

Capitalism and Christianity: Compatible Worldviews?

May 5, 2011 by Rev. Elisa Owen

"As for those who in the present age are rich ... They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."

—1 Timothy 6:17-19

We are aging soldiers an ancient war.

Seeking out some half remembered shore

We drink our fill and still we thirst for more

Asking, "if there's no heaven, what is this hunger for?"

—Emmy Lou Harris, *The Pearl*, "The Pearl," (Nonesuch Records, 2000).

"Whatever I had read as a child about the saints had thrilled me. I could see the nobility of giving one's life for the sick, the maimed, the leper. But there was another question in my mind. Why was so much done in remedying the evil instead of avoiding it in the first place? Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just minister to the slaves, but to do away with slavery?"

—Dorothy Day

Scene: Playground

Young Girl reading a book about knights

Girl: What does our family crest look like mommy?

Mom: Poor people being crushed by boots.

—*The Reader's Digest*, "Life's Funny that Way" (May 2011), 81.

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One question emerges over and over again among congregations and Christian ethicists: Is the economic theory underlying modern capitalism Christian? Are its ethical principles compatible with the Christian worldview?

Despite many claims to the contrary^[1] (by those who believe capitalism's freedoms are not only historically derived from a Christian worldview, but also conducive to the nurture of the freedom God wishes to bestow on all people), the short answer is that intrinsic to the Christian worldview is a fundamental critique of capitalism. Certainly from my on-going private sector experience—longer than my professional church and non-profit experience—I see the limits of making the market lord and definer of human hopes.

There are three primary reasons I see for this intrinsic tension, even over and against the many Christians who openly promote the idea that *laissez faire* capitalism is "God's preferred economic system."^[2] The first is that capitalism does not share Christianity's understanding of the ends of human life. The second, and related, reason is that capitalism does not share with Christianity a common understanding of the nature of human beings. Finally, and again tied into the other two, is that capitalism does not share Christianity's understanding of work as vocation.

It understands work as a mere factor of production, rather than as a primary way for participating in the life of God and contributing to the common good.

These differences mean that, unless there are those in the Church who can articulate very real limits for presently unfettered markets, we will continue to condone through our silence a misguided idolatry. We will continue to condone the heresy that markets can care for us, our neighbors, and God's creation just as well as we can through our constant participation in democratically elected governments, our involvement in the institutions of civil society, and our grounding in Christian communities committed to exposing idolatries rather than abetting their perpetuation. Ultimately, the Church's failure to recognize and call out this idolatry has prevented Christians from presenting a common front of solidarity with the marginalized when political and economic policies consistently favor the interests of accumulated wealth over the interests of a more broad based concern for community health.

Theology's Right to Speak

Economics can come to replace theology for many reasons because they are addressing, not two different unrelated areas of human inquiry, but, in fact, very similar questions of who human beings are and for what purposes they exist. In the 18th century, as a result in part of Immanuel Kant's philosophical work, theology's relevance was quarantined. Kant's philosophical work reserved for theology only the role of helping humanity navigate the realm of values. Meanwhile, economics was gifted with the label "science," and thus all of the thinking surrounding it, including its way of understanding human purpose and behavior, became our primary way of understanding how human beings do and should behave within the realm of the "objective science of commerce." One problem with this fact/value distinction is that it ignores the values that inform the sciences, especially the social sciences. We thus have lost an understanding of the subjectivity that influences thinking about scientific matters, and the objectivity that is infused in thinking about ethical matters. The result is that we have been fed a lie; that the "science" of economics deals with the way things are, and that theology deals with mere values, the way things should be or could be, were human life and choice not constrained by "the facts."

This fact/value distinction, at its most pernicious, allows free market worshippers to pass off the policy priority they champion (market freedom at any social or environmental cost) as "fact." In reality, that policy has been cultivated in the soil of various value-laden assumptions.

Let us be clear. Economics is a serious discipline worthy of respect. The subjective realm can be an incredibly creative space—as long as we do not thrust one tradition into that space while claiming "objectivity" for ourselves. Economists, this means, are not just accountants fine tuning our systems of material production and analyzing hard data to enhance our ability to create wealth. They are philosophers of human action and purpose. As such, they often venture into the realm of moral philosophy, part of the small realm modernity preserves for theology around the edges of the "hard" sciences.

Theologians, that is, all Christians, thus have not only a perfect right, but perhaps also a duty, to walk resolutely back through the door economists have left open between the two disciplines. There, we must loudly insist that theology, with its understanding of the good, the beautiful and the true, as well as its understanding of human ends and appropriate means, be allowed to inform

its sister discipline—just as the sciences have been allowed to form, shape and challenge theological inquiry.

As Stephen Long argues in his book *Divine Economy*, the “is” of modern economics can only be challenged when the “ought” of a theological *telos* (or goal of human life and a corresponding description of human behavior) is allowed to reorder both our understanding of our economic system and our expectations of it. Long uses the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, a moral philosopher, to argue that we must make room for the primacy of theological virtues over the a-rational attachment of modernity to “value,” which is determined at the level of the individual.

Instead, Long claims, modern economics narrows the question governing all economic exchanges to one: If this transaction goes through, will I personally be better off? This question is now, perhaps, the most salient one governing not only our economic, but also our political decision making. The result is a constraint on the development of community-wide dialogue around what constitutes the common good. Long points out that this is just one reason we should allow Alisdair MacIntyre’s work to tear down the false walls we have allowed to be constructed between the two realms of thought. To the extent that economic theory and theology both claim territory in the same realm, more specifically as they both make claims about the bases of human action, they are talking about the same thing in two different ways.[\[3\]](#)

The very word “economy,” after all, is derived from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which occurs throughout the New Testament (1 Timothy 1:4; Ephesians 1:10; 3:2; 3:9; 1 Corinthians 9:17; Colossians 1:25). *Oikonomia* is (repetitious with Verhey) the law or rule of the household. In theological terms, God is like an immensely wealthy householder who desires to dispense God’s unsearchable riches (Ephesians 3:8) to all of God’s people, the members of the household. However, to accomplish this enormous task God needs a plan, an arrangement, an economy. Can we doubt, given this, that God cares about our economic rules, that God has some skin in the game when it comes to questions about how we are going to set up our commercial homes? How could we possibly imply that the structures we set up to govern the dispensing of goods and services, the rules of our commercial houses, are somehow immune to critique by, or are perhaps even shaped by, the rules God has set up to govern God’s world? Far from being inappropriate, it is now imperative for theological reflection to inform economic policy making.

Compatibility (motivation, ownership, mutuality)

The chief end of human beings

As stated above, the first place where *laissez faire* economics and Christianity experience the friction of incompatibility is over their respective understandings of the chief end of human beings; that is, their view of human purpose. From the perspective of the Reformed theological tradition, the purpose of human beings can be summarized in the first question of the Shorter Westminster Catechism, one of the confessions guiding our interpretation of the Bible: “What is the chief end of man [sic]?” The answer is that the chief end of human beings is to “glorify God and enjoy God forever.” For our purposes, I propose that “enjoying and glorifying God” can be understood through the Decalogue, as well as through other pivotal pieces of Biblical instruction such as the *Shema* and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Based on these pivotal scriptural admonitions, the specific content of enjoying and glorifying God forever necessarily includes

loving one's neighbor as oneself (as per the summary of the Decalogue found in Matthew 22: 36-40) and also seeking out "blessedness."

Blessedness is indeed all of those things articulated in the Sermon on the Mount: poverty of spirit, mourning with those who mourn, meekness, a thirst for righteousness, being merciful, having a pure heart, being a peacemaker, enduring persecution for the sake of righteousness. (Notice there is nothing written about the blessedness of thinking first and most often of one's own material welfare.) Blessedness can also be understood through the model of Jesus, as abiding in a deep relationship with the Father (or Divine Parent) through the power of the Holy Spirit. Within the parameters of that relationship, and the relationships with others that are its product, lies God's provision for the perfection of the human personality. No, not one of us is perfect but there is in Jesus Christ a vision of what it means to be most fully alive, most fully and authentically human. And full humanity, perfect humanity in fact according to the Bible's worldview, consists of exactly what Jesus revealed most clearly through his sacrifice on the cross. Perfect humanity is grounded in obedience to the Father's purposes of reconciliation, forgiveness, self giving, and an almost "militant" insistence on mutuality, care for the other, even unto death.

On the other hand, according to the theory undergirding the U.S. economic system, the chief purpose of a human being is to produce the wealth which will ensure that person's own well being. Human beings are "welfare maximizers." They enter into economic exchanges in order to increase the number of goods and services to which they (and those who contribute to their wellbeing) have access. The theory argues that as individual actors make their fully autonomous and self-centered decisions, their decisions contribute to the common welfare by growing the economy through an increase in the total amount of goods and services in the marketplace. And, as those goods and services increase, there are more goods to go around. Interestingly, however, economic theory makes no attempt either to distinguish among goods and services or to order the desires of those acting in the marketplace to increase their own welfare. One of the fundamental incompatibilities between Christianity and capitalism, then, is that the latter makes no distinction between an increase in goods and an increase in *good*. For the purpose of dominant economic theory, one is the same as the other. If someone desires something, and someone else is willing to provide it, it then contributes to the welfare of the individual and thereby, the community.

Within the realm of economic theorizing, desire alone is primary. The choices people make within their varying constraints (i.e., the limit of their financial and other resources) to meet that desire are not evaluated by economics. Its concern is simply that individuals are allowed free choice in how they will use their resources. There is, in this world which economic theory creates, no appropriate "object" of human desire, there is just the shrill insistence that each individual be given an inalienable right to choose his or her own object, to name for himself and for herself what he or she wants, and, *if* he or she has enough money, to get it. I assert that the very refusal to order human desire is to take a moral stand, and that stand is to abstain: To abstain from making any judgment about what is good, what is beautiful, or what is true.

As a result of this "valueless" science's unwillingness to place any objective above individual freedom in the marketplace, our economic system has a very difficult time distinguishing between wants and needs. Should a rich person be able to accumulate five homes and a yacht

before a poor child in the same society has adequate healthcare? The economic system we have constructed is not good at distribution partly because, when markets are left unregulated, wealth, and not need, determines the goods that are produced, who gets them, where they are produced, and who is left vulnerable to the waste that is left in the wake of that production.

The Bible does not leave the ordering of desires to individuals. The Bible, in fact, asserts in no uncertain terms who and what is worthy of being desired. And, what is worthy of being desired is a relationship with God and others. In fact, the very desire to decide for ourselves what is good and what is evil, what is worthy of our time, attention and resources and what is not, is precisely the desire that got us kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Our so called “right” to value people and objects (and to value some people over other people) according to our own wishes is called, in the Bible, “sin.”

The Bible offers a very different definition of freedom than the one provided by capitalism. In the Bible, freedom is not understood as a freedom from all constraints—a freedom which ultimately leads us to enslave ourselves to the narrowly defined interest of “me, myself and I.” Instead, Christian freedom is that freedom won for us by Christ, a freedom *from sin for service* to God and one another. Biblical freedom is a freedom that leads not to unlimited material prosperity and the maximization of individual welfare, but instead, leads to a hungering to perform service to others, the satiation of which leads to peace and joy and to a transcendently grounded understanding of what is true, good and beautiful.

The Bible’s view is that human beings, apart from the grace of God, are apt to use their freedom to enslave themselves and others to darkness. In fact, the Bible asserts that, far from needing to be set free to choose, we instead need to be set free from the sin that prevents us from choosing the right thing! The Biblical view of human nature is that, when humanity chose against service to God and others in the Garden, we chose instead a self serving agenda that ends up trapping us in prisons of anxiety and fear—the anxiety of lives poured out in an endless striving for material security.

Ownership: A Necessary Digression

The Bible does recognize the legitimacy of private ownership. Otherwise what would be the significance of “thou shall not steal” or of Jesus’ words to the rich man in Mark 10:21 (RSV)—“Go, sell all you have and give to the poor”? But the Bible always speaks of possession in the larger context of responsibility to God and to community. According to the Bible, what belongs to the individual belonged first to God and does not cease to belong to God. Stewardship rather than ownership is the primal category. Human beings are blessed, not for our own sakes, but in order to contribute to the common good, to bless others. That is perhaps why, implicit in the biblical narrative, there are limits to the accumulation of wealth.^[4] An entry in *A Companion to the Bible* offers this explanation of the Biblical viewpoint: “The condition of the misery of any of God’s children is not acceptable to God. On the contrary, God wishes it to cease, and that is why God forbids the accumulation of possessions in the hands of the rich. That accumulation announces the ruin of the rich person, who puts his confidence not in God, but in the accumulation of riches themselves.”^[5]

According to Walter Owensby’s summary of the biblical view of wealth,

Material goods are not evil but rather the good gifts of God for all humankind. Evil arises when what God intends to be shared in common is seized by the few for their own power and privilege. Ownership, instead, should be determined by need and by the ability to use resources appropriately—that is, in meeting the need of others. The concentration of wealth through inheritance is denounced. Not even labor power expended gives absolute property rights to the individual, since the resources with which labor is mixed are the gifts of God. God does not abandon a prior claim, and thus Christian faith can honor no absolute, individual right to private property.[\[6\]](#)

There is simply, “Nothing in the biblical tradition that even remotely accepts the concept of the right of the individual to acquire any quantity of goods or wealth in blind indifference to the condition and needs of others,” or for that matter, in blind indifference to the fruits that help us to recognize that a human soul is on the God-enabled journey toward perfection.

Nor does the biblical tradition exhibit any inclination to trust in the good will of individuals or in supposedly automatic mechanisms (e.g. invisible hands or trickle-down theories) to achieve a God-envisioned economy of justice in which the needs of all are met. The voice of the prophets and of the early church fathers is avowedly interventionist in economic affairs.[\[7\]](#)

Though it is true that Biblical faith acknowledges the reality of individual property rights and the individual right to decide what to do with property, that right is understood only within the context of a stewardship ethic that regards the whole of creation as God’s capital on loan to each generation to meet the needs of all of God’s people. It is, therefore, in conflict with our Christian faith to assume that capital owners should have perfect autonomy to decide for themselves what constitutes a “good” use for their resources without considering the maximization not only of their own welfare and/or that of their shareholders, but also of those who labor on their behalf, the community from which the laborers come, and the physical creation which sustains them both.

Human nature and mutuality

In addition to different understandings of human purpose, modern economic theory and Christian theology have a different understanding of human nature. Human behavior can be best understood, according to economic theory’s anthropology, through an anticipation that each individual actor in any given human interaction is primarily motivated by two related questions: a) “How will this benefit/harm me?” and b) “How can I act to maximize the benefits that accrue to me in this interaction while minimizing the harm?”

Human behavior according to theological anthropology, on the other hand, comes down to a constant struggle between actions motivated by an unenlightened serving of self that is a response to fear and alienation from God, and an enlightened serving of God and others that is a response to our experience of God’s love. Theology claims that, with God’s help, we can indeed do the good we have been shown in Jesus Christ and, in so doing, participate in the life of God. Theological anthropology makes room, in other words, for normative human action that is motivated by an understanding and a cleaving to that which is good, beautiful and true for all time.

From the Bible's viewpoint, "homo economicus" (the human as defined by capitalism) is simply the fallen condition through which we might begin to understand the origins and motivations for human sin. "Homo economicus" is who human beings are reduced to when they lose their connection to God, transcendent value, and God's dreams for the world.

Thankfully, theological anthropology offers us an alternative self understanding that lifts us out of the identity the serpent would have had us adopt, and to our detriment. According to the Bible, we are made in the image of God. For our purposes, we will understand this to mean that we are made in the image of the One whose life is characterized by the loving, life-giving mutuality that characterizes the Trinity.

The mutual self-giving within the Trinity is a model for understanding and ordering economic relations. For, as in heaven, so shall it be on earth: once we recognize that we are made in the image of God—in the image of the Trinity—we must seek to ground our relationships, economic and otherwise, in the same mutual accountability, trust, community and service to the other that are exhibited among the three personae of the Trinity.

What are the implications of adopting an anthropology that honors the desire to nurture long-term relationships as much as the desire for material gain? First, we might return to policymaking a consideration of the common good. That is, we will think of policymaking in terms of the impact the policy has on the health, wealth and ability of all citizens to engage in fruitful long-term relationships. Second, we might begin to understand and articulate debates over taxation in terms of the opportunity to participate in the life-giving privilege of being our brother's keeper, instead of characterizing it as "robbery of individuals by the government." Third, we might begin to talk about regulation, not as a burden on the few, a hindrance that keeps individuals from exercising their rights, but as a way of protecting the many, of keeping some from injuring others with their "freedom," which often translates into a willingness to sin.

Work (labor and calling)

A third way Christian theology and the theory undergirding modern economics differ in their worldviews is regarding their understanding of work. Economic theory views work as an input to production. Labor is an input into economic activity that helps increase the overall wealth of a society. But, labor is not the only factor of production; capital is the other. Land and environmental resources, viewed as they are by classical economic theory as inexhaustible, are not understood as factors of production. They are givens. The decision, to define the factors of production in this narrow way, suggests that the assumptions that undergird the theory informing our decision making are unrealistic at best.[\[8\]](#)

Labor, as one factor of production, is subject, as is everything else in the worldview of economic theory, to the laws of supply and demand. A glut of people who can perform the duties required for specific tasks drives down the cost of labor in that field. If there are only a few who can perform the duties of a position in another field, such as the position of quarterback of the Indianapolis Colts, then this position's compensation will reflect the scarcity of people who can perform up to the expectations of the fans of this professional organization. Labor, as a mere input to production, is subject to market determined pricing. Justice—a set of theologically determined ideas about what one human being owes another, or of what kind of communities

God wills us to create—is not considered by the market’s mechanisms. Justice is, in fact, irrelevant to the market mechanism that determines the compensation of human beings who bleed out their life’s energy on behalf of accumulated capital the world over.

In contrast, Christian theology views work as a service done to God, not just to the employer. Work is a way of contributing to the common good, an effort for which, according to Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of a just wage, a person should be compensated to provide adequately for her family’s needs. Reformation theology rejects a rigid distinction between a holy life and the life of ordinary people. Each person has a divine calling to serve his or her neighbor through work.

Although work was valued in Calvin’s theological explorations of vocation, and profit was looked upon as a sign of God’s blessing, Calvin condemned profit making as the chief end of enterprise. In Calvin’s own words:

It is not enough when one can say, I work, I trade, I set the pace. This is not enough; for one must be concerned with whether it is good and profitable to the community and able to serve our neighbors...it is certain that no occupation will be approved by Him [God] that is not useful and that does not serve the common good and that also redounds to the profit of everyone.[9]

In response to all of those who have argued that Calvin embraced capitalism, it should be pointed out that he, at best, held it at arm’s length. Finally, he embraced only the sovereign God, evaluating human enterprise according to the extent to which it enabled his fellow human beings to serve God.[10]

Conclusion

Ultimately, as we have seen, the theory undergirding western capitalism is based on underlying values, values which color its interpretation of the facts it tries to analyze. In short, this economic theory exalts liberty over responsibility, the individual over the community, and property over piety. As such, *laissez faire* economic theory does not adequately address the reality that human freedom is both destructive and creative. For these reasons, theological conservative, Carl F.H. Henry, insisted that capitalism not go unquestioned. He wrote:

Once it is fully understood that there are no natural harmonies and equilibria of power in history as in nature, that advancing civilization tends to accentuate rather than diminish such disproportions of power which exist in primitive communities, then it must be understood that property rights become instruments of injustice—free enterprise at least intrinsically incorporates certain economic values, notably a certain legitimacy of self-interest and the propriety of private property that can become idolatrous if taken out of the larger moral context.

The larger moral context is that there is a mismatch of values between the way Christian theology describes the purpose and ends of human action and life *and* the way that our current economic system describes them. Henry claims that present economic theory exalts consumption in such a way that can only be regarded as condoning greed. It values self interest above self

sacrifice and freedom more than responsibility to the other. In addition, the moral imperative in the worldview painted for us by our prevailing economic theory is production, and, in the worldview presented in the Bible, just distribution.

Markets have strengths that can be harnessed for the greater good of human societies. Though theology and economic theory are distinct disciplines, they both seek answers to the basic questions of human identity and purpose. We do not need to reject theology for economic theory, or vice versa. But we do require consistency. The fact is that there are values informing the development of our Western economic theory which are incompatible with the values inherent in our dominant Western theological tradition. We need to recognize these incompatibilities so that we might advocate a more coherent and theologically responsible set of values, in place of present unexamined assumptions that frequently contradict each other.

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Notes

[1] For an example of this type of Weberian argument, see Richard Doster, "Christianity and Capitalism: Can Christians Reclaim Capitalism," *By Faith: The Web Magazine of the PCA*, Issue 27 (April 2010), <http://byfaithonline.com/page/ordinary-life/christianity-and-capitalism>. Doster writes that in spite of the of the "rough couple of years" through which American style capitalism has passed, it is in fact compatible with Christian principles because: a) it encourages creativity, people to live out their *imago dei* calling to be co-creators with God; b) it creates wealth and when it does, that rising tide lifts all boats, i.e., the economic pie grows for everyone's benefit, not just the few; c) the income gap between the rich and poor is not the problem, the creation of wealth is the problem. The issue, in other words is not that 3 men, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates and Carlos Helu control more wealth than 600,000,000 of the world's other people, the issue is why is it that those other 600 million have failed to create more wealth? That is where Christians concerned with economic injustice should focus according to Doster; d)

The ends of business may appear to be selfish but they are actually a force for good and not evil. Business writ large may in fact be, “the greatest force for good today because it increases prosperity, ends poverty, improves the quality of life, and promotes the health and longevity of the world’s population;” e) Justice does not demand equality of reward. The scripture passages Doster uses to “prove,” despite other scriptural voices discouraging hoarding and an unequal distribution of wealth, that in God’s Kingdom there are varying rewards include Luke 19: 17-19 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 among others; f) Capitalism encourages us to work hard, which keeps us out of trouble; and finally, g) the creation of wealth that capitalism offers is the best way to lift the poor out of poverty and, thus, the spread of capitalism is God ordained and reflects God’s heart for the poor.

[2] See for example www.actoninstitute.org, “integrating free markets with Judeo-Christian principles, and <http://www.torenewamerica.com/democratic-capitalism-review>, for a review of a Michael Novak book *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* for just a few examples of how the argument that capitalism is “God-ordained” runs. See also the work of Max Weber, German sociologist and political economist and Max Stackhouse, a former professor of ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary, for expositions of this view.

[3] Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London: Routledge, 2000), 218.

[4] Walter Owensby, *Economics for Prophets* (William B. Eerdmans Press: Grand Rapids, MI, 1988), 34-36.

[5] As quoted in *ibid*, 36.

[6] *Ibid*, 40.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] Carol F. Johnston, *The Wealth or Health of Nations: Transforming Capitalism From Within* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998). Wikipedia summarizes the pre-modern view: “The classical economists also employed the word ‘capital’ in reference to money. Money however was not considered to be a factor of production in the sense of capital stock, since it is not used to directly produce any good.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Factors_of_production.

[9] Walter Owensby, *Economics for Prophets*, 17.

[10] *Ibid*, 21.