

Review Article

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Amy E. Black. *Beyond Left and Right: Helping Christians Make Sense of American Politics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2008. 256 pp. £17.50. ISBN: 978-0-8010-6726-6.

Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen and David Van Heemst. Foreword, Desmond Tutu. *Hope in Troubled Waters: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007. 254 pp. £10.99 ISBN: 978-0-8010-3248-6.

Jonathan Chaplin and Robert Joustra (Editor). *God and the Global Order: The Power of Religion in American Foreign Policy*. Waco, TX: Baylor Press (Baylor University), 2010. viii + 306. £33.5. ISBN: 978-1-60258-250-7

Economic policy issues from a political will; the fiscal policy and pecuniary impact of one nation is no longer isolated: a tiny troubled economy (Greece) has generated a Eurozone crisis that profoundly impacts on U.S. economic recovery. Globalization: American recovery may be being hampered by Greek debt, but when the U.S. sneezes, the rest of the world catches its economic death of a cold! So much for isolationism. To talk of recession, of economic downturn, of the current crisis with the banking sector, of national debt, is to talk about a world order. Given its dominant role in the global order, what sort of critical assessment of U.S. politics, also economic and foreign policy, is of consideration to Evangelicals? These three books give us a salient picture of what might constitute a valid consideration. Underpinning them is a demand to get beyond the dualistic political divisions? Given global poverty, terrorism, environmental degradation where is hope? Which g/God amongst the panoply of modern/liberal “gods” and “idols” that rule with legion multiplicity the messy world of Western politics are we talking about? What is the role of religion in American politics and U.S. foreign policy, with the inevitable economic impact?

Amy E. Black (associate professor political science, Wheaton College), in *Beyond Left and Right: Helping Christians Make Sense of American Politics*, asks many pertinent questions from a non-partisan approach. Can the United States seriously be considered a Christian nation? Is the idea of a Christian nation possible? What exactly does the American constitution define as church-state relations? What place is there for disagreement between Christians who are called by Jesus to be reconciled? Black considers these questions in the context of the heated debates generated by the issues, and focuses on the apparent distinction between a political conservative and a theological conservative? Ultimately the central question is how possible it may be to apply one's faith to the messy world of politics, for that matter, how possible is it for Amy E. Black to be non-partisan in this volume as she offers a guide to the byzantine workings of the U.S. political system in the context of "faith-based political decisions". Black acknowledges that talking politics breaks the code of social etiquette, and trying to get beyond the dualism inherent in all political debates is the aim of her volume; this aim is, for Christians, very necessary. Therefore the opening section deals with the basics, the framework underpinning any political debate. Contrary to the social etiquette that Black argues constrains political and religious debate, she reminds us that it is imperative for us to decide which politicians and political parties respect the Kingdom of God and seek, however incomplete or fragmentary, to move society and the political agenda towards the Kingdom of God (contrary to the British Labour government, 1997-2008, where Alistair Campbell declared publically that they did not do God). Black therefore tackles the thorny question of the sin of compromise: should voters elect people they profoundly disagree with on key issues (pp. 29-39)? Can such compromises advance the common good? Black provides several graphic text boxes in each chapter that give factual details to assist the reader in terms of constitution, history, though often these have woven into them polemical details which obscure the facts rather than elucidating—but such is the nature of political debate. However, she deals with really pertinent issues when she asks the question, "Does the Church have any business in politics?" Archbishop Desmond Tutu is reputed to have commented, in the days of apartheid in the 1980s, that he did not know which bible his critics were reading from when they said religion and politics should not be mixed. Black looks at the

historical context—American and European—and what the context was for a wall of separation between the Church and the State and what exactly the first amendment protects, what it includes, but also what it excludes (pp. 128-36), and therefore the role of the Supreme Court and how it handles decisions of a religious nature. In the end the solution to the problem of getting *beyond* left and right appears to be individualistic, which it may be argued contradicts the inherently corporate and collective nature of politics: “finding your own path.” (p. 139f.) Finally Black comes to the salient point of considering prayer. Prayer becomes a particularly subversive political act precisely because it is not merely wishful thinking but actually affects the political landscape and changes the debate and the results of elections pneumatologically. (p. 219f.) In the context of prayer she notes how important it is to get beyond a polarized debate. “Although the political agendas and concerns facing those inside and outside the church are often the same, the gift of prayer provides Christians another way to make a difference. Though it can be, for Black, exciting and even fun to participate in politics, our individual actions are only a small piece of a much larger picture.” (p.220.)

Bob Goudzwaard (professor emeritus, economics and social philosophy, Free University of Amsterdam), Mark Vander Vennen (writer, Ontario, Canada), and David Van Heemst (professor of political science, Olivet Nazarene University, Illinois), in *Hope in Troubled Waters: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises*, move the debate into a more explicit economic perspective. The authors focus on the dire straits which all nations and societies find themselves in the early twenty-first century, specifically within the Western sphere of influence. The result is then a biblically-informed critique of the Western liberal consumerist lifestyle that demands everything at once, which must be seen as juxtaposed against economic meltdown, poverty and terrorism, environmental degradation, a suffering globe where planetary scale problems abound, and crises that now threaten humanity’s very existence. The central concept invoked in this astute volume is correctly and predictably, “idolatry”. Where are believers in the fight against idolatry? Also, should we despair, Does not hope mitigate against despair? Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen, and Van Heemst point to Christ as the source of hope and as the answer on how we should live and work together, instead of being driven by selfish demands. But how? That is the central thesis of

this work, a thesis defined by hope. If despondency and rage, indifference or escapism, are no option, if the despair that unsettles hope must be abandoned, Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen, and Van Heemst, using their social science credentials, diagnose the idolatrous obsessions driving the world's social and economic, political and religious, crises, but they still come down on the side of hope. But restraint is the imperative. If cynicism and hope are the flip sides of a dialectic coin, then the argument for a biblically informed basis, i.e., a scriptural hermeneutic, is the mechanism for defining and justifying hope. Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen, and Van Heemst still hold to a thesis of hope. This is so even in the face of globalization; also given the evidence of social fragmentation caused by an unregulated global market. Furthermore, hope must be held to even in the moral and ethical void issuing from the dominant culture (Western liberalism). Hope here is defined in terms of the Old Testament tradition of the Hebrew prophets. Therefore, the authors can attempt to analyse the ideologies that drive the idolatries that are suffocating us—politically, environmentally, and, crucially, economically. Hope is defined by and in a gospel of love and truth, humility and justice, but is there too much emphasis on the nature and objective of Old Testament Hebrew hope? A problem: is there not something of a Western romanticism in this invocation of “Hebrew hope”. This is not a call for Marcionism but are we in the danger of marginalizing Supersessionism? The cumulative hope of the Old Testament prophets was for the messiah to come. He did; the Christ came, and was crucified—and resurrected for our salvation. Hope should not, therefore, be for some ancient Hebrew belief in the coming messiah. Though the authors rightly assert the Christ as the only source of hope, many readers may find it difficult to see a clear and acceptable connection with the ancient Hebrew hope for heaven on earth and a political messiah figure. Will this world, human civilization, fare well in the *eschaton*: the hope is not now for individuals, who form the invisible community of the Church, and how they will stand before Christ in judgement. This criticism notwithstanding, what do the authors have to say specifically about economics? There are multitudinous references but there are specific foci: for example, the relationship between economy (οἰκονομία *oikonomia*—“household management,” often, “the rule or law of the house”) alongside justice and peace (pp. 169-83—this provides a rare example of a specific biblical exegesis with an economic critique).

Other examples include an examination of the vulnerability created by an unregulated free market (pp. 136-37), the dilemma of economic growth vis-à-vis environmental degradation (pp. 24, 28, 137f., 190, 218-20), and national autonomy (p. 31). Can we talk about an economy of care?—

Viewed through the lens of Scripture, the widening ways of God justice, peace, stewardship, love, truth, freedom challenge us with a desperately needed, life-awakening appeal today. They urge us to do genuine justice to the poor; to integrate a living practice of peace building into our acts of justice, stewardship, and mercy; and to build an economy of care, an economy of enough. Will our governments, labour unions, businesses, other organizations, and we ourselves listen to this appeal? And will we inscribe it into a personal and national economic program? It is time to put such a program in place, not because the program itself can help us, but because its implementation will be a sign of our willingness to repent, to turn our ways to the only *One* who can and who will help us. Perhaps this is the act of Esther today. (p. 205.)

Essentially Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen, and Van Heemst fall back—quite justifiably—on biblical rhetoric. This is good and is in the end the only solution. But it has been said many, many, times in the post-WWII world to little or no avail. Yes, it needs restating; and Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen, and Van Heemst's reminder is probably one of the best yet, but will it achieve anything? Has it achieved anything in the five years since the book's publication? Perhaps a biblical perspective that is rooted ontologically into the very nature of postlapsarian humanity is what is needed. For example, in the Apostle Paul's comment—

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. *I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.* (Rom 7:14-19 my emphasis.)

We may have doomed ourselves to failure, historically these bad habits go back a long way, the mess we are in is endemic to humanity, and the present crisis had its genesis in the early Enlightenment, but Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen, and Van Heemst are quite correct, we must never, cannot, abandon hope, we must never stop trying. Perhaps if there is one small criticism, this work does not give a sufficient perspective to original sin (without this so

many of these critiques read as secular sociological apologies), and also to the importance of prayer as the ultimate form of subversive *praxis*? To be realistic is not necessarily to despair or be cynical.

Jonathan Chaplin (director, Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, Cambridge U.K.) and Robert Joustra (Redeemer University College, Ontario, Canada), editors, in, *God and the Global Order: The Power of Religion in American Foreign Policy*, look specifically at international religions and therefore implicitly at the power of global markets, international finance, monetary access and fiscal justice. What role does religion have in globalization from the perspective of international relations? Such foreign policy and international relations are grounded so often in an economic outlook—for example the Eurozone crisis, or the sub-prime mortgage catastrophe in the US. Unfortunately they do not start with a doctrine of religion, but religion is defined by what is taken to be its antithesis—secularism. The authors of these essays present what is seen as the role that faith, from both a religious and secular perspective, plays in shaping an American response to contemporary world developments and problems, but also how religious consciousness might affect the body politic in the future. As such it is aimed at three “distinct” groups of people: “first, the many actors in U.S. foreign policy at home and abroad who see themselves as guided in some way by Christian faith; second, scholars in international relations curious about what a religion-sensitive—indeed, Christian perspective in the field—might look like; third, practitioners and scholars from other faith perspectives, and those who think they have none, on the role of faith in international affairs.” (p. 2.) *God and the Global Order*, consists of nine essays written by widely differing specialists from a Christian perspective with one central objective: returning religion from exile, in so doing they challenge secularist assumptions. A pertinent assumption given the seismically fractured and constantly changing positions in politics is that, “religious commitments are more than mere shifting brand loyalties or markers of individual self-expression, as they are typically construed by Western modernists ... there is a density, an intensity, and a complexity—a thickness—of religion that we overlook at our (literal) peril ... ignorance of this thickness of religion is evident wherever attempts to overcome political conflicts fuelled by religious division proceed on the basis of a thin liberal cosmopolitanism.” (pp. 205 and 207). So what

do we have here? The first part, “Taking Religion Seriously,” consists of four chapters, which encompass several points: the potential revival of religion in the history of American foreign policy and international relations; an examination of American religious freedom policy; an attempt at decoding and understanding radical Islam; the question of Judaism in the form of “three Zionisms” and their impact on American international relations and foreign policy. The second part “Enlisting Religion Diplomatically,” consists of five chapters: a comparison of U.S. Religion and European anti-Americanism; the on-going difficulties in American-Russian relationships; the thorny question of the ethics of humanitarian intervention; the specific difficulties surrounding America’s invasion and subjugation of Iraq and the question of reconciliation, which only religion can supply; and finally, an exploration of how we may need to re-read religion from a correct perspective in the context of the global resurgence of religion. The great American mission, the belief that it was providentially founded and ordained, appears to have failed in recent years. Can U.S. international relations still be measured against this mission? Do policy makers, diplomats and economists who wield so much power even consider the God-perspective? Do American policy makers specifically recognize the power of faith to inform and enhance U.S. foreign policy. These essays address these questions though faith appears to be somewhat syncretistically ill-defined, however, the authors make the case for a warning: ignoring the role of faith(s) and the problems of the world with its economic chaos and its multitudinous arguments that all too often spill over into violence are exacerbated.

