One World, by Peter Singer

reviewed by Heidi Hadsell in the February 22, 2003 issue

Recent events have underlined the need for fresh ethical reflection on international issues. The likelihood that the United States will go to war against Iraq has suddenly and urgently placed U.S. foreign policy on the table for discussion. Environmental and economic policies are pressing concerns that quickly push ethical analysis beyond national limits. Many international friends and partner churches complain that despite the size and power of the U.S., the ethical perspectives of its people remain parochial. We need quickly to get up to speed. For this, Peter Singer's book is a good conversation partner.

Singer's premise is that changes in the material world are posing new ethical and organizational challenges that push both moral thought and human institutions in new directions--directions that transcend the nation state and make a new global ethic an urgent necessity. He builds his argument around four areas: the economy, the environment, international law and community. Since complex environmental questions such as holes in the ozone layer and global warming are not confined to individual nations, they cannot effectively be addressed by individual nation states. They require international ethical thought and the international cooperation of governments, scientists and citizens.

Exploring a number of ways to think ethically about environmental questions, considering principles of fairness, such as "he who harms pays," and finding ways to apply the utilitarian calculus of the greatest good for the greatest number, Singer concludes that "the United States and other rich nations should bear much more of the burden of reducing greenhouse gas emissions than the poor nations--perhaps even the entire burden." He points out that rich nations use a disproportionate share of the world's resources but can get away with not paying their fair share of the burden by "standing simply on their presumed rights as sovereign nations." Referring to the U.S.'s consistent refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol, Singer argues for the need to "think about developing institutions or principles of international law that limit national sovereignty."

The World Trade Organization, which for most North American Christians was little noted or understood until demonstrations and street fights surrounded its Seattle meeting in 1999, is the centerpiece of Singer's thought on the economy. He examines four objections to the WTO that have helped make it a primary target of the international movement against globalization. These objections include the complaint that it puts economic concerns ahead of all others, so that some of its decisions actively harm the environment and ignore human rights; that through many of its rules and trade agreements and its philosophy of free trade, it erodes national sovereignty; that its decision-making structure is undemocratic; and that the economic trade it promotes actually increases the gap between rich and poor nations.

While Singer concedes that there is some validity to these complaints, he concludes that something like the WTO is necessary: "Just as national laws and regulations were eventually seen as essential to prevent the inhuman harshness of 19th-century laissez-faire capitalism in the industrialized nations, so instituting global standards is the only way to prevent an equally inhuman form of uncontrolled global capitalism." He argues that it is "possible to imagine a reformed WTO in which the overwhelming commitment to free trade is replaced by a commitment to more fundamental goals."

Singer's point that the world needs global standards and an end to uncontrolled global capitalism is well taken. But he does not adequately deal with the charge that the WTO is a primary mechanism through which northern and western countries impose their philosophy of trade on the rest of the world, to their own great economic benefit. The same complaint is raised against other international agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, but Singer confines himself largely to a discussion of the WTO.

Singer agonizes about dictatorships or other "nonlegitimate" forms of government making bad environmental and economic decisions. He envisages the need for an international "tribunal consisting of judges and experts to scrutinize the credentials of each government on a regular basis." This worry takes him to the next step of his argument, which focuses directly on the sovereign rights of states and the questions of humanitarian intervention.

Singer gathers historical evidence to demonstrate that something like an international standard of what a sovereign state should be has evolved, a standard that could be used to guide intervention. He calls this "the 'democratic concept of

legitimate government' in which the concept of national sovereignty carries no weight if the government rests on force alone." His argument begins with the post-World War II war tribunals, cites international treaties on torture, considers the International War Crimes Tribunal, and concludes with Kofi Annan's argument for humanitarian intervention "when death and suffering are being inflicted on large numbers of people, and when the state nominally in charge is unable or unwilling to stop it."

Singer points to an important emerging area of ethical debate to which informed citizens, religious communities and the like need to pay attention: What are the proper limits of national sovereignty? It makes sense to insist, as Singer does, that "a global ethics should not stop at, or give great significance to, national boundaries. National sovereignty has no intrinsic moral weight."

Yet one is forced to ask many questions about his position. What distinguishes the simple imperial invasion of one country by another from humanitarian intervention? Who decides? Singer does suggest a criterion: "The limits of the state's ability and willingness to protect its people are also the limits of its sovereignty." This argument addresses some issues but raises a series of others. For example, what about the many ways the language of humanitarian intervention may be cynically used to justify imperial and military aggression? What about the fact that some nation states have a highly disproportionate amount of military power? Singer's argument may sound reasonable enough if one is sitting in the U.S. where we can be pretty sure that no other country will dare invade. But it does not sound reasonable to those in countries that are likely to be on the receiving end of Singer's logic.

In fact, American exceptionalism in the past several years proves the point that power is an important factor when thinking about moving beyond the nation state. The many instances in which the U.S. has refused to cooperate with already established international rules or in creating new ones, ranging from the Kyoto Treaty, to the treaty on landmines, to its frequent disregard of the United Nations, are examples of one way of living globally: as a hegemonic power that plays by its own rules. The international concern over such American exceptionalism is widespread. Americans should try to comprehend it and take it seriously. The issue is not simply how to live together, but how to live together when one nation is so economically and militarily dominant.

At this point, Singer's argument, which initially seems like a helpful ethical critique of American provincialism and a cogent brief for an international perspective, ends up sounding more like an ethical apologia for a northern and western global project. Adding to this impression is Singer's positioning of himself as a disinterested philosopher who attacks "ethical relativism." This allows him to dismiss many of those who would object to his conclusions on the grounds of differing conceptions of legitimacy, political traditions, visions of the good, cultures, levels of power or reason itself. Once he dismisses everyone else, what is left is Singer's own definition of universal values. Historically grounded in the Enlightenment, these sound very much like what the French call the "pensée unique"--thought that claims itself as the only reasonable way to think. This is the nightmare of the antiglobalization folks come true.

In the same manner and for the same reason Singer excludes religious thought and religious communities from the conversation. He sets up an equation in which one must choose between being provincial and self-serving, captured by religious, cultural and national loyalties, or being an enlightened universalist and thus an implicit supporter of a northern and western global political and economic project legitimated by the claims of universal reason and its conception of democracy.

What does Christianity have to contribute to all this? Is Christian thought destined to be self-concerned and parochial, as Singer suggests, and thus irrelevant? The answer is complex and far exceeds the limits of this review. For starters, however, several points can be made. Christian theology insists that ultimate values and loyalties are grounded in our relationship with God and thus always transcend human groupings and institutions. For this reason Christian thought has often been suspicious of the nation state's claims for ultimate loyalty. In addition, Christian theology and ethics insist on the intrinsic value of all human life, independent of such variables as nation, wealth or religion. Consequently, Christian ethics requires justice and compassion for the neighbor across the continent or globe as well as the neighbor next door. Similarly, Christian ethics insists on the intrinsic value of all life--not just human life, but all of God's creation. The active care for nature at home and elsewhere is thus integral to Christian ethical responsibility.

Christian moral anthropology, as understood by thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr, makes one acutely aware of the human capacity for sin, for self-interest and for self-deception. Given our propensity to think that our self-interest is in the interest of everyone, the more disinterested and neutral one thinks one is, the more potentially

dangerous one is to others.

While Christians are no better and sometimes worse than anyone else at putting their ethics into practice, and while they argue among themselves, they do work their values out in varieties of ways and contexts. They have participated in and contributed to such international initiatives as the Human Rights Declaration and, more recently, the Earth Charter. These are the kinds of initiatives that, as Singer points out, are significant building blocks in the institutionalization of an international vision of justice and responsibility that moves beyond the nation state.

Singer is absolutely correct in asserting that we need a global ethic. We cannot address environmental, economic and many other issues without thinking beyond the nation-state. We are indeed one world and need to come to terms with what that means. What one hopes for Christian thought in these matters is what one hopes for the thought of others: that while it is particular and therefore inevitably limited, it can contribute to a more universal global ethic, which will finally result from many similarly limited voices. Singer's perspective is an important part of the conversation, but it is just one voice among many.