INEQUALITY AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Inequality and Christian Ethics provides a moral and empirical analysis of contemporary inequality. Drawing on Christian social ethics, political philosophy, and development economics, the book seeks to create an interdisciplinary conversation that illuminates not only the contemporary realities and trends of inequality, but their moral significance as well. It is necessary to examine and understand inequality in various forms – which the book maps out – including disparity in income, education, and health as well as differentials based on race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality. The book draws in particular on the theological ethics of Gustavo Gutiérrez and H. Richard Niebuhr to provide a Christian ethical approach to inequality and well-being. It considers the "capability approach" set forth by Amartya Sen, Nobel laureate in Economics. Sen's framework helps to add specificity to what the commitment to "equality before God" would demand in social and economic relations.

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We measure what we value.

Paula Rayman[1]

[S]o long as no good, and then no single group of men and women, is dominant, so long as all value doesn't flow in one direction, we won't be counting and measuring all the time. Actual inequalities in this or that sphere will matter less than they do now; we will measure ourselves locally but won't need to fix our place in some larger and more general hierarchy. Or, more likely, some people will still need to do that and will look for some way of doing it, but enough of the rest of us will think this activity slightly ridiculous or beside the point.

Michael Walzer[2]

I do not mean for there to be relief for others and hardship for you, but rather it is a question of equality, with your present surplus going towards their lack. At another time, their surplus may be for your lack, so that there may be equality. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

2 Corinthians 8:13–15[3]

[1] Paula Rayman, "The New Economic Equation," presentation at the Center for the Study of Values in Public Life, Harvard Divinity School, November 19, 1996.
[2] Michael Walzer, "Response," in David Miller and Michael Walzer (eds.), *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 285.
[3] Author's translation; quoted biblical text is Exodus 16:18.

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General editor's preface

This is the sixteenth book in the series New Studies in Christian Ethics. The subject of inequality has concerned quite a number of theologians over the last few years. However, few if any of them show the sort of sophistication offered by Douglas Hicks in this book. In some respects *Inequality and Christian Ethics* is similar to the first book in the series, Kieran Cronin's *Rights and Christian Ethics*. The latter noticed that theologians often talk about "rights" but seldom show that they have a rigorous understanding of the detailed discussion of this issue in recent philosophy. Douglas Hicks has also noted a similar gap in the theological literature, although in this case in relation to the philosophical and economic discussion of equality and inequality.

There are further points of contact between Douglas Hicks's *Inequality and Christian Ethics* and other books in the series. Peter Sedgwick's *The Market Economy and Christian Ethics* is probably the closest. Both books offer a detailed account of socio-economics in the modern world, which is well informed and also careful not to claim too much in the name of Christian ethics. David Fergusson's *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics* offers a similar tension on the crucial issue of Christian distinctiveness in a pluralistic society, which differs significantly from the "ecclesial ethics" approach of theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas. Garth Hallett's *Priorities and Christian Ethics* shares Douglas Hicks's emphasis upon the needy and vulnerable: both are clearly motivated by a deep moral and theological perception of injustice in the world, as the opening pages of the present book make clear.

Having identified inequality as a subject which needs to be explored in greater depth, Douglas Hicks proceeds to offer a theological account of this issue which makes full use of the rival theories of John Rawls and Amartya Sen. It is finally Sen's understanding of "equality of basic capability" which he finds to be the more fruitful and which he believes can be better related to Christian ethics. From an explicitly secular perspective Sen has nonetheless long argued that moral perception is inextricably involved in an adequate understanding of equality and inequality in the world. An equality of basic capability involves qualitative issues and not simply a quantitative provision to satisfy basic needs. Douglas Hicks argues that, once this is acknowledged, Christian ethics can contribute at three distinctive levels. First, it provides a moral vision and justification for how inequality matters and why public response is needed. Then it can offer moral examples of Christians, such as Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu, who have actively striven against inequality. And, thirdly, Christian ethics provides a particularly compelling moral call to action: at best, Christian communities can transform lives and behavior towards a greater equality of capability.

This is a lucid, scholarly, and highly committed book. It works closely with the two aims of the series, namely to promote monographs in Christian ethics which engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level and, secondly, to encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate.

I commend *Inequality and Christian Ethics* very highly indeed. It sets new standards for theologians discussing equality and inequality, as well as offering a thoughtful challenge to secularists who see the need for values and action beyond analysis in this crucial area.

ROBIN GILL

Preface

Recently I had the opportunity to visit South Africa, five years into its transition towards legal and political democracy. South Africa's present-day reality is marked by rich cultural diversity and hope amidst turmoil. Most striking to this observer, as I was editing *Inequality and Christian Ethics*, was the degree of social and economic inequality. As this book will emphasize, inequality can be indicated in various ways; flying into Cape Town at dusk, I could see below me a "map" of inequality contrasting well-lighted neighborhoods with others that were nearly or completely dark. These latter areas were part of vast shanty-towns and squatter settlements that have taken root around Cape Town in the past few years. One of the most beautiful cities in the world, Cape Town has suburbs as "modern" and affluent as any, complete with Audi dealerships and "cyber-cafes." Yet they exist just miles away from the absolute poverty of cardboard and metal shelters that characterize nearly every city of the developing world.

It is no wonder that violence, fear, and social division permeate South African society. It is not an overstatement to say that people in the suburbs *defend* themselves against their predominantly black neighbors – with fences and even barbed wire protecting houses, businesses, and schools. Carrying a gun has become commonplace. Magazines include prominent advertisements for security companies and alarm systems. Affluent people will only leave their vehicles in guarded parking lots, and even "common" cars have complex alarm systems that cost money to install and time to operate. A few car owners have gone as far as designing "flame throwing" mechanisms in

order to deter or maim car-jackers. South Africa's transition toward democracy has laid bare the fact that social and economic inequality entails high costs for all people – citizens or foreigners, black, white, or "coloured," rich or poor.

By the numbers as well as by such narrative descriptions, South Africa experiences one of the highest levels of income-based inequality in the world. Yet the realities described above are just an exaggerated version of the phenomena that have also occurred in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in the world as a whole. The United States, by most accounts, suffers the highest level of income-based inequality in the developed countries – and it has increased significantly over the past three decades. The United Kingdom saw the steepest rise in inequality across the 1980s and into the 1990s. Many if not most readers of this book live in the United States or the United Kingdom; these facts make the book of particular interest to them.

In an era of globalization, rapid changes have allowed some people access to the entire world by means of the internet and air travel, while the majority do not ever leave their own country. When the world population is grouped together as one whole, the level of income inequality is as high as inequality in any single nation of the world. That is, global inequality stands at roughly the same level as exists in South Africa. This reality should be of concern to anyone who speaks of, or seeks to create, a global village or even a sense of global solidarity. If the world actually operated as one community, it would face the kind of social and economic pressures that plague South Africa. Many people, including Christians and other persons of faith, have expressed moral concern about such realities and trends of inequality. I hope that this book helps to clarify and promote discussions about the moral, economic, and policy-related dimensions of inequality, and their interrelation. Sharpened understandings, in turn, should lead to more determined personal and public responses.

Conspicuous on these pages are ideas appropriated from professors at Davidson College, Duke University, and Harvard

University: to them I owe the bulk of my intellectual debts and to them I offer my profound gratitude. At Davidson, Charles Ratliff moved me to consider the moral issues of economic distribution, posing the question (as only he could), "A rising tide may lift all boats, but what if you don't have a boat?" Clark Ross and Peter Hess provided me with the essential framework and tools of economic analysis. David Kaylor introduced me to liberation theology and critical biblical scholarship. Lois "Sandy" Kemp awakened my conscience and intellect to injustice and deprivation in Latin America, and she taught me the Spanish I needed to hear at first hand the stories of people in Central America, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and migrant worker camps of North Carolina.

Professors at Duke Divinity School helped me to develop the vision and skills required for constructing the "theologically informed approach" presented on the following pages. Mary McClintock Fulkerson taught me, in the spirit of "*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*," to draw upon our shared faith tradition in order to address gender, race, and class inequalities. Frederick Herzog lived his theological passion and creativity. Without Thomas A. Langford I would be much less able "to think theologically." Thomas E. McCollough, who continues to provide good counsel and insight, encouraged me to invite others to join in morally serious conversation and action.

The professors with whom I learned and taught at Harvard sharpened my skills and vision. Harvey Cox, Cornel West, Diana Eck, John Rawls, Stephen Marglin, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza each contributed to my thinking on one or more dimensions of this project. From across the Charles River at Boston College, David Hollenbach, S.J., was a crucial model for developing a Christian ethical approach to economic life.

My greatest intellectual debts accrued during this project will be all-too apparent on the pages that follow. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to study with Amartya Sen, whose insights into ethics and economics pervade my own perspective. Much of the normative work I undertake is an effort to evaluate critically and to expand constructively the proposals offered by Professor Sen. If I have deepened a conversation between his

"capability approach" and Christian social ethics, I will be pleased. His earning of the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences is a tribute to his work in social choice and welfare economics, including his pioneering books and articles on the complexities of inequality.

I express profound appreciation to Ronald F. Thiemann, whose counsel, proposals, and support have been invaluable. In my view, Dean Thiemann embodies his vision of a person of faith who contributes to society by drawing upon the analytical skills and moral perspectives at his disposal. His framework for religion in public life has helped to shape not just this work but my wider intellectual project.

I would also like to express my appreciation to friends and colleagues who have read and discussed significant portions of this work, either in dissertation or book form: Robert B. Bennett, Jr., Joanne B. Ciulla, Brent B. Coffin, Richard A. Couto, Stephen J. Davis, Mark Engler, Eric Gregory, Cynthia McIntyre, Douglas F. Ottati, Brian Palmer, Robert L. Payton, Ellie Pierce, Terry L. Price, and Christopher Steck, S.J. Lawrence C. Metzelaar assisted me in the graphic presentation of the socioeconomic data. Thanks are due to Cindy Venturini, Raegan Williams, and Angela Mims for their research assistance at the University of Richmond. I express a special word of gratitude to Robert A. Johnson, Jr., of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA), for his timely and thoughtful comments.

The arguments were improved by responses to my work at meetings sponsored by the Duke University Department of Religion, the American Academy of Religion, the Yale-Harvard-Boston College Ethics Colloquium, the Harvard Religion and Society Colloquium, the Religion, Values, and the Economy Forum sponsored by Harvard's Center for the Study of Values in Public Life, and the Leaders/Scholars Association. I benefited greatly from the welcome extended to me as an exchange scholar, during the 1997–98 year, by the Yale University graduate program in Religious Studies; I offer special thanks to Margaret Farley, Thomas Ogletree, and Gene Outka.

Substantial funding for dissertation research and writing was provided by two grants from the Mellon Foundation.

Faculty members at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, at the University of Richmond, have been invaluable colleagues and conversation partners as we together seek to articulate and promote leadership as service, especially service to the most vulnerable citizens of our society and in the world as a whole. I hope that this work furthers the social and moral analysis needed to understand the human contexts that require effective and ethical leadership.

The parishioners of a number of communities of faith – especially Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis and Clarendon Hill Presbyterian Church of Somerville, Massachusetts – have enabled me to understand the equality before God as a form of communal practice and as a social vision. I express my gratitude to James D. Miller, William G. Enright, Joan B. Malick, Thomas W. Walker, Ray Bowden, and Patricia Budd Kepler for their ability to articulate the integration of faith commitments and intellectual inquiry.

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Abbreviations

ERP	*Economic Report of the President*
GDI	Gender-related development index
GDP	Gross domestic product
GNP	Gross national product
GWP	Gross world product
HDI	Human development index
HDR	*Human Development Report*
HPI	Human poverty index
IAHDI	Inequality-adjusted human development index
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISEW	Index of sustainable economic welfare
LIS	Luxembourg Income Study
MER	Market-based exchange rates
NCCB	National Conference of Catholic Bishops
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development
PARE	Price adjustments of rates of exchange
PPP	Purchasing power parity
PQLI	Physical quality of life index
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WA	*World Bank Atlas* method
WDR	*World Development Report*