Rebecca Todd Peters


One indication of a good text is its ability to offer insight and wisdom in situations that occur after it was written. I was grateful to be finishing *Solidarity Ethics* amidst protests in the wake of the grand jury rulings concerning the use of lethal police force in Ferguson, MO and Staten Island. As a white, middle class, cisgendered woman, I found myself asking questions about what it means to be a good ally, a good citizen and a committed Christian in times of deep injustice and structural violence. Peters is a steady, relevant guide and offers a stream of thought-provoking questions on the ethical demands of privilege in light of the vast inequalities of neo-liberal globalization.

The book is clearly organized into six chapters that explore solidarity from a theoretical, theological and ethical perspective. Peters grounds her work as a Christian social ethicist in feminist liberation ethics and takes seriously the obligation to offer critical social analysis with clear reference to lived Christian theology. Her voice throughout the book is both firm and self-critical. The reader does not get the sense she is being lectured or scolded but rather warmly invited into a conversation and asked to join a larger struggle.

One of the strengths of this text is Peters’ gift for clearly deconstructing and explaining economic globalization in an accessible way that circumvents the criticism that she isn’t an economist. She doesn’t dwell on the history of neo-liberal globalization but she has done the appropriate research and offers only what is necessary for the reader to understand the central point: what do we do with the knowledge that our wealth comes at the expense of the suffering of poor and marginalized people whom we may never meet?

*Solidarity Ethics* is framed around two questions ‘to what extent will one participate in a system that benefits some at the expense of others?’ and ‘to what extent are one’s own daily habits and practices complicit in the exploitation of other human beings and the planet?’ (p. 8). To the claim that many are unaware of the cost of their privilege, Peters’ response is unequivocal: ‘The fact that most people are not aware of the exact ways in which their actions are complicit in the exploitation of other people and the planet does not make their position morally neutral’ (p. 36).

Peters defines solidarity as ‘the building of relationships between people across lines of difference with the explicit or implicit intention of working together for social change’ (p. 16). One chapter traces the philosophical, political, religious and historical development of the idea of solidarity, tying together multiple epistemologies and grounding this study in interdisciplinary research.
A later chapter explores a theo-ethics of solidarity by a close examination of sustainability, social justice, *metanoia*, honouring difference, accountability and action.

One of the strongest chapters in the book, ‘Foundations for Transformation’, details three possible moral responses to the suffering of others: sympathy, responsibility and mutuality. Peters unpacks each of these moral responses and their implications, decrying both sympathy and responsibility as limited and ultimately insufficient responses. Sympathy, even when it motivates volunteer work or donations still maintains a fundamental division between the self and the other and suggests a troubling theology of blessing that justifies the wealthy and condemns the poor. ‘People who act out of sympathy lack an understanding of, or simply avoid thinking about, the systemic factors that have contributed to the social injustice or tragedy that has moved them to act’ (p. 37). Acting from a moral space of responsibility means spending money in socially responsible ways and making personal lifestyle choices that reflect one’s values. While this may seem admirable, Peters points out the limitations of this approach: ‘The danger of acting out of this intuition is that it betrays an imbalance of power in the relationship between the two parties, implying that one is responsible and therefore morally good while the person in need is in some way irresponsible and therefore morally flawed’ (p. 39). Peters frames God’s commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves as a demand for equality rather than paternalism and exhorts us to embrace mutuality, a moral intuition that pushes us to develop relationships that recognize our moral equality. Peters writes, ‘As long as people primarily define their actions as helping others, either out of guilt or responsibility, they will fail to recognize the ways in which their own humanity is tied up in the health and well-being of others’ (p. 45).

The journey towards an ethic of solidarity demands that we reckon with privilege and how our race, class and gender benefit some of us in ways that are hard to acknowledge. Peters’ discussion of privilege is nuanced and powerful. She explains the historical construction of white privilege in the United States and contrasts it with privilege in ancient Israel to ground in theology her conviction that those with privilege must first understand their own privilege in order to build authentic mutual relationships.

The book concludes by offering three strategies to embody an ethic of solidarity. In an age inundated by shallow Buzzfeed top ten lists, I must admit that I was sceptical that concrete steps could adequately address the complexity of the problem that Peters details. Nonetheless, readers tend to demand practical solutions to complex problems and Peters obliges by presenting a series of shifts in the ways we conceptualize daily decision-making and use of our
resources. She urges intentionality about our purchases and our routines not as an easy fix to complex economic and social problems but as a way of shifting our consciousness. Peters lauds ‘trading, collectivism, altruism, reciprocity and sharing as essential and productive aspects of our economic life’ (p. 101) and calls for a realignment of our relationships in order to build ‘meaningful ties that are not built on colonialism, paternalism or resource transfer but that allow real bonds of Christian love and solidarity to be forged together’ (p. 109).

Solidarity Ethics argues for a shift from charity to social justice and from individualism to mutuality. This book is a wonderful contribution to public theology. I will revisit this text often, as I too struggle to understand how to love and thus act in solidarity with marginalized people to whom I owe my life.

Emily Welty
Pace University, New York, USA
ewelty@pace.edu