

Free People: A Christian Response to Global Economics

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Tricia Gates Brown, a New Testament scholar, tackles the uneven playing fields and injustice embedded in global economics (or the process of globalization) and provides a biblical perspective on how Christians should live and respond in light of the many issues linked with globalization.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first three chapters center on the state of the global economy in the last three decades or so, and what the author understands as the negative effects of neoliberal global economics on millions of victims in the global north and global south. The following three chapters focus on surveying and analyzing biblical perspectives on economics, especially on wealth and its usage. The book concludes with personal stories of Christian responses to global economics (Chapter 7).

In Chapter 1, Brown surveys the major players of the global economy: transnational corporations (TNCs), international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), and, to a lesser extent, the governments of developed countries, which collectively are seen to have compromised the well-being of people. Brown highlights examples of uneven playing fields that favor TNCs and developed countries at the expense of developing countries, such as imposing liberalization (or neoliberal economics) on poor countries while protecting developed countries' markets, and the conditionality constraints and discriminating terms imposed by IFIs on developing countries. Brown also highlights the distorted political processes, at the national level, such as the fast-track authority of the U.S. president to force a yes-or-no vote (no amendment allowed) on trade agreements, e.g., NAFTA.

Chapter 2 highlights the opposition to the injustice and uneven playing fields of the global economy, such as the street demonstrations and unrest in many developing countries that were primarily instigated by the IFIs' external economic impositions on developing countries and especially on the poor. Brown devotes most of the chapter to surveying, in some detail, the demonstrations that took place in the global north between 1999 and 2001 during meetings of the major global economic players (e.g., WB,

IMF, WTO, and the G-8 Group). The major goals of the demonstrators were to express solidarity for global justice and to air grievances on a wide set of issues such as greater transparency, public involvement in the shaping of trade policies, environmental issues, labor rights, and human rights. Brown emphasizes the brutal and barbaric police response to the demonstrators (including violent anarchist groups), and expresses concern at biased U.S. media coverage that ignored the good causes and civil behavior of most of the demonstrators. The chapter concludes with a set of questions and answers to challenge how “evangelists” of the global economy portray freedom and how they accommodate the loss of some freedoms in both developed and lesser-developed countries.

Chapter 3 covers four case studies of how the global economy works in the global south: one on the role of NAFTA in the war in Chiapas, Mexico; another on the globalization of trade and how it harmed the poor coffee farmers in central America by shifting production and trade to cheaper Vietnam; and two studies of sweatshop-like practices in Indonesia and Bangladesh.

Brown presents a good survey of biblical perspectives on numerous economic issues, in Chapters 4–6, using the term “biblical economics” in reference to the repeated themes and central biblical ideas about wealth and its usage. Chapter 4 lays out the Old Testament patriarchs’ trust in God and God’s care for the poor with special attention to the Pentateuch’s laws, such as the laws on gleaning, the Sabbath year, Jubilee, and tithing, and proper use of wealth for God’s intended desires. Next, Brown surveys the post-Davidic era that was characterized by a centralized government and religion and the accumulation of wealth by the rulers and elites at the expense of the others and conquered nations. Brown also discusses the prophets’ warnings against economic injustice and the devastating outcomes of disregarding God’s covenant.

Chapter 5 summarizes Jesus’ teaching on wealth and its uses throughout Jesus’ ministry, teachings, and parables, such as Jesus’ command of radical generosity, caring for the poor, forgiveness of debt, and utter dependency on God. Ironically, Jesus was considered a social bandit by the elite class, partly because his ministry centered on the poor. Brown also highlights the “presentness” of the Kingdom of God in our earthly world and our hope in the future fullness of the Kingdom of God.

In Chapter 6, Brown highlights the Pauline teaching which warns that fallen powers and principalities that were created by God have become enemies of God, acting against God and God’s creation. She also addresses the spiritual side of human institutions such as legal and monetary

institutions that are imbued with power to lead the human spirit away from God's intention; she affirms that the spirituality of such institutions is an "inner mechanism" that empowers them in a way that determines people's existence. Brown ends the chapter by sharing the biblical hope embodied in Jesus' victory over these fallen powers and principalities in his resurrection, in that after being crucified by them he disarmed them and showed them to be impostors.

The last chapter displays individuals' narratives of how to use their wealth, motivated by their Christian faith, to honor God and God's creation, including their global neighbors and the environment.

While Brown's work is laudable in its attempt to establish a biblical basis for justice in global relations, it would be necessary, I believe, to consider the historical events and economic causes leading to the emergence of neoliberal economics. Government control over economic affairs in former communist countries, and excessive government interventions, inward-looking economic strategies, corrupt economic and political structures, and lack of essential institutions for successful economic and social development in many developing countries, contributed significantly to their dismal or non-existent growth and economic and social development. Thus, many developing and formerly communist countries have transitioned into more market-led economies, accompanied with effective and efficient institutions, similar to those in the global north and the newly industrializing countries, such as the "four tigers" (South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan), which have experienced higher rates of economic growth and development.

The book overlooks many achievements associated with globalization, such as the ongoing international immigration from the developing to developed countries that has brought about immense welfare gain to developing countries. Remittances sent by immigrant workers in developed countries to their developing countries of origin have more than tripled since 1990, reaching \$161 billion in 2004, an amount which is twice the foreign aid received by them (World Bank 2006, pp. 313–314). Moreover, the book mentions very little about Sub-Saharan Africa, the region least associated with globalization (except the ongoing immigration to escape poverty). It is not a surprise that Sub-Saharan Africa trails the rest of the world in all economic, socio-economic, and socio-political achievements (UNDP 2005). China, in contrast, is an example of successful engagement with the global economy, following the lead of the "four tigers" in the late 1970s. India followed the Chinese example in late 1980s and early 1990s, and India was followed recently by Bangladesh. These three poor and

heavily populated countries represent some of the most important examples of many countries that have gained significantly from globalization (Bhagwati 2004; Sachs 2005; UNDP 2005).

Brown's recommendation that we, as Christians, should "resist participation in the dehumanizing and oppressive structures of our economic system" (p. 146), demonstrates a relatively pessimistic and passive outlook towards the world economic system, focusing mostly on the "fallen powers." However, active participation, including civil disobedience whenever appropriate, will have positive effects in terms of containing, and even transforming, the existing fallen aspects of human institutions such as TNCs, IFIs, and governments. Recent historical records show the disappearance or the decline of many fallen global/regional institutions such as colonialism and communism, and the surfacing of new redeemed institutions that have positive effects on the global community. The growing numbers and presence of international non-government organizations and civil societies—including churches and Christian organizations—and new global initiatives that seek to eradicate the many problems of poverty, foreign debt, and economic and social development, are examples of redemptive global institutions that should be acknowledged and recognized. The poor in the global south benefit and can benefit further from the global north's effective participation in global economics: sharing wealth, participating actively in good TNCs, missions and community development programs, and ensuring that NGOs and civil societies monitor, report, and even prevent the abuses of the poor and vulnerable in these communities.

Brown's recommendation "to limit the amount of wealth we work to acquire" (p. 146) may lead some readers to think and act locally to serve their families and local communities. However, acquiring and sharing wealth can play a significant role in eradicating poverty and improving the standard of living of millions of our neighbors in the global south. A Christian perspective should encourage active participation in our effort to bring the world closer to God's Kingdom; as John Wesley stated brightly, "Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can." Furthermore, redemptive acts of generosity by wealthy individuals and organizations, Christian and non-Christian, and official government agencies have been used, and should be encouraged as long as the poor live among us in our global community.

The book includes some controversial and unrelated issues that may distract readers' attention from the main subject of the book. Examples include her description of the war in Iraq as an example of the fallen spirituality

of institutions, and her depiction of medical intervention to delay the death of a sick child as another example of powers that are fallen spiritually (p. 166).

Globalization is still an ongoing process in its early stage, such that current abuses of globalization should be evaluated alongside the gains from participating in the global economy (Goudzwaard 2001, p. 15). Christians have the moral duty to oppose all inhumane practices and call for their eradication; nonetheless, they also have the moral duty to participate in the redemptive activities of global economic practices that far outweigh the cost of abuses. For example, the number of the world poor living on less than \$1 per day has dropped from 1.5 billion in 1981 to 1.0 billion in 2002. The success is even more impressive in developing countries that have participated efficiently, such as China where the number of people living on less than \$1 per day dropped 72 percent between 1981 and 2002. In contrast, this number increased by 84 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2006, table 2.7). Other economic and social indicators follow the same pattern.

Brown's statement, "The redemption of which Paul speaks frees us from all dominating powers, including the power of Mammon, or the economic structures in which resides the spiritual force Jesus called Mammon" (p. 171), reflects her rejection of economic structures, not the fallen aspects of economic structures. Fallen aspects have penetrated all human institutions, e.g., governments, churches, and corporations. However, redemptive progress has also been made in economic structures, especially in the presence of supporting internal institutions, such as democratic governments, transparency, and effective laws. Economic structures do not operate in a vacuum; they are integrated with other institutions and structures.

Brown's view that the standards of the Kingdom of God upset the norms of economics, such as the praising of the poor widow who gave her last two coins into the temple treasury (Luke 21:1–4) and the women who poured expensive perfume on Jesus' head (Matthew 26:6–13), can be interpreted differently. Many economists, including this reviewer, disagree with the author's claim, since valid economic interpretations and justifications of both acts exist, but this may go beyond the purpose of this review.

In summary, I commend Brown's concern for the victims of global economics and also her survey and analysis of biblical perspectives on economic issues such as wealth and its use, which are still subject to further discussion. However, the book lacks the essential analytical reasoning required to fully understand some of the economic issues covered.

References

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