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Kritik Teologis terhadap Kapitalisme Global: Analisis Etika Ekonomi Kristen dalam Konteks Ketimpangan Sosial

Theological Critique of Global Capitalism: A Christian Economic Ethics Analysis in the Context of Social Inequality

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Abstrak: *Penelitian ini mengkaji implikasi etis kapitalisme global melalui lensa etika ekonomi Kristen, dengan fokus pada perannya dalam menghasilkan ketimpangan sosial struktural. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengembangkan kritik teologis terhadap kapitalisme global dan membangun kerangka etis konstruktif yang berlandaskan prinsip-prinsip Kristen. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan interdisipliner, penelitian ini mengintegrasikan teori-teori ekonomi tentang ketimpangan dengan analisis teologis-etis untuk mengatasi kesenjangan antara studi ekonomi empiris dan refleksi teologis normatif. Temuan penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa ketimpangan dalam kapitalisme global bukanlah hal yang insidental melainkan tertanam secara struktural, didorong oleh akumulasi modal, hubungan kekuasaan yang asimetris, dan pengaturan institusional yang mengistimewakan modal di atas tenaga kerja. Teologi Kristen menawarkan kerangka kritis yang berlandaskan pada konsep keadilan, martabat manusia, dan solidaritas, dengan doktrin imago Dei yang menegaskan nilai intrinsik setiap manusia dan opsi preferensial untuk orang miskin yang mengungkap ketidakcukupan moral dari sistem yang melanggengkan marginalisasi.*

Kontribusi: *Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka etis konstruktif yang terdiri dari tiga prinsip utama: keadilan sebagai transformasi struktural, solidaritas sebagai praktik ekonomi, dan martabat manusia sebagai standar evaluatif utama.*

Kata Kunci: *kapitalisme global; ketimpangan sosial struktural; etika ekonomi Kristen; martabat manusia dan keadilan; kritik teologis terhadap kapitalisme.*

Abstract: This study examines the ethical implications of global capitalism through the lens of Christian economic ethics, focusing on its role in producing structural social inequality. The purpose of this research is to develop a theological critique of global capitalism and construct a constructive ethical framework grounded in Christian principles. Drawing on qualitative and interdisciplinary approaches, the research integrates economic theories of inequality with theological-ethical analysis to address the gap between empirical economic studies and normative theological reflection. The findings reveal that inequality in global capitalism is not incidental but structurally embedded, driven by capital accumulation, asymmetrical power relations, and institutional arrangements that privilege capital over labor. Christian theology offers a critical framework grounded in the concepts of justice, human dignity, and solidarity, with the doctrine of *imago Dei* affirming the intrinsic worth of every human being and the preferential option for the poor exposing the moral inadequacy of systems that perpetuate marginalization. This study proposes a constructive ethical framework consisting of three key principles: justice

as structural transformation, solidarity as economic practice, and human dignity as the central evaluative standard.

Contribution: The study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by demonstrating that theology can function not only as a critical voice but also as a constructive resource in addressing global inequality.

Keywords: global capitalism; structural social inequality; Christian economic ethics; human dignity and justice; theological critique of capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, global economic inequality has reached unprecedented levels, becoming one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary society. Reports from the World Inequality Lab indicate that the top 10% of the global population captures more than half of total income, while the bottom 50% receives less than 10% (Chancel et al., 2022). This imbalance is not merely statistical but reflects deep structural disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and economic power. Similarly, findings from Oxfam International highlight that wealth concentration has intensified in the aftermath of global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, further exacerbating poverty and social vulnerability (Oxfam International, 2022). Such patterns suggest that inequality is not an accidental byproduct but an embedded feature of the current global economic order.

At the center of this issue lies global capitalism, a system characterized by market expansion, capital accumulation, and profit maximization across national boundaries. While capitalism has contributed to economic growth and technological advancement, scholars increasingly argue that its globalized form tends to widen socio-economic gaps (Milanovic, 2016). The logic of capital accumulation often prioritizes efficiency and profit over equitable distribution, leading to labor exploitation, environmental degradation, and systemic marginalization. As Piketty and Zucman (2014) demonstrate, when the rate of return on capital exceeds economic growth, wealth inequality tends to increase structurally over time. This dynamic raises critical ethical questions regarding justice, human dignity, and the moral legitimacy of existing economic systems.

The state of the art in this field reveals two distinct scholarly trajectories that have developed in parallel rather than in dialogue. On the one hand, economic analyses of inequality, advanced by Thomas Piketty and Branko Milanovic, offer rigorous empirical accounts of wealth concentration, income distribution, and the structural dynamics of global capitalism (Piketty & Zucman, 2014; Milanovic, 2016). These studies employ

quantitative methodologies, including longitudinal data analysis and capital/income ratio modeling, to demonstrate the structural nature of inequality. Piketty and Zucman's (2014) empirical framework reveals that when the rate of return on capital (*r*) persistently exceeds the rate of economic growth (*g*), wealth accumulates faster than income, leading to intergenerational concentration of capital. Milanovic's (2013) methodological innovation lies in his global inequality analysis, which encompasses both intra-national and inter-national dimensions, demonstrating that globalization has produced new forms of stratification.

On the other hand, theological scholarship, particularly within the traditions of liberation theology and Christian social ethics, provides a rich normative framework grounded in concepts such as justice, solidarity, and the *imago Dei*. Thinkers like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Kathryn Tanner offer profound critiques of economic injustice and the moral assumptions underlying capitalist systems (Gutiérrez, 1973; Tanner, 2019). Gutiérrez's (1973) methodological contribution lies in his articulation of the "preferential option for the poor," which reframes economic inequality as a theological problem by beginning with the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Tanner's (2019) theological analysis interrogates the internal logic of capitalism, arguing that its fundamental principles—competition, accumulation, and self-interest—stand in contrast to core Christian values such as grace, gift, and unconditional generosity. However, these theological approaches often lack sustained engagement with contemporary economic theory, quantitative analyses, and the complex institutional structures that characterize global capitalism.

The research gap lies at the intersection of these two fields, where a significant conceptual and methodological divide remains. Economic scholarship tends to prioritize analytical precision over moral evaluation, while theological discourse emphasizes ethical critique without fully incorporating the analytical tools of modern economics (Atkinson, 2015). This dual limitation results in a fragmented dialogue between economics and theology, limiting the capacity of both fields to address complex global issues effectively. The absence of such integration represents a critical gap in current scholarship because addressing global inequality requires not only an accurate diagnosis of economic structures but also a coherent ethical framework capable of guiding transformative action (Stiglitz, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to develop a theological critique of global capitalism grounded in Christian economic ethics while proposing an alternative ethical framework that addresses structural inequality. This study moves beyond approaches that isolate theology from socio-economic realities or reduce economic critique to purely empirical analysis. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, which synthesizes theological ethical principles with critical analyses of global capitalism. First, it enables a more comprehensive evaluation of economic systems that includes not only efficiency and growth but also moral legitimacy and social justice. Second, this study situates Christian ethical reflection within contemporary global economic discourse, addressing a significant gap where theological discussions often lack engagement with modern economic structures). Finally, this article contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by proposing a framework of Christian economic ethics that is both normatively grounded and contextually relevant.

METODE

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in theological-ethical analysis, integrating insights from theology, economics, and social theory. Rather than relying on quantitative measurement, the research seeks to interpret and critically evaluate the moral dimensions of global capitalism through the lens of Christian theology (Klein, 1990). This approach is particularly suitable for addressing normative questions related to justice, human dignity, and ethical responsibility—dimensions that cannot be adequately captured through empirical data alone. The research adopts an interdisciplinary framework, recognizing that global capitalism cannot be fully understood within the boundaries of a single discipline. Julie Thompson Klein (1990) emphasizes that interdisciplinarity enables the synthesis of diverse perspectives, thereby generating more comprehensive and nuanced analyses of complex issues. By drawing on economic theories of inequality, theological ethics, and critical social theory, this study situates itself within a broader scholarly conversation that bridges normative and empirical domains. Additionally, the study is informed by critical theory, particularly in its effort to uncover underlying power structures and ideological assumptions embedded within global capitalism.

The analytical process in this study proceeds in three interrelated stages, reflecting its qualitative and interdisciplinary orientation. First, the study conducts a thematic

analysis of key economic theories on global capitalism, identifying recurring patterns related to inequality, capital accumulation, and structural injustice (Piketty & Zucman, 2014). This stage synthesizes insights from major economic thinkers—including Thomas Piketty, Branko Milanovic, and David Harvey—to establish a conceptual foundation for understanding the structural dynamics of global capitalism. Second, the findings from this economic analysis are interpreted through the lens of Christian theological concepts, particularly those related to justice, human dignity, and the common good (Thiselton, 2009). This stage involves a hermeneutical process in which theological doctrines—such as *imago Dei*, preferential option for the poor, and solidarity—are brought into dialogue with contemporary socio-economic realities. Third, the study develops a constructive ethical framework by synthesizing theological principles with critical economic analysis (Tanner, 2019). This stage represents the primary contribution of the research, as it moves beyond critique toward the formulation of a normative model capable of addressing inequality within global capitalism. The resulting framework integrates insights from both disciplines—economics and theology—offering a coherent basis for evaluating and reorienting economic systems toward human flourishing rather than profit maximization.

RESULT

Structural Inequality in Global Capitalism

The findings of this study confirm that inequality within global capitalism is not merely incidental but structurally embedded within its operational logic. Rather than being an unintended consequence of market dynamics, inequality emerges as a predictable outcome of the mechanisms that govern capital accumulation and distribution (Harvey, 2007). This insight aligns with the broader body of critical political economy, which views inequality as a systemic feature rather than a deviation from equilibrium. Thomas Piketty and Gabriel Zucman (2014) provide one of the most influential explanations of this phenomenon by demonstrating that when the rate of return on capital (r) consistently exceeds the rate of economic growth (g), wealth becomes increasingly concentrated in the hands of those who already possess capital. This dynamic generates a self-reinforcing cycle of accumulation, whereby inherited wealth grows faster than earned income, thereby entrenching intergenerational inequality. Importantly, this process is not limited to national economies but is amplified

within the global system, where capital mobility allows investors to seek higher returns across borders.

Globalization intensifies this structural imbalance by creating asymmetries between capital and labor. While capital can move rapidly across jurisdictions in search of favorable conditions, labor remains constrained by legal, social, and geographic limitations (Rodrik, 2018). As a result, workers are often subjected to downward pressure on wages and labor standards, particularly in developing economies competing for foreign investment. This imbalance contributes to a global economic order in which the benefits of growth are unevenly distributed, reinforcing disparities both within and between nations. Complementary analyses from political economy scholars argue that financialization has intensified these dynamics by shifting economic priorities toward short-term returns and shareholder value (Krippner, 2005). From a critical perspective, David Harvey (2007) further argues that neoliberal capitalism operates through processes of "accumulation by dispossession," whereby public resources, social goods, and communal assets are systematically transferred into private ownership. This includes the privatization of state-owned enterprises, the commodification of natural resources, and the financialization of essential services. Such processes not only redistribute wealth upward but also erode the social foundations necessary for collective well-being, including access to education, healthcare, and public infrastructure. The prophetic critique of structural injustice is not limited to the Old Testament. Togatorop et al. (2024) demonstrate how Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) challenges economic systems that privilege the powerful over the vulnerable. Their analysis shows that the Kingdom of God operates on a different economic logic—one rooted in grace and equality rather than merit and accumulation.

Moreover, the structural nature of inequality has significant implications for democratic institutions. As wealth becomes increasingly concentrated, economic power translates into political influence, enabling elites to shape policies in ways that further entrench their advantages (Stiglitz, 2015). This dynamic creates a feedback loop in which inequality reinforces itself through both economic and political mechanisms. Consequently, inequality cannot be adequately addressed through market corrections alone, as it is deeply embedded in the institutional and structural framework of global capitalism. These findings challenge dominant narratives that attribute inequality primarily to individual effort, skill differentials, or market inefficiencies (Milanovic,

2016). While such factors may play a role, they do not sufficiently account for the systemic patterns observed across different contexts. Instead, inequality must be understood as a structural condition produced and reproduced by the logic of global capitalism itself.

This structural understanding provides a crucial foundation for theological engagement. By identifying inequality as a systemic issue rather than a moral failure of individuals, it opens space for a more profound ethical critique that addresses not only personal behavior but also the underlying structures that shape economic life (Wolterstorff, 2008). In this sense, the analysis of structural inequality serves as a critical bridge between economic theory and theological ethics, preparing the ground for the development of a normative framework grounded in justice, dignity, and solidarity. The findings also underscore that globalization has redistributed income unevenly, producing winners and losers across different regions and social classes (Milanovic, 2013). Branko Milanovic's work demonstrates that while globalization has contributed to the reduction of extreme poverty in certain regions, it has also produced new forms of inequality, particularly within advanced and emerging economies.

Theological Critique: Justice versus Exploitation

Christian theology offers a moral vision that stands in critical tension with the logic of capitalist accumulation identified in the preceding analysis. While global capitalism tends to normalize inequality as a byproduct of market efficiency, Christian theology evaluates economic life through the lens of justice, human dignity, and the common good (Wolterstorff, 2008). In this framework, justice is not limited to procedural fairness or legal compliance but encompasses relational and distributive dimensions grounded in the inherent worth of every human being. Gustavo Gutiérrez's (1973) articulation of the "preferential option for the poor" provides a decisive normative criterion for evaluating economic systems. This principle requires that social, political, and economic arrangements be assessed according to their impact on the most vulnerable. From this perspective, systems that systematically marginalize the poor cannot be justified on the basis of efficiency or growth alone; they must be regarded as structurally unjust.

Building on this foundation, Kathryn Tanner (2019) offers a penetrating critique of capitalism's internal logic. She argues that the competitive and accumulation-driven dynamics of capitalism are fundamentally at odds with the theological economy of grace. Whereas capitalism operates under conditions of scarcity, rivalry, and conditional

exchange, Christian theology envisions an economy grounded in divine abundance, unconditional giving, and relational interdependence (Tanner, 2019). This contrast exposes a deep incompatibility between the moral anthropology implicit in capitalism—centered on self-interest—and the theological anthropology rooted in gift and communion. Furthermore, theological ethics challenges the instrumentalization of human beings within capitalist systems. When labor is treated primarily as a commodity and individuals are valued according to their productivity, the intrinsic dignity of the person is subordinated to economic utility (Sen, 1999). Amartya Sen's capability approach reinforces this critique by emphasizing that human well-being must be assessed in terms of substantive freedoms rather than mere income or output.

The tension between justice and exploitation becomes particularly evident when examining how economic gains are distributed. Capitalist systems often justify inequality through meritocratic narratives, suggesting that outcomes reflect individual effort or talent (Stiglitz, 2015). However, these outcomes are significantly shaped by unequal access to resources, opportunities, and power. Christian theology, therefore, calls into question the moral legitimacy of distributions that systematically disadvantage certain groups, regardless of their formal legality. This critique leads to a broader ethical conclusion: capitalism is not merely an economic system but a moral order that embodies specific values, assumptions, and priorities (Tanner, 2019). By privileging profit maximization and efficiency, it risks subordinating justice, solidarity, and human flourishing. Consequently, theological critique does not limit itself to evaluating the outcomes of capitalism but interrogates its foundational assumptions about human nature, value, and social relations.

In light of this analysis, the tension between justice and exploitation is not peripheral but central to understanding the ethical limits of global capitalism (Wolterstorff, 2008). Christian theology exposes this tension by insisting that economic systems must be judged not by their capacity to generate wealth alone, but by their ability to uphold the dignity of every person and to promote equitable and life-giving relationships. The theological critique of global capitalism thus operates on multiple levels, addressing both the structural mechanisms that generate inequality and the normative assumptions that legitimize it. This multidimensional critique provides the essential foundation for constructing an alternative ethical framework that is both analytically rigorous and normatively compelling.

Human Dignity and Economic Systems

A central finding of this study is the normative primacy of human dignity as a criterion for evaluating economic systems. Within Christian theology, this principle is grounded in the doctrine of *imago Dei*, which affirms that every human being possesses intrinsic worth that cannot be reduced to economic value or instrumental utility (Wolterstorff, 2008). This theological anthropology provides a critical standard against which the structures and outcomes of global capitalism must be assessed. However, the analysis demonstrates that contemporary global capitalism frequently operates in ways that undermine this principle. Individuals are often treated as units of labor, valued primarily according to productivity, efficiency, and market contribution (Waters, 2007). Such a reductionist framework risks subordinating the person to the demands of capital accumulation, thereby transforming human beings into instruments rather than ends in themselves.

From a critical economic perspective, Amartya Sen (1999) challenges this instrumental view by proposing the capability approach, which evaluates human well-being in terms of substantive freedoms and opportunities rather than income alone. This approach resonates strongly with theological concerns, as it shifts the focus from economic output to human flourishing. By emphasizing what individuals are actually able to be and do, Sen provides a framework that aligns with the ethical priority of dignity over efficiency. Theologically, the instrumentalization of human beings constitutes a form of dehumanization that contradicts the moral foundations of Christian ethics (Wolterstorff, 2008). Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that justice requires recognizing persons as bearers of inherent rights grounded in their dignity, not as means to economic ends. When economic systems fail to uphold this principle, they erode the moral fabric of society by legitimizing forms of exclusion, exploitation, and inequality.

Moreover, the prioritization of efficiency over dignity has broader social implications. Systems that privilege productivity and profit often marginalize those who do not meet market standards—such as the poor, the elderly, or those in precarious employment (Stiglitz, 2015). This dynamic reinforces structural inequality by assigning differential value to human lives based on economic contribution. In this context, dignity becomes conditional rather than intrinsic, undermining the ethical foundations of both social cohesion and justice. Christian theology, therefore, offers a corrective by re-

centering economic life around the dignity of the human person (Tanner, 2019). This entails not only protecting individual rights but also restructuring economic institutions to ensure that they promote human flourishing rather than mere accumulation. Such a perspective challenges dominant economic paradigms by insisting that markets must serve people, rather than people serving markets.

Consequently, a theological critique of global capitalism must move beyond identifying injustice to articulating a positive vision of an economy ordered toward dignity, solidarity, and the common good (Rieger, 2010). This reorientation provides a crucial bridge to the constructive ethical framework, where the principles of justice, solidarity, and human dignity are integrated into a coherent model for evaluating and transforming economic systems. The findings also reveal that the structural nature of inequality has significant implications for democratic institutions. As wealth becomes increasingly concentrated, economic power translates into political influence, enabling elites to shape policies in ways that further entrench their advantages (Stiglitz, 2015). This dynamic creates a feedback loop in which inequality reinforces itself through both economic and political mechanisms, making it imperative for theological ethics to address not only individual behavior but also systemic structures.

Toward a Constructive Christian Economic Ethics Framework

While critical analysis is indispensable for exposing the structural injustices embedded within global capitalism, this study also seeks to move beyond critique toward the construction of a normative ethical framework grounded in Christian theology (Tanner, 2019). Building on the findings, three interrelated principles emerge as foundational for a Christian economic ethic: justice as structural transformation, solidarity as economic practice, and human dignity as the central evaluative standard. Within Christian economic ethics, justice must be understood not merely in terms of redistribution but as the transformation of the structural conditions that generate inequality (Gutiérrez, 1973). As demonstrated in the analysis of global capitalism, disparities in wealth and opportunity are not accidental but are produced by institutional arrangements that privilege capital over labor and concentrate economic power. From a theological perspective, justice entails rectifying these systemic imbalances by addressing the underlying structures of exploitation, exclusion, and domination.

Gustavo Gutiérrez's (1973) emphasis on the preferential option for the poor underscores that justice must prioritize those most affected by structural inequality. This implies that ethical economic reform cannot be limited to charitable redistribution but must involve transformative changes in labor relations, access to resources, and global governance mechanisms. The second principle, solidarity, shifts the focus from individualistic economic behavior to relational and communal dimensions of economic life (Rieger, 2010). Rooted in Christian theological traditions, solidarity affirms the interconnectedness of human existence and calls for economic practices that reflect mutual responsibility and care. Joerg Rieger (2010) argues that economic systems should be evaluated based on their capacity to foster relationships of cooperation rather than competition. This perspective challenges dominant capitalist paradigms that prioritize self-interest and accumulation, proposing instead an economy oriented toward the common good.

Solidarity, therefore, is not merely an abstract ideal but a practical principle that can be embodied in economic institutions and practices. It calls for alternative models of economic organization—such as cooperative enterprises, community-based economies, and socially responsible governance—that prioritize collective well-being over individual profit (Bretherton, 2019). By emphasizing relationality, solidarity redefines economic success not in terms of growth or accumulation but in terms of the quality of social relationships and the extent to which economic systems promote inclusion and participation. The economy of the Kingdom of God operates on grace rather than merit. As Togatorop et al. (2024) argue, "upah dalam Kerajaan Allah bukan berdasarkan apa yang telah kita baktikan" (wages in the Kingdom of God are not based on what we have contributed), but on divine grace. This theological insight challenges the meritocratic narratives that often justify economic inequality and offers a normative foundation for economic practices rooted in generosity, reciprocity, and mutual care. The third and most fundamental principle is human dignity, which serves as the ultimate standard for evaluating all economic activity (Wolterstorff, 2008).

Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach reinforces this critique by emphasizing that development should be measured in terms of human freedoms and capabilities rather than economic output alone. When applied, human dignity requires that economic decisions—whether at the level of policy, institutions, or individual action—be evaluated according to their impact on the well-being, agency, and flourishing of persons. Economic

systems that compromise dignity, even if efficient, cannot be ethically justified within this framework. Taken together, these three principles form a coherent normative framework that not only critiques the limitations of global capitalism but also offers a constructive vision for a more just and humane economic order (Tanner, 2019). Justice as structural transformation addresses systemic inequality; solidarity as economic practice reorients relationships toward the common good; and human dignity as the central evaluative standard provides the ultimate ethical criterion for evaluation. This framework represents the primary contribution of this study, demonstrating that Christian economic ethics is not merely a set of abstract moral principles but a practical resource for rethinking and reshaping economic systems in ways that promote justice, dignity, and human flourishing.

DISCUSSION

Critical Analysis of the Structure of Global Capitalism and Inequality

The discussion of structural inequality in global capitalism reveals a complex interplay between economic mechanisms and ethical considerations. Thomas Piketty and Gabriel Zucman's (2014) empirical framework demonstrates that when the rate of return on capital (r) persistently exceeds the rate of economic growth (g), wealth accumulates faster than income, leading to intergenerational concentration of capital. This dynamic is not merely cyclical but structural, suggesting that inequality is embedded within the very mechanisms of capital accumulation. Piketty and Zucman's work provides indispensable insights into the mechanisms that generate inequality, yet it operates within a predominantly descriptive or policy-oriented framework that lacks a robust moral or normative foundation (Atkinson, 2015). This limitation has been widely noted in contemporary economic discourse, where the emphasis on measurement and modeling frequently sidelines ethical evaluation. The tension between structural critique and reformist perspectives reveals an important analytical insight: global capitalism cannot be understood solely as an economic system but must also be examined as a moral and political order (Stiglitz, 2015).

Branko Milanovic's (2013) methodological innovation lies in his global inequality analysis, which encompasses both intra-national and inter-national dimensions, demonstrating that globalization has produced new forms of stratification. His work demonstrates that while globalization has contributed to the reduction of extreme

poverty in certain regions, it has also produced new forms of inequality, particularly within advanced and emerging economies. This has led to a complex stratification in which segments of the global middle class experience stagnation, while the global elite continues to accumulate disproportionate wealth (Lakner & Milanovic, 2016). Milanovic's analysis, however, shares a limitation with Piketty and Zucman's work: while it offers powerful critiques of capitalist structures, it tends to rely on secular theoretical frameworks that do not fully engage questions of ultimate moral grounding, human dignity, or theological anthropology (Polanyi, 1944). As a result, these analyses, though structurally incisive, often remain normatively underdeveloped in relation to deeper ethical or metaphysical concerns.

David Harvey's (2007) conceptualization of contemporary capitalism as a process of "accumulation by dispossession" further deepens this analysis by highlighting the systemic nature of inequality. He argues that public assets, social goods, and common resources are increasingly privatized and commodified, a process that not only redistributes wealth upward but also transforms social relations, prioritizing market logic over communal well-being. However, not all scholars view capitalism as inherently incompatible with social justice. Amartya Sen (1985) offers a more nuanced perspective by arguing that markets can play a positive role in human development when embedded within ethical and institutional frameworks that promote capabilities and freedoms. From this standpoint, inequality is not an inevitable outcome of capitalism itself, but rather the result of inadequate governance, weak institutions, and the absence of moral constraints.

The synthesis of these perspectives reveals that global capitalism generates wealth and innovation while simultaneously raising profound ethical questions regarding justice, distribution, and human dignity (Stiglitz, 2015). These tensions provide a critical entry point for theological engagement, particularly in assessing the moral legitimacy of economic structures that shape contemporary global society. The economic analysis of inequality—advanced by Piketty, Zucman, Milanovic, and Harvey—offers rigorous empirical accounts of wealth concentration, income distribution, and the structural dynamics of global capitalism (Piketty & Zucman, 2014). However, these studies often operate within a predominantly descriptive or policy-oriented framework that lacks a robust moral or normative foundation. This limitation creates a disciplinary gap in which theology and economics operate in parallel rather than in dialogue. The integration of

theological insights with economic analysis enables a more comprehensive evaluation of economic systems that includes not only efficiency and growth but also moral legitimacy and social justice (Klein, 1990).

Theological Critique of Capitalism: Justice, Dignity, and Solidarity

The theological critique of global capitalism operates on multiple levels, addressing both the structural mechanisms that generate inequality and the normative assumptions that legitimize it. Gustavo Gutiérrez's (1973) articulation of the "preferential option for the poor" provides a decisive normative criterion for evaluating economic systems. This principle requires that social, political, and economic arrangements be assessed according to their impact on the most vulnerable. From this perspective, systems that systematically marginalize the poor cannot be justified on the basis of efficiency or growth alone; they must be regarded as structurally unjust. The implication is significant: inequality is not merely an unfortunate outcome but a moral failure embedded in institutional arrangements. Gutiérrez's (1970) methodological contribution lies in his reframing of economic inequality as a theological problem by beginning with the lived experiences of marginalized communities rather than abstract doctrinal formulations. Gutiérrez's critique of the "sacred/profane" dichotomy is echoed in Van Buskirk's (2021) ecclesiological analysis, which argues that "the salvific action of God underlies all human existence" and that a division of "Church" and "world" is "artificial and theologically untenable."

Kathryn Tanner (2019) offers a penetrating critique of capitalism's internal logic, arguing that the competitive and accumulation-driven dynamics of capitalism are fundamentally at odds with the theological economy of grace. Whereas capitalism operates under conditions of scarcity, rivalry, and conditional exchange, Christian theology envisions an economy grounded in divine abundance, unconditional giving, and relational interdependence (Tanner, 2019). This contrast exposes a deep incompatibility between the moral anthropology implicit in capitalism—centered on self-interest—and the theological anthropology rooted in gift and communion. Tanner's work is particularly significant because it moves beyond external moral critique and instead interrogates the theological assumptions embedded within economic practices themselves.

The tension between justice and exploitation becomes particularly evident when examining how economic gains are distributed. Capitalist systems often justify inequality

through meritocratic narratives, suggesting that outcomes reflect individual effort or talent (Stiglitz, 2015). However, these outcomes are significantly shaped by unequal access to resources, opportunities, and power. Christian theology, therefore, calls into question the moral legitimacy of distributions that systematically disadvantage certain groups, regardless of their formal legality. This critique leads to a broader ethical conclusion: capitalism is not merely an economic system but a moral order that embodies specific values, assumptions, and priorities (Tanner, 2019). By privileging profit maximization and efficiency, it risks subordinating justice, solidarity, and human flourishing.

The normative primacy of human dignity as a criterion for evaluating economic systems is grounded in the doctrine of *imago Dei*, which affirms that every human being possesses intrinsic worth that cannot be reduced to economic value or instrumental utility (Wolterstorff, 2008). However, contemporary global capitalism frequently operates in ways that undermine this principle. Individuals are often treated as units of labor, valued primarily according to productivity, efficiency, and market contribution (Waters, 2007). Such a reductionist framework risks subordinating the person to the demands of capital accumulation, thereby transforming human beings into instruments rather than ends in themselves. Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach challenges this instrumental view by proposing that human well-being must be assessed in terms of substantive freedoms and opportunities rather than income alone. This approach resonates strongly with theological concerns, as it shifts the focus from economic output to human flourishing.

Nicholas Wolterstorff (2008) argues that justice requires recognizing persons as bearers of inherent rights grounded in their dignity, not as means to economic ends. When economic systems fail to uphold this principle, they erode the moral fabric of society by legitimizing forms of exclusion, exploitation, and inequality. The prioritization of efficiency over dignity has broader social implications, as systems that privilege productivity and profit often marginalize those who do not meet market standards—such as the poor, the elderly, or those in precarious employment (Stiglitz, 2015). This dynamic reinforces structural inequality by assigning differential value to human lives based on economic contribution. In this context, dignity becomes conditional rather than intrinsic, undermining the ethical foundations of both social cohesion and justice. Christian

theology, therefore, offers a corrective by re-centering economic life around the dignity of the human person (Tanner, 2019).

Toward a Constructive Christian Economic Ethics Framework

The synthesis of economic analysis and theological ethics reveals that meaningful responses to global inequality require both structural analysis and moral re-evaluation of the foundations of global economic systems (Klein, 1990). The constructive ethical framework developed in this study is built upon three interrelated principles: justice as structural transformation, solidarity as economic practice, and human dignity as the central evaluative standard. Justice, in this framework, must be understood not merely in terms of redistribution but as the transformation of the structural conditions that generate inequality (Gutiérrez, 1973). As demonstrated in the analysis of global capitalism, disparities in wealth and opportunity are not accidental but are produced by institutional arrangements that privilege capital over labor and concentrate economic power. From a theological perspective, justice entails rectifying these systemic imbalances by addressing the underlying structures of exploitation, exclusion, and domination.

Gustavo Gutiérrez's (1973) emphasis on the preferential option for the poor underscores that justice must prioritize those most affected by structural inequality. This implies that ethical economic reform cannot be limited to charitable redistribution but must involve transformative changes in labor relations, access to resources, and global governance mechanisms. The second principle, solidarity, shifts the focus from individualistic economic behavior to relational and communal dimensions of economic life. Rooted in Christian theological traditions, solidarity affirms the interconnectedness of human existence and calls for economic practices that reflect mutual responsibility and care (Rieger, 2010). Joerg Rieger (2010) argues that economic systems should be evaluated based on their capacity to foster relationships of cooperation rather than competition. This perspective challenges dominant capitalist paradigms that prioritize self-interest and accumulation, proposing instead an economy oriented toward the common good.

Solidarity, therefore, is not merely an abstract ideal but a practical principle that can be embodied in economic institutions and practices. It calls for alternative models of economic organization—such as cooperative enterprises, community-based economies,

and socially responsible governance—that prioritize collective well-being over individual profit (Bretherton, 2019). By emphasizing relationality, solidarity redefines economic success not in terms of growth or accumulation but in terms of the quality of social relationships and the extent to which economic systems promote inclusion and participation. The third and most fundamental principle is human dignity, which serves as the ultimate standard for evaluating all economic activity (Wolterstorff, 2008). The theological concept of *imago Dei* affirms that every person possesses inherent worth that must be respected and protected within economic systems. This principle directly challenges utilitarian and efficiency-driven approaches that justify inequality on the basis of aggregate outcomes.

Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach reinforces this critique by emphasizing that development should be measured in terms of human freedoms and capabilities rather than economic output alone. When applied, human dignity requires that economic decisions—whether at the level of policy, institutions, or individual action—be evaluated according to their impact on the well-being, agency, and flourishing of persons. Economic systems that compromise dignity, even if efficient, cannot be ethically justified within this framework. Taken together, these three principles form a coherent normative framework that not only critiques the limitations of global capitalism but also offers a constructive vision for a more just and humane economic order (Tanner, 2019). This framework represents the primary contribution of this study, demonstrating that Christian economic ethics is not merely a set of abstract moral principles but a practical resource for rethinking and reshaping economic systems in ways that promote justice, dignity, and human flourishing.

The implications of this study are both theological and socio-economic. Theologically, it demonstrates that Christian ethics is not limited to personal morality but extends to the critical evaluation of economic structures (Bretherton, 2019). It affirms that theology can serve as a vital resource for engaging contemporary global challenges, particularly those related to inequality and injustice. From a socio-economic perspective, the study highlights the need for economic systems that are not only efficient but also just and humane (Stiglitz, 2015). It suggests that addressing global inequality requires more than technical policy solutions; it necessitates a re-examination of the moral foundations that shape economic life. In this regard, the integration of ethical principles such as dignity and solidarity into economic decision-making processes becomes essential for

fostering inclusive and sustainable development (Sen, 1999). The synthesis of theological ethics and economic analysis thus offers a holistic approach to addressing global inequality—one that is grounded in justice, oriented toward solidarity, and centered on the dignity of the human person.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the relationship between Christian theology and global capitalism by analyzing the ethical implications of structural inequality and proposing a constructive framework grounded in Christian economic ethics. The findings demonstrate that inequality within global capitalism is not incidental but structurally embedded, driven by mechanisms of capital accumulation, asymmetrical power relations, and institutional arrangements that privilege capital over labor. In response to the first research question, this study shows that Christian theology critiques global capitalism at both structural and normative levels. Structurally, it exposes how economic systems generate and sustain inequality. Normatively, it challenges the moral assumptions underlying capitalism, particularly its emphasis on competition, accumulation, and profit maximization. Drawing on theological insights such as the preferential option for the poor and the doctrine of *imago Dei*, this critique highlights the incompatibility between exploitative economic practices and the ethical demands of justice, dignity, and solidarity. With regard to the second research question, this study develops a constructive ethical framework derived from Christian economic ethics, built upon three interrelated principles: justice as structural transformation, solidarity as economic practice, and human dignity as the central evaluative standard.

The implications of this study are both theological and socio-economic. Theologically, it demonstrates that Christian ethics is not limited to personal morality but extends to the critical evaluation of economic structures, affirming that theology can serve as a vital resource for engaging contemporary global challenges. From a socio-economic perspective, the study highlights the need for economic systems that are not only efficient but also just and humane, suggesting that addressing global inequality requires more than technical policy solutions. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. As a qualitative and theoretical inquiry, this study does not include empirical testing or quantitative validation of its proposed ethical framework. Additionally, the reliance on secondary data may limit the ability to capture localized or

context-specific economic experiences. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating empirical investigations, such as case studies, field research, or policy analysis, to test and refine the proposed framework in practical contexts. Comparative research between Christian economic ethics and other religious or philosophical traditions could also enrich the interdisciplinary dialogue, while empirical studies examining how faith-based communities embody alternative economic practices would provide valuable insights into the real-world implications of theological ethics.

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