
Tough Questions on Faith and Political Economy: A Commentary

Philip Powell and Richard Slimbach

The following is a response by Philip Powell (co-director of the Justice Conference, UK, and also Theology and Network Engagement Manager with Tearfund, UK) to the five questions Richard Slimbach poses on faith and political economy in his article “[Asking Tough Questions About Transformational Development](#),” published in this journal in the summer of 2023 (Slimbach 2023). A follow up comment by Slimbach appears at the end. Both of these contributions were part of a webinar on June 27, 2023 discussing that article; the rest of the webinar content, consisting of two other responses and discussion around them, is published in this issue as well. The full recording of the webinar can be found at <https://vimeo.com/844345288/e970fe8826?share=copy>. The specific questions to which Philip Powell responds are:

1. In what ways have your family background, theological education, and ideological leanings shaped your perspectives on US foreign policy and the global US American military ‘footprint’?
2. Are policy advocacy, community organizing, and other actions that prioritize economic justice, environmental sustainability, and human rights legitimate areas of public engagement for Christian NGOs?
3. What does our theology say about the importance of environmental responsibility? Why must the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor be heard together? What keeps Christian organizations from tackling big environmental issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and resource (oil, gas, and mineral) depletion? What goals might Christian NGOs set for themselves in these areas?
4. Given the realities of global poverty, increasing income/wealth inequality, and excessive levels of consumption and material waste in the Global North, what is expected of Christian organizations committed to the welfare of the poor and dispossessed?
5. Our current economic system works to create immense wealth and to grow economies, but morally, how does it work? What does it do to people and planet, not just for them? Do the internal mechanisms of capitalism act to preserve and protect the earth’s ecological processes and biodiversity? Do they enable people to live in caring relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature? Do they encourage people to desire and delight in God? Do they strengthen the world’s cultural and religious traditions and identities that provide meaning, direction, and joy in life? In other words, in what ways does advanced capitalism nurture and/or hinder transformational development?

Philip Powell

Thank you to the Accord Network for inviting me to respond. And thank you, Richard, for writing this challenging article, asking tough questions about transformation and development. I thought the title should have been extended to say something like asking tough questions about transformation and development and learning to live without the answers in the short and medium term. I want to agree with you that this is about having a conversation, and sometimes

it is about developing a spirituality to live with, while not having the answers, because any rush to give answers is going to be shallow and short-sighted, because these are very complex issues that Rich has touched on, things like militarism and capitalism. I am going to try throwing a few ideas out for us, and hopefully we can discuss this later when there are questions.

I wholeheartedly agree with Rich that we need to go beyond where we have been in terms of thinking

about issues. I read the line you wrote about what young adults from evangelical backgrounds are feeling. You wrote that what they find maddening is the avoidance, or silence, they experience within churches on issues of greatest consequence to the planet's future. I am largely sympathetic to their complaints. I find a lot of millennials unable to cope with being in a church that is talking about some sort of spiritual stuff while the world is on fire. And yet I do not see how turning away from the church is going to deal with some of the big issues we are facing. Because ultimately, I agree with what the late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin says, that the church, God's people, is still the foretaste, the sign, and the instrument of God's kingdom. We need God's solutions to some of these problems. Newbigin also said that the alternative to the current order that is falling apart is the church itself. We are the embodiment of a different kind of world. This does not go into the view that we would withdraw and just live in a Christian bubble.

To respond to some of these questions you pose, which are very challenging, I am just going to give my viewpoint. The first question is about my own sort of background and where I come from. I grew up in India. Both my grandfathers served in the armed forces, one in the British Army, the other in the Air Force. I grew up in a home that was very pro-missionaries and pro-Americans. A lot of Indian Christians grew up being quite pro-American. In fact, two of my favorite films growing up were a film called *Hatari* with John Wayne, and the other was the film *Patton* about the US Army General Patton during the Second World War. Indeed, when the first Gulf War was happening, I was actually collecting photos of the news in the newspaper, black and white photos from an Indian newspaper, and sticking them in a book to have images of the US military victories. Because my grandfather was in the Army I had that sort of love for the Army. And yet, a decade or so later, when the second Gulf War was happening, on the 15th of February, I was in London marching against the second Gulf War. Something changed in my outlook, especially because of leaving India and coming to live in the UK. I began to see the problems with what some call "US imperialism." I think what I am grappling with is how to bear witness to who Christ is, God's self-disclosure in history, in the midst of our complex world. My own academic background is in international relations, which helped me understand that there are no easy answers. One of the things to say about my personal background is that I feel I have had to overcome in my own journey the divide that I felt growing up with a quite a pietistic faith—prayer, evangelism, doing mercy ministry—but had very little vision for engaging politics, for engaging the sphere of

public life. And so this is a little bit about my own journey.

To the question about legitimate areas of public engagement for Christians NGOs, of course the answer is "yes, yes, yes." But it is really about the details of what that "yes" means. So often young adults who are against injustice, and who want justice, seem to know better about what we do not want, while finding it difficult to articulate what we are for. So, yes, we're against economic exploitation, but how do you get to having a world in which there is economic justice? What are we for? I'd like to introduce the writings of someone here in Cambridge (UK), Michael Schluter (<https://www.jubilee-centre.org/founder-dr-michael-schluter>), who has been writing a lot about relational thinking and how to transform capitalism from within. It has more of a vision of what kind of society we want than just saying what we do not want.

Coming to the question of theology, let me first read a quote. The reason I want to read this quote is because it again refers to Lesslie Newbigin, who I have found very helpful. The quote is by David W. Smith of Great Britain, from his book *Transforming the World: The Social Impact of British Evangelicalism* (2004). Toward the end of the book, he writes these words:

And yet, as evangelicalism changed over time, so its understanding of the nature and consequences of conversion was modified in all kinds of ways, with the result that the biblical promise of the new humanity was watered down to an offer of personal peace and happiness. Guttled of its spiritual content, conversion was reduced to an experience which required no radical break with the values of our secular culture. Indeed, conversion became a purely private affair, bearing so little relevance to the public sphere that a widespread resurgence of born-again religion, revival, could occur without posing the remotest threat to a society whose prosperity is built on a justification of greed and whose security rests upon a willingness to commit genocide and turn God's earth into an uninhabitable wasteland. Evangelicalism, no less than liberalism and Catholicism, ceased to have critical contact with Western culture and became party to the veneration of modern forms of the sacred, the nation state, the ideology of guaranteed security and, above all, the cult of mammon, which the Bible frankly calls idols. Conversion became a means of personal psychological release from the historical situation, and those who experienced it were left, in activist words, totally integrated with society, religiously degraded and reduced to one dimension. The resultant peaceful coexistence

between the church in the West and the culture of the Enlightenment has led Newbigin to describe European Christianity as the most advanced case of syncretism.

That was David W. Smith pointing out what is happening in our world in terms of Christianity in the West. That is when I decided to read more about this man, Lesslie Newbigin. Let me read one of the quotes from Mark Noll, and I am then going to say a couple things about the other questions. This what Noll writes in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (2001):

Among Evangelicals of all varieties, there was little evidence of any felt need for systematic, theoretical reflection, for a theology applied self-consciously to politics, and for a critical historical study in aid of political theory. Concern for political involvement was replaced with an almost exclusive focus on personal evangelism and personal piety. Current events evoked interpretation of prophecy instead of either reforming activism or political analysis.

Noll's book shows that the kind of Christianity exported to the parts of the world where I grew up was very much about one's personal salvation. I never heard the idea that the gospel was good news for public life. I wonder how we recover a theology that overcomes the public/private division? I can mention many names, but I'll mention one simply because he is from the United States. This is E. Stanley Jones, who was committed to personal evangelism, but who also saw himself as a statesman. He was engaged, for example, in trying to prevent the United States going to war with Japan. We have these examples, but in the circles where I move with young leaders, if I mention E. Stanley Jones, most of them do not know who he is.

Coming to the last of the questions, I want to refer to the [Micah Network Declaration on Integral Mission \(2001\)](#). This declaration says many things about structural injustice. Here is one of the lines from the Micah Declaration. "We affirm that the struggle against injustice is spiritual. We commit ourselves to prayer, advocating on behalf of the poor, not only before the rulers of this world, but also before the judge of all nations." The most complicated and challenging thing for Christian development agencies to deal with is how to find a way forward in reforming the kind of capitalist economic global system we have. Until we find a way forward out of this debt-based system, driven primarily by increasing returns on capital, I do not see any way that we can deal with inequality, and also, as you suggest in your paper, what Martin Luther King Jr., if he were around today, would likely call "ecocide." That is the big question for us. To conclude, my challenge is to

find a kind of formation that allows people to live some degree of Christlikeness in a world that is so far away from what God intends, while also finding ways to engage with systems and structures.

Richard Slimbach

Philip, I very much appreciate, and agree with, your quotes from the British commentator David W. Smith, who is honoring Newbigin and Mark Noll. I agree that a big part of the problem is traceable to what has been a major contribution of Evangelicalism, which is the stress on personal piety. But when it never leaves the congregational setting, there is then an overemphasis, even an exclusive emphasis, on personal salvation, on a way of reading the Bible, on a colorblind kind of racial identity, and on an association with various political movements like the Moral Majority in the United States or Tea Party Trumpism, which, to outsiders, transforms the community into little more than a political block. That is the great obstacle we face in the United States right now in relation to radical discipleship. Lastly in relation to ecocide, reforming capitalism in the short term, that is in the next thirty years, according to IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) estimates is an unrealistic endeavor and carbon emissions continue to rise year by year. There is no slowing down. And in my view, the mechanisms of global capitalism, which is the air every country breathes economically, politically, culturally, and socially, it becomes a question of regulating or transforming it with protections, which I tried to highlight by giving the Nordic examples. Finland, Sweden, and Denmark are capitalist societies, but they are social democratic capitalist, and have significant safety nets and protections for both people and planet.

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