

Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today's Economy

Douglas A. Hicks and Mark Valeri, eds. 2008. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans. ISBN 978-0-8028-6033-0, \$28.00.

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In this age of hyper partisanship, Christian scholars must be among those who refuse to succumb to the temptation of conversing only with people who share their views. In a globalizing world, in which increasingly complex systems and patterns of life combine with ever more detailed vocational specializations, keeping the communication lines open is vital if we want to understand how to be faithful Christ-followers in our individual decisions as well as in our collective decisions about how to order society. This is the task Hicks and Valeri set for themselves as they assemble ten essays by scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Ethicists, theologians, business professors, church historians, pastors, one theater professor, and one economist are brought in to advance our understanding of our moral obligations in an increasingly globalized world.

Do they succeed? Well, the topic is a very big one, and of course we need to hear from many more voices than just the ones in this book, but I give it a qualified yes. The essays are pertinent, serious, and worth a listen. With Rebecca Blank being the only *bona fide* economist in the volume, Christian economists might easily brush off the sometimes strained attempts of other authors to apply ethical insights to economic theory and contemporary economic life. But this would be a mistake. Instead, we should listen to the reflections of our fellow travelers as they wrestle with such scripturally inspired concerns as how God created us to live in community, who our neighbors are, how we can and should care for each other, and to be faithful in the economic areas of our lives. The questions they raise are good, and if we are not persuaded by their answers, then we should take up the task of trying to improve on them.

The book opens with a teaser, the imaginary but realistic tale of Denny McFadden, a mechanical engineer who works for a high tech manufacturing firm based in New York. Denny occupies a mid/high level management position and reluctantly plays his part as his company moves production operations first to Mexico and then to China. As workers are laid off in New York and then in Mexico, Denny watches the livelihoods and the communities of his subordinates decline. As a Christian, he wonders what his moral responsibilities are and whether this is the way God wants him and his company to manage the business. Eventually, Denny comes to realize that he too will no longer be needed. The book offers Denny no definitive answers to his questions, the bulk of the book simply affirming

that his concerns are legitimate and that we must discuss them carefully, seriously, and from many angles.

The main goal of the book, the third in the Eerdmans series on “Religion, Ethics, and Public Life,” is to further the conversation. Should Christians care about people south of the border and on the other side of the world? The first two essays answer this in the affirmative by exploring the age old question put to Jesus by the skeptical lawyer, “And who is my neighbor?” Pastor Thomas Walker, and then religion professor Eric Gregory, both wrestle with the question of how ethical responsibilities rise and fall depending on how “far” away people are from each other. Walker and Gregory both argue that the priest and the Levite saw the injured man on the Jericho road as too “far away” to merit their attention, while the Samaritan (!) saw the injured Jew as a “near one,” or a neighbor. Offering no precise set of applications, Jesus tells the lawyer (and us) to “go and do likewise.” The message gleaned is that we ought, out of love, to care for people who may seem far away, but whom we should really think of as close by, our neighbors. Both essays affirm that Denny bears some responsibility for the well-being of the workers in New York, as well as those in Mexico and China. Globalization makes us all “near ones.” The third essay is essentially a paean to Bono, who leverages his fame to tell Christians and others that yes, they have an obligation to do something about global poverty, that there is much they can do, and that they ought to organize and actually do it. Author Douglas Hicks praises Bono for using his position and resources to call Christians to live out their faith in a global context.

The second section of the book presents four assessments of whether globalization’s moral dilemmas, like rising global inequality and labor/community dislocations, are adequately addressed by contemporary economic theories and institutions. Kent Van Til, an ethicist well-versed in economics, is disturbed by the reliance of mainstream economics on such conventions as *homo economicus*, self-interest, individual preferences, utility, efficient markets, and the like. He notes how dissonant these are with the values and norms of scripture, like neighbors, relationships, and community. Van Til believes economics could become more consonant with scripture if we followed the lead of economists like Amartya Sen rather than the likes of Gary Becker and Hernando De Soto. Sen maintains intellectual rigor while admitting a realistic and complex view of humans as moral agents and community members. The economics of Becker and De Soto, on the other hand, is too reductionist and morally thin.

Two essays in this section, one by Rebecca Todd Peters, a religious ethicist, and the other by Janet Parker, a pastor, challenge the legitimacy of the overall capitalist system. Todd Peters’ main concern is that our current system is based too heavily on the idea that people are actually supposed

to care only for themselves and not for others. It is not just a working assumption, but a normative guideline. This is problematic in and of itself, as is the poverty and injustice that result when people behave this way. She is glad to point out that people are not, in reality, completely self-interested, that they really do care for others, and that some actually choose “to make different decisions that are based on different assumptions about relationships, transactions, and community—in short, decisions that are based on a different value system” (p. 91). She wants us to recognize this much more complete view of human motivation and then work together to build a new economy on a foundation of different and better values. To make her point, she wades into “Das Adam Smith Problem,” arguing that Adam Smith offers one way to integrate values of compassion and community into economic theory and structure. Ultimately, she offers no specific solutions, but is convinced that it is very hard to live morally when the system expects us to behave otherwise. She argues that Robert McNamara, as an individual, tried to provide moral leadership at the helm of the World Bank, but was ultimately thwarted by the system. What we really need, she says, is “systemic reform” (p. 106).

Taking an ecological tack, Parker argues that global capitalism is too “monoculture” (p. 133). She believes God loves diversity and that global capitalism destroys it, but she offers no guidance on how much diversity God actually wants and what the criteria might be for determining the difference between good and bad diversity. The need for such criteria becomes apparent when Jeff Van Duzer has just decried ethical diversity in the previous essay. Still, Parker’s general claim about the importance of (especially) biological diversity is certainly valid, but we will need to think harder about the general morality of diversity and especially how that relates to economic life.

The essay by Van Duzer, dean of the School of Business and Economics at Seattle Pacific University, takes a visionary look into the future and sees trends in globalization leading to increasing conflicts for business leaders as they try to live ethically in a globalized market. His biggest concern is that new business strategies will so distance buyers from how products are made and marketed that they will not be able to make moral decisions, even if they want to. This will lead buyers to focus only on price, allowing externalities and immoral practices in production and marketing to go unnoticed, thus resulting in a race to the bottom. He encourages Christian business people to intentionally market their products as ones that meet reasonable codes of conduct (e.g., fair trade), and to support government efforts to internalize externalities and to regulate businesses to uphold acceptable ethical standards.

Oddly, Rebecca Blank’s essay on the role of government in market economies is not located in this section on system assessment, but this

is where it belongs. Blank reviews the standard economic reasons for why governments intervene in markets (e.g., externalities, public goods, redistribution, and limiting the market in such areas as child labor, sex, and drugs). She then argues that scripture and biblical thinking, like concern for others and especially the poor, and the importance of values other than market determined values, support the intervention of the government in these areas. Instead of pitting the government and the market against each other, she argues that appropriate government activity complements the market. I wonder if the adjustments to the system recommended by Van Duzer and Blank would be enough for Todd Peters.

In the final section on work and vocation, business professor Shirley Roels addresses the future of manufacturing, and theater professor Robert Austin and business professor Lee Devin analyze the rising importance of the “knowledge worker.” In a sophisticated study of the history of work and the fulfillment it brings workers themselves, Austin and Devin show how the progression from custom work in the medieval period gave way to alienating, dehumanizing mass production work in the industrial era and how globalization and new technologies are once again restoring not only custom work to the consumer, but also fulfilling work to the new knowledge worker.

Remember Denny McFadden? Finally, one of the authors, Shirley Roels, takes up his questions directly by considering the impact of globalization on the manufacturing industry. Arguing that markets are essential to healthy economic life, she counters clichés often heard about how the poor keep getting poorer with real data that show economic growth actually contributes to improved well-being for the poor. That said, she argues that we cannot just rely on the system, but that everyone, including leaders of manufacturing industries, is morally responsible for God’s world and for our neighbors the world over. She provides examples of some manufacturing companies that take this responsibility seriously and have implemented creative ways to respect the dignity of their employees, their customers, and all their other stakeholders too.

Together, these essays make up a thoughtful collection, but it is indeed a collection, not a unified, purpose-driven set of essays. The editors make an attempt to draw out the coherence of the essays in their final comments, but it is a stretch. About all they can say is that the essays are interesting and are indeed relevant in this time of globalization. Many of the essays, for example, do not even refer to the globalizing world, or do so with only a few concluding comments suggesting their thoughts are relevant for the global arena too. They are right, of course, but one might have expected that specific and stated global challenges would have been front and center in a book intended to help us “live out and apply one’s religious and moral obligations in an interdependent global economy” (p. viii).

The book succeeds in keeping scripturally-based ethical principles before us and in making some initial applications to global economic life. It is a conversation that needs to continue, and one that Christian economists would do well to join with enthusiasm. ■