

Justice: A Global Adventure

Walter Burghardt

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2004 (275 pages)

In his latest book, *Justice: A Global Adventure*, Walter Burghardt offers his reflections on the nature of justice and the practical implications of the biblical injunction to “act justly” (Mic. 6:8). As the subtitle suggests, the work is situated within the context of the contemporary dynamics of globalization, though considerable attention is also given to domestic affairs in the United States. The final chapter, which examines justice in relation to modern developments in communication technology, is mainly devoted to a listing of justice-related Web sites with a brief description of each. The tone and content throughout are those of a popular work intended for the educated layman: serious but not academic; engaging a broad range of literature in a relaxed, conversational tone; and informative and mildly exhortatory.

Burghardt begins with an analysis of justice, where he employs three basic categories: legal, ethical, and biblical. The first two are mentioned only briefly; his primary interest is in biblical justice, which Burghardt conceptualizes as “fidelity to relationships and responsibilities that stem from a covenant with God,” (25) or simply “right relationship” to God, other humans, and the earth. In this chapter, he also elaborates on “New Testament justice,” which is essentially to “love as Jesus loved,” (19) and he gives some attention to basic principles of Catholic social teaching and the importance of the common good. He maintains, however, that there is a clear difference between biblical justice and the philosophically grounded forms of justice that appear in the Church’s social tradition (commutative, distributive, and social justice). Drawing on the work of biblical scholar John Donahue, Burghardt contrasts justice that is impartial, concerned with individual rights, and distinct from charity, with biblical justice that is partial to the oppressed, concerned with right relationships with God and neighbor, and inseparable from steadfast love and mercy.

In this chapter, Burghardt also strongly criticizes “a perilous proposition [that] pervades a large segment of our American Christian culture,” namely, the idea that Christianity is solely concerned with the soul’s relationship to eternity. This proposition “insists that the Son of God took our flesh not to relieve our sufferings but to forgive our sins, and so the Church’s function is to focus not on violations of social justice but on the undying hardness of human hearts” (11–12). Against this view, Burghardt avers, “salvation depends on fidelity to three relationships”: loving God above all, loving neighbor as Jesus loved, and treating the created order with respect and reverence (21).

Having conducted his analysis of justice in this way, Burghardt explores four themes in the remaining chapters of the book: “Justice Applied,” “Justice Sacramentalized,” “Justice Globalized,” and “Justice Communicated.” “Justice Applied” deals with a number of areas of concern in the U.S. context: poverty among children, the condition of the elderly, the criminal justice system—including capital punishment—ecology, homeless veterans, and the war in Iraq. In each area, Burghardt provides a snapshot of

the current situation, evaluates it in light of the principles of justice, and suggests possible remedies.

“Justice Sacramentalized” reviews the history of the liturgical movement through such people as Virgil Michel, who envisioned an integral relationship between liturgy and renewal of the social order. Here Burghardt also discusses the transforming power of the Eucharist, both in terms of healing divisions that wound community, and in terms of individual conversion in moral, intellectual, and religious senses. He briefly mentions current divisions over liturgical “reform” versus “renewal,” as well as the importance of liturgical enculturation in the ethnically diverse American church.

“Justice Globalized” surveys a range of views on the process of globalization. Burghardt takes a middle ground, rejecting views that are strongly pessimistic along with those that are wholly sanguine. In his judgment, “the possibilities for good, for justice, are enormous,” even “unprecedented” (184). This potential arises primarily because globalization vastly increases the interrelatedness of the world’s population, and relationship is at the heart of Burghardt’s vision of justice. On the other hand, Burghardt also thinks that global inequities are a major problem for globalization, both ethically and in terms of the long-term viability of the system. Here, he singles out free trade, which he considers a positive force, but he finds that it is not as free in fact as it is in theory. Various protectionist, even “mercantilist” practices, as well as the dominance of certain actors, prevent a genuinely free trade system whose benefits should be more widespread. On the other hand, Burghardt also maintains that premature liberalization in developing nations does more harm than good.

The final chapter, “Justice Communicated,” briefly discusses the modern shift in communication technology and then describes about twenty-five Web sites devoted to some aspect of justice. Nine are “peace fellowship” sites sponsored by a variety of religious organizations, the others include such sites as the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Catholic Worker, Electronic Iraq, Amnesty International, and the United Nations Children’s Fund.

The overall tone of Burghardt’s book is one of hope. Although he is critical of various situations that he regards as unjust, he takes a positive and practical orientation toward bringing about “right relationships.”

Among the various criticisms that might be made of Burghardt’s *Justice* is the overuse of extended quotations. The chapter on globalization, for example, frequently uses citations in excess of two pages, sometimes with only a paragraph or two from Burghardt linking them together. At these junctures, the text loses its authorial voice and coherence and becomes a farrago of disconnected texts and voices.

Another, more substantive weakness, is the treatment of justice itself. The discussion of legal justice, for example, does not mention the historical and theoretical relationships among positive law, moral law, and divine law. The whole notion of law, which is deeply inscribed in the biblical tradition, has a rich history in moral and political philosophy, as well as in Catholic thought and Western civilization more generally. It is a history that is intertwined with the notion of justice, both in the Bible and in legal

and ethical discourse. A deeper analysis of the philosophical and theological foundations of justice, among other things, would have shown an underlying link between “right relationships” with God and neighbor and submission to the moral law that proceeds from God and is directed to the common good. It would also have facilitated a discussion of the distinction between that which persons can be obligated to do by force of law and that which they are obligated to do under the moral law but cannot justly be coerced into doing. Such a distinction is critical when one is seeking just means to a more just society. Much more could be said on this subject, but suffice it to say that Lady Justice is not given her due in this work.

A final criticism has to do with Burghardt’s treatment of Christian salvation. His criticism of the view that “the Church’s function is to focus not on violations of social justice but on the undying hardness of human hearts” betrays a confused understanding of the relationship between violations of social justice and personal sins. Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, describes this confusion in the language of “social sin” and “personal sin,” and takes care to clarify the matter. “A situation—or likewise an institution, a structure, society itself—is not in itself the subject of moral acts.... At the heart of every situation of sin are always to be found ... sinful people” (n. 16). As the pope goes on to say, converting human hearts is more essential to achieving social justice than structural or legal changes are. It is also more central to the Church’s mission of salvation.

As mentioned above, Burghardt is deeply concerned about the proposition that “insists that the Son of God took our flesh not to relieve our sufferings but to forgive our sins” (11–12). This is an odd concern for a Catholic priest, to say the least. It reveals a curious blind spot regarding the act that Saint Paul identifies most strongly with the justice of God: “the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his justice, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is just and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:24–26).

This, too, is biblical justice. The form of administering God’s justice that should never be forgotten by the Church in the age of globalization is one form that was completely neglected by Burghardt: evangelization.

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