

COMMENTS ON THE RESPONSES

By Max Stackhouse

I am grateful to Professors Peter Whitney, Jeff Lenn, and R. Bruce Douglass for their insightful responses to and probing questions about my presentation. Each of these scholars has had both international exposures related to the trends I try to identify and serious engagements with the issues I seek to address. I take up their main concerns in order.

I.

Prof. Whitney is gracious in his overview of my argument, and I appreciate his assessment of it. He has also added to it. I did not know the historical origins of the term “Washington Consensus.” The gap between the scholarly use he outlines and the current populist use I cite, and the probably social consequences if one or the other were adopted are enormous. I share his opinion that the scholarly view is the more progressive one and more likely to aid development; while the populist one is the more reactionary and more likely to perpetuate poverty. We also share the question: Why is the Reformation-based church leadership attracted to the latter?

I have questions about his view that “economics is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for globalization.” He continues: “Doesn’t globalization tend to begin with a breaking down of barriers to economic relationships desired by a critical number of people?” I would ask: What does the breaking down, or rather what builds the bridges that make such relationships possible? I think a positive view of technology is required, one that is based in a culture that fosters both science and the value-laden notion that we can and should transform nature when and if we can enhance the possibility of abundant living over time. Also required is the construction of social institutions that encourage peaceful exchanges on many fronts, including corporations, trans-national laws and networks of trust. These channel the human propensity to self-interestedness and ethnic, regional or class chauvinism. They invite us to consider what others need or want.

Such social and ethical developments enable us to reach beyond the tribe or nation, thus making concrete the faith-based conviction that humanity does not end with our “own kind” in our own place. When these are in place, we can deal with and recognize the legitimate moral and material interests of the stranger beyond the barriers of borders. Some religions, traditions and cultures do not foster a civil society with these features. Progressive economic life, especially contemporary trade and development, in other words, is a culturally, socially, ethically and even religiously dependent phenomenon, not an autonomous cause. Much socialist and capitalist theory wrongly sees economic interests as the singularly causative forces in human affairs. That they play a role is obvious, but they are interwoven with other causes. I offer a theological view because I think that neither a naturalist nor an economic view can explain or guide globalization as well as the more comprehending view a theological ethic demands.

In a related argument, Prof. Whitney suggests that the turning point toward modern globalization could be dated as 1947 when a group of western-led countries formed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) – which became, some half century later, the WTO. The case for the date is strong; but it would, in my view, be stronger yet if it were noted that the United Nations, with its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and a host of aid, church, service, humanitarian and educational

organizations were also formed in the wake of the defeat of Hitler's National Socialism and came to fruition when the wall came down and the Soviet Union collapsed. Also, 1947 saw the start of decolonialization with more than one hundred "new" countries adopting constitutional governments with international connections. All these were anticipated by longer, slower processes of social, cultural and religio-ethical changes favoring global interactions against which the Axis powers had reacted and which the Soviets tried to dominate. Thus, if I have a chance to converse with Prof. Whitney further, I will again argue that globalization depends on and implies a larger civilizational shift than an economic one, which is one result.

II.

It was good to meet Prof. Jeff Lenn again, to read his comment on a topic about which we both care and to extend a conversation we began many years ago. His response focuses on one critical question: Why speak of "the grace of God" when the issues could be seen, perhaps better seen, through the lens of "the justice of God?" "Christian justice," he writes, "demands a skeptical affirmation rather than a full embrace of market economics." He is quite right, of course, that I could have chosen this lens. But I decided not to. The injustices he cites are already well known to be wrong, denunciations of them are repeated frequently and efforts are being made to correct them everywhere. Exploitation is exposed when it is found; corrupt leaders of giant corporations are put in jail or on notice, and monopolistic practices are blocked.

What is seldom acknowledged by those who speak of God's justice as if they know now what it will turn out to be, however, is the affirmation of the creative life-enhancing, providential, grace-full dynamics that are at work in the overwhelming majority of globalizing influences. If we do not affirm globalization with less scepticism and keep on reforming it in accord with a gratitude to God for the spreading possibilities of democracy, human rights and access to an abundant life, what economic order shall we embrace as more just? Subsistence agrarian, feudal peasantry, mercantilism, socialism, communism, or what? Of course to mention these suggests that market capitalism is but one of a series of developments, and it is unlikely that it is the final one. It surely is not the Kingdom of God; but over the past thirty years I have lived and worked in societies that is trapped in one or another of these systems. They are not idyllic; they are less just; they are not "godly" even if they are "spiritual." Today, the people in these systems are trying to find their way into the social and cultural possibilities that globalization brings. Religious leaders concerned about justice should help them and prepare them morally, spiritually and socially for what they will encounter! That will bring more justice.

In another way, I think I agree with him; but perhaps not just as he wishes. My comment on Prof. Whitney's response already suggested that I am not devoted to "market economics" as it is interpreted by a large number of economists today and as it is taught in some business schools. As often as not the discipline is cut off from social, cultural, religious and ethical modes of historical analysis. In spite of some serious interdisciplinary work, "true" economic thinking, many say, does not fraternize much with the other social sciences – anthropology, sociology, psychology or cultural studies, let alone the humanities or those fields of philosophy, theology and ethics that seek to clarify issues at the normative levels of human understanding. Yet it makes basic claims about human nature, social change, human desires and how the world ought to work. These are often shallow and limited to factors of "impersonal price mechanisms."

The modes of analysis that are dominant, thus, may be informative at one level; but they do not reflect how people think about economic life. They appear to a non-economist to flatten everything they touch to a compressed utilitarian functionality. There is no height or depth of life that is touched by the height or depth of life, as we see in a Dante or a Milton. There is only seldom the recognition of the joys of having a job with a good boss and congenial workmates, loving the work when it is done with skill or excellence, giving it sacrificial attention when a project needs doing, being a responsible person in supporting a family, having at least some discretionary income for the simple pleasures of life with friends or loved ones and being able to give to a faith group or a favored charity. I think that the vast majority of business life, as really practiced, even in the multinational enterprises, are based more on these virtues than on the flat vices of economic reductions. The economists and professors of business I know talk one way when they put on their professional hats, but live another; and their technical talk does not really account for the way they live and arrange their lives economically. Nor does it account for the social matrix in which factory workers in underdeveloped countries live in their own social context or what drives the jet-setting managers of multinational corporations. The theologians of the Reformation who spoke of people having a “calling” in economic life to serve others, the common good and the purposes of God under just laws, even in a sinful world, came closer.

Thus, I may have to disagree with Prof. Lenn when he laments that “the new ‘laws’ of supply and demand built around an impersonal price mechanism have changed work to impersonal and interchangeable labor, introduced consumers as the drivers of demand and elevated... corporate managers to an elite status.” The economists have rightly discovered the laws of supply and demand and of pricing, and it is better to know these than not to know them. Further, many of these “impersonal mechanisms” have given peoples not previously a part of the wider economic picture a chance to find a vocation in the new plural possibilities of global life. The worker in an outsourced Asian factory, as I have seen, is now an agent in the global economy, even if on the lower rungs of the ladder. Such a worker, many for the first time, is also a customer whose wants and desires have to be attended to by others. And while I agree that the absurd salaries commanded by those who engineer economic growth are disproportionate to the contribution they make, I do not expect that kind of privilege to last. One of the jobs of business teachers is to teach others how to manage the big shows better and cheaper, as a vocation, leveling the spike some have as a temporary advantage.

III

This brings me to the last and briefest response, the one from Dr. R. Bruce Douglass, who graciously hosted me at the gathering where I made the initial presentation. I am grateful to him for the opportunity. He says we see much of the world in the same light – except for one critical point. He thinks that I have built my case “too simply on the premise that modernization is unambiguously a good thing,” which he does “not believe is the case. ... (A)ny fair account of its consequences must also acknowledge that it has brought great evils....”

He is correct that the “short century” between 1917 and 1992 was very bloody. It brought wars and tyrannies that make it rank among the worse epochs of history. And he is right to attribute this, as well as many benefits, in large measure, to “modernization,” the definition of which has now been under debate for nearly a generation that claims to be “post-modern” and tends to see everything as fragmented idiosyncrasy with no master narrative. I see modernization as the tendency to view everything in terms of the rise of the sovereign nation state (liberal or radical or reactionary) which was to be based on

secular reason in contrast to irrational religion. It had an alternative, an ideological master narrative. Radically liberated from any profound sense of the laws and purposes of God, as well as from any sense of original sin, it would be an epoch of unmitigated human progress for a favored people – the enlightened, a superior race, an oppressed class or some combination of these factors. None of these turned out to have been so.

Globalization makes progress a possibility for all. But Dr. Douglass' question can be put thus: Is globalization like modernization ideologies or different? Another illusion or a genuine promise?

On the whole, I think of it as genuinely promising in spite of the continuing power of original sin and the real possibilities that we might globally warm ourselves to death or lose our way in new imperialist pretenses or ethnic fragmentation, possibilities that demand that any optimism be guarded or cautious. Our capacities to resist the sovereignty of grace are real, but not they are not determinative. Indeed, deriving from those Biblically-based Reformation theologies that interacted with Renaissance learning, a valid insight was gained. We may never be able to overcome the temptations to human sinfulness in this life; but modest progress can be made in faith and ethics, and thus in the ways in which we order our lives together – if we see the world as it is ruled ultimately by the God who is graciously and providentially guiding the dynamics of history toward a just and merciful end. Modernizers dispensed with the notion that God's grace could be involved in the realities of life, and modernization turned vicious before it fell apart. I think globalization as the alternative postmodernism offers new opportunities for building a reconstructive infrastructure that is more inclusive of wider humanity than has ever been possible before. It is highly unlikely that we can walk up its ramp to the very gates of heaven, but guided by a shared public theology we may be better equipped to resist the temptations to sabotage its promising possibilities.

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