

God and Capitalism: A Prophetic Critique of Market Economy

J. Mark Thomas and Vernon Visick, eds.

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This short collection of five essays plus an introduction was developed from a 1987 lecture series by Agenda for a Prophetic Faith, an interfaith group of clergy and laity in Madison, Wisconsin. Despite the title of the book, the contributions have little to do with either God or the market economy. The authors are primarily concerned with developing socialist, Marxist, or Liberation Theology perspectives on the economy.

The introduction by editor J. Mark Thomas provides a clear and insightful overview of differing perspectives on the relationship between God and the economy. Thomas describes the neoconservative (Michael Novak) understanding of democratic capitalism as the best system for an imperfect world of selfish individuals and "new religious right" (Jerry Falwell) identification of free-enterprise with Biblical truth. He contrasts that vision with the classical antipathy to market transactions represented by Aristotle and to the interference with pure market prices practiced by the New England Puritans. Thomas distinguishes conservative political theology or "culture religion" from "prophetic religion." The first affirms the established culture and ideals while the second "measures self, friend, and foe against the same plumb line of justice" and asserts that "no economic system is beyond criticism." Thomas places the essays of this book within the "prophetic criticism" tradition and suggests that they follow in the religious socialism tradition of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr in contrast to the neoconservative positive evaluation of capitalism. Thomas' distinction between cultural affirmation and evaluation in the light of justice is useful and important. Unfortunately, his fellow authors do not accept a Biblical standard as authoritative and therefore are reduced to criticizing the existing economy in the light of their own preferences and prejudices.

Norman Gottwald's essay interprets both Old and New Testament accounts as political struggles among rival economic systems. According to Gottwald, Israel was born out of the struggle of oppressed underclass

REVIEWER

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people of Canaan who "asserted the full and free use of their own labor products, and they did so within the context of a society and culture where cooperation took precedence over competition." The Exodus from Egypt was not a particular historical event, but was "a metaphor to describe all kinds of experiences of oppression and resistance shared by the Canaan Israelites" and was a "testimony to the process of social and political struggle by which Israel emerged from disparate groups of politically and economically subject peoples." The Israelite "communitarian" economy created by this process of class struggle was interrupted by the advent of a monarchy that restored repression and taxation. The monarchy was then challenged by the prophets who sought a return to the early communitarian ideals. Jesus was in the tradition of the prophets "in alignment with the communitarian values and practices of the countryside of Galilee" and "in opposition to the native tributary power represented by the Sadducees and the Jewish elite in Rome." Gottwald concludes that the Biblical blessings are only available to oppressed people and should not be claimed by people in the U.S.: "Language from the lips of underdog, insurgent peasants, when put in the mouths of citizens of the dominant oppressive power in the world today, simply will not work in the way it did originally."

William Tabb's essay is the only economist's contribution to the volume. Like Gottwald, Tabb is critical of the U.S. economic system but for very different reasons. Whereas Gottwald saw the U.S. as a whole as "the dominant oppressive power," Tabb sees the U.S. elite as oppressing the workers in the U.S. His solution is a nationalistic policy that maintains high unionized wages and excludes competition from foreign goods made with less expensive labor. He attacks neoconservatives and monetarists and singles out Sweden as a model of enlight-

ened economic policy asserting that it does well with "strong unions, high taxes, and an intrusive state pursuing social security and full employment."

Beverly Harrison is also angry with the observed order but her villains are "racism, class and gender privilege, and compulsory heterosexuality," leaving many of the blue collar workers (presumably largely male heterosexuals) that Tabb sees as oppressed as the oppressors of Harrison's essay. Harrison employs a "socialist-feminist hermeneutic of suspicion" to show that the world is not what it should be. She deplores the fact that most people in the United States view themselves as part of the middle class when they should see themselves as oppressed by white male heterosexuals. She quotes Marx extensively as the best authority, and accuses Christians of misunderstanding Marx, but is also suspicious of Marx for being a European male. Our task should be to rouse the middle class out of their happy complacency and convince them to become angry about their subjugation, oppression, and hopeless prospects for economic advancement. Harrison's prescription bears some resemblance to the idea of conviction prior to conversion, but it will require truly amazing grace to transform "bad" heterosexual white males into "good" lesbians of color.

Gregory Baum provides a useful survey of the Canadian Catholic bishops' comments on the economy, emphasizing that it is a more radical critique than the U.S. bishops'. He emphasizes that they approach the problem by first examining concrete problems of the poor in the economy and then looking for ways to act in "solidarity with popular groups in their struggles to transform economic, political and social structures that cause social and economic injustices." He contrasts that approach with the U.S. approach of first developing ethical and Biblical principles. Baum notes that the Canadian approach is heavily influenced by Liberation Theology

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and "examination of society from the perspective of the people at the bottom and in the margin."

Dorothee Soelle concludes the volume with an essay on the meaning of the Jubilee. It is the most orthodox of the pieces and the only one to take the words of Scripture seriously. She expounds on the description of the Jubilee Year, notes that even though it may not have been implemented, it provides a blueprint for liberation from oppression, and advocates an emphasis on God's ownership of the land and forgiveness of debts. She uses the Jubilee as a metaphor or broad concept for non-participation in oppressive institutions and does not develop specific implications for what a Jubilee would mean in our society.

The fundamental problem with this little book is that the authors are attempting to be "prophetic" without any authority. They do not expound on the Biblical prophets, nor do they claim or evidence direct divine inspiration themselves. Their syllogism appears to be: The prophets were critical of society; we are critical of society; therefore we are prophets. It doesn't take an expert in logic to see the flaw in that reasoning.

Because the essays are cut off from any authority of either ethical principles or method of analysis they are highly idiosyncratic. The various authors all agree

that current U.S. society is bad and generally use an antiestablishment and vaguely Marxist approach to describing society's foibles. However, they do not agree among themselves on the source of the problem, the proper method of analyzing the problem, or the solution. Nor do they acknowledge that they are presenting inconsistent perspectives or make any effort to clarify what they hold in common and what they believe differently. The essays are dominated by strongly stated opinions with little that an economist would recognize as either supporting data or analysis.

The essays are useful as a sampling of the thought of leftist vaguely religious people on the state of the economy. Harrison's essay made me pity the students of Christian Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary who have to take her class. If the class is conducted in the intemperate vituperative jargon of her essay, even I would be convinced I was oppressed after sitting through many hours of that abuse. However, as entertaining as they may be in places, the essays add little to the analysis of the relationship between Christianity and the economy. Even the best of them, Dorothee Soelle's essay on the Jubilee, presents no insights that cannot be found in older literature. This is a book most members of the Association will not mind missing. ■