

## **God and Global Capitalism: Let's Say Something Positive**

### **Richard Higginson**

The Church of England has not exactly covered itself in glory recently. St Paul's Cathedral has dithered over the protestors camped outside its doors, first threatening to evict them and then deciding it liked them after all. Under media pressure and parroting the simplistic question 'What Would Jesus Do?', too many church commentators have resorted to crude capitalist or socialist slogans. There is more to being prophetic than bashing bankers' bonuses. Let's put some positive, substantial content into this discussion!

Christian faith, rightly understood and practised, can be an enormous power for good in the global economy. There are times when it has been in the history of the West, and there are parts of Asia (eg China and South Korea) and South America (eg Brazil and Chile) where it is such a power now. Christianity is a positive influence when it does five things.

First, *stimulates enterprise*. The church should support entrepreneurship as a noble vocation that requires qualities of vision, passion, risk-taking, persistence and decisiveness.

Second, *reduces poverty*. Christians should promote a view of business with social as well as financial purposes, releasing people from poverty by focusing on the most disadvantaged members of society as employees and customers.

Third, *promotes integrity*. The church should encourage people to do business without deception or corruption, living integrated lives that display honesty, consistency and transparency.

Fourth, *ensures sustainability*. Christians should set an example as responsible stewards, developing products that are environmentally sustainable.

Fifth, *fosters discipleship*. Business is a strategic place for Christian witness, the aim being not just the making of converts but teaching men and women to glorify God through being faithful followers of Jesus in the marketplace.

Across the developing world, Christians are active on all these fronts. Andrew Tanswell runs ToughStuff, a successful social enterprise selling innovative solar-powered energy solutions in East Africa. The Anglican organisation Five Talents, led by Tom Sanderson, is transforming people's lives by a combination of micro-loans, sound business training and innovative savings programmes. The Mahalir Aran Trust in Tamil Nadu, India, teaches women commercial tailoring skills as an alternative to the sex trade. Lautaro Wines is a Traidcraft fair trade producers' cooperative demonstrating impressive

solidarity and resilience following the earthquake which hit Chile's Central Valley last year. TS Wong, chairman of Jetta, leads the way in promoting higher health and safety standards and better treatment of workers in the toy manufacturing sector in mainland China.

Many of these positive stories are examples of alternative business models: social enterprise, fair trade, micro-credit, eco-friendly companies and cooperatives. None of these models are panaceas; they can be done badly or well. But taken together they comprise an alternative to capitalism's dominant paradigm of public limited company and maximising shareholder value. They constitute signs of hope in an otherwise gloomy economic outlook.

Some conventional companies also display refreshing characteristics. There are good people and socially responsible units operating across the corporate spectrum. See for instance the impressive work being done by KPMG's Global Citizenship Unit, run by Lord Michael Hastings. Note too that the alternative models are already operating within the global capitalist structure. They face the same market disciplines (the need to attract investors, satisfy customers and be cost-effective) but have different priorities. Capitalism is not the homogeneous entity - the undifferentiated seamless robe - that its critics often assume. It has countless variations that are rooted in national histories and cultures.

The UK suffered more than most from the financial crisis because we had linked our version of capitalism so closely to the US model. This may have been understandable because of the close ties between the two countries and because American capitalism appeared for a while alluringly successful. But its colossal dependence on debt, its huge pay differentials and the chicanery of sub-prime mortgages have exposed its moral fragility. An alternative form of capitalism we have been foolish to ignore is the social market version practised by the Scandinavian countries. Norway, Sweden and Denmark display no shortage of enterprise, but they are far more egalitarian and among the least corrupt countries on earth. While Scandinavians pay higher taxes, they benefit from excellent public services and avoid catastrophic levels of public debt. They have come through the financial crisis relatively untroubled and sensibly kept well clear of the Eurozone.

All of which leads to saying this. The debate needs to shift its focus from the clergy of St Paul's and the protesters in their precincts. We need to join with them in a well informed debate, fed by biblical theology and economic

understanding. And let's give our support (financial, moral and prayerful) to Christians who are already making a difference, proving a power for good in the global economy.

Dr Richard Higginson is Lecturer in Christian Ethics and Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall Theological College, Cambridge. His book *Hope for the World: Christian Faith and the Global Economy* is due to be published in 2012. Faith in Business is running a conference on *Motivation in Business* from March 30-1 April 2012. See [www.faith-in-business.org](http://www.faith-in-business.org).