

Christianity and Political Economy

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One of the main difficulties in considering the relationship of Christianity to Political Economy is that the latter is a relatively recent historical reality, and to a degree it can be considered a post-Christian phenomenon.

Before the Eighteenth Century there had been no such 'science', or even any definite science of 'economics'. Even the prodigious precursor of Political Economy, Thomas Hobbes's secretary, William Petty, described his novel discipline as 'political arithmetick'.

Of course, this might just be a matter of nomenclature, but it is really more than that. In pre-modern times any concern with what we should today think of as 'economic' issues was somewhat sporadic.

That was above all because the nature of intellectual preoccupation reflected current social reality. And in pre-modern social reality, the 'economic' was, as Karl Polanyi put it, largely 'embedded' in social and political concerns. 'Wealth' was not pursued in abstraction from wider goals of flourishing and the pursuit of social influence and political power. Merely material and instrumental pursuits were thought of as belonging to a lower, artisanal stratum. And even there the products of labour beyond the sustaining of subsistence had to take primary cognisance of elite needs for symbolism and beauty in the absence of anything like a mass market in consumption on today's scale.

Of course, besides labouring, fighting and praying (the defining functions of the three estates, prevailing amongst almost all pre-modern civilisations) there were merchant and money-lending operations. But these were regarded with a considerable amount of disdain.

In consequence, intellectual reflection on the economic tended to be much more confined to directly ethical considerations than would be the norm today: What is a just price? What is a just wage? Can usury ever be permitted? What profits should legitimately accrue to investors? Is wealth inherently an evil that can at best be mitigated? And so forth.

Often this suspicion of what we think of the economic as such is today viewed as something unnatural, with ‘natural’ wealth-seeking being held back by strange religious attitudes. Yet in the long historical term, and in an inter-civilisational perspective, it is surely our current, modern, post-Christian civilisation that is the oddity, dominated as it is by a relatively naked pursuit of material goods, trivial consumption and technological control over nature. The question should not be ‘what held this pursuit back for so long?’ but ‘how did economic disembedding ever come about?’

Oikonomia and Chremastike

In trying to understand this, it is important first to realise that *oikonomia* or ‘economics’ originally meant ‘household management’ in ancient writers like Aristotle and Xenophon.

What we think of as a discipline concerned with production, consumption, trade and finance was instead described by Aristotle as *chremastikē*, (i.e., relating to the gaining of wealth) and was not accorded much status, for reasons already given.

Nevertheless, the fortunes of *oikonomia* in the ancient sense are not irrelevant to the emergence of ‘economics’ in the modern sense. In the Greek world, the household, where the matron had a dignified role, was subordinated to the male world of politics, although women did play (and as citizens) a considerable role in the public realm of religion. But in the Roman

world *oikos* and *polis* were more muddled up, just as public religiosity was even more important. This meant that the familial and the dynastic figured more prominently and that corporate bodies managing affairs of agriculture, production and trade now assumed a rather more 'political' dimension besides incorporating more of *chremastikē* into *oikonomia*.

This was not unconnected with the fact that Rome was originally a co-settlement of several tribes which eventually grew into a unique city-empire. One can see its suspension between the tribally intimate and the effectively 'global' reflected in the Stoic doctrine of *oikeoosis*, or of gradually identifying oneself as an individual by 'making oneself at home'.

One begins by identifying oneself with one's own family, then with one's city, then with one's country and finally with the entire human family and indeed the entire cosmos. In mutated form this became the Christian doctrine of the *ordo amoris*, the 'order of affections' or 'of priorities', about which there has been so much recent public debate. But it will be seen that it did not pit locality versus the 'cosmopolitan' (a Stoic concept), but rather suggested that one needed to advance from seeing 'the city' as merely comprising one's *domus*, to seeing the whole world as one's 'home'.

The coming of Christianity vastly accentuated this merging of the political with the economic in the sense of 'household care'. The Church was seen as an all-embracing institution in an unprecedented fashion: as combining city, household, academy and mystery cult and as ideally embracing the entire human race. It was, in this respect, the organised possibility of the cosmopolitan *ordo amoris*: you now have practical channels for loving also your far-off neighbour and you can start to rest assured that those far-away have local neighbours caring for them directly. The Roman empire itself became re-thought as a vast network of exchange of gifts and prayers, as one can see from the *Acts of the Apostles* and the epistles of Paul.

The exigencies of *agape* (unconditional love) now also demanded that governance of this new sort of city be concerned with every last detail of each individual's life, just as God is concerned with every last detail of his creation – down to the number of hairs on our heads, or that not one sparrow will fall to the ground outside God's care, according to Christ.¹ So political rule was no longer a matter of isolated sovereignty and sporadic show of force, but of much more continuous *administration*, echoing the divine providence.

In this fashion, one could say that governance became more 'personalised', although that carries the danger that this tendency might inversely institutionalise our personal relationships, allowing a bureaucratic prying into every aspect of our lives. This tensional dilemma is still with us today: it is surely a post-Christian dilemma.

Such an extension of administration, itself linked to the performance of charity and mercy, indicates that the primary Christian sense of the 'economic' is not at all what we might expect. Far from being basically about the market, it is more primarily about political governance – as opposed to mere assertion of sovereignty, political force and political persuasion (although persuasion can often be mixed up with 'economic' administration).

This sense of 'economy' was a profoundly theological one. God is replete in his own absolute being, but he 'economises' this being by sharing it through the processes of Creation and Redemption. The Church and her sacred officers participate in this 'economising' process through the liturgy, preaching, ethical guidance and performing works of mercy.

Since there was little actual duality of 'Church and State' in the Middle Ages, but rather a single governance of 'Christendom' with the more coercive work of the secular realm strictly

¹ Matthew 10:29-30

ordered towards the ends of redemption, all this ‘economising’ of the realm of the political spread from the Church to the exercise of secular kingship and nobility.

Disembedding of the Economic from the Social and Ecclesial

What has arisen, by contrast, within modernity, one could argue, is a double disembedding of the ‘economic’ from the social and the ecclesial – *both* as the emergence of an independent and amoral market *and* as the emergence of an equally amoral, because largely instrumental, bureaucracy tethered to the interest of national power, and relatively indifferent to the primacy of international Christian civilisation.

To put it crudely, favouring either the one or the other gives us our secular politics of ‘Right’ versus ‘Left’, but it could be wondered if either perspective is satisfactory from a Christian point of view. On the one hand, we have the brutal though ordered anarchy of economic competition as a strange ordering principle; on the other hand we have the ultimate perverse depersonalisation of Christian ‘rule of person by person’ in terms of a state controlling every aspect of our lives, not out of divine concern for them, but for the sake of its own greater efficiency. Of course, all along and more than ever in our own day, these seeming alternatives also in reality fuse: corporations manipulate us through information besides profit and the state cows us through debt and welfare payments, besides deploying the assistance of corporate forces.

The real question, then, is not ‘how should Christians respond to ethical questions arising today from the economic realm?’ but ‘can the realm of the “economic” on the modern understanding of the term have ethical status for the Christian at all, along with the modern understanding of political administration?’ And equivalently, could there be any sort of Christian ‘political economy’ or does the very discipline solidify post and anti-Christian assumptions?

To ask these questions is not at all to deny the validity of the more technical aspects of political economy which were relatively unknown before modern times. Petty, a key precursor, was essentially a Baconian. Just as Francis Bacon asked how one might accumulate and consolidate the practical wisdom of artisans, in the specifically Christian interest of alleviating the human condition, so also Petty asked how one might more systematically increase human wealth by gathering statistics and investigating things like the money supply – why did it fluctuate, what was the best median level and how might this be controlled? He had by no means altogether abandoned earlier moral horizons and still, for example (even if his position was much less rigorous than that of Aquinas) thought that licit returns on money-lending were a matter of inherent desert.

Nonetheless, we see already in his work the primacy of national and mercantilist concerns. Still more notably, we see an oscillation between a bias towards *laissez-faire* and a preparedness to see state interventions in the spheres of industry and welfare. To a degree his understanding of both the market and the state had begun to be detached both from the wider social order and its purposes of deeper human flourishing in ethical, aesthetic and religious terms.

The Source of Disembedding

When we enquire just how this disembedding came about, it is important to mention, alongside material and social factors, certain decisive intellectual shifts that occurred within Christian theology and philosophy themselves, transforming the sense of the ‘economic’ in both theological and worldly senses.

First, there was a growing suspicion of the popular and festive aspect of religion as argued by Charles Taylor after Ivan Illich. The more that the Dionysiac and the folk-liturgical was eschewed, the more Christian practice shrank to the sphere of ethical control, and the more

that in turn could become so routinised as to lose any real sense of ultimate *telos*, or eventually any need for reference to God at all. Within this carapace of a wider secularisation, one sees the modern world emerging in which eventually (especially in Protestant lands) a huge number of ‘holy days’ would give way instead to more time devoted to labour, trade, legal administration and political policing.

Second, the pursuit of absolute poverty by the medieval Franciscans had an ironic effect. If ownership was regarded as inherently inimical to salvation, then conversely ownership can start to seem morally neutral and indifferent. Thus, it was typically Franciscan professors who started to see ownership as outright and absolute, unconnected to inherited duties conditioning the legitimate holding of property or of offices. The same scholastic doctors tended also gradually to ease restrictions on usury, to promote subjective rights over distributive justice and to weaken the notion of ‘the common good’ into an aggregated good of isolated individuals. Equally, given that the possession of material things was now so disdained, material reality (both metaphysically and experientially) started to be seen more as a qualityless aggregate which one could indifferently modify. The road to the ‘commodification’ of everything, even people and land and money (that should be a mere means) had been opened up. For this reason the philosophical path to purely mechanical physics was the same path that tended to think of the social order in terms of numerical calculus.

Thirdly, another irony attended the thought of the Reformers and especially of Luther and Calvin. They fully shared and even intensified the medieval suspicion of wealth and trade and disapproval of usury. Indeed, they regarded this as a perversion of the divine *economia* in just the same way that they thought of a trade in relics and a gambling on one’s salvation as a perversion of the same *economia*. And yet, their despair of any human ability to remedy itself in this and other respects, even after the reception of grace (though there were many

variations here) led to such extreme reliance on imputed grace (not involving any necessary spiritual transformation) and resignation to divine predestination, as to much encourage a handing over of the entire realms of art, symbolism and economic activity to entirely secular considerations. Notably, this went more in the direction of surrender to state absolutism in the case of Lutheranism and to market forces in the case of Calvinism. We can see, geographically, the consequences of that contrast even today.

In the fourth place, the tendency to demoralise both administration and market exchange was vastly accentuated in the later history of Calvinism, and perhaps more decisively in the history of ‘the Catholic Calvinism’ which was Jansenism. If, for the former, natural Man is totally depraved, and for the latter nearly so, then the divine economy can no longer operate through the participation of the human spirit in the divine. Instead, both in governance and in the economy, order must be miraculously distilled from disorder, *either* by the controlling central hand of Leviathan, *or* through the hidden hand of the marketplace. So either a sovereign king mediating the now inscrutable and de-ethicised will of God, or divine providence working in a new and essentially utilitarian way to bring about a social good in the long run (which is endlessly postponed and so never fully comes), despite the very many human sacrifices necessarily made along the way.

It is these suppositions of an essentially perverse theology which basically underly the legacy of political economy and what we mean by the economic.

Christian Responses to the Disembedding of Economy

There can be two responses to this. From a secular perspective one can ask why we should now continue to be held captive by a hidden theological genealogy at all? But from a Christian perspective one can realise that this perverse theological legacy is not supported by

the Bible or by pre-modern Christian tradition – nor by the most astute and profound Christian thinkers since then, whether Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or Anglican.

To say what Christians should propose instead of modern administration and modern economics can scarcely be entered into here. But two points can be made.

First, the typical secular Right versus Left exclusive alternatives of either centralised administrative control or spontaneously emerging market order should be refused. States have to improvise all the time; firms have to plan ahead to a considerable degree – and not just to anticipate markets for their goods, but also to forge new ones. Our collective life is much more like individual life than this crude stand-off might suggest. It is a matter of social ‘art’ or architectonics, where to a degree we shape things by foreshadowing in our minds what we are bringing about and yet we do not fully know what this will be and must constantly adapt to circumstance and the unexpected promptings of what emerges.

This more ancient conception of both politics and household management as art much more fits with the religious sense that we must constantly attend to heavenly or divine inspiration which always draws us towards the Good and can never be ethically indifferent.

Secondly, it *is* possible to combine modern technical economics in an ultimately Baconian and so ‘scientific’ lineage with an inherently ethical economics and a newly embedded economy. There are perhaps more examples of this in continental economics, and notably in the Italian tradition of *economia civile*, which is as old as that of civil economy (and also in a Baconian tradition via Vico and Genovesi). The ‘civil’ is not quite the same as the ‘political’, because it comprises a cleaving of economic purposes also to socially participatory ones and not just to either mercantilist or international market horizons.

Instead, sophisticated ‘scientific’ attention to likely and unintended economic processes is here combined with an allowance that every economic contract can involve an *inherently*

mutualist and shared sympathetic concern, which is perfectly realistic in the light of shared community belonging. On this basis, the continuous negotiation of inherently just shares, prices and wages in an older, Thomistic sense can be included (as it was by Antonio Genovesi, an ordained priest), just as every transaction has some sort of ‘artistic’ onlook towards eventual upshots which it shapes, even though it cannot altogether anticipate them.

Such transactions will more naturally tend to uphold the role of trade guilds and other mediating institutions, whereas the modern, bastard-Christian liberal outlook tends to promote the ever further isolation of individuals, only connected by either the bureaucratic state or the ‘providential’ market.

Such an alternative, civil economy perspective holds out the promise of marrying what is validly modern and ‘objective’ in economics, with a humanism that does not surrender ethical value and human persons to supposedly inevitable processes which are nothing of the sort. Surely all Christians, other religious persons and even just the humanely concerned and metaphysically sensitive should seek for something lying more in this direction?