

Editorial

This issue of *Transformation* reports on an historic, international conference on Christian Faith and Economics, co-sponsored by *Transformation* and held at Oxford from January 4 - 9, 1990. At this event, liberation oriented theologians affirmed free market strategies and conservative market economists demanded a special focus on justice for the poor. Harsh critics of the policies of Western democratic capitalism endorsed democracy while its staunch defenders condemned the centralized economic power, consumerism and dehumanisation in capitalist societies.

The important "Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics" (printed here) was issued by over 100 bankers, theologians, economists and ethicists, business leaders and development practitioners from every continent. Participants came from a very wide range of ideological and geographical contexts.

The Oxford Declaration bridges several sharp debates and affirms strengths on both sides. Economic systems must be judged by their ability both to create wealth and to distribute it justly. Both freedom rights and sustenance rights are important and are grounded not in societal fiat but in God's creation of persons in the divine image. The God of the Bible demands special attention to the weak, especially the poor members of the community, because of their vulnerability; in this sense justice is biased. But civil arrangements rendering justice dare not go beyond what is due to the poor or rich; in that sense justice is ultimately impartial. Biblical values and historical experience call Christians to work for democracy while recognizing that racism, materialism and concentrated economic power often lead democracies to marginalize the poor and act unjustly.

A common commitment to Jesus Christ and submission to the authority of the Bible made possible this striking bridging of divergent viewpoints. There was vigorous debate between spokespersons who had in the past sharply criticized other participants. Face to face sharing and honest, mutual listening by, for example, both Latin Americans struggling with the desperate problems of debt and poverty and North American defenders of democratic capitalism were significant. But pervading the entire process was the strong desire of all to submit without reservation to biblical authority. The result was mutual respect, new insight and common affirmation.

The common ground achieved by this conference is a powerful confirmation of the fact that genuine submission to scriptural authority and a common, vibrant faith in the biblical Lord Jesus does in fact enable those who vigorously disagree to transcend their differences to a significant degree. Only those present at the conference will fully appreciate the sense of trust, openness and mutual learning that occurred across major ideological and geographic divides. Again and again participants expressed gratitude for the openness of the process and the opportunity to learn from others.

For at least two decades ecumenical Christians, liberation theologians and defenders of democratic capitalism have engaged in sharp debate. The Oxford Declaration, drafted by a diverse, international circle of evangelical Christians, offers a significant way to bridge these hostile divisions.

The Oxford Conference also issued a statement on "Income Generation by the Poor". Impressed by Hernando de Soto's *The Other Path* and a study written by Dr Joe Remenyi for the Oxford Conference on micro-income generation projects that empower the poor by providing loans, conference participants urged churches, non-governmental agencies and governments to increase greatly the availability of credit to the very poor. This issue includes the statement on income generation as well as a summary of Remenyi's study.

In a year or two - or ten - we will see more clearly whether this conference and "The Oxford Declaration" are as significant as they seem today. What is beyond dispute, however, is that it was a time when old stereotypes were shattered and new friendships were formed. For those gifts and whatever fruit they may produce, we rejoice. ●

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