

Book Reviews

Counting the Cost: Christian Perspectives on Capitalism

Art Lindsley and Anne Bradley (Eds). 2017. Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press. ISBN 978-089112-408-5. \$29.99 (paperback).

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Titles create expectations. In this case, the expectations created by Art Lindsley and Anne Bradley of the Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics remain unfulfilled in the end. This edited volume of chapters is long on counting the *benefits* of capitalism, and rather short on counting the costs. It also covers only a small range of Christian theological perspectives that could be brought to bear on the topic. No single book can begin to cover the wide array of Christian thought regarding capitalism and capitalist economics, though one can admire Paul Oslington's *Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics* for its intentional inclusion of a variety of historical and denominational perspectives. *Counting the Cost*, on the other hand, is not an academic exploration of the Christian perspectives on capitalism but an unapologetic apologia for economic liberty and free market capitalism.

Largely written in a style for the general public, the book is structured as a series of “responses” to criticisms of capitalism. Chapters include, “Is Capitalism Contrary to the Bible?” “Is Capitalism Exploitative?” “Do Global Corporations Exploit Poor Countries?,” and “Is Capitalism Bad for the Environment?” (It should be mentioned that many of the chapters of *Counting the Cost* appear to have been written in reaction to the “Occupy Wall Street” movement of 2011–2013.) As with most edited volumes, the chapters vary in strength. Some are excellent contributions to Christian considerations of capitalist systems. Other chapters are less strong. Space limits my ability to address all of the chapters in depth, so I will focus on only a few.

Counting the Cost opens with one of the last essays of Michael Novak. In *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism Thirty Years After*, Novak considers capitalism within his tripartite social nexus where, “capitalism designates only the economic system, ordered by both separate and independent political and cultural systems” (p. 15), and yet, “Each of the three systems of democratic capitalism depends on the other.” This system “depends on good habits of the heart” (p. 36) and “true liberty...

[which] means ordering one's own life – that is, self-government – for the sake of human flourishing, through reflection and deliberation” (p. 18). Novak's system draws on the Christian theological principles of creativity and freedom of choice as the motivating forces. Some self-interests are acknowledged to be “evil, some are neutral, and some are very good” (p. 29), recognizing the reality of the Fall, and balancing these forces with “divisions of power” (p. 37). The result, according to Novak, is a social system that has generated tremendous increases in incomes, health, and longevity, reductions in poverty, and overall “human progress” (p. 32).

“Human flourishing” has become a phrase like “sustainability,” somewhat vague, appealing to all, able to be co-opted and employed in a variety of sometimes contradictory uses. Careful definition of the term “human flourishing” is critical for its use in a formal economic and Christian theological context. To their credit, Lindsley and Bradley bring in Jonathan Pennington to set the stage in Chapter 2, “Human Flourishing and the Bible.” Undoubtedly the most important chapter in the book, this is a condensed version of Pennington's “A Biblical theology of human flourishing” (2015), which he then further expands in dialog with the Sermon on the Mount (2017).

Pennington here defines flourishing as “the great and universal desire for life in its fullness,” while explicitly rejecting its reduction to “the individual's subjective experienced pleasure” (pg. 40). For Christians and economists, this is a critical point to get straight. In “A Biblical theology...” (2015), Pennington further explains, “the version [of human flourishing] most of us know about is obviously *not* godly and is a function of modern individualism” (*italics in the original*).

In the current chapter, Pennington explains that biblical flourishing is present when there is *shālôm*, which he explains is more than inner or inter-relational peace, but “when all the parts of one's life – health, economics, relations – are functioning together in harmony and completeness.” It reminds of “the eschatological age when God's reign is restored on the earth and the needy will be protected,... the poor will receive justice, and the lame will walk” (p. 45). It also includes the state of “blessedness” (*‘ashrê*) that comes not through divine favor but “through faithfulness to the Lord and wise living,” (p. 46). This flourishing is achieved through being whole, with singular devotion toward God and integrity in all of life (*tāmîm*).

Pennington points out that a biblical perspective on human flourishing is different from “all other forms of human flourishing in the world

[including Aristotle's version of *eudaimonism*] ... in four categories: different values, different people, different means, and different goals" (p. 50), which Pennington then describes in more depth. He concludes that,

It is important that we think about the work of a Christian and the church in the world in this full-orbed way.... At its worst, [the] Christian materialistic way of being in the world confuses certain political and economic platforms with Christianity, allowing no critical engagement with the dangers of consumerism and unbridled narcissism. At its best, Christians may adopt a *eudaimonistic* version of Christianity that rightly sees that pleasures, goods, wealth, and flourishing are not bad, but even in this better choice over bald consumerism, there is a sub-Christian problem. Biblical Christianity is calling us to more than a baptized *eudaimonism*, but to an active *eudaimonizing* of the whole world (p. 58).

This biblical "human flourishing" is not a concept based on individualism; it does not start or end with the individual or with community but with God. It is not materialistic only, but incorporates the relational and the spiritual. It values shalom, righteous relationships (justice), and love as well as creativity and freedom. It calls us to "performing the virtues and then experiencing the glory recogniz[ing] that all this good glory and flourishing is coming from God's gracious gift" (p. 55).

The only criticism of Pennington that I would offer is with regard to his concluding paragraph, where he attempts to link his work to the rest of *Counting the Cost*. He does so by stating, "we can and should ask which economic systems most helpfully align with the church's call to bring flourishing to all the world." We can ask that, but should we? This question is an invitation to anoint an economic system and to avoid the very critical engagement of evaluating and transforming all economic systems that his approach to flourishing enables us to undertake. He then casts a dyad that is not in keeping with the rest of his work, "Does [capitalism] encourage us to serve one another and bring about well-being? Or rather, at its heart, is it exploitative and corrupt?" (p. 59). In this false dichotomy, the second is not the only alternative to the first.

Pennington asks, "In context of this nuanced understanding of biblical flourishing, how should a Christian understand capitalism?" (p. 59). Rather than responding with a false dichotomy, I would submit that the question should then be, "In what ways does capitalism encourage us to

be whole and to serve, help, and (to use Pennington's term) *eudaimonize* the world, and in what ways does it facilitate the exploitative and corrupt *de-eudaimonizing* of the world?" This would empower us to bring his understanding of human flourishing to bear, calling us to evaluate capitalism (in the current book, but other systems as well) in light of the "different values, different people, different means, and different goals," that are distinctively Christian.

Many of the subsequent chapters in the book follow the dyadic approach. Chapter 3 "Is Capitalism Contrary to the Bible?" concludes "the Bible does not teach socialism or encourage government redistribution of wealth" (p. 88), and, "So if private property and limited government are biblical teachings, then Marxism, socialism (large-scale government redistribution of wealth), and big-government options are excluded" (p. 74). This single version of capitalism is "biblical," and any other is not. Throughout *Counting the Cost*, the preference set over the varieties of capitalism seem to be lexicographic, with any diminution of liberty (or increase in government functioning) being an absolute reduction of acceptability, indeed, of "biblicality."

Many of these chapters follow a similar rhetorical structure:

1. assert the goodness of capitalism in the area under discussion (inequality, exploitation, etc.);
2. observe either that a) no system is perfect since it is created by fallen humans, or b) that the system would work well if not for the fallen nature of the individuals who act within it, so it is not the system's fault;
3. point out through extreme counterexamples (in short or long form) that socialism and communism are far worse at the area under discussion; and
4. conclude that obviously Christians should therefore support economic liberty and free market capitalism.

With this rhetorical approach, the benefits of capitalism (which are many) are emphasized, and the costs are substantially discounted or dismissed if discussed at all. "Limited government" is presented as the only acceptable government, and the only alternative to socialism and communism. An academic audience will likely find this less than convincing.

In Chapter 5: "Is Capitalism Exploitative?" Connors considers the claim that capitalism exploits the poor, particularly wage laborers.

He reviews data on the macro-scale impacts of capitalist development including life expectancy, infant mortality, health care, and “civil liberties,” which he calls “human flourishing” (p. 124–134) (a similar emphasis by Bandow is found in Chapter 8). This data is important for a complete view of the capabilities of a capitalist economic system. Capitalism does many things well. Connors then asserts that any agreement entered into by both parties “voluntarily” is by definition not exploitative. “Coerced labor is exploitation. Non-coerced labor... is not exploitation. Sweatshops are factories that have harsh working conditions according to the standards of wealthy countries, but whose workers choose to work voluntarily” (p. 120). (Similarly, Grudem and Asmus (Chapter 10) assert that voluntary transactions “should not be called ‘stealing’ but rather ‘buying.’”) Connors concludes that therefore “Christians should labor to bring capitalism to the poorest parts of the world where it is needed most” (p. 135).

However, analogically, the Jewish and early Christian prohibitions against charging interest on loans to the poor were prohibitions not only to protect against force exerted by the lender, but force exerted by circumstances. One does not charge interest to the needy, even if in the circumstance they are “willing,” because to do so is to exploit them (cf. Wykes (2003)). The appropriate definition of exploitation is not coercion by force, but taking advantage of the other’s circumstances for one’s own benefit, a definition that would significantly alter the way that Christian *eudaimonism* would be approached in these chapters.

Chapters 6 and 7 take up questions of inequality. Bradley argues that income inequalities result from the differences in giftings and abilities. Buchanan and Smith side with Adam Smith in asserting that the differences seem “to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education” (p. 181). Both follow the traditional marginalist argument that the wage “reflects the relative levels of underlying scarcity of the skills required reconciled against the consumers’ demand for those skills” (p. 147). The question of whether this constitutes a “just” wage is not addressed but implicitly assumed, which is problematic because in questions of inequality, the allocation of the whole of the created value (think total consumer and producer surplus) is exactly what the argument is over, not only the marginal value.

In Chapter 9, Noell addresses “Capitalism and Consumerism.” In this well-considered chapter, Noell identifies “excess” as a characteristic

of consumerism that is shared by greed, rightly noting that both pre-date capitalism by millennia. The question he addresses is whether capitalism in general (and modern mass advertising in particular) coerces consumers into purchase decisions that they do not want to make, or whether consumer sovereignty is alive and well. Here he takes a nuanced line, acknowledging that advertising entails both informational and persuasive content. He reasonably rejects the “dependence effect” of Galbraith. This means that consumers must take responsibility for their own choices. Noell encourages his readers that, “It is in our own spiritual self-interest to carefully examine our spending patterns.”

Yet Noell is more ready to absolve producers of responsibility for *eudaimonizing*. He accepts Darmon’s hypothesis that marketers “attempt to use the language that consumers probably use when they contemplate making such purchases” (p. 256). Reflection on the behavior of sexually provocative models selling hamburgers should make us skeptical of the universality of Darmon’s thesis. As with the question of exploitative employment relations or lending that were addressed in discussing Chapter 5, “voluntary trade” is an insufficient indicator of non-exploitation (whether in this case of either the consumers or of the models!), and there is responsibility on all parties to carefully examine their actions.

There is a limited range of Christian theological principles brought to bear in these responses to criticisms of capitalism in *Counting the Cost*. Those principles are primarily on the lines of human freedom and creativity as aspects of imago dei. Examining capitalism from these values is important, and therefore *Counting the Cost* can provide a particular set of perspectives on capitalism and capitalist development. Far less consideration is given to many other Christian values upheld by others in the church that would inform a more complete discussion, including the aspects of community inherent in the Trinity, of social justice, and of love and the rich dimensions of Christian *eudaimonism* that Pennington describes in Chapter 2. A more full critique of capitalism from that perspective would be most welcome.

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