

God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy

by M. Douglas Meeks

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This book is ostensibly about theology, but it is really about current American politics. For we live in “a society whose engendering cry is ‘liberty and justice for all,’ but whose tendencies are to sacrifice either liberty or justice for the sake of the other” (4). The “only historically, objectively given way” to get both is by *democracy*: meaning “the organized struggle, through the expansion of rights, against privilege and domination in all dimensions of life” (6). *Domination* is thus the enemy to be vanquished; by which we are to mean “first, unaccountable power to command and control the behaviour of others” and secondly, “the ability to determine the logic of distribution in a sphere beyond a social good’s own proper sphere of distribution” (58). The question is therefore “whether democratic practices can be transported into the various social spheres *so that democracy becomes the principle by which human life is formed*” (42, my italics).

This is important in America today because “in an economy predominantly defined by market arrangements the domination of nature through technology and the eclipse of participatory politics by the values and mechanisms of the market, are added to the ancient oppressions of sexism and racism” (35). Despite the lip service paid at various places to “the logic of the market” (e.g. 37, 152, 155) the chief polemical thrust of this book is therefore that “the market should be blocked in some spheres of society” (182). But we are never told how or by whom this should be done, nor which are the proper “spheres” in which the market should rule.

The author’s central theoretical assumption is that “the ability to command comes from the rights of denying to others access to the goods that constitute livelihood. These rights are basically property rights” (59). Though it would be more correct to insert “some of” before “the goods,” there can be no serious objection to this assumption. Since equality means “the equal access of all persons to what they need for their lives and what they need to contribute to the lives of others” (100) it is almost the opposite

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of *domination* and thus the goal of *democracy*. It follows that “the fundamental inequalities of social position,” which are chiefly “enfleshed” in “property rights and wage labor,” are the cause of *domination* (61). The historically-minded reader is struck with the sense of *déjà vu*. We are back in book VIII of William Godwin’s *Political Justice* (1793). As every economist knows, it was the polemical object of Malthus’s first *Essay on Population* (1798) to counter Godwin’s attack on property rights and wage labour. According to Malthus, *political economy* proves that property rights and wage labour, far from causing social evil, are both inevitable and beneficent. At the heart of Malthus’s argument is the putative “fact” of scarcity caused by the fecundity of Nature in a finite universe. And it is precisely scarcity in the objective, non-artificial sense that Douglas Meeks—who appears to have read neither Godwin nor Malthus—has to ignore or deny in order to make his Godwinian arguments work (e.g. 12, 60, 109, 171, 174). We seem not to have come very far in the last two hundred years.

Now Godwin’s great work was constructed without any dependence upon the Deity whatsoever, and most political radicals since that time, including those in present-day America who advocate the causes approved by Dr. Meeks, have felt no need to invoke that “unnecessary hypothesis.” So “Why bring God into this picture? Because some views of God are a major part of the problem. By offering a simple, unitary picture of power they justify economic and political structures of domination” (7). Against these we are to set the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which is “the Christian way of demythologizing God concepts that undergird utopian and ideological uses of economic assumptions” (9). The method followed throughout the book in dealing successively with the market economy, property, work and needs is to identify certain features of present social arrangements as leading to domination; to connect these with various

“false” understandings of the divine nature; then to supply a “correct” theology which is supposedly correlative with a “correct” understanding of political and economic matters.

It is evident that much of all this is unexceptionable and even praiseworthy. No one can deny that many features of present-day American society are in urgent need of reform, nor that the market economy, relatively successful as it has been, does not always produce outcomes that most Americans could approve. No Christian would want to admit that theology, meaning the intellectual framework of religious belief, can have no relevance to our ethical and political concerns. And most (though not quite all) men and women of goodwill would side with Meeks in wanting to see more “justice,” “liberation” and “democracy” in our society, and less “domination,” “exploitation” and “oppression.” There is urgent need of a clear and persuasive account of the way in which Christian theology, combined with expert knowledge of the economy and of American institutions, can enlighten our political understanding. I therefore report with much disappointment my opinion that this book does little, if anything, to meet that need. Its theology is eccentric and sectarian. Its arguments are confused and self-contradictory. And its knowledge of the relevant facts is uncertain or non-existent.

Dr. Meeks seeks to recommend a “biblical religion” and a “biblical” understanding of God (4, 37, 71). But as every theologian has known at least since the days of Samuel Clarke’s *Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712) it is impossible to extract a coherent account of the Trinity from the Bible. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a construct of the Catholic Church, valuable for those who accept the doctrinal authority of the ancient councils, but useless for those Protestants who wish to depend on Scripture alone. It is disingenuous of Meeks to elide this problem by pretending that his conception of the

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Trinity, upon which so much of his argument depends, is "biblical." He compounds the error by a pointed omission of many aspects of the God who actually is to be found in Scripture. We hear little or nothing of God as "Father," or as "judge." Though it is impossible to ignore the theme of the "Kingdom" in the teachings of Jesus, Meeks tries to conceal the fact by writing instead of *basileia* (95, 119, etc.), or even "*basileia* household" (120), which diverts our attention from the politically embarrassing kingship of God to the cosily domestic *household* (*oikos*) where a thoroughly unbiblical "God the *Economist*" (where "economist" is taken to mean estate manager) presides benevolently, dispensing "livelihood" to all with an even hand.

It is to Meeks's credit that he is honest enough to admit that theology, in his book, is merely *instrumental*. Its purpose is to subvert justifications of "domination" and to strengthen justifications of "democracy." It is therefore important for him to evade or discredit the "transcendence" of God, or any rate those "attributes of infinity, immutability, immortality, aseity and impassibility" which describe "the emperor, the ultimate property owner" (67, 68). So far does Meeks go in this direction, however, that at many points his theology is identifiably heterodox. We read of "God's struggle with death, the power of the nihil. Will the cosmic household live or will it fall victim to God's enemy, death...?" (77). In passages like this (e.g. 44, 75, 89, 119, 137, 148-9) the ancient Hebrew faith in the unity and sovereignty of God is thrown away and the Manichaean heresy revived. Related to this, though logically separable, are the many other passages where the distinction between the first two persons of the Trinity is obliterated, and God the Father is represented as suffering (e.g. 3, 43, 72, 85, 170). Of course Meeks is free to revive old heresies if he thinks it will make his political points. What he is not free to do, it seems to me, is to have his cake and eat it too. If he wants to make use of the non-biblical doctrine of the Trinity,

which rests upon the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, he cannot simultaneously maintain Manichaean and Patripassionist doctrines which are in conflict with the Trinity and condemned by the Church.

Not only is Meeks's theology eccentric and self-contradictory: it is also militantly sectarian. Having correctly noted that ideological divisions "run through every communion, dividing congregations and denominations according to the prevailing spectrum of economic ideologies" (25). Meeks proceeds to side with those in the American churches who wish to recommend a drastically new understanding of the political obligations of Christians. Of course, he is entitled to do so and he may even be correct. But when the whole tradition of Christian social teaching is so comprehensively denied it would have been prudent—not to say charitable—to pay some attention to what one's fellow-Christians have thought about these matters over the past sixteen hundred years.

The central economic conception in Christian social teaching is the omnipresence of *scarcity* in consequence of the Fall. As Meeks himself acknowledges, "The deepest scarcity of the human being comes from the scarcity created by our finitude and mortality, the scarcity of time, energy and life" (176). But as so often in this book, having paid lip-service to an important truth he then ignores or denies it. "As a *starting point*, scarcity is an illusion. In almost all situations of human life, scarcity has been caused by human injustice" (174). We must understand it as an "*insufficiency of the means of access to resources*" (60): "If the righteousness of God is present, there is always enough to go round" (12; see also 109, 171ff).

It would seem from these passages that Meeks is making an empirical judgment about the world as it now is. If the judgment were correct his political arguments would stand, his dotty theology could be jettisoned without loss to his cause, all the painful and sometimes tragic "trade-offs"

we have to make in private and public life—including the trade-off Meeks himself identifies between “liberty” and “justice”—would become unnecessary. And readers of this *Bulletin*, breathing one huge, collective sigh of relief, could abandon with good conscience the unpopular and unrewarding science of *economics*, meaning by that the study of costly choice.

But *is* the judgement correct? Was Godwin right, or was Malthus? Granted Meeks’s point that much scarcity in poor societies is created by corrigible social arrangements, and in rich societies by a wanton inflation of desires. Is this really the whole story, and have we all simply been dupes of an ideology from which only Dr. Meeks and a handful of other *illuminati* have been miraculously delivered? It is obvious from the passage I have already identified (176) and from several other places where he speaks of “economizing” in the ordinary sense (e.g. 40, 52-5) that Meeks does not really believe this himself. It is this essential frivolity—a willingness to waste his readers’ time with long trains of argument *that he knows in advance will never go anywhere*—which largely vitiates Meeks’s book.

Scarcely less damaging to its author’s credibility is the tendentious way in which the components of his arguments are formed. According to the Old Testament, for example, the history of Israel begins with the call of Abraham. But this does not suit Meeks’s polemic so we are instead told repeatedly that it begins with slavery in Egypt (e.g. 40, 78ff, 146 etc.). There is virtually no acknowledgement that Meeks’s key political concept of the “household” *oikos* (in New Testament Greek) is used throughout the Old and New Testaments to refer to domestic arrangements in a way that takes for granted—as normal, right and proper—the things he most deplors: patriarchy and slavery, and (in the Old Testament) pro-Semitic racism. The worst example of this sort of thing is to be seen in the treatment of access to “livelihood.”

Over and over again we are told the “economy” in the sense of coping with scarcity, and in particular market arrangements based upon private property rights, must “exclude from livelihood” some of God’s creatures. What Meeks’s account deliberately and dishonestly conceals is that such arrangements do not exclude a person from livelihood *tout court*: they only exclude him from livelihood *upon his own terms*. Under any conceivable set of social arrangements—patriarchal, feudal, socialist, capitalist—access to livelihood for those without the power of self-sufficiency is dependent upon either of two conditions: the *willingness* to make an economic contribution; or the *inability* to do so. Young children, the aged and the infirm have a claim based upon the second condition. But as for the able-bodied: “If any would not work,” said St. Paul, “neither should he eat” (II Thess. 3:10).

Why is Dr. Meeks so determined to conceal this point? Why does he pretend to believe that scarcity is an ideological delusion? Why does he so wrest Scripture in order to present us with a Diety who shall be politically correct? The answer, I think, lies in his ambition, which I have referred to at the beginning of this notice, to bring about a society in which “democracy becomes the principle by which human life is formed” (42). For those without religious belief of any kind this may (or may not) appear a worthwhile goal. But Christians believe that their citizenship is in Heaven, and that they are bound to regard “democracy,” like all other earthly expedients for mitigating the effects of the Fall, as imperfect, contingent, and merely instrumental. By making “democracy” the end and “God” the means, Dr. Meeks would seem to have got things horribly mixed up. He should not feel too surprised if some of the more outspoken among his fellow Christians accuse him of whoring after strange gods. ■

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