

God's economy

My task is to take the final few minutes and to put this evening's topic and, I hope, what we have already heard from our speakers, into the context of a 'worldview.' Pragmatic short-termism is one of the prevailing failings of our age, politically, economically and intellectually. If we are to truly understand who we are as human beings, our economic and social relationships, then we need to place our thoughts and practices into a much wider vision of the world. Allister Heath, the influential editor of City AM, commented this week that 'political ideas have always been cyclical,¹ that is, they wax and wane, like the moon, according to economic conditions; compare that to the Earl of Shaftesbury's statement in 1827 that 'I desire to be useful in my generation, and die in the knowledge of having advanced happiness...I want nothing but usefulness to God and my country.'² Our worldview matters; it affects our purpose, our calling, our values and our behaviours.

One of the consequences of our educational system is that we tend to become ever more specialist in our areas of interest and expertise. Indeed, inter-disciplinary work is usually frowned upon by all as 'not pure.' The economist, the theologian, the historian and so on rarely speak to each other. It was not always so. The history of tertiary education and intellectual endeavour is actually that of a broad canvas, history, theology, science, literature, philosophy and language. The collapse of coherent worldviews from the nineteenth century onwards has contributed significantly to this trend of ever narrowing areas of specialisation. Part of the vision of CEME is to bring economics, business, theology, philosophy and history into conversation with each other once again.

If we think we don't need it, listen to Henry Blamires, albeit writing in the 1960s, but equally relevant today – 'In contradistinction to the secular mind, no vital Christian mind plays fruitfully, as a coherent and recognizable influence, upon our social, political, or cultural life....Except over a very narrow field of thinking, chiefly touching questions of strictly personal conduct.'³ Now that is very interesting in our current situation. The Christian may indeed be seen having something to say about ethical behaviour in business, but what is of far more long-term significance is for the Christian to have something to say about business itself.

Now listen to this from the management guru Peter Drucker:

'Management always lives, works, and practices in and for an institution, which is a human community held together by the bond that, next to the tie of the family, is the most powerful human bond, the work bond. And precisely because the object of management is a human community held together by the work bond for a common purpose, management always deals with the Nature of Man, and (as all of us with any practical experience learned) with Good and Evil as well. I have

¹ Allister Heath, CityAM, 18th February 2013

² Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury, the great reformer*, Lion Hudson, 2010

³ Henry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How should a Christian Think?* SPCK, London, 1963

learned more theology as a practicing management consultant than I did when I taught religion.’⁴

Drucker is recognising that theology and the market are in conversation together.

So then, a vision of God helps us understand the economy in three ways.

First, the Christian view of the world understands God to be a God not of chaos but of order. Indeed, order is the essence of creation. By reading the account of creation in the book of Genesis we can see how divine order and economic order are related. The essential elements of the divine economy are all present in the Garden of Eden. The human person – in the figure of Adam – we should note, is set a task both to work in and to care for the garden. So already we can begin to see what Drucker observed; effectively, the flourishing of the human person through the value of work. If the productive capacity of a person in work carries divine value then that tells us something about a theological view of business and economy. To be honest with you, it also severely challenges any welfare system that disincentivises work. Eden was also a place for ethical behaviour – Adam and Eve were to obey God’s instructions. It is rarely noted that in the setting of Eden God also provided many of the natural resources needed for economic activity, not only water and food, but also valuable resources of gold and precious materials. Now it is true that in this picture of creation everything is good and has not been contaminated by human sin; of course we know that in this world that is not the case and to that we will return, but it essential to understand the interaction of the economic activity of humanity and the basic principles of Christian world view.

Second, the Christian worldview sees God as a God of innovation and creativity. If Genesis talks about order, then Exodus talks about innovation. After the people of Israel had escaped from Egypt, Moses received instructions for the construction of a tabernacle to provide the focal point of worship. In Exodus 35:30, he points to one individual, Bezalel, and asserts that God has filled him, ‘with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts,’ referring to his ability of working with gold, silver and wood in order to prepare the tabernacle. He adds, in verse 34, that the Lord had also given him ‘the ability to teach others’. We see here the coming together of crucial theological and economic concepts. Notice again the centrality of the flourishing of the human person, who has been endowed with skill, but note also two other crucial economic concepts, growth (that is, adding value through the combined use of resources and skill), and human capital, that is education and the training for the acquisition of such skills. The divine economy is an enterprise economy.

I hope you can begin to see why worldview is so crucial to understanding the functioning of the economy. However, if we are to obtain a complete picture we need to also assert, thirdly, that God is a God of justice. Christians understand justice far less than economists, though they talk about it far more! A just price is one set by the market, bringing about the efficient allocation of resources, bringing buyers and sellers together. There is, however, a problem. Just as sin disrupted the glory and order of creation so sin has also disrupted economic order. So, a fair price may indeed be set by the market, but if the market has only a monopoly player then it may be the monopolist rather than the market which sets price, which may

⁴ Peter Drucker, quoted in Joseph Maciariello and Karen Linkletter, *Drucker’s Lost Art of Management*, McGraw Hill, 2011, page 25

be exploitive rather than fair. Protective mechanisms may be needed. Similarly, the propensity to evil rather than good in human behaviour can lead to unethical behaviour in the market leading not to just prices or practices but to greed and exploitation. So justice challenges us and requires of us that we exercise our Christian virtues of compassion, love and care, but that we do so not through contradicting the divine provision of an enterprise economy, but by bringing values, culture, standards, and indeed a coherent worldview to it.

Economics and business and our worldview are inextricably linked. In accordance with those principles we need to be encouraging enterprise, efficiency, education, business *and* ethical behaviour. Similarly we need to be very aware of market failings and imperfections. However, and perhaps this is a good place to end, we should, be wary of thinking that the answer to every problem is more regulation and more regulators or the prescription of high and redistributive taxation, with higher government spending. This may in fact not be the right response of the God of justice when that same God is also the God of enterprise, creativity and innovation. The classic Christian response has been a strong voluntary sector and strong families so that compassion and protection is exercised locally to those in need rather than creativity, investment and prosperity being threatened by centrally-imposed high levels of redistributive taxation which threatens not only economic growth but also genuine social compassion.

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