

Dialogue II

International Business and Social Justice: A Response to Hill

Brian E. Porter
Hope College

Alec Hill's "Let Justice Flow Like a River: International Business and The Book of Amos" is an excellent contribution that challenges businesspeople to improve the standards in which international business is conducted. Hill uses the book of Amos as a foundation for five principles: 1) universal moral minimums must be met (i.e., reject cultural relativism), 2) groups are morally accountable (i.e., guilt by association), 3) practice professional holiness (i.e., the same moral code should exist for both business and personal actions), 4) be sensitive to the poor, and 5) powerful economic interests should facilitate the integrity of political and legal systems (e.g., bribery should be avoided).

Hill is straightforward in his writing, and his propositions seem biblically on target relative to other Scripture. As Chewing wisely exhorts, one should properly interpret Scripture by

"allowing the Bible to speak for the Bible."¹ That is, "We should examine the meaning of a particular passage of Scripture in the light of all the other passages of Scripture that speak to the same subject," and "Whenever possible, bring at least three passages of Scripture to bear on any pronouncement of truth in the areas involving faith and learning."² Though Hill primarily references the book of Amos in his writing, he could have easily referenced other books of the Bible. There are at least two other passages of Scripture, other than those found in the book of Amos, that support each of Hill's five principles. Given that a common element of Hill's five principles is social justice, numerous passages of the gospels permeating with the teaching of love³ are applicable.

It is appreciated that several of Hill's examples pertaining to international commerce indicate how organizations have fallen

short on the five principles. One can often learn a great deal from another's shortcomings. Hill's examples are pointed and penetrate the reader's consciousness. For example, Hill's reporting about workers on Angolan oil rigs, where double standards are shamefully practiced, is disturbing and convicting. Unfortunately, the injustice that Hill describes is common. Many commodities other than oil are obtained unethically in international commerce. Hill could have just as easily written of cocoa and coffee beans, both often harvested by child slave labor,⁴ or diamonds, which are routinely delivered to developed countries through a supply chain involving international criminality, including the amputation of hands,⁵ or gold, where the policies of at least one mining conglomerate encourage workers to travail in impoverished conditions and separate from their families for months at a time.⁶

At least two aspects of Hill's paper are worthy of further attention. First, though surely not the author's intention, the tone of the paper may be construed as ethnocentric. That is, one might deduce from the paper that the business practices of North

America, in particular those practiced in the United States, are a benchmark for ethicality and result in greater social justice. Second, Hill's use of bribery in developing countries as a primary example of unethical behavior may in itself indicate the difficulty of completely separating oneself of the biases of cultural relativism and parochialism.

The U.S. Should Emulate Others

Four of Hill's examples (for his five principles) directly or indirectly imply that ethical standards in the United States are superior to those of the comparison country. *American oil rig workers are treated better than Angolan workers. Lead based paints are legal in Latin America, though illegal in the United States since 1978. A United States executive is driven to suicide due to unethical Latin American business practices. American businessmen are completely demoralized by the corruption in Kenya.*

The truth is, the United States is far from exemplary. Many statistics that rank countries pertaining to justice place the United States in an unenviable position. The United Nations'

State of the World Report lists the United States as the richest country on Earth (based on GDP per person), yet the country with the highest poverty level among major industrial nations (ranked 17th).⁷ Relative to life expectancy or infant mortality, the United States ranks 25th, behind almost all rich countries and a few poor ones.⁸ For the richest and most powerful country in the world's history, and the one for which Christianity has the greatest influence (two out of every three American adults report making a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and about 85 percent call themselves Christian), these statistics are distressing.⁹

Granted, business is not the sole contributor to these discouraging facts, nor is it the total solution. However, it would appear that businesses in countries other than the United States are better implementing certain aspects of Hill's five moral principles. Businesspeople of the United States should humbly be the student of other countries, not always the instructor, of how to conduct business justly.

One possibility is to emulate Japan in helping to narrow the economic divide that currently exists and continues to grow.

In the United States between 1979 and 1997, the average income of the richest fifth of the population increased from being nine times the income of the poorest fifth to around 15 times their income.¹⁰ Just as we have benchmarked Japan's expertise in the past (e.g., TQM and JIT), we should do the same for executive compensation. The consequences could potentially improve the plight of many living in the United States. Bezruchka argues that one reason the Japanese have the highest life expectancy in the world (3.5 years greater than the U.S.) is because Japanese CEOs make only 15 to 20 times what entry-level workers make, not the almost 500-fold difference that exists in the United States.¹¹

An absurd executive compensation system that contributes to a growing chasm between the have and have-nots is but one aspect of business in the United States that may be considered unjust by people of other countries. Europeans are often dumbfounded at the lack of basic benefits provided to employees in the United States. In Europe, employees typically receive six weeks annual vacation, full health care, extensive paid maternity and paternity leave, affordable and

quality day-care, free early childhood education, inexpensive higher education, and work weeks of less than 40 hours to allow more time with one's family. These are but a few of the benefits that most Europeans consider basic rights and yet are virtually nonexistent in the United States.

Bribery in the United States

Ironically, the examples that Hill uses to support his fifth principle, *powerful economic interests should facilitate the integrity of political and legal systems*, may implicate Hill of violating his first principle. Hill denounces bribery in developing countries (e.g., Nigeria, Pakistan, Kenya, Bangladesh, and Russia), writing that it is "dangerous to society" and that it "stacks the deck against the disenfranchised." Hill's accusation is not new. Bribery has long been a contentious issue when dealing with certain lesser-developed countries, and most businesspeople in the United States would concur with Hill that it is an unethical means to conduct business.

However, Hill fails to realize, or at least mention, that indirect bribery is rampant in the United States in the form of lobbies,

campaign contributions, and political action committees. AT&T alone made political contributions of \$2.12 million in 1998.¹² In the United States, the deck is also stacked against the disenfranchised and is dealt in favor of large organizations. For the most part, powerful economic interests are violating Hill's fifth principle. Rather than facilitating the integrity of the political and legal systems, powerful economic interests routinely navigate and pervert these systems to their advantage. Is it possible that, in God's eyes, the sophisticated bribery practiced in the United States is more sinful than the direct bribery practiced in some other countries?

When Hill condemns direct bribery in developing countries, yet fails to recognize the veiled bribery in the United States, it may be due to a cultural relativism or parochial paradigm. As Christ instructed on at least two occasions, it is much easier to see faults in others rather than in oneself.¹³

Final Thought

This brief response is not meant to undermine the important contribution made by Hill's paper. On the contrary, Hill should be lauded in that his paper does not

rationalize or excuse the current state of business. He accurately observes that Christian businesspeople are not promoting social justice sufficiently, are accountable, and should do better. Rather, this response is meant to strengthen Hill's exhortation and notch the bar even higher for Christian businesspeople so that, though justice will unfortunately never flow like a river, it can at least trickle a little stronger.

Brian E. Porter

Associate Professor, Department
of Economics and Business
Hope College
Holland, MI 49422-9000
FAX 616-395-7490
porter@hope.edu

ENDNOTES

¹Chewning, R.C., Biblical orthodoxy requires the S.N.A.P. of Scripture. *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, Fall 1998, pp. 78-93.

²Ibid.

³For example, "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40).

⁴Slave labor taints chocolate industry, *Holland Sentinel*, June 24, 2001, p. A11.

⁵Report of the United Nations Sierra Leone Sanctions Committee Expert Panel, December 2000.

⁶Schoofs, M., African gold giant finds history impedes a fight against AIDS, *The Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2001, p. A1.

⁷U.N. among its peers, U.S. posts highest poverty level, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 9, 1998, p. A6.

⁸Bezruchka, S., M.D., Is our society making you sick? *Newsweek*, February 26, 2001, p. 14.

⁹Prothero, S., Bookshelf: Church spires and minarets. *The Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2001, p. A16.

¹⁰Does inequality matter? *The Economist*, June 16, 2001, p. 9.

¹¹Bezruchka, p. 14.

¹²Peddling influence, *Cable World 12*, No. 4, January 24, 2000.

¹³Matthew 7:3-5 and Luke 18:9-14.

