

Global Justice in a Digital Age: An Interview with
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Global Economic Disparity

Dr. van den Heuvel, the gap between the rich and poor, between the one-third world and the two-thirds world is enormous. Will global economic activity eventually bridge this gap?

Only, I think, if we change the structure of the global economy. There are a number of people who say the free market will close that gap by itself. If you just wait long enough, they say, then the market will take care of all of us, Well, the trouble is that we have had the free market for a long time now, and the gap is only getting worse. The people who can't participate in the economy are also not to benefit from it, because they have no power to really argue back and forth and put in their demands, which is essential for a free market. So the answer is no.

Yet many economists would argue that "the rising tide lifts all ships." That is, the dramatic growth of Western economies will inevitably add to the wealth of the poorer economies. Of course, we'll still have a gap, but the poorer economies can benefit, nonetheless, from dramatic increase in western prosperity. Is there any hope, then, that through normal capital economic development, poorer countries will see some alleviation of their problems?

Well, that's a triple question. The first one is, yes, the rising tide lifts all ships, but what about the people who have no ships? And I think you are talking about people who have no boats. Secondly, can you possibly imagine that in a world of free enterprise, capitalism, as we know it now, would substantially increase benefits also for the poor people? The answer is yes, because we have a number of capitalist countries-probably this one also, but in any case the countries in Western Europe, which are all capitalist in some form or another-who, by structuring their capitalism in a certain sense, of course, made the people benefit by fixing prices, by fixing minimum salaries, by having social benefits and social laws which would benefit children, women, workers, and so on. And if you would do that globally, then of course you would bridge the gap in no time. The funny thing is that we have more than enough money going around to do that right now. The trouble is that in the capitalist societies where the poor have benefited, you speak about a society in which capitalism took place within a political body, say, within our democracies, where negotiations between capital and labor, for instance, were written into the

law, and then capitalism is willing and able to reform itself. The trouble is that you have no world government. You have no world democracy. And so one of the sad things is that if you have a great businessman in this country who is a patron saint to the arts, who is very good to his workers, who would not think of employing children, who makes sure that his employees' children get education benefits-the moment he takes off from O'Hare, and he sits in the air, then all the social restraints he has in his own country are not valid anymore and suddenly, probably against his will, he becomes an exploiter. As I told some of the students in the school this week, if you look at the garments you wear, at the shirt you are wearing, and if it comes from a low cost country (as we call that euphemistically), then probably children's labor has been instrumental in the low price of your shirt. That is very disturbing. The answer to your question is, yes, capitalism can be reformed. So you don't have to abolish capitalism or become necessarily communist or whatever possibilities there are. You can reform capitalism, and you have to do it. And it will not happen, history teaches us, without an incentive, the incentive being that the people now exploited get a chance to organize themselves and present themselves as dignified human beings.

One of the contributions you've made to our campus discussion this week is that the economic gap is more than just material, but also produces a psychological disturbance, so to speak. That is, the people who "do not have" will see the people who "have" and it's precisely that tension, that psychological difference or that recognition of wealth, that will destabilize a global economy.

In two ways, even, I think. It's a thesis. We don't have much experience in that. On one hand we know that the people on the other side of the divide, at least about 75% of the population (you can even use more dramatic figures) are structurally less well-off than we are. They are not just poor people. You have poor people everywhere. No, they are structurally "less good-off." They cannot advance because the power to advance lies in the hands of people who do not live in their countries. So, you get great bitterness on the side of those poor because they know they are in the majority, they know they are created as dignified individuals like anybody else, they work their head off all the time-people work longer hours than in a capitalist society-and yet there is no advancement. That means on their side, you get great bitterness and a hatred toward our type of society. That's the one part. What's worse, in our own society, when people wake up to the fact and find out that they are so much part of the problem, you get a kind of a self-hate. You look at yourself and you say, "I don't really want to be part of other people's misery. I would much rather pay a proper price for their resources. I would rather have our social laws also apply to them." And since that isn't organized, you get a psychological backlash, even in the rich societies. So it hurts on all sides.

Do you see that self-hate affecting the Western Church in any way, to any degree?

Yes. We had a period when in Latin America very strong voices would tell us how unjust the world was and how the rich treat the poor. That was a period in which people realized that, and you had in theology-in Western theology, American theology, Western European theology-many

voices which you might describe as voices of self-depreciation-self-hate is perhaps a little too strong for church circles. But there was great self-criticism. People looked into their spiritual mirrors and did not like what they saw. Some may say this has ebbed away a little bit, that in Western Europe at least-which I know better than this country-church life in itself was so eaten up by these questions that people left the churches in great numbers. And that meant that the people who are still in the pews are so concentrated on the sustenance of their own structures that the feeling for the "have-nots" who began that whole process is much less. That is the third disturbing factor, so to speak, that once you have gone through the hatred of the people who are poor, and you come to something like the self-hate of the people who are rich, then you also must say that self-hate leads to a depletion of institutions like churches and political parties. Then people in charge of churches and political parties and labor unions all get self-concentrated in order to maintain the structures in which they live. So, misery on misery.

So the people in the church have a vested interest in trying to reduce the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots." And that would enable a healthier church life. Not only would members be more satisfied with the quality of their faith, but also it would allow the church itself to be more vital and more significant in society.

That's true. It's funny, you know, because that's also on all levels. The economy, of course, is greatly helped by a strong global market. The more people who can buy, the better it is. So anybody, really, is interested in getting those markets developed. Bill Gates last year said that people working on software and on technological equipment should not expect to find a market in poor countries. It is a strange statement, because that's true at this moment. I would have expected that he said, "Please, could we all develop the markets in the third world?" because that would be to the enormous advantage of the economy of the rich countries and of the poor countries. And the same thing as you just said is also true for the churches. Churches want to be a healthy part of society; they want to live in a just society. It's sad to say, but internationally, we live in a very unjust society; for Christians-nothing new, because they know the prophets. We have been told always that we live in a world full of sin in which none of us is as righteous as we would like to be-but still, a very sad occasion. With all the power we have-we are more powerful than any generation before us, we are richer than any generation since the creation of the world-we are not able to find the social, political, and spiritual solutions to have equal shares or fair shares around the globe.

Bridging the Global Digital Divide

We've been talking about the gap in economic terms, in examples such as manufacturing and clothing goods. Yet you speak of the gap as a divide, and this week you've been on campus speaking about the digital divide. Why is communication technology central to bridging the gap? Why can't we just think of that mechanism for bridging the gap in terms of organizing labor internationally or advocating for child labor laws? Why communication technology?

Over the last centuries, we have learned that charities did not solve the problem. In early development attempts, people used to say it is not important to give people food, it is important to give people a plow. You should not give him fish, you should give him a rod to fish. That was in the agricultural mood, if you like. If you come to the industrial society, then we said, "Well, the poor will only advance if we invest money in the machines so that they can become part of the modern world and they themselves have the same kind of possibilities of development and growth as we have created for ourselves." So, rods in an agricultural society, machines in the industrial society, and now we come to a new period of history in which information itself and information technology is the center of power. Our money is not something we have in an old stocking back home. It does not sit in the bank; it sits in the digital world. For example, money may come from Hong Kong and travels instantaneously around the world, picking up investments, growing in the meantime. In short, it has become a digital affair. Same is true of the way we do our purchasing in this country. We do that through the credit card. In all kinds of ways, the exchange of information, the selling of information, the fact that you pay with your credit card in Shop A means that a whole economy of a city knows the pattern in which people spend their monies. And all information goes around the world. If you are not part of that going-around of information then you are not a part in this society. So there is only one way in which the poor people become a master of their own fate, and that is if they are let into the centers of power of an information society. And that means they have to have access to those machines with which we do that. The fact is, half the world's population, three billion people, has never had a telephone call, or made a telephone call. Thus, when we discuss telephone technologies, the bringing over of data through telephone lines, half the world's population doesn't know what we're talking about.

What kind of connectivity, then, is desirable? Is it simply enough to have telephone access? Must they have Web access?

I think we speak about universal access. And we may "relativize" that a little bit. First we say, people in an informational society need access to the media, from Internet to telephone and back. That's one. Otherwise, say, "You have no Internet? Then how do you send your messages?" By fax? That takes an hour. By letter? That takes four days. The decisions are taken in split seconds, so you're not there. You have to have people who have access. Your question is, "Is that enough?" Alas, the answer is, "if that were only true." Because if tomorrow every household in this world, all those two billion households, we reckon, if they all would have Internet, they would have only access to that in which they have no part yet-except that they have access. They are not controlling it yet; they have no power in it yet. So you're talking about access to the machines and access to the world that machine represents. If you then say, "Can that be done within a short time?" The answer is no, because people are so far behind with education and with all the technical equipment, with electricity, with the possibility to maintain all those expensive toys we are now at this moment utilizing: microphones and screens and modems and telephone lines. You need a whole army of people to make them, to maintain them, to service them, and so on. I think we should wire all strategic places: for instance, postal offices, schools, church buildings (in the sense of that which surrounds the sanctuary); in all these places you could

follow what happens in this world. And I have learned that would cost about half of what we spend on dog food in this country. It is a little less than what we spend on cosmetics. Now I know that that is rhetoric because you cannot stop having cosmetics tomorrow, or dog food. But it gives you the scale. It is not an insurmountable amount of money at all; we could do it within ten years.

But connectivity then-that would be physical access-is still insufficient, because there must be some kind of control...

...and input...

What do you mean by control or input?

Input is very simple. Let's say we are sitting here in Wheaton. Wheaton is a good school. What would be easier than to put all the curricula of Wheaton on the Internet and make it possible for people in Ghana to switch on their screen and be part of the educational effort of Wheaton? That sounds lovely, but of course it doesn't work that way. Because in Wheaton, you get education for Americans largely, even if you have guests. It is given by Americans. It is on the American agenda. It has nothing to do with droughts; it has nothing to do with the deserts sneaking up on us. It has little to do with ecology, unless Lake Michigan gets totally out of hand, so to speak. But it is not enough that you have access to Western material. There has to be input from the countries themselves. If you want to know about Ghana on the Internet-I haven't done that for a little while, but I would not be amazed that if most of the material you would get from the Web would be Western material about Ghana with a little bit of Ghanaian stuff, but I would not be sure if you could get Ghanaian culture. Could you get poetry, could you get music? Probably not yet. So you cannot study Ghana. And the Ghanaians cannot study their own country. So you talk about double access, the access of the man and the woman who can use the machines and the ones who can replenish and fill that tremendous universal library which we call the Web. On the control side, it is in a sense the same thing. Providers control to a large degree what is happening on the Web. If there is no input from the two-thirds world, then they themselves probably do not want all that material. They say, "Unless we can be part of the people who turn the knobs, who sit there and work the machines, it is not our thing. We have to participate, because it is our money, it is the price for our commodity, so already it is about us. But it is not of us yet."

So, if we're going to bridge the digital divide then we not only have to do an enormous amount of work in wiring the world, but we also must provide training, know-how, or availability of some resource materials so that indigenous cultures can craft some of their own materials and make that available. Is that right?

Absolutely. And those who are trained need to stay in those countries. We are talking misery this afternoon; another misery is that when people are educated in India or in Japan or in Indonesia, they are bought away by the forever-hungry market in Europe and in North America so that we don't allow those countries to develop. We use the mistaken excuse that people are free to move.

Of course people are free to move-I am not against putting people in prison when they have a degree in computer technology. But I think that we have very good measures to protect our own labor market. If I want to come to work in the United States tomorrow, then I have to do a lot of work. It's kind of unpleasant to think that a good computer technician, being educated in India, can come to the United States and have no problem at all because there is a firm that wants him. That is not just. And so, we have all kinds of things in which we have double standards, which is a spiritual problem.

But we're talking about an enormous effort here, that we want to cultivate and maintain the technological literacy of an enormous number of people. And yet in order to do that, many critics say you are, therefore, exporting Western technological culture right into the developing world...

They're right.

... along with all the attendant problems of Western technological culture: the extremes of materialism, the immorality, the perversity that comes across in much of the material, the loss of privacy or the risk of the loss of privacy. Do we simply risk that Western cultural influence, or are there ways to mitigate or soften its kind of homogenization?

If you develop Period A to Period B, you pay the price for that development. If there were a lot of people around the world who say, "We don't want the bloody stuff; we would rather remain poor, we would rather live on one dollar a day than on seventeen times that," then that would be another ball game. But there is not a country in the world and there is not a people I know who is not willing to apply its own discipline against all those things you have just mentioned and get the benefit of the development. The same argument was, of course, true in the industrial society. This lovely island of Bali in Indonesia: should we not prevent the building of all modern hotels, because it really kills that lovely culture of the people themselves? I have always said people have as much a right to have their culture disrupted as we do. Integrated computer technology did not come from a church pew into society; it comes from the market and the military. We, ourselves, gladly took the price which we had to pay for it because we knew the benefits in medicine. (We often forget that computer technology has made science explode and especially medical science. So the benefits are tremendous.) And who would not be willing to pay a cultural price for that new power among us?

So you have confidence, though, that indigenous cultures can maintain something of value that they treasure in the midst of the Western training?

Yes, but I would phrase that differently. I think that non-Western cultures could contribute a lot to the new culture of a global society. What is happening with global economy, that's there. We all know that. We all know that that erodes a little bit the political power in our own country. Most people know that too. They get a little mad that the decisions about the American economy are also made in Brussels and in Japan, but they understand that in order to get a global economy

and the benefits, you'll have to sacrifice some of your own cultural autonomy. That they understand. What we are working towards is not a global economy, but a global culture also. In a big country like the United States, you have Chinatown, you have a Jewish section in big cities, and that works in a combination of integration and self-hood. But, the integration is what comes first. Everybody in his right mind would say that we have benefited greatly from the influx of the other cultures. That is what's going to happen to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. That is certainly happening to Europe, and it is now done by illegal immigrants. We'll have to find a way to make these movements legal, and we are very slow in developing that. My plea here on campus has been that in educational institutions like Wheaton-but also in reflective institutions like churches-we put that benefit much higher on the agenda than we have ever thought necessary.

And from your talking on campus this week. I know how strongly you favor dialogue, of encountering the other, not simply exchanging information. Wiring the world is not going to produce communication, but it sounds like it's producing the opportunities for communication.

I think that's very true. It may produce a little communication, by this I mean the inter-relationships which build and strengthen and renew our communities (communication is about building of communities). That may even be possible without all these personal interchanges in the flesh when we can touch each other and sit in the same room. But let's for argument's sake say no, it doesn't work merely to produce opportunities, it actually produces communication itself. Let's do it simply. Take the global economy. What has that meant? It has meant that business and banking directories are in constant communication back and forth, negotiating, exchanging info, in split seconds all around the world. So there, the new technology has made for communication. Take a second example, the scientific community. There is not a scientist who would not work with a network of contacts around the world, breaking through any border. We applaud. The next example gets more difficult. Education: yes, and no. I think universities will be more and more internationalized in their input, in their output and in their relationships. Exchange of faculty will become normal. Students studying abroad is already becoming normal but is not yet mandatory. My prophecy is that in twenty-five years you cannot get a degree if you have not studied in another culture. Then comes churches. Yes, there are all kinds of ecumenical movements, there is an evangelical movement, there is the old-fashioned ecumenical movement of the historical churches. They have made relationships which we didn't think possible for a long time. I'm almost seventy-that means that I was brought up without any contacts outside my own Presbyterian denomination. I find it now very normal that I sit in a conference next to a Catholic, a Baptist, a Methodist, and a Pentecostal. And we hear in their introductions that they come from that tradition, and we say, marvelous, because that means plurality of input. That will enrich us. We have lost our fear of each other to a large extent.

The Church, Technology, and Christian Ethics

Do you think the Church worldwide has any contribution to make in mitigating the

undesirable effects of wiring the globe?

Yes. Let's call the thing by its name: there's a lot of pornography on the Internet. There is a lot of hate literature to be found on the 'Net. Can it be mitigated? First of all, it cannot be taken off, because that is the price we pay for this tremendous new library. Secondly, I think it's very hard to tell people that they should not use that stuff. It is ten times better to say, "Here we have this tremendous instrument of information," and help people to fill their time, so to speak, with worthwhile things. And here I blame the churches. I have not seen a church bulletin yet in the United States—a bulletin where you find the Sunday school times, the choir rehearsal times—where you also find a little notice that says, "This week you should watch two documentaries about this, that and the other thing, and don't miss that film because that is a very strengthening film for the values we hold." We don't do that. Churches usually say, "Don't watch television so much" And if kids in this country are not very different from mine, then they will all go and watch it because their parents say, "Don't watch it." If they are helped—and here churches are extremely important—to take the valuable bits and use those, and secondly, produce those themselves, then we would befriend the media much more effectively.

Many of the churches have been very effective in using communication technology as tools, although they do not promote communication technology as strongly or use it as wisely as perhaps they could. But still, they think of it as a tool. Yet, you advocate that churches think of it less as a tool and instead recognize it as the shape of the world, as the culture in which we live.

That's right.

Why have churches been so slow to recognize the centrality of communication? Of all people, the Church ought to be aware of the centrality of communication to the constitution of a culture, to a constitution of a people. And yet we insist on treating it merely as a tool that can either be good or bad, and we miss the bigger picture. Why is that so?

It could be very simple. It could just be that we, the churches, were the communicators of this world for a long time in the Middle Ages, and also I think here when the West was won in the United States. The church was the place where you got your information. And so we are the owners of communication and then we are passed by with these modern means, and we may just be a bit jealous. We feel that a thing has been taken away from us. That is one. The other one is that I think we have also always communicated in "bubbles," in close circles, in our own circle. And now we have to learn that communication brings us into contact with all these "dangerous" individuals outside the church. And I think that lots of us would like that community to be a Christian community. And we find it very difficult to speak in terms of the whole human community. Do you remember in '64 when Apollo VIII went around the world? Those men were strapped into that capsule, and for the first time in human existence they saw not the sun come up over the horizon of the earth, they saw earth come up over the horizon of the moon. And so there

was the earth that nobody had ever seen but God, so to speak. There was this little planet of ours. What did they see? They saw a beautiful, unified planet, as if we were really all together. And that, of course, is not true, because we fight each other out of the house from time to time. Not only was that a tremendous aesthetic experience, I think it is also something of a challenge: "See how beautiful and how unified this tennis ball in the universe really is? Don't mark it up!"

As you've said in describing the digital divide and the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots," we are producing a gap in theological work as well, such that the theology of the rich will differ dramatically from the theology of the poor, and consequently Western theology will be virtually irrelevant to the rest of the world. What intellectual contributions, then, can the Western world, can the Church, offer? Are we limited to offering our technical expertise?

No. I think we offer dialogue. That is to say, we offer opportunities for people to meet personally. We do lots of exchanges, lots of conferences, and lots of publications. That we'll have to do, because we have to educate our own generation. And we must, against all odds, make sure that between the "haves" and "have-nots" there is still somewhat of a communication.

But that still sounds like we're facilitating interaction. We're facilitating communication. So our contribution to the new global culture is not our ideas, not our theological work or our insights into doctrines, but our capacity to facilitate other ideas?

And our own, because you get your own tradition back. Let's say I am a European and you're an American. If we want to communicate, it will only work if you are an American and I am a European. If we are absolutely clear and honest about our identities, and if we make those clash in the middle and both trust on the Spirit, He will give us a larger community than we have experienced when we were young.

So we are free, then, to pursue Western intellectual ideas, to nurture that tradition?

Absolutely.

But we approach the rest of the world differently? With a different attitude? With a different perspective?

And with the curiosity that in some cultures those same things may be present in even more glorious forms. I think of the South African concept of community. If you know Africa well, you're always amazed at how tremendously forgiveness-oriented Africans are. They can forgive ten times better than we do. That is a concept of human contact which I think we don't have. So, when you talk about community, an African in the group is a gift of God.

One of the things we like to do in the Western world in our theological work is to develop ways of living. We develop morality. We develop ethical standards and promote ethical

reflections. What is the place for Western ethical reflection in a global culture?

That's a difficult one, because I think that we have made concepts and essays out of the things which are dear to us; we have a theology of this, that, and the other thing, we have an ethical concept for everything which is reasonable, developed out of our heads-and out of our emotions very often-but it may well be that the majority of the world does not want to hear our theories if they are in conflict with the way in which we behave. One of the great contributions of the "have-nots" to the "haves" may well be that they say "Shut up," and create a new silence in which together we can ponder the narrative of God's dealing with men. He goes to the extent of sending His Son so that we can be reconciled with Him. That slight narration of God's grace can be heard anew. And it may well be that we have to burn a few theological books before we can open our hearts again.

Is a global ethics possible?

[Hesitation] Yes. You hear how I hesitate. Because I think that if you and I, two Africans, one Latin American, somebody from the Middle East, four women and three children have to get something done together, then you can only get that done if you have shared values. (We have to add up all the values we individually represent because we have different values. Universal values, I think, do not really exist except in our imagination.) For each project, and each activity, and each community, to act morally you need an ethic. You need to reflect on that moral decision. And that, of course, is possible worldwide. But it will be very different from what is in the ethics books that I carry when I travel in my teaching capacities through Europe and America. Because that is all from the same premise and then deducted into the world of action. In the real world, you'll have a project which has to be done, something difficult which is to be accomplished, a community has to be built, a city has to be renewed, you have to make decisions on biogenetics, you know, the wildest dreams. And on all these things there is a value discussion. For all these things you need each other. God help us if only one value system would be supposed to carry it all. And in that dialogue in which we progress together, we will develop global ethics, and then I mean ethics indeed as a plural. We'll have to get used to the fact that we cannot have a tremendous intellectual building in which everything has its own place, but we have to learn to live with a number of buildings of ethical concerns which we built together, and in some places that may be different from others.

People in the church, though, will accept that kind of advice with mixed results. On the one hand, people in the church understand the need to collaborate and to learn and to grow-at least we'd like to think that. But on the other hand, people in the church believe they have truths that have been received. So somehow, the church must balance its capacity to maintain and hold truth with its interest in listening and working with others. How do you work with that balance?

We have received nothing for ourselves. We have received everything to contribute. We have to give it away free, as it was given to us free. Of course we have truth, we have the narrative for

which we are willing to live and die. That narrative cannot be taken off our back. So wherever we enter, that whole bag of truths comes with us. But it is offered. We do not step in the middle of a room with a gun to the head of people and say, "And now you accept or you go to hell!" That is not the way in which we have seen how God and his Son operate. It is offered, as Christ Himself offered Himself, to be accepted or rejected. This is an awesome freedom which is given in creation, that man is free to reject the gift which God gives him. In order to be able to be rejected, it must be freely offered. And so church people are accountable for the truth they have received. That is their contribution, their gift to the history of mankind.

And it sounds like it could be a model for a global ethic. That is, the people of God can demonstrate what it is to offer and to give, and that would be a desirable ethic for a global culture.

And not show their fear that it may not be accepted. Because lots of people are willing to offer as long as it is accepted. But if you really give a free gift, then freedom can only be expressed in a freedom to reject and to accept. That makes it exciting.