.

Timothy Gorrige, an academic theologian, has a much more ominous perception of the global market. It is precisely where biblical language of evil powers applies, he says. The Christian gospel has always struggled against principalities and powers, and in our age, says Gorrige, this means neo-liberal capitalism. The Christian task is to let the gospel unmask those powers, build authentic community, and begin to imagine sacramental forms of consumption.

Ann Pettifor, of the Jubilee Campaign, adds alarming notes about the state of global financial policy and calls for a return to biblical notions of Sabbath and Jubilee for radically reshaping it. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda similarly assumes that Christians must oppose neo-liberal economic arrangements, and offers lessons from Luther for developing a subversive form of Christian agency.

So what exactly is the good by which we measure globalization? Such different appraisals of the theological significance of the market make the reader wonder (assuming these essays really did arise from collegial exchanges), what was the response from corporate leaders when Gorrington placed their companies on the wrong side of the apocalypse, or when Moe-Lobeda offered resources for subverting their efforts? Did anyone come to a modified sense of how Christianity names the good in and against globalization? Here Heslam's epilogue is disappointing, neither providing more of the story nor suggesting avenues of common principle, but rather suggesting still another biblical framework for our reflection.

THEOLOGY AND THE COMMON GOOD

The final book may offer the missing common "good" from *Globalization and the Good*, and thus offer a theological framework for orienting Christian diversity toward meaningful reforms of the global market. *In Search of the Common Good* (London: T & T Clark, 2005, 360 pp., \$40.00), edited by Dennis McCann and Patrick Miller, presents the product of a three-year project conducted by the Center for Theological Inquiry: a set of essays on biblical, legal, political, and theological understandings of the common good.

The collection provides very useful beginnings for Christian rediscoveries and reinventions of the common good in the face of global economic challenges. It offers three kinds of resources — one kind helping Christians find the meaning of their faith for a globalizing age, another suggesting how that renewed faith might participate in pluralist common efforts of reform, and a third kind offering critical cautions on such negotiations between culture, politics, and religion.

Church groups will find especially interesting the three essays that use the theme of the "common good" to interpret Scripture in ways that might renew biblical faith in a global age. Victor Furnish's essay on the letters to the Romans, Galatians, and Philippians, for example, asks us to consider how Paul's message of God's uncommon love carries citizenship responsibilities for the common good. In other words, Furnish shows Paul teaching gospel-formed churches not to turn away from the wider society in sectarian indifference, nor suppose they have themselves the mandate to govern, but to act as decent citizens, challenging the shameful and supporting the good aspects of the culture.

So how do biblical Christians know what is publicly shameful and decently good? Patrick Miller and Jacqueline Lapsley lead reflections on Old Testament texts, asking us to think about how the Commandments and the Jonah story teach us the shape and extent of moral community. Read with global relations in mind, their reflections must challenge our shameful forgetfulness of the poor, our failure to imagine the distant suffering as our near neighbors in God. And they will support Christian social practices that seek to create decently human conditions for others.

Other essays in the book show the public relevance of Christian views of the common good; for example, how it functions in Thomas Aquinas to move ethics beyond the conceptual space of interpersonal relations, or how it is used in Catholic social thought to protest against aspects of modernization while endorsing others. Meanwhile other contributors chasten naïve enthusiasm for all projects claiming the public interest by reminding us how the common good can quickly become normative tyranny.

The theological heart of the book is secured by the contribution from Max Stackhouse, whose essay makes all three kinds of resources cohere. He argues for restoring particular religious visions of the common good as moral therapy for the public discourse on globalization. Stackhouse says that public thinking about our common good has suffered from the retreat of public theology and the loss of an orientation to the final good (the “uncommon good”). Lacking that orientation, our globalizing civilization tries in vain to order its fragmented subsidiary goods, among them its market, into a decently humane society. Global poverty shows that civilization is miserably failing at that, while nonetheless fearfully turning away from religious social visions. But religion is not a threat to society, writes Stackhouse; rather, it sustains meaningful pluralism by reminding every subsidiary good (like health of the market) of its orientation to a final good. Even religious pluralism is no threat, for competing religions at least share an orientation to something beyond – and in that there is therapy for the tyranny of the merely subsidiary, the false religion of the market.

Stackhouse’s argument makes the case that Reformed Protestant “federated covenantalism” does this best, for both theological and subtly historical reasons, and this theological particularism (and barely visible neo-imperialism) will chafe. But his general point seems just the tonic needed. The road to Steger’s Marshall Plan of reform, or any meaningful healing of the global economy, may require a deeply religious form of therapy. More than merely the restoration of Christian contributions to the public square, it requires the visible public presence of communions of faith, dedicated to charitable solidarity with the poor, loudly prophetic about justice for the oppressed, and witnessing against the false gods of market materialism.



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