The Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics

ENTERPRISE AND FAITH SERIES

God and Competition

Towards a Positive Theology of Competitive Behaviour

Edward Carter

Copyright © 2019 Edward J. Carter

This edition: Copyright © 2019 The Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of CEME, its board or staff.

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Scripture quotations are from New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

First edition 2019
ISBN: 978-1-910666-16-6

Published by:
Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics
31 Beaumont Street
Oxford OX1 2NP

Design by Push Start Marketing Ltd, 46 Market Square, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 6AL

Printed in the United Kingdom by Foremost Print Ltd, Unit 9a, Vantage Business Park, Bloxham Road, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX16 9UX

The Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics

We are a think tank based in Oxford that seeks to promote an enterprise, market economy built on ethical foundations.

We undertake research on the interface of Christian theology, economics and business.

Our aim is to argue the case for an economy that generates wealth, employment, innovation and enterprise within a framework of calling, integrity, values and ethical behaviour leading to the transformation of the business enterprise and contributing to the relief of poverty.

We publish a range of material, hold events and conferences, undertake research projects and speak and teach in the areas with which we are concerned.

We are independent and a registered charity entirely dependent on donations for our work.

Our website is www.theceme.org.

For further information, please contact the Director, Revd Dr Richard Turnbull, at:

The Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics
First Floor, 31 Beaumont Street, Oxford, OX1 2NP

About the Author

Edward Carter is the Vicar of St Peter Mancroft, Norwich and was formerly Canon Theologian at Chelmsford Cathedral. He holds degrees in Theology and Economics and prior to ministry in the Church of England he ran his own business and worked for small companies.

Contents

1 Introduction 7

2 The Nature of Competition 13

- 2.1 Competition in Economic Theory 14
- 2.2 Competition as Entrepreneurial Activity 16
- 2.3 The Destructive and Creative Power of Competition 17
- 2.4 Competition: A Force that Shapes History 19
- 2.5 Summary 21

3 A Christian Approach to Competitiveness 25

- 3.1 The Christian Instinct to Avoid Competitiveness 26
- 3.2 Examples from the Bible 30
  - 3.2.1 Esau and Jacob 30
  - 3.2.2 Paul and 'running the race' 33
- 3.3 Competitiveness and Christian Identity 36
- 3.4 Competitiveness and Christian Solidarity 38
- 3.5 Creative and Destructive Competition Revisited 40
  - 3.5.1 Behaviour: Free or Obsessive? 40
  - 3.5.2 The Governing Movement 40
  - 3.5.3 Matters of Equality 41
  - 3.5.4 Difference and Togetherness 41
  - 3.5.5 An Understanding of Place 42
  - 3.5.6 Art and Imagination 42
- 3.6 Being a Competitive Christian in the Marketplace: A Case Study 43
- 3.7 Summary 47

4 Conclusion 51

- 4.1 Describing a Society that Fosters Creative Competitiveness 53
- 4.2 Describing a Moral Stance that Encourages Creative Competitivenes 55

Chapter 1

Introduction

In July 2013 the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, gave an interview to the magazine *Total Politics* in which he said:

> I've met the head of Wonga and I've had a very good conversation and I said to him quite bluntly we're not in the business of trying to legislate you out of existence, we're trying to compete you out of existence. He's a businessman; he took that well.[1]

Although in the end the subsequent failure of Wonga, a pay-day, high-interest loan provider, had more to do with changes in the regulatory framework and an inadequate response from the company's management, Archbishop Welby's comment was nevertheless very striking. It seemed to open up the possibility that commercial competition might in some circumstances be part of God's purposes.[2]

In a broader way, competitive behaviour is clearly a significant factor in the lives of communities and individuals. This is not to exclude cooperation. Rather, it seems important to acknowledge that both are real, and to explore how they might fruitfully co-exist. This is one of the underpinning premises of game theory, in which positive outcomes are achieved through a careful application of both competitive and cooperative behaviour.[3]

In 2016 I wrote a short publication entitled *God and Enterprise*. As part of my attempt to sketch out a theologically robust theory of entrepreneurial activity I found myself referring at various crucial points in my argument to competition. I described how a context of abundance will open up the possibility of generosity and competitiveness co-existing, leading to a situation in which there can be a 'competitiveness that somehow enjoys the achievements of others rather than seeing them as a threat'.[4] I also referred to the 'striving for fullness of life that Paul describes in his letters and which is akin to the competitive striving of an entrepreneur'.[5]

As I re-read these passages, I began to realise that a fuller attempt to examine the powerful phenomenon of competitiveness in the light of the Christian faith would be both helpful and necessary. All too often in Christian circles there is a default assumption that competitiveness must be a bad thing. However, this theme of competitive striving does find its place in the Bible in various ways, and in a broader sense is clearly woven into the fabric of creation. This is by no means to say that it is an entirely good or holy thing. More interesting is to examine whether it is irredeemably evil and fallen.

Whether good or evil, or some mixture of the two, it nevertheless seems difficult to deny that the competitive urge is a powerful thing. In the natural world, even the ways plants compete for the available sunlight or animals compete over territory and food appear to be highly significant factors as the growth and development of a habitat occurs. In human terms, for example in the field of sport, it is competition that brings forth achievement. In the 1980s, one of the great sporting rivalries was between Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe. There was a genuine edge to the competition between the two; no love was lost. But years later Borg's comment was, 'We brought tennis to another level.'[6]

Again and again, because of and despite the fierceness of the sporting competitive situation, an advance is made, hence the new records that are so regularly set. It seems at least possible that these advances are connected to human flourishing as well as achievement, and that this in turn might have something to do with God's purposes.

This is also true in the world of business and commerce. To take just one example, Boeing and Airbus are currently the world's two largest commercial manufacturers of aircraft. The story of their competitive rivalry has many fascinating aspects, but the overarching narrative is one in which that particular rivalry brought forth advances in the sector, and led to improvements and new possibilities.[7] Even if there are questions about the moral status of air travel, at the very least it remains true that such a competitive situation seems to release extraordinary power and effects great changes. Competition cannot be ignored as a phenomenon, and deserves a careful examination from a Christian perspective.

On Sunday 17 February 2019, I found myself due to preach at St Peter Mancroft, the church in Norwich where I am the vicar. One of the Bible readings was 1 Corinthians 9.24–27, in which Paul describes the need to run the race and to win the prize. I took this as an opportunity to explore briefly the theme of competitiveness, and to ask if it could be seen as a good and Godly thing. I touched on the creative and destructive aspects of competition, and the great themes of identity and solidarity within the context of salvation history. This publication has as its aim a more extended reflection on the questions I provisionally engaged with in my sermon.

‘Competition cannot be ignored as a phenomenon’

First, in Chapter 2, I examine the very nature of competition from various perspectives, while attempting to build up a picture of what might be termed the timeless, ‘mechanical’ aspects of competitiveness, as well as the bigger story of how competitive behaviour shapes the flow of history. Although there are certainly destructive elements to this, I conclude that the freedom to compete is both a powerful and a largely positive thing, when held in balance with other human emotions and urges.

Then, in Chapter 3, after noting the conventional wariness on the part of some Christians towards competitiveness, but also the way it is sometimes embraced, I undertake a careful and extended explanation and interpretation of two particular Bible passages. One of these is long and the other very short. I show the way these two apparently different descriptions of competitiveness are connected, and then offer some theological insights into how human competitiveness might play its part in helping both individuals and communities discover their true identity and purpose under God, in a creative rather than destructive way. I then introduce a case study – the result of an interview with a Christian entrepreneur – to see how theory and practice might inform and corroborate each other.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I draw together my conclusions, describing some guiding principles and practical suggestions that I hope will be helpful both for Christians in business and more generally. My aim is to show that

competitive behaviour might be understood not as a problem to be shrugged off but as a powerful aspect of human nature, to be harnessed carefully and deployed, just as Archbishop Justin Welby spoke of competing Wonga out of business in 2013.

Notes

1. https://www.totalpolitics.com/articles/interview/archbishops-move-can-welby-restore-faith-church.

2. Malcolm Brown's survey of Anglican Social Theology describes well the freshness that Justin Welby's comments conveyed; see his 'The Case for Anglican Social Theology Today', in M. Brown (ed.), *Anglican Social Theology*, London: Church House Publishing, 2014, pp. 1–27 (pp. 19–21).

3. There is a vast literature on game theory; for one quite technical overview, see S. Tadelis, *Game Theory: An Introduction*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

4. E. Carter, *God and Enterprise: Towards a Theology of the Entrepreneur*, Oxford: The Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics, 2016, p. 22.

5. Carter, *God and Enterprise*, p. 42.

6. https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/15/sports/tennis/borg-and-mcenroe-in-rivalry-and-friendship.html.

7. J. Newhouse, *Boeing Versus Airbus: The Inside Story of the Greatest International Competition in Business*, New York: Vintage, 2008.

Chapter 2

The Nature of Competition

There are a number of different aspects of competition to consider.

2.1 Competition in Economic Theory

Neoclassical economic theory, which has dominated the study of economics over the past 70 years, has a central place for competition.[1] The abstracted version of this theory posits a situation of 'perfect competition', in which a large number of firms supply a marketplace populated with a large number of consumers, and in which there is perfect information about the desires and intentions of all those producers and consumers. While it is easy to point out the lack of realism within such a hypothetical marketplace, nonetheless the value of the analysis lies in the underlying assumption that competitive behaviour will push things towards a more optimal outcome. Inefficient producers will be unable to compete successfully, and so will have either to adapt or die. Producers attempting to secure super-normal profits will find that they are competed away. Once the market has reached its equilibrium point under these competitive pressures, consumers will benefit from an optimal supply of goods or services at a price and quantity that combine to maximise utility, and producers will be able to earn what are termed 'normal profits', which provide a level of return that equates to other rates of return on capital elsewhere in the economy.[2]

Even if the assumptions of perfect competition cannot ever completely apply, it remains true that the behavioural patterns implied will still be present, at least in part. That this is true is seen when a monopolistic (one seller) or monopsonistic (one buyer) market is examined. These are the most extreme cases of market failure, or more accurately competition failure. An untrammelled monopolist or monopsonist will be able to acquire surplus profits, simply because of the lack of competitive pressure. Intuitively this feels unfair, or even immoral, but in a technical sense it still springs from optimal behaviour, at least in the short term. This is why large companies with a dominant market position are often so keen to use buyouts and

mergers whenever a growing competitor emerges. It also explains why so much regulatory effort is put into constraining such corporate tactics.

However, society also promotes competitive restrictions in the form of patent law. When a patent is granted it gives the patentee a legal monopoly to produce and sell a product. This is felt to be a desirable thing because it encourages inventive and innovative activity, and allows the innovator to benefit from the product that has been created or improved. In the case of healthcare and therapeutic drugs, this is the entire business model. The fortunes of companies operating in this sector depend completely on the pipeline of newly patented drugs they have coming through. Without the protection of a legal monopoly it would seem unlikely that a firm would commit to the huge research and development overheads required to bring a new drug to the market, knowing that a competitor could quickly and inexpensively copy it. Legal monopsonists also sometimes exist, usually when some national strategic interest is at stake and a compulsory purchase price is set by regulation.

Herman Daly has pointed out that the pressures of competition in a market can often lead to the externalising of costs, rather than the securing of proper efficiency gains.[3] This is a particular problem when the global economy is considered, since the weakness of international law results in a variety of legal and moral standards across different jurisdictions, something that companies can exploit. The strongest examples of this kind of cost externalising are found in environmental standards and in workers' rights. A business, instead of improving its activities when it comes to costs such as these so as to be competitive, can instead in effect lower its standards under the pressure of competition by externalising costs such as pollution control, wage levels, medical insurance, liability for accidents and so forth. This is the kind of activity the UK Modern Slavery Act of 2015 has been designed to restrict and curtail.

Even in a self-contained market that is broadly competitive and in which costs cannot be externalised, there are ways surplus profits can be earned in the short run. This is the more dynamic aspect of standard neoclassical theory, under which some kind of competitive activity, perhaps an innovation, will give a particular firm a short-term advantage. However, in a competitive

marketplace this short-term advantage will soon be competed away. Even though under the theory the equilibrium point is meant to shape the entire pattern of activity, in fact in a changing and developing world there is no persisting equilibrium, and competition is not so much a 'flattening' thing making everyone the same but rather the characteristic of a marketplace that opens up constant activity and movement.

Economic theory can thereby be turned on its head, such that it no longer works with the assumption of an equilibrium point but describes a world of constant change in the face of the competitive instinct. This is to place enterprise much more at the heart of economics than the neoclassical theory normally allows for, and to open up a rich description of economic history that overlaps with other societal themes, such as democracy and personal freedoms.[4]

2.2 Competition as Entrepreneurial Activity

Entrepreneurs seek to disrupt markets. That they sometimes succeed in doing so results in significant market changes over time. Once-prominent corporations are overturned or diminished, for example Kodak in the face of digital cameras, or the home video-rental company Blockbuster, which was unable to survive the arrival of digital streaming services such as Netflix. In general, the forces of competition seem increasingly to work in this way within the capitalist economies of today.[5]

One striking example of this principle is seen in the global advertising agency TBWA, which calls itself the 'Disruption Company' and has registered disruption as a key descriptor of what it can offer its clients. While in one sense this is just a clever piece of promotional marketing, such positioning reflects what is required if a brand is to be strengthened and a client served properly.

The way early-stages venture capital is sought also reflects the language of disruption, for example on the UK-based Crowdcube forum. One recent (2019) example, among many others, is a company called Blueprints, which operates as an investment platform for economic development projects. The opening statement of its crowdfunding pitch used language that referred to disrupting a $33.5trn market with peer-to-peer technology and

an equitable 50:50 model. Here, the use of the word 'disrupt' speaks of business opportunity. Indeed, Crowdcube itself has been described as a powerful force in disrupting the venture capital market, and allowing many new small investors to access opportunities, albeit with risk entailed.

A picture of competition emerges that is both creative and unsettling. It is creative in that new ways of doing things are encouraged, but it is also unsettling or even destructive in that existing market players are challenged and sometimes destroyed. Richard Higginson captures this well in his 1997 Grove Booklet *The Ethics of Business Competition*, as he explores and challenges the two prevailing metaphors attached to business competition, those of 'war' and of 'sport' or 'the game'.[6] Higginson is satisfied with neither as a complete description of the competitive business situation, but he sees them as useful in helping to encapsulate the combination of creative power and combativeness that entrepreneurial activity seems to give rise to, and which in his eyes must therefore be held within an ethical framework.

2.3 The Destructive and Creative Power of Competition

As already described, competition is of central importance within the economy, but it is of course also of broader significance. It is recognised within sibling and other relationships, within sport and within politics.

Perhaps the strongest destructive manifestation of competition can be seen when rival nations go to war with each other.[7] In the years leading up to the First World War the European 'Great Powers' saw themselves as competitive rivals with competing interests. Notably, the naval arms race between Germany and the UK witnessed a competitive scramble to build ever-larger warships. When war broke out, all sense of proportion was lost and the destructive–competitive forces at play resulted in unprecedented loss of life and material wealth.

One of the best-known British Army Chaplains in that war was G. A. Studdert Kennedy. Although he is better known for his poetry, his most distinctive theological contribution is to be found in his short book *The Hardest Part*, which sprang directly out of his experience near the front line. In a way that foreshadows the writing of the theologian Jürgen Moltmann,

Studdert Kennedy describes the Christian God as being present in human suffering and tragedy. Scarred deeply by the destructive experience of war and its apparent inevitability, the tools of unity and cooperation become for him the only way humanity can make progress towards God. His view of competitiveness is set alongside this godly progress, being the contrasting way a fallen world carries out its affairs:

> There is no such thing as peace, and never can be. Competition is just peaceful war with far more cruel weapons than either shot or shell. War is competition stripped of all disguise – without the velvet glove. Who is going to deny that competition is the law of business and the law of life? A few parsons perhaps, and some socialists who want what they have not got. Every sensible man of the world knows that cut-throat competition is the law of life, the cause of progress and the only real motive of efficiency and work.[8]

Studdert Kennedy makes here a direct connection between war and competition, which is for him 'peaceful war'. However, just as he describes the presence of God within the pain of war, so too I believe he opens up the possibility of finding God's purposes within the deeply rooted competitive human instinct.

War is destructive, but it also at least has the potential to be ultimately a force for good, bringing about a new situation in which justice is done and a new peace made. This is the basis for the 'just war' theory, under which some Christians take the view that a war should be fought, albeit as a last resort.[9] The restorative aspects of such a war are usually taken as its principal justification but there might also be other, more creative features lying within such conflicts.

In his book *The War of the World*, Niall Ferguson sketches out the brutal and deeply destructive history of the twentieth century.[10] It is in many ways nothing more than an account of a bloodbath. However, at a few moments in his account Ferguson brings to bear some intriguing insights. These revolve around the idea that out of the competitive instincts lying at the heart of conflict there is also a unifying force at work. Ferguson observes that competition between nation states includes a balancing aspect, by which

any one player on the stage is naturally held in check by the others. He also describes what he terms 'the osmosis of war', under which enemies begin to take on the characteristics of each other.[11] While this includes the mirroring of cruelty and hatred, it also contains the seeds of a commonality that is revealed through the hard-fought rigours of competition.

Osmosis, in a scientific sense, can only work if there is physical proximity. The two liquids become more and more like each other, not withstanding the membrane that exists between them. This physical proximity is an important factor when it comes to exploring the creative aspect of competition. The competitive situation brings different players together and builds a mutual awareness. A business will know its competitors well because they are competing in the same marketplace, and out of this mutual knowledge there arises both a kind of commonality and a fierce rivalry.

'Competition can foster a greater mutual understanding'

Peace is often assumed to be the complete opposite of the destructiveness of war, but it can be argued that the seeds of a creative reconciliation lie within the physical proximity that the competitive, even warlike situation itself brings about. Far from being nothing but a 'problem', competition can foster a greater mutual understanding and provide the resources for what in the end will be a much more secure and creatively peaceful outcome.

2.4 Competition: A Force that Shapes History

Arguably the most important difference between a feudal, pre-modern economy and the economies of the Industrial Revolution is the fact that individuals are no longer kept in their 'proper', predetermined place within the social structures but are now set free to find their own role alongside everyone else. The most important aspect of a modern economy that makes this possible is the permission and ability to compete. This development depended on social and legal changes, but more importantly it sprang out of a change in the way people thought about the world and its economic life.

In his popular history *A Splendid Exchange*,[12] telling how trade and economics have played a leading role in shaping history, William Bernstein explains how the intellectual and philosophical revolution brought about by Adam Smith and other thinkers led to the 'creative disruption' of open competition. Bernstein illustrates this powerful change with reference to the East India Company (EIC).[13] Founded in 1600 by royal charter from Queen Elizabeth I, the EIC operated successfully in the Far East, initially purely as a trading concern although it became a political force in its own right. It traded within the conventions of the time, following long-established customs and regulations. The story is complex and in many ways a testimony to human folly and greed, but at heart it describes how a change in economic philosophy played out in the real economy. As Bernstein concludes, 'Before 1700, the globalist creed of Child and Martyn gained remarkably little public traction, but by 1830, Adam Smith's free-market principles, as personified by William Jardine and James Matheson, carried the day.'[14]

A persuasive theory as to where this seismic change had its roots is set out by R. H. Tawney in his highly influential book *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*.[15] Tawney's thesis has been contested and adapted in various ways, but the way he points to a connection between changes in religious practice and changes in the economy seems robust. The Puritans overthrew the old religious hierarchies of the late medieval period on theological grounds, harnessing the energies of the Reformation. They paired a new individual accountability before God with a heightened sense of personal agency. As these two things gradually became separated and detached from faith itself, so the rise of secular ethics and of free-market economics became inevitable. Tawney captures this movement on a personal level in these words, part of his conclusion:

> From a spiritual being, who, in order to survive, must devote a reasonable attention to economic interests, man seems sometimes to have become an economic animal, who will be prudent, nevertheless, if he takes due precautions to assure his spiritual well-being.[16]

If this is true for the individual, it is even more powerfully so for the community. Brad Gregory, building on Tawney's insights and with the advantage of having seen the full flowering of the global free-market

economy, sketches out the relationship between changing religious ideas and the rise of modern capitalism.[17] He traces the roots of competitiveness and innovation in the economy as far back as the twelfth century and, in common with many others, links the Protestant work ethic to Calvin's theory of predestination. Gregory describes these changes as resulting in a world view that makes everything into a 'commodity', and in which any sense of 'enough' is swept aside by the desire to acquire more. In particular, the idea of a 'standard of living' becomes an empirical concept rather than a qualitative one. As he describes, a new system was evolving in which competitive participation was the price of mere survival.[18]

However, I believe this narrative, in which the theological revolution of the Reformation is then rather uncomfortably developed into a deep secularisation of ethics, politics and economics, as well as the privatisation of faith, does not necessarily mean that competitiveness is irredeemably evil. Rather, it is the *detachment* of the 'striving' element of human nature from its theological home that has proved to be the problem as economic history has unfolded. The work of Tawney, Gregory and many others illustrates that competition as a free-standing, independent 'value' will be both powerful and dangerous as it shapes history. The possibility that competitiveness, taken as an element within a richer world view grounded in the Christian faith, might retain its power but see its dangers contained, is one that I wish now to test as my argument develops.

2.5 Summary

I have set out the way competition is described and understood in contemporary economic theory, including a discussion of what happens when there is competition failure. I then located this phenomenon of competition within an economic world view that is in many ways driven by innovation and enterprise. I then went on to describe the potentially destructive power of competitiveness, particularly as seen in open conflict and war, while identifying strands that point to a more creative side to competition. In the final section of this chapter I set out the theory that the rise of free-market capitalism, which assumes a central place for competition, came from developments in theological and philosophical thinking as the old medieval certainties were overthrown at the Reformation.

Notes

1. Any standard contemporary economics textbook sets out competition theory as one of the core elements within economics; see for example A. Gillespie, *Foundations of Economics* (4th edn), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

2. Note, however, the logical flaw that is sometimes held to be true in this description, that the forces of competition will of themselves tend the market towards a monopolistic or oligopolistic situation because the 'losers' are competed out of existence. For a helpful discussion of this, see M. Brown, *After the Market: Economics, Moral Agreement and the Churches' Mission*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2004, pp. 83–4.

3. H. E. Daly, *Beyond Growth*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996, pp. 146–9.

4. For a description of how Joseph Schumpeter locates enterprise and the competitive human instinct at the heart of economics, see Carter, *God and Enterprise: Towards a Theology of the Entrepreneur*, Oxford: The Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics, 2016, pp. 34–7.

5. For a description of this, see Z. J. Acs and C. Armington, *Entrepreneurship, Geography, and American Economic Growth*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, esp. ch. 1.

6. R. Higginson, *The Ethics of Business Competition: The Law of the Jungle?*, Cambridge: Grove Books, 1997, pp. 5–7.

7. Note also the extreme destructiveness of competitiveness between different religions or traditions within a single religion, which has often spilt over into physical conflict. On this, the humanist Raymond Tallis comments: 'Historically, human beings have psychologically and physically flagellated themselves – and, more importantly, their fellows – in a competitive obeisance to the Deity or deities, notwithstanding that they are idealized archetypes of themselves' – R. Tallis, 'Human Transcendence: The Possibility of Spiritual Irredentism', *Theology* 122:2 (2019), pp. 83–92 (p. 84).

8. G. A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Hardest Part: A Centenary Critical Edition* (ed. T. O'Loughlin and S. Bell), London: SCM Press, 2018, p. 47.

9. For a contemporary view of this kind, see N. Biggar, *In Defence of War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

10. N. Ferguson, *The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred*, London: Allen Lane, 2006.
11. Ferguson, *The War of the World*, esp. ch. 15.
12. W. Bernstein, *A Splendid Exchange: How Trade Shaped the World*, London: Atlantic Books, 2008.
13. Bernstein, *A Splendid Exchange*; see ch. 11, 'The Triumph and Tragedy of Free Trade', pp. 280–315.
14. Bernstein, *A Splendid Exchange*, p. 294.
15. R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, London: Penguin Books, 1938; based on the Holland Memorial Lectures given in 1922.
16. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, p. 273.
17. B. S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.
18. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, p. 260.

Chapter 3

A Christian Approach to Competitiveness

The Christian will often display an instinctive resistance to any idea of competition or competitive behaviour. However, both biblically and in Christian theology there are alternative views.

3.1 The Christian Instinct to Avoid Competitiveness

There appears often to be an automatic, even instinctive Christian reaction that sees competitive behaviour as a bad thing, both for the individual and for society as a whole. For example, F. D. Maurice, often seen as the founding father of Anglican Social Theology in the nineteenth century, set out a programme involving practical cooperation and communitarianism based on the unity that human beings have under God, and in which competition would thereby be held in check.[1]

Similarly, Catholic Social Teaching, which is built on a series of papal encyclicals and other official church documents,[2] also places particular stress on a communitarian understanding of society in which cooperation is to be preferred, albeit in the context of social pluralism. The key themes are those of human dignity (including dignity in work), community and participation for the common good, care for creation, peace and reconciliation, and solidarity. This last theme brings out the need for mutual respect and conveys a sense that human beings are stronger together than when alone, and can therefore have a greater impact for the good when in solidarity with others. Virtues named when it comes to business leaders include diligence, industriousness, prudence in the face of risk, reliability, fidelity and courage in making difficult decisions. It is interesting that competitiveness is not listed here, although a space is allowed for initiative and entrepreneurial activity,[3] while the kind of healthy competition that moderates monopoly power and encourages good use of

‘Human beings are stronger together than when alone’

resources is accepted as a tool for justice, but only when rooted in a proper Christian ethical framework.[4] Thus, in the end business is described in terms of serving the common good, and a good business is a society of persons or a community of solidarity within which the dignity of all is upheld.

This broadly cooperative approach is reflected widely across the different Christian traditions and manifests itself in a variety of ways, notably when one considers the entire 'Social Trinity' methodology. This takes the harmonious relationship between the three persons of the Trinity as a guiding template for human relationships, instantly thereby placing huge weight on the unity that is desirable. One of the leading theologians to follow this line is Kathryn Tanner, who argues that a proper and Trinitarian collective cooperation will mean that the need for competition disappears. The ideal is an economy in which there is 'no competition in property or possession'.[5] Another strong critique of the competitiveness embedded within modern market economies is made by John Milbank, who sees competition and violence as the core attributes of a pluralist, capitalist world. He argues that this all-pervasive contemporary secular narrative needs to be challenged by an ecclesial socialism, being a paradigm of cooperation demonstrated by the Church as an example to the world.[6] These arguments, and many others like them, offer a strong reminder that virtues such as compassion, concern for the other, mutual dependence and selflessness all belong with the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself.

Another significant theological challenge to competitiveness arises out of its perceived restlessness and the lack of any space for reflective, thoughtful behaviour. John Swinton's impressive account of the way the modern world has made 'time' a scarce commodity, and therefore a problem to be overcome, sees competition as part of the dysfunctionality of today's society:

> the time of the clock contains a worldview, a politics, and an economics. It also creates and sustains a quite particular anthropology. The desirable state for human beings living within SAET [Standard Average European Time] is to be able to handle the economics of time efficiently in a world that adores speed, loves intellectual prowess (quickness of mind), and worships comfortably at the altar

> of competitiveness, productivity, efficiency, and self-sufficiency (using *your* time well on your *own* behalf).[7]

Rowan Williams feels for the same point in his comments on recent market crises when he sketches out a vision of how human life can be well lived in common with others, in part when space for reflection is allowed and the feverish efficient management of things is challenged.[8] Williams seems to set 'virtue' in opposition to 'competitive production' when, like Swinton, he subsumes competitiveness within an aggressively restless and utilitarian approach to life.

The general wariness towards competitiveness on the part of theologians and church leaders that I have set out so far seems also to be corroborated in some surveys. David Clark, as part of a far-reaching piece of work, asked UK Christians in secular employment to identify the values by which they tried to abide in their work.[9] The highest scoring category was focused on 'compassion' and 'care for others', which scored 61 per cent. Other leading categories were 'honesty' and 'integrity' at 53 per cent, 'fairness' and 'respect for others' at 37 per cent, 'patience' and 'understanding' at 17 per cent and 'friendship' and 'community' at 16 per cent. While there was no specific mention of 'competitiveness', the closest to this was a cluster of values such as 'high standards' and 'hard work', at 16 per cent. While this survey might have been framed in a way that made it unlikely for respondents to articulate the 'striving' aspects of work, it is nonetheless very striking that the default assumptions about the values Christians feel they ought to aspire to at work are, in a sense, 'sanitised'.

'Competition spurs us on to do better'

While it can be argued that the basic Christian response towards competitiveness is to see it as irredeemably bad because of its tendency to be associated with acquisitiveness, self-sufficiency, restlessness and even aggressiveness towards others, there are nevertheless examples of Christian thinking that take a more positive line. Boldest among these would be the kind of description offered by Wayne Grudem who, while acknowledging the potentially destructive aspects of competition, argues strongly that 'God

has created us to do well, and to improve what we are able to do. Competition spurs us on to do better, because we see others doing better and we decide we can do that too.'[10] Grudem not only claims value for competitiveness on an individual level, he also suggests it has importance on a communal level: 'Competition is thus a sort of societal functioning of God's attributes of wisdom and kindness, and it is a way society helps people discover God's will for their lives.'[11]

Another equally robust claim that competitiveness should be seen in a positive light if it is held within the right kind of framework is set out by Stephen Green, who has experience both as an ordained Christian minister and in the world of business. As he argues:

> Trading depends on an instinct for competitive gain, but that is true of all human commerce. The competitive instinct can become obsessive and unbalanced, for sure. But it is not intrinsically wrong, any more than the desire to excel in, say, athletic competition is wrong. It needs to be fettered by law and regulation where appropriate; and it needs to be developed within a shared moral framework which places public value on integrity in commercial practice and on care for the weak. Where these conditions prevail, the competitive instinct is fully compatible with the basic commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves.[12]

When compared to arguments such as those put forward by Grudem and Green, a strand of more nuanced but nevertheless positive Christian thinking about competition is represented by Ronald Preston and John Atherton, who fill out a picture of economics that is realistic about the motives attached to self-interest and self-discovery, and that sees the common good emerging at least in part out of 'the tussle in the public forum'.[13] It is very much in this tradition that David Sheppard, the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool for over 20 years (mostly when the city held strongly socialist views), could offer a reminder of 'the sheer exhilaration in the production of wealth'[14] and that 'obeying that calling need not involve us in an inhuman rat race.'[15]

So although there is a proper Christian wariness towards human competitiveness, there are theological resources to be tapped that might

allow a much more positive picture to be constructed. These are based both on the individual instinct to flourish through being competitive, and the way a society or community in which competitive behaviour is permitted will in some sense have the potential to be shaped for the common good. Before developing these insights in two specific directions, I wish now to turn to two examples from Scripture.

3.2 Examples from the Bible

In theological terms, the Bible sets out a faithful and powerful account of the life of creation – and in particular of human beings – under God. If this is so, it should hardly come as a surprise that it will reflect in some sense the competitive instinct that exists within the natural order. Beyond this there is scope to explore the ways God's saving acts through history in the Bible harness and operate through the forces of competition. What follows are two examples of this exploration.

3.2.1 Esau and Jacob

The account of Esau and Jacob, set out in Genesis 25—33, can be read as essentially a description of two brothers in competition with each other and of the way God makes himself part of such a narrative. In outline, the story moves through the following episodes: Esau and Jacob wrestle with each other in Rebekah's womb and are born in a kind of competitive race (Genesis 25.21–26); the twins are favourites of different parents (25.27–28); Jacob coerces Esau into selling his birthright for food (25.29–34); with Rebekah's help, Jacob tricks his father Isaac so that the blessing properly due to Esau is stolen from him (27.1–40); Jacob, fearing for his life, prepares to flee in the face of Esau's anger (27.41–45); Isaac sends Jacob away from home to his Uncle Laban (28.1–5); on the journey, Jacob dreams of a ladder set up to heaven and knows God's presence and promise; he in turn makes a vow to orientate his life towards God (28.10–22); Jacob is tricked by Laban (29.1–30); Jacob, a model entrepreneur, grows rich and has sons (29.31—30.43); Laban having become envious, Jacob decides to depart for home with his numerous family and many possessions (31.1–18); Jacob sends a message ahead to his brother Esau, telling him how well he's done (32.1–5); Esau comes out to meet Jacob with 400 men, and Jacob tries to appease him with gifts (32.6–21); Jacob wrestles face to face with God and is given

a new name, 'Israel' (32.22–31); Jacob and Esau meet face to face and are reconciled (33.1–11).

The effect of the way this narrative is recounted is to bring out striking parallels between the sibling rivalry between Esau and Jacob on the one hand, and the relationship between Jacob and God on the other. This entire framework is introduced right at the start of the story, when God's oracle to Rebekah describes a future for her sons that will be marked by competitive struggle (Genesis 25.23). As Laurence Turner notes, this oracle:

> functions as a thematic preface to the whole of the Jacob story … Additionally, its very nature as a word from Yahweh makes it significant in a narrative where divine speech is much less frequent than in chapters 12 to 25.[16]

The way the narrative is structured means that the chronological story (competitive struggle) of human individuals who seek to make their way in the world is set within a framework of blessing and God's presence. The narrative therefore has a 'timeline' aspect as well as a 'ladder to heaven' aspect, as the following summary reveals:

Birth (struggle) of Esau and Jacob

    Theft of Esau's blessing

        Jacob meets God (Bethel)

            Laban tricks Jacob

                The next generation (Jacob's sons)

            Jacob tricks Laban

        Jacob meets God (Peniel)

    Esau's blessing restored

Burial of Isaac by Esau and Jacob

While it might be possible to over-schematise this narrative, it remains true that its overall literary structure conveys a strong sense of divine purpose in the midst of human striving and competitiveness. This is also seen in many of the linguistic details, of which just two will serve as illustration here. The first is at the start of Genesis 32, when Jacob is on his return journey to find Esau. As Bill Arnold comments:

> The beginning of the action … has an ironic feature unmistakable in the Hebrew original, but obscured in almost all the translations. Jacob's 'messengers' sent to Esau in Seir correspond to the 'angels' of God who met Jacob at Mahanaim (the same word is used, *mal'ākîm*).[17]

This example conveys the close involvement of God in what would otherwise be seen merely as human scheming. In contrast, and by way of a second linguistic example, at Genesis 32.13 the 'present' that Jacob prepares for Esau is the Hebrew word *minhah*, whereas by 33.11, after Jacob has met and wrestled with God at the Jabbok and then met his brother Esau, this same 'present' has become a 'gift' or 'blessing' (*berakah*), which is the same Hebrew word used at 27.35 when Isaac tells a distraught Esau that Jacob has stolen his blessing through trickery and deceit.

From these and other detailed features of the narrative, as well as its overall shape, two core themes emerge. The first is that of identity. Jacob discovers who he is. This happens in a very formal way when he is given his new name, Israel. This is not only a name for him as an individual but also a name for a people descended from him. Jacob also discovers about his identity more informally, as he uses his gifts and skills in the competitive struggle and as he is forced to integrate God's presence into his own identity as something of a trickster and an entrepreneur.

The second core theme is that of solidarity. The relationship between Jacob and his brother Esau is complicated from the start, not helped by their parents each having a different favourite son. However, after years of separation and suspicion, the narrative reaches its powerful conclusion when Jacob declares to Esau: 'truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God' (Genesis 33.10). This would normally be an overly bold statement to make but just moments before, Jacob has indeed seen God 'face to face'

(32.30) and survived. Out of all the competitive struggles between the brothers, a deep sense of commonality and oneness is found. Indeed, this rests, extraordinarily, on Jacob's wrestling match with God. The competitive struggle turns out to be the central way a human being finds communion with God and communion with another person.

The overall effect is one in which the purposes and blessings of God, who is both above and entangled within the events of Jacob and Esau's competitive rivalry, are played out. It is as if the competitive nature of the brothers' relationship, which at times threatens to spin out of control and become destructive, is guided by God in such a way as to make it creative and ultimately fruitful. As Bill Arnold suggests, the result is 'a wonderfully textured narrative that highlights God's sovereign but subtle role in the events'.[18] An even closer link between the themes of competitive success and blessing, in the Old Testament in general and the story of Jacob and Esau in particular, is hinted at by Claus Westermann as part of his explanation of the way God's promises are integral to the flow of history.[19] As has often been observed, this is central to the entire account of the Patriarchs, which begins at Genesis 12.1–3 with God's promise of blessing to Abraham – a blessing that is for all the families of the earth and specifically taken up in the New Testament by Paul as he carries the Christian message to the Gentiles (Galatians 3.6–9).

3.2.2 Paul and 'running the race'

Perhaps the best-known of Paul's appeals to what appears to be competitive striving when it comes to living the Christian life is 1 Corinthians 9.24–27. As Richard Higginson explains, this 'spur to excellence'[20] sees Paul describing a heavenly prize for those who run the race with perseverance, with the involvement of others alongside us as a kind of urging influence that impels us to reach our full potential. It is worth setting it out in full:

> Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

Any passage from the Bible should be studied within its context, and these few verses belong within a carefully constructed letter written by Paul to a church facing various internal conflicts. He has set out his detailed response to issues such as personal relationships (chapter 7) and the sharing of meals (chapter 8), and he is soon to go on to describe the Church as a 'body' (chapter 12); in fact the body of Christ, with many very different members. The thing that holds this body together above all else is love (chapter 13), and all that Paul has taught only makes sense in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and the promise of resurrection for those identified with Christ (chapter 15). So the four verses from chapter 9 that describe a competitive race and the 'spur to excellence' can be seen to be part of the bridge that takes us from the destructive conflicts and disputes Paul addresses at the start of his letter, to the vision of a Church and a world that has the risen Christ as its head.

The key word in the passage for our purposes is 'compete', in the opening phrase. In the original Greek this is the verb *trecho*, which in its straightforward sense means 'to run'. Indeed, the same verb and its cognate noun occur three times in verse 24, and a more strictly accurate translation, if repetitive, would be: 'You know, don't you, that the runners in a race all run, but only one is given the prize. Run in such a way that you take it.' Again, in verse 26 the same verb occurs as Paul explains that he does not run aimlessly. Paul's metaphor here is certainly one of running a race, and the Greek conveys urgency and speed. Other uses of this verb in the New Testament often refer to people running somewhere, for example to the empty tomb. An important case is at the heart of the parable of the prodigal son (or the loving father), when the father of the parable, filled with compassion, runs to meet his penitent son (Luke 15.20). However, there are a number of more obviously metaphorical – or spiritual – examples where the idea of running is used to illustrate the way Christians should strive urgently in their journey to God, notably Hebrews 12.1: 'let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.'

It is unclear whether the competitive element in this race is dominant or whether it is principally the need for speed and effort, as for example at 2 Thessalonians 3.1: 'pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread

rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you.' This need for striving is couched more strongly in 1 Corinthians 9.24–27 than elsewhere in the New Testament, in terms of competing for a prize. However, the thrust of Paul's entire argument in the letter is one of communal fellowship in the risen Christ, and it therefore seems clear that he is not suggesting only a single person will win the prize of being raised with Christ. Rather, this is about an urgent need to strive in a focused and self-controlled way towards God, and the other runners are fellow strivers rather than enemies to be defeated.[21]

There remains one further New Testament example of the Greek verb 'to run', which I believe is of particular importance in this discussion. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, begins a major new section of his argument at chapter 9. It is to do with the sovereign choice of God when it comes to his ancient people, the Jews, and the new election in Christ. Although many interpreters have suggested that the theological heart of this letter lies earlier, in Paul's discussion of faith and works, scholars are increasingly realising that Romans 9.1—15.13 is in fact best understood as containing the core of what he wants to say. As he begins, he sets out the way God's covenant promises can be traced back to Abraham, Isaac and then Israel (Jacob). However, he then issues a reminder that God's grace and mercy operated even at this stage, when Jacob and his twin brother Esau were still in the womb (Romans 9.11–13). As his explanation of God's sovereignty continues, Paul states quite clearly: 'So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy' (Romans 9.16). The word translated here as 'exertion' is from the Greek *trecho*, 'to run'.

There is here a striking connection between the account of Esau and Jacob, full of competitiveness but always under God's overarching purposes, and Paul's literal and metaphorical use of the image of running or exertion. Paul acknowledges the truth of the striving on Jacob's part, but knows he must locate this within a bigger narrative rooted in God's mercy and grace revealed in Jesus Christ. I believe this conveys well the significance in Paul's argument of the need to run competitively, but also ultimately the way it is subordinated to a bigger story of God's purposes grounded in his mercy and grace, revealed in Jesus Christ.

To put it another way, competition is perhaps one of the ways human beings can find their true identity under God and in Christ, and so be incorporated into the new election, or new covenant, in God's kingdom – just as Jacob was chosen under the old covenant provision and then discovered what this meant through his extraordinarily competitive life alongside his brother Esau. The race of 1 Corinthians 9.24 is, I therefore argue, analogous to the competitive struggle Jacob entered into with his brother, and which concluded with him 'face to face' with both God and the selfsame brother Esau.

3.3 Competitiveness and Christian Identity

One of the central themes that emerges from what I have described here as 'creative competition' is that of personal identity. At heart, I wish to argue that human competitiveness plays an important part in self-identity. Beyond this, I wish to suggest that competition is one of the things that brings with it a stronger sense of human identity under God.

To a greater or lesser extent, competition within economic theory is a tool that yields utility or an optimised market outcome, and a competitive stance in business should result in enhanced profits. Competition is therefore seen as a means to an end. As such, I believe it would be inadequate as a Christian virtue. However, once competition is seen not only as a means to an end but also as an element within a person's identity, then a positive place for competitiveness within a Christian description of human nature might emerge.

For a Christian, there are a number of interrelated ways that human identity is connected to God. Most straightforwardly, there is the doctrine that men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1.27), as part of a divine blessing within the bigger creation of all things. While a crude dominion theology, under which human beings have licence to use nature for their own advantage, should be balanced with a proper appreciation of stewardship, there remains nonetheless a sense in which human beings, 'in the image of God', have the ongoing role of co-creating and shaping the natural world. This has an element of striving and competitiveness within it, as John Habgood has observed: 'I suspect that part of the attraction of blood sports lies in the competitive encounter with creatures which are truly wild,

and which therefore have to be studied and respected if their ways are to be properly understood.'[22] Such a 'competitive encounter' need not only be in the form of hunting. It should encompass the entire range of creative human activity under which new things are conceived and designed, and then fashioned. Within all this striving, the human identity is revealed as being in the image of the God who creates.

'Human competitiveness plays an important part in self-identity'

Alongside this, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which at heart is about the identity of God, can be connected to the nature of human society and therefore the identity of human beings as defined through their relationships with others. This is termed the 'Social Trinity' model of Christian moral thinking, under which the perfect communion within God (the Trinity) acts as a template for human relationships. While this is attractive, I believe it is ultimately weak. It tends to project backwards from human society on to God, therefore describing God with reference to an idealised human image rather than seeing human beings as made in God's.

There is a particular challenge here when it comes to the theme of competitiveness and identity. To talk of any kind of competitiveness within the Christian God seems clearly to be both foolish and impossible. Indeed, as noted earlier, one of the reasons why some theologians look negatively on competitiveness is precisely because they take the 'perfect', non-competitive model of intra-Trinity communion as the aspiration for humans in relationship with one another. While it might then be possible to stress the need to eradicate human competitiveness as an aberration, an alternative is to set this Social Trinity way of doing theology alongside other theological approaches.

In April 2016 a story emerged in the UK press about the parentage of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. Research had raised the possibility that he was in fact an illegitimate child, and he agreed to have a DNA test. This showed that he was not in fact the son of his mother's husband,

Gavin Welby, but of Sir Anthony Montague Browne, Private Secretary to Winston Churchill. This could have been a very difficult news story for the Archbishop, and for the Church of England, but he turned it powerfully into an opportunity to speak of Christian identity when he described this discovery as 'a story of redemption and hope … I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes.'[23]

Here we have set out in striking terms the Christian belief that human beings are called to find their identity in Christ, as part of God's purposes for his creation. This is true both on an individual level, as a person 'takes on Christ' in baptism and through Holy Communion, but also in a collective manner, as an individual is incorporated into the 'body of Christ', the Church. In both these ways, every human being is able to discover more about who he or she truly is under God.

One overarching interpretation of the letters of Paul is that he takes both of these important and interrelated identity themes and lays them alongside the complexities of life in the here and now, affected by evil and the fall, as well as the promise of fulfilment as God's purposes are brought to completion. To put it another way, Paul relentlessly and urgently asks of his readers, 'Who are you?', as he reminds them of the great sweep of salvation history and explains to them the individuals – and people – they are called to be in Christ.

This call involves the 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit, which I have argued is best understood as a dynamic concept involving enterprise.[24] It also involves running the race to win the prize, as explored earlier here. There are of course many other elements in a human life that make it Christlike and therefore foster true identity under God, but my argument here is that the competitive, entrepreneurial aspects of life are part of this and should not be forgotten. It is not that they replace bonds of love or self-sacrifice. Rather, competitiveness should be recognised as taking its proper place alongside these other things, as an individual's Christian identity is shaped.

3.4 Competitiveness and Christian Solidarity

As seen earlier, solidarity is one of the central themes within Catholic Social Teaching, and although it can correctly be understood as a core aspect of

cooperation, there is also a sense in which solidarity can emerge out of competitive situations. This is the case because solidarity is not exactly the same thing as mutual love or unity. This is picked up well by the feminist theologian Margaret Farley when she warns of the dangers not just of isolated competition but also of the 'collective singular' that can reinforce privilege and status. This leads her to look for 'a solidarity among fragmented, partial, separate, even oppositional, socially constructed temporary selves'.[25]

We have here a theological basis for the kind of 'oppositional' competitiveness that challenges monopoly power but is paired with a solidarity that rests both on respect for the other and a sense of freedom and struggle. Solidarity avoids complicity in inherited cooperative social structures that can in fact reinforce imbalances of power. As Farley observes, solidarity is the framework within which these power imbalances can be contested without the danger of fragmentation.

The account of Esau and Jacob above demonstrates this well. As the narrative develops, the power imbalance brought about by the elder–younger situation at the birth of the two brothers must be resolved one way or another. One possible answer is an enforced, almost suffocating imposition of harmony from outside, but this would fail to acknowledge the very real emotions involved. Another possibility would be the kind of approach sketched out by the philosopher René Girard, who argued that human beings imitate each other, thus giving rise to rivalries, and that this is usually only resolvable by the creation of a scapegoat – a common enemy.[26] Girard's theory in its fullest form sees Jesus Christ as the scapegoat who can bring true peace, and there is much of interest in what he wrote. However, I wish to argue that the theme of solidarity is rich in being able to hold together the observed competitiveness that is experienced by human beings on the one hand, with the desire for mutuality on the other.

The competitiveness between Esau and Jacob is fierce and threatens at times to become destructive. However, the solidarity between the two, which is connected to the solidarity between Jacob and God, metaphorically wrestles with this competitiveness and turns it into a situation of mutual regard and equilibrium. The same theme was seen to lie at the heart of Paul's writing about running the race, in which competitiveness must be understood with reference to the fellow strivers.

3.5 Creative and Destructive Competition Revisited

Having explored at some length the possible foundations of a positive Christian interpretation of competition, it is helpful to revisit the earlier discussion about the destructive and creative aspects of competitiveness, so as to locate them more securely within the theological framework that has been sketched out, both with reference to Scripture and as regards the important themes of identity and solidarity. I wish to do this by suggesting in six different ways the contrast between creative competition and destructive competition, as interpreted theologically.

3.5.1 Behaviour: Free or Obsessive?

In a situation of creative competition I believe an individual is acting as a free agent, able to make moral decisions, guided by the image of Christ that is in them and by the sense of solidarity that they have with others, including their competitors. Thus, the individual's competitive urges are played out within the framework of salvation history – the framework of God's grace.

In contrast, in a situation of destructive competition I believe an individual will be acting obsessively or compulsively. This is what Wolfgang Streeck describes as 'competitive hedonism',[27] when individuals are governed by personal greed and the desire for self-sufficiency, and when they are no longer free moral agents in any deep sense. Both identity and solidarity are therefore lost.

3.5.2 The Governing Movement

Under creative competition I wish to argue that the principal movement or trajectory an individual is on will be, in theological terms, one of ascent or nearness to God's kingdom. This is what Paul described when he wrote about running the race and gaining the prize. The prize is union with God and a place in the new creation with the risen Jesus Christ. It is, perhaps, akin to John Bunyan's classic idea of a pilgrim's progress.

However, destructive competition assumes that the principal movement is along the timeline of worldly history, and involves a fight to maximise the utility an individual will end up with. To achieve this one needs to treat time

as a scarce commodity and use it optimally. Here, there is no place for the pilgrim's progress with a place of fulfilment as the journey ends. Rather, it is a restless progress that has no end and always seeks to subdue anything that gets in its way.

3.5.3 Matters of Equality

Creative competition is a powerful means for overturning power imbalances and vested interests. It therefore contributes directly and powerfully to a proper equality under which inherited unfairnesses can be removed. This was recognised in the account of Esau and Jacob and is the basis for modern legislation that seeks to counter monopolistic behaviour in markets. There is a sense in which the main emotion at work is hope.

Destructive competition is, in complete contrast, brought about by power or information imbalances. Classically, this is seen in the way dominant empires and vassal states operate, or a commercial player with dominant market share seeks to overpower and eliminate smaller competitors. The overturning of one superpower leads to the rise of the next, and the main emotion and motivational power at work is fear.

3.5.4 Difference and Togetherness

In a situation of creative competition the sense of togetherness, or solidarity, will be prominent. This is recognised strongly in sporting rivalries, under which the contest is often very hard-fought but the common ground is also affirmed. Beyond sport, in commercial and other situations it seems that for competitiveness to be creative and positive there must be a solidarity rooted in the willingness to stand together and look one another in the eye.

The prerequisite for destructive competition, on the other hand, seems to be a stress on difference. This is very apparent in situations of conflict and war between nations. The enemy, or competition, is demonised and characterised as different or abnormal. Thus, in the fury of the First World War the nations of the United Kingdom and Germany, with so much in common, including closely related royal families, found themselves stressing the differences between the characteristics of the two nations as part of a competitive situation that rapidly became deeply destructive.

3.5.5 An Understanding of Place

Competition is often connected to place or space. This is seen in nature, when territories are contested by birds and animals or when well-rooted trees successfully compete for space in a forest. However, I believe creative competition sees place as a home and a launch pad, providing stability and rootedness as a competitive world is faced. There is a hint of this in Psalm 92, in which the righteous are compared to a palm tree being planted in the house of the Lord. Because of this they flourish. Creative competition therefore requires a deep sense of the importance of place and home. It will depend on a developed sense of belonging, which connects to the theme of identity.

‘Competition is often connected to place or space’

In contrast, destructive competition will merely see a place as a possession and a disposable asset – something to be fought over or traded. Identity is weakened and even lost, and competitiveness can only therefore be a thing that destroys any sense of rootedness or true flourishing.

3.5.6 Art and Imagination

Finally, I suggest that creative competition must be an imaginative thing, looking always for new possibilities. Creativity by no means has to be competitive, but competitiveness always has a chance to be creative, striving for a new way of seeing and understanding the world. This is the role of art in its many different forms, which may delight or disturb but always opens up imaginative possibilities as people discover more about their identities and about the common ground shared with others.

The moments when art is viewed with suspicion or is suppressed, for example in a political regime that has dictatorial tendencies, mean that imagination is lost and the competitive urge becomes increasingly destructive.

These six short subsections all suggest that competition can take different forms, and specifically that it can be either creative or destructive. A Christian perspective helps us to understand why it is that competitiveness

might become destructive and negative or creative and positive. Of course, it might be that the negative pressures are so great that competition is always likely to be dangerous and destructive, as so many theologians have argued. However, it is also possible to suggest that there might be situations in which competitiveness is a creative element within the bigger story of God's purposes for his creation. If this is the case, Christians need not be afraid of competition on principle. However, it could also be argued that an important part of the Christian witness and mission should be to help people understand the ways competitiveness can either be destructive or creative, and furthermore to work actively in support of the things associated with competition that is truly creative in nature.

3.6 Being a Competitive Christian in the Marketplace: A Case Study

I wish now to present and examine a case study concerned with competitiveness and the Christian calling, so that the theoretical and conceptual discussion above might be tested with reference to a real person's experience.

On 12 March 2019, I interviewed a committed Christian who is an entrepreneur and business leader in the agricultural industry. His particular sector is characterised by larger multinational players and also a number of smaller and medium-sized enterprises operating in different sub-markets.[28] In the interview I was looking for direct and unguided comments so as to see how this entrepreneur's thoughts on competitiveness resonated with the thinking I have set out above.

He had a good and thoughtful account to give about the way competition supports efficient working and acts as a spur to innovation in a business context, and suggested that it is largely the forces of competition that expand markets. However, he recognised strongly the problematic aspects: 'There's a light side and a dark side.' The difficulties he identified were connected to selfishness: 'I want your market share, I want your customers … I want to supplant your products', and he made a direct connection to the survival of the fittest within the natural order: 'Competition is something which is part of our human, created world.'

However, alongside this he sought to establish a sense of human morality: 'As humans we have to know when it becomes destructive; when competition doesn't create, it destroys.' Connecting this to the agribusiness sector, he described the hybrid corn seed market in the USA as being as one that erred towards destructive: 'the market where we can all bleed … There's almost an intuitive point, of saying: this is bad competition, this is destroying value.' This moral judgement was, for him, earthed in his faith: 'There's a need as Christians for us to actually know where the boundaries of good competition and bad competition are.'

As I asked him about his actual experience of competition, he explained that the shape of the particular market he operates in colours his view, and that the competitive relationship with the larger and dominant firms in the industry feels very different from that with the other, smaller businesses. The relationship with the disproportionately larger competitors is characterised by fear, including at times a fear of litigation. He also therefore experiences a combative and quite aggressive kind of competition, in which the question becomes 'How to beat them down'. As I listened to him speak, there seemed to be very little 'human' dimension to this relationship, nor any sense of creative possibility.

However, when it came to the other, smaller competitor businesses, similar in size to the one he had helped to build, the picture was very different. He described an annual industry convention at which many of the key people leading these competing businesses would gather, not to collude but to network, discuss topics of interest to the industry and for mutual encouragement. He explained that when they would meet up they would:

> celebrate we'd survived another year, because it was a really hard industry to be in, and it was an industry we all loved because it was about creating new products, and which was about feeding people … It was really hard to make money and everybody knew how hard it was, but everyone was equally committed to actually making things happen … It was like a group of friends … We were competing against each other, but at the end of the day we knew how hard it was for each other.

When asked further about his awareness of his competitors as real people, and the depth of knowledge in these competitive relationships, he spoke energetically:

> You'd wargame … What do you think their moves are going to be, and how will we counter those moves? … I wonder what they're thinking? I wonder what they'll do in this situation? And then you're out there looking for signs … You'd build a profile of [your competitor's] company.

A picture emerges of the clear commercial necessity of knowing your competitors almost better than your friends and, through this deep knowledge, of those competitors becoming friends.

He also reflected on how this process of gaining greater knowledge about the competition contributes to a greater self-knowledge. He spoke of matching strengths against weaknesses, so as to push the business ahead in a competitive manner: 'If you're going to compete you need to understand how that self-knowledge and how you're made up and how you work, and your organisation and theirs, allow you to compete.'

My final question to him was about how he felt the competitive situations he'd been in, as he ran his business, had contributed to his own life story. He gave a compelling account of one particular 'defining moment':

> We started building the business with a handful of people and a few million dollars of income, and by a mixture of creative entrepreneurial building of new ventures, joint ventures, collaborations, acquisitions – but accompanied by very, very careful integration – organic growth, investment in R&D, sensible step-by-step stuff, a few moments of inspiration here and there, assembling a great team to run what was a growing business, we ended up increasing revenues over twenty-fold in operations in Europe, North America and Australia, and based on the data that we could access we realised that we'd become the largest company, the leading company in the world in our sector, and we'd actually gone past the leader in the market. We didn't look at it as actually running a race where you actually get to the end of the

> 100m and you stop. It was almost like a perpetual long-distance race, and we'd started at the back of the pack … and we'd slowly caught up to the pack, and then we'd made our way through the pack, and then we'd jostled with the guys at the front, and then suddenly we'd moved forward.
>
> It was a feeling of pride, that we were now a part of that group [the competitors], and the moment I was happiest with was, we presented this [story] at an industry forum. In that forum I put up a little diagram showing our trajectory, showing the milestones; and our competitors were getting up and taking photographs of it. And then the head of the company that had been the market leader got up and basically said, 'We acknowledge that we are the leaders in the old world, and you are the leaders now in the new world.' And that was a moment – it wasn't a moment of triumph, it was a moment of pride; a feeling that we are now part of something good, we've achieved something we can all be proud of, we've delivered on what we said we were going to do; and we've been acknowledged by and are respected by our competitors. Because I think you should always respect your competitors; you've got to know them; you need to respect them. That moment of respect meant a lot. People came up and said, 'I've never heard them say that, ever.' That was an achievement in itself! To be acknowledged by your competitors as having done a good job, and done it well. They weren't bruised, they weren't hurt. They were going to work hard to try and catch us up again, and in fact they ended up adopting a strategy similar to ours.

Here, in an entirely spontaneous way, is set out an account of competitiveness that I believe draws together the themes of identity and solidarity. The entrepreneur I interviewed explains how, under the fierce pressures of competition, his achievements helped shape his own life story and those of his business colleagues. At least some of the defining moments of his life have been forged out of this competitiveness, to be set alongside others that have sprung out of a more overtly cooperative or sacrificial stance. In addition, he expresses his solidarity with his competitors, as a kind of friendship rooted in respect and in the strenuous striving that competitiveness demands. While

aware of the destructive possibilities, I believe he elucidates a robust and theologically informed account of *creative competition* in a business setting.

By way of a final comment, it is interesting to note that the disproportionately large and dominant market players did not fit so well into his description of creative competition. There was no sense of solidarity, other than among the smaller businesses in the face of quasi-monopolistic competitors, and any possibility of identity shaping on his part seemed to be lost in the face of the aggression and even fear that he experienced in that one-sided competitive relationship.

3.7 Summary

I believe there is a strong Christian instinct to see competitiveness as a dangerous thing, but a counternarrative does exist, under which competition can play a part in the promotion of the common good. I took two examples from the Bible and explored how they shed light on a Christian appreciation of competitiveness. This suggested that the themes of identity and solidarity are especially significant when it comes to describing a more positive understanding of competition. I then re-examined the creative and destructive aspects of competition in the light of the theological engagement, before presenting a case study in support of the argument.

Notes

1. For a concise summary of Maurice's work, see J. Morris, 'F. D. Maurice and the Myth of Christian Socialist Origins', in S. Spencer (ed.), *Theology Reforming Society: Revisiting Anglican Social Theology*, London: SCM Press, 2017, pp. 1–23. For an excellent contemporary survey of the Church of England's stance towards capitalism, see E. Poole, *The Church on Capitalism: Theology and the Market*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 (pp. 41–91).

2. Among the most important teaching documents are the encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Centesimus Annus* (1991) and *Laudato Si'* (2015).

3. *Centesimus Annus*, 32.

4. For a concise and clear description of this central point in Catholic Social Teaching, that self-interest in a competitive environment cannot lead to the common good without a proper moral framework, see C. K. Wilber, ‘Individualism, Interdependence, and the Common Good: Rapprochement between Economic Theory and Catholic Social Thought’, in C. R. Strain (ed.), *Prophetic Visions and Economic Realities*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989 (pp. 229–41).

5. K. Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005, p. 76.

6. J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990; see esp. pp. 195ff.

7. J. Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship*, London: SCM Press, 2016, p. 31.

8. R. Williams, ‘Knowing our Limits’, in R. Williams and L. Elliott (eds), *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, pp. 19–34.

9. D. Clark, *A Survey of Christians at Work*, Birmingham: Christians in Public Life, 1993, p. 70.

10. W. Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God: The Bible’s Teaching on the Moral Goodness of Business*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003, pp. 63–4.

11. Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God*, p. 65. Here Grudem echoes in certain ways Michael Novak’s seminal defence of competitive capitalism: M. Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982. However, for an argument that Novak has a ‘thin’ idea of community, see M. Brown, *After the Market: Economics, Moral Agreement and the Churches’ Mission*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2004, p. 140.

12. S. Green, *Serving God? Serving Mammon?*, London: Marshall Pickering, 1996, p. 107.

13. R. Preston, *Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism*, London: SCM Press, 1979, p. 46. Among John Atherton’s various contributions, see in particular J. Atherton, *Christianity and the Market: Christian Social Thought for our Times*, London: SPCK, 1992.

14. D. Sheppard, *Bias to the Poor*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983, p. 130.

15. Sheppard, *Bias to the Poor*, p. 131.

16. L. A. Turner, *Genesis*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, p. 108.

17. B. T. Arnold, *Genesis* (The New Cambridge Bible Commentary), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 280–1.

18. Arnold, *Genesis*, p. 281.

19. C. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, trans. Keith Crim, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978 (German original 1968); see esp. pp. 28, 67.

20. R. Higginson, *The Ethics of Business Competition: The Law of the Jungle?*, Cambridge: Grove Books, 1997, p. 9.

21. This is the dominant interpretation of these verses; see for example A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary), Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000. Thiselton comments in line with others: 'The climactic statement that only one receives the prize has nothing to do with any theology of exclusivism or elitism, but serves as part of the analogical picture which provides the setting for the notion of the urgency and strength of motivation which leads the athlete to surrender lesser goods in order to attain the higher goal' (p. 709).

22. J. Habgood, *The Concept of Nature*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002 (p. 56).

23. See https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/08/justin-welby-dna-test-reveals-my-secret-father-was-sir-winston-c/.

24. E. Carter, *God and Enterprise: Towards a Theology of the Entrepreneur*, Oxford: The Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics, 2016, pp. 43–5.

25. M. A. Farley, *Changing the Questions: Explorations in Christian Ethics*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015, p. 126.

26. For one exposition of Girard's thinking, see C. Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.

27. W. Streeck, *How will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System*, London: Verso, 2016, p. 45.

28. For reasons of commercial sensitivity the names of the entrepreneur and of all the businesses have been omitted.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

I have attempted to set out an argument that takes seriously the competitiveness that seems to be part of human nature, and which is a significant element within the world in which we live. My approach has been to shed light on the reasons why competition can be creative, to understand how these reasons fit within a Christian world view, and then to describe what might happen when such competitiveness is allowed to play out.

It is important to stress again that competitiveness is by no means the leading Christian virtue. It must take its place behind the great virtues of faith, hope and love, and the boldest claim that can be made for competition is that it coexists with other modes of operation such as cooperation, togetherness and mutual peace. However, I have argued that competition is observably a powerful and real thing, and a force that shapes not only individual lives but also history itself. Beyond this, I have suggested that competitiveness can be seen to have both destructive and creative aspects. At its best it works to foster communal solidarity and to reinforce a healthy sense of individual human identity.

'Competition is observably a powerful and real thing'

Two important questions therefore arise. The first is concerned with the shape of a community or society, its features and its expectations, and how these might form the framework within which the competitive urge can be tilted in a creative direction. The second is connected to the moral stance of individuals and enterprises, the ethical guidelines they use when making decisions in life, and how these might most fruitfully provide a context within which innate human competitiveness can contribute to a godly and wholesome sense of self.

4.1 Describing a Society that Fosters Creative Competitiveness

In theological terms, the societal framework that best fosters creative competition is one in which the generous abundance of the divine blessing in creation is recognised and in which God's grace is the undergirding factor. This was clear from Paul's use of the race metaphor in 1 Corinthians, and underpinned the story of Esau and Jacob. A society or community in which scarcity is taken to be the dominant reality will experience competitiveness as a deeply destructive thing. Competition will be all about a selfish greed for a disproportionate prize of scarce rewards. In a fallen world, scarcity *is* the curse that the power of sin projects. However, the Christian gospel message is that this projection of scarcity is a delusion, albeit a powerful one.

This is partly an attitudinal matter, in which the need for more is replaced by a satisfaction with enough. A modest but entirely sufficient plate of food can be perceived as complete and adequate in itself or within a world view that says, 'It could have been bigger or better.' A utilitarian matrix will always provide the latter response. However, a truly received gift will never be viewed in this way. Instead, it is experienced as a thing of beauty in itself; complete in that moment.

However, alongside this attitudinal stance there is also an actual need to experience the bounty of creation as a reality. In overall terms this is undeniable and is reflected in, for example, Psalm 65, in which the creative acts of God are seen to result in the abundance of his blessings. The challenge is that in specific local situations this abundance can be absent. At its simplest this might be due to a specific environmental context, such as a location characterised by extreme cold or heat. Much more significantly, this lack of abundance can be experienced because of marked inequalities within a community.

My main conclusion, therefore, as regards the fostering of a societal context that will bring about creative competition is that it should be one in which there are not any deeply ingrained or permanent imbalances of power or size.

The description of the market I was given by the entrepreneur I interviewed demonstrated this clearly. This gives a clear theological justification for statutory interference in markets to prevent serious power imbalances. While antitrust policies are usually put in place to try to maximise consumer utility and optimise a market outcome in utilitarian terms, my argument, by contrast, is based on the need to encourage and allow creative competition.

‘My argument is based on the need to encourage creative competition.’

Connected to this, there appears to be a local, or adjacency aspect to creative competition. This need not mean a return to the extreme localism of the era before the Industrial Revolution. The interview example related to competitors who were in different parts of the world, but the sense of togetherness was nevertheless strong. However, it could be argued that policies that help businesses to feel embedded in their geographical contexts will prove beneficial when it comes to fostering a sense of solidarity among competitors. This aspect of a business’s life might be reflected in the kind of embeddedness to which the great nineteenth-century Quaker enterprises committed in places such as Bournville. In contrast, a business that is essentially placeless will struggle to experience any sense of solidarity with competitors.

If an organisation is rooted properly in this way, I believe it will model behaviour that connects to the bounty of blessing in creation. This is because it no longer sees its assets as merely disposable or short term, but as part of a longer-term commitment to a place and a community. In turn this changes the nature of the competitive struggle, reframing it so that it belongs within a bigger picture of divine blessing shared among all those who compete.

Solidarity between competitors cannot be enforced. Rather, it can only arise out of a context that encourages it. This in turn shapes the competitive instinct so that it remains creative and works ultimately for the common good, not in a utilitarian sense but in terms of the bonds of mutual concern and even love.

4.2 Describing a Moral Stance that Encourages Creative Competitiveness

The dangers of tipping into destructive competition do not just lie within the structures of a community. They also reside in the moral stance of the individuals and businesses within a community. This connects directly to the way identity is perceived, since an awareness of identity directly affects behaviour.

If an individual essentially understands herself or himself as a self-sufficient entity set on maximising personal advantage, then competitiveness will tend to be destructive as it plays out within that person's life. This is, of course, the dominant model under which human beings are currently taught to self-identify. It sees competition as a zero-sum game in which the metaphorical cake of predetermined and fixed size must be divided among competing individual interests. Identity is correlated to the size of the slice an individual ends up with, a concept that has meaning both in absolute terms and in relation to the success of others.

In Christian eyes this is an impoverished way of talking about identity. As discussed above, human identity in Christian terms is connected to a person's relationship to God, as made real in Christ. This in turn is connected to their place in the world, within creation and within the body of Christ, which is the people of God. Obviously, for many people this awareness of identity might be underdeveloped. However, my argument is that as a sense of personal identity is deepened and enriched in these ways, so the competitive instinct will be transformed from being destructive into being creative. This was particularly clear from the story of Jacob, who found his eyes opened to a reimagined place in the world under God in a very immediate manner, and so was able to transform his previously antagonistic attitude towards his twin brother Esau into one that allowed for a sense of togetherness and mutual concern, even while the competitive edge remained.

In terms of public policy suggestions, it is challenging in a multicultural and secular setting to propose anything that directly connects to Christian identity. However, a parallel case might be the way Christian values are taught in schools. At its best this happens in a way that reinforces positive

moral values within a framework given by the Christian world view and an individual pupil's identity within that. Such values are therefore not abstract or free-floating but anchored by the Christian account of history.[1]

One equivalent in a commercial context is Blueprint for Better Business,[2] which seeks to work with business leaders to foster a deeper morality rooted explicitly in the Christian faith but designed to be widely applicable. Another is The Prince's Responsible Business Network, now integrated with another organisation called Business in the Community.[3] For example, in April 2019 this organisation ran an event entitled Purposeful and Innovative Cultures, a crucial element within which was the values of a business and the way these had an impact on its purpose and then success.

A statutory requirement for businesses to engage with these issues might be thought too strong an intervention. However, much can be done in a voluntary capacity by business leaders, and the political and societal pressures on business to embrace overarching community aspirations are significant. At the very least, some kind of training for non-executive directors in the moral aspects of business would be helpful, to place alongside training in the legal requirements placed on corporate boards. Such training in values and morality, if then embedded into the culture and identity of a business, would help ensure that the competitiveness that drives innovation and enterprise is shaped in a creative way rather than becoming destructive.

It is easy to see such efforts to shape the moral framework as some kind of veneer, to make business seem respectable or tweak corporate behaviour in a superficial manner. This would be a mistake. A concrete policy suggestion would be for government to insist that it will only award contracts to supplier companies whose directors have undertaken accredited training in this area, provided by organisations such as Blueprint for Better Business, The Prince's Responsible Business Network or the Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics. Shareholders might also be encouraged to ask if directors have engaged with this agenda. The result could be a step in the direction of reharnessing the power of competition for the common good.

Competitiveness is real and potentially can work in a creative way. This creative outcome depends both on the shape of a community and the moral stance of the individuals and enterprises within it.

Notes

1. For an approach to teaching Christian values in an educational setting that works in this way, see E. J. Carter, *Story Assemblies for the School Year*, Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2010.

2. https://www.blueprintforbusiness.org.

3. https://www.bitc.org.uk.