

“Christian Principles for Global Business”

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We are living in less than optimal times for both business and Christianity: Enron, John Geoghan; Arthur Anderson; Bernard Law; World Com; Archdiocesan cover ups and presidential insider trading. The arrogance of the Vatican is mirrored by the arrogance of the sitting vice president in regard to his practices as CEO of Halliburton. In the business world we are deceived by false profits; and in the church we are abused by false prophets. Thus, I fear as I attempt to sketch out some substance for my title: “Christian Principles for Global Business,” a discerning audience might rightly cry “a plague on both your houses.” But my goal here is to attempt to return to some foundational concepts that gave birth to Christianity. I will demonstrate that far from being irrelevant to “the real world,” earliest Christianity understood itself in view of terms it borrowed from the real world, including the world of Hellenistic commerce and politics. Finally, I will suggest that some small hope for diversion from current business practices can come from the women and men who have been trained in the language of global markets. However, corporate officers must learn to reimagine their presuppositions in light of a Christian vision of social justice, precisely because the Christian vision of social justice, while distinctive, is not idiosyncratic, but rather has been synthesized out of cultural institutions and social markers. Furthermore, the first Christian communities adopted and adapted these ideals of citizenship, democracy and community to their particular needs.

Paul of Tarsus was the first Christian theologian. In writing to his communities, Paul often invoked the Hellenistic concept of *koinonia*. In its simplest translation it connotes partnership. In fact, this term is found in the language of torts in the Hellenistic world well pre-dating Paul. It was used to identify a contractual arrangement between business partners. Secondly, it was utilized by the Greek philosophers to designate their ideal of the *polis*. Citizens of the polis (of course, you had to be a male landowner to be a citizen) were expected to subjugate their concerns for personal profits to the overarching needs of the whole. In Greek political thought, the opposite of *koinonia* was called *eritheia*, usually translated as selfish or avaricious ambition. Note that the opportunity to

hold property and increase one's estate was not threatened, but rather kept in proportion to the needs of the polis. One's property and wealth was understood as part of the polis, as an organ within the body rather than an island within the surrounding sea of a nation-state. Above all, the term *koinonia*, in both its commercial and political contexts connoted the state of interdependence that existed between the partners. The term demanded that this interdependence must be acknowledged and cultivated for the success of either the business partnership or the political fellowship.

Paul utilized this term *koinonia* to describe his community ideal for his churches. In Philippians he exhorted his congregation, threatened by internal division, to have the same mind, a phrase synonymous with the connotation of *koinonia*. He called the Philippians his *koinonoi* in the Gospel, as he did his friend and fellow Christian Philemon. Philemon was a businessman so successful that he owned slaves and a house big enough for the Christian congregation Paul founded to meet in on a regular basis. He exhorted the Philippians to consider each other as better than one's self – a call for personal subjugation to the good of the body politic. In Corinthians he used the metaphor of the body of Christ, and in so doing reminded his audience that they, like a body, are interdependent. E. g., the head and the heart need each other. No part of the body is autonomous, or self sufficient. His great sermon on *agape*, in 1 Corinthians 13, represents his understanding of what *koinonia* means for Christians. *Agape* is one of the three terms for *love* in Koine Greek. In Paul's context, *agape* serves the preeminent expression of Christian love. In common usage, the term *agape* means, "to place first in one's interests or concerns." As Paul used the term, it meant to place Christ and the believing community first in one's concerns. The earliest Christians understood the Eucharist as an *agape* feast, where the unity of the believers in the love of God and the love for one another was ratified by the reading of scripture, the manifestation of spiritual gifts, and the eating of the body and drinking of the blood of the savior. The love and commitment to the larger community that 1 Cor 13 praises states in the clearest possible terms that personal accomplishment has lasting measure only in the manner in which it contributes to the community. To use a modern athletic metaphor, Paul's concern is not with the player's individual skill, but rather with how much better he or she makes the rest of his or her teammates.

Finally, it is important to remember that Paul believed that in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, free nor slave, male nor female. After he converted a certain slave named Onesimus to Christianity, he had to write to Philemon, Onesimus's owner, to inform him that Onesimus was still a slave in the eyes of the world, but in Philemon's eyes must now be considered a brother in Christ. There was no doubt in Paul's church that the welfare of the individual superceded the legal standards of business practices. Paul never condemned slavery as a cultural or social institution. He did not condemn Philemon for being wealthy or for owning slaves. But Paul's vision practically restructured Philemon's world, where now a slave was to be seen as a brother. The language of domination within the empire was displaced within the church by the language of kinship. Ownership was transformed into partnership. Paul utilized a model of polity that I call "charismatic democracy." This does not mean that Paul's churches were governed by a rigid majoritarianism. Paul's experiments in church were not exercises in majority rule. However, as best as we can reconstruct from his letters, Paul's churches did seem to represent one imaginative and innovative set of experiments that are most accurately labeled democratic and charismatic co-jointly. Through the discernment of the activity of the Spirit, the ancient church excavated the diverse gifts of its many members, celebrated them at its love feast, and cultivated those gifts in partnership for ministry.

As citizens of a marginal movement, the earliest Christians had a unique perspective on freedom. These authors and their communities experienced freedom in a profound and world changing way through their faith. In turn, they also arrived at the insight that their oppressors were enslaved. For Paul, if one were "in Christ," nothing about one's demographic profile mattered in terms of salvation. Sin and evil are the lords of those not in Christ, and neither wealth nor any other social marker can save them from what Paul calls "the wrath to come." Mark likewise dismissed the posturing of Jews and Christians alike, but rather held to the vision that "whoever would be first must be last and servant of all." They understood, as Paulo Freire re-articulated two millennia later, that "the great historical and humanistic task of the oppressed is to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors cannot find in their own power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves." (Freire 1992: 28) Freire's statement

reminds us that global business constitutes the primary form of oppression in the world. The forces that create and drive the global markets have neither the inclination nor the freedom to cease and desist from this rapacious activity. However, the vision that in different forms drove first Plato and Aristotle, and then Paul, can offer an alternative manner for thinking about the ways in which principles of business are taught and implemented.

The case to be made here is very modest. It does not imply that business could or should be “Christianized.” Yet if we recognize that in all ages Christianity has fashioned its self understanding out of the matter of the culture in which it finds itself, then also its principles should hold the potential for appeal to those in the culture who do not necessarily wish to embrace the entire belief system. Thus, I would argue that drawing on the well spring of values as partnership and democracy, just as Paul, Mark and other Christian theologians articulated them could offer one effective means of addressing the problems created by the proliferation of global business.

Political Scientist Benjamin Barber has called the explosion of global markets “McWorld,” by which he means “[the] onrushing economic, technological and ecological forces that demand integration and uniformity that mesmerize peoples everywhere with fast music, fast computers and fast food – MTV, Macintosh and McDonalds, pressing nations into one homogeneous global theme park, one McWorld tied together by communications, information, entertainment and commerce.” (Barber, 2001: 4) The primary failings of global business, as Barber sees it, is in its maniacal focus on market and commerce and profit at the expense of all other values. “Market psychology,” he says, “undermines the psychology of skeptical inquiry upon which autonomous judgment and resistance to manipulation are founded. . . . markets offer no collective responsibility.” (16) From his perch as a political scientist, Barber charges that the modern global market place especially imperils the values of citizenship and democracy. In universalizing markets, McWorld “undermines democratic institutions, eschews civil society, and is indifferent to civil liberty.” (6) Perhaps the most insidious aspect of McWorld is that “It softens up citizens to accept the decline of political institutions and tries to persuade them that they will be better off – more “free” – when their collective democratic voice is stilled, when they think of themselves not as public citizens but as

private consumers. Consumers are poor substitutes for citizens, though, just as corporate CEO's are poor substitutes for democratic statesmen." (Barber 2001: xxix)

In his address before the Senate this past Wednesday, July 17, Alan Greenspan said that "An infectious greed seems to grip much of our business community." (New York Times 7/17/02). Also, he noted quite tellingly that "It is not that humans have become any more greedy than in generations past. It is that the avenues to express greed have grown so enormously." (New York Times 7/17/02) A recent poll of Fortune 500 CFO's indicated that 12% of those polled falsified corporate earnings statements, while another 52% were asked to falsify such data. If the poll is a reliable indicator of current business practices, more than two thirds of major corporations are contemplating or engaging in practices to deceive their stockholders, employees and clients. The current culture of McWorld is thoroughly corrupt, militantly self-aggrandizing and utterly unconcerned with the commonweal. However, it remains the unique challenge and responsibility of Jesuit universities that house schools or colleges of business to offer alternative models to the business culture for which the fictional character of Gordon Gecko, from Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street*, remains the Olympian ideal. I am suggesting that within the world of Jesuit higher ed, we have access to a deposit of tradition that can offer a viable alternative to the current, virulent practices that benefit so few and harm so many. I further suggest that these Christian principles for doing business are neither odd nor irrelevant to real world concerns, but rather offer consonance with other critiques of our current situation proposed from beyond the Christian orbit. In painting an alternative vision, Jesuit higher ed in business disciplines can take one small step towards liberating not only the oppressed, but the oppressors as well.

At this point, I would return to explicit consideration of the principle of *koinonia*, or partnership and mutual interdependence. Although the sun has long set on the British Empire, colonialism remains a central force for oppression and injustice in today's world. However, today the principal agents of colonialism are found more often in the boardrooms of massive corporations rather than in governmental offices of sovereign states. E., g., on Thursday, July 18, the Associated Press reported that hundreds of impoverished Nigerian women non-violently took over five different ChevronTexaco terminals. In a country long racked by poverty, military dictatorship, and now

questionable civilian government, the oil terminals serve as oases of modern civilization with every imaginable comfort. Yet, literally 400 yards from modern hospital facilities, whole families die of starvation, malaria and other afflictions, some of which perhaps result from the work of the oil facilities themselves. How is it that an oil conglomerate can export 500,000 barrels of oil per day, and have people of the land from which the oil is extracted starve to death in the shadow of its production facility? Given the mass of raw capital that a half of million a barrels of oil per day generates, is it unreasonable to expect the poor of that land to receive benefits of basic sustenance and medical care, as well as some employment subsidized by the McWorld conglomerate that flourishes amidst that poverty? Unfortunately, in today's corporate culture, my previous statement hardly constitutes a rhetorical question. However, the women of the Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic groups have dragged the oil executives, mostly kicking and screaming, one or two small steps towards a manifestation of partnership with their people. It is instructive to note that the AP also reported that "ChevronTexaco even promised to throw a party [the next day] for the women, their families and neighbors to thank them for not damaging the oil facility." The first Christians celebrated their partnership on a weekly basis in what they called their agape feast. In a vastly different culture, two millennia removed we see that a small move towards partnership, including pledges to hire 25 neighboring indigenous people to work in the terminal, culminates in a celebratory meal. And to use Freire's language, the oppressed Nigerian women have helped to free the oppressors, at least momentarily, from the effects of their own oppressive behavior.

My point, here, though, is that the takeover by the women would not have been necessary if the businessmen and women of ChevronTexaco had been taught to see the world through a different set of lenses. My fear, of course, is that the agreement arrived at by the oil company negotiators will prove cosmetic and transitory at best. An understanding of the Christian principle of *koinonia*, however, would impel business people to accept the natural fact that the wealthy corporate officers and company laborers and the poor of Nigeria are, in the end, interdependent. This would mean, practically speaking, that the corporate executives could not *imagine* building a modern hospital facility without allowing the poor people who live in its shadow sufficient access to it. It would mean that the oil terminal employees would not feast sumptuously every day, like

Luke's rich man, while the poor who lie at the terminal gate, like Lazarus, would be denied even the scraps that fell from their table. It would mean that ChevronTexaco would act like a good citizen of the world community, rather than as multinational version of the gunman who grabs the cash – or in this case the oil -- out of the drawer of the Seven-Eleven and runs away leaving the store clerk lying helplessly on the floor.

Koinonia, the classical expression of both business partnership and political democracy, tempered by agape, the concern that places a primacy on the needs of the community, stands as an alternative model for the typical fashion in which firms like ChevronTexaco do business. Ignacio Ellacuria expressed these values eloquently in stating, "Christianity struggles against those things that dehumanize . . . it upholds solidarity and kinship between all human beings." (Hassett and Lacy, 1991: 207) Barber, no Christian himself, stated a very similar thought in his reflections on 9/11: "To build the new world that is now required calls for a new Declaration of Interdependence, a declaration recognizing the interdependence of a human race that can no longer survive in fragments – whether the pieces are called nations, tribes, peoples or markets." (Barber 2001: xxiv)

I have some hope in this regard, because I work in a Jesuit institution. Jesuit institutions of higher ed around the world educate a significant portion of men and women who become corporate executives. Ellacuria reminded us that Christianity, universities and corporations are all realities in history. (Hassett and Lacy, 1991: 204) This means that the historical work of education in the present can offer the possibility of creating a reality wherein investment capital produces kinship as well as profit. This means that we remember, as Freire has taught us, that education in any discipline, including the academics of the business world is never morally neutral. It should not require a United States Senator to remind us that even the manner of the accounting of stock options constitutes a moral activity. However, if you doubt John McCain, just ask the employees and other victims of the collapse at Enron or World Com whether or not accounting is a morally neutral discipline. This means, for business education in Jesuit schools, that we must not fall prey to the myth of dispassionate neutrality. Barber reminds us that "Where once the student was taught that the unexamined life was not worth living, he is now taught that the profitably lived life is not worth examining."

(Barber, 1992: 207) We have at our disposal a tradition that can offer a vision of business that can articulate values of community alongside of goals of productivity and profit margin. McWorld teaches us to desire things we neither need nor can afford, and in so doing enslaves us to our greed. Yet Paul was confident that he could teach Philemon, a wealthy and powerful man, to understand that his relationship to Onesimus was no longer one of domination but that of kinship. The women of the Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic groups may have taught one of the most powerful corporations in the world the same lesson. It would seem that our Christian principles are not wholly circumscribed by history or doctrine, and that they can change the reality of the world in which we live today.

Bibliography

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