

The Social Crisis of Our Time by Wilhelm Roepke

New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers, 1992. ISBN: 1-56000-580-7, \$24.95. (Originally published in 1942 by Eugen Reutsch Verlag.)

Christian economists should take seriously G. K. Chesterton's warning against adopting the medical practice of "stating the disease before we find the cure." He argues that when we move from the human body to the socio-economic realm "we must actually find the cure before we find the disease." Chesterton's point is simple. We can all agree on what a healthy human body would be like, and so physicians can prescribe treatments which are intended to restore the body to its healthy state. But in socio-economic matters there is no such agreement on what constitutes a state of health, even among Christian economists. "We agree about the evil [e.g. poverty, unemployment, inflation]; it is about the good that we should tear each other's eyes out."²

In *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, Wilhelm Roepke (1899-1966) gives us not only a profound analysis of "what's wrong" with the Western world, but also a vision of "the good" which is firmly grounded in the tradition of Christian humanism. And Roepke's analysis remains as timely today as when it was originally published in the 1942 Swiss edition. His underlying philosophy is well summarized in the words of a citation given to him in 1962: "The measure of the economy is man. The measure of man is God." Based on this philosophy, he set forth a vision of an economic system that would neither violate our inherent dignity, as creatures made in the image of God, nor force us to act in ways that are in conflict with our fundamental nature. As measured against this standard he found wanting laissez-faire capitalism and all forms of collectivism, and thus he called for a "Third Way."

Some confusion surrounds Roepke's use of this term since others have applied it to the "mixed market economy," which combines certain elements of capitalism and socialism, and still others have used it as a synonym for the welfare state. Roepke, in fact, rejected all of these arrangements. Instead, he promoted a system not unlike that envisioned by the Southern Agrarians in the U.S. or Chesterton and the Distributists in England. The common thread that connects each of these visions is that human dignity and true human freedom are consistent with, and indeed

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make necessary, an economic system that embraces the widespread distribution of property, small-scale enterprises, and the work of skilled craftsmen. "Capitalism," as it had evolved with its "monopolies, mammoth industries, stock companies, holding companies, mass production, proletariat, &c," and embracing what Roepke called the "cult of the colossal," stood as the utter antithesis of the Roepke/Agrarian/Distributist vision.

But Roepke's strongest criticism of capitalism was its tendency to hasten the process of "proletarianization" where artisans and peasants are replaced by wage laborers, a process that is now all but complete in the industrial countries of the West.³ The deleterious consequences of this process, extending beyond pure economics to the "psycho-physiological" dimension, include:

the devitalizing effect of the proletarian-industrial way of life and work, which cannot be improved upon either by higher wages or by bigger cinemas; the dependence and insecurity which rule out ownership as well as long-term incomes; the regimentation of labor which has to be performed anonymously and under the invisible overseer's whip of the machine giants, under constant discipline and as part of an oppressive totality, thus largely losing all meaning and dignity; a form of existence estranged from nature and an organic community life, unsuited to man's constitution and depriving him of the natural and social integration he needs (p. 14).

Roepke's rejection of capitalism (as it had evolved) was by no means a rejection of markets as such, for which he remained a strong advocate, provided that they were *truly* competitive. Yet even competitive markets had their limits and were, in a sense, a second-best. He called for a "return to the old easy-going spirit by... increasing the sector of simple economic relations (self-sufficiency and local selling and buying) at the expense of the sector of

anonymous competition..." (p. 133).

In addition, competition was by no means a substitute for, and could not function well without,

certain definite ethical norms: general honesty and loyalty in business, adherence to the rules of the game, making excellence of workmanship a point of honor, and a certain professional pride which deems it humiliating to defraud, to bribe or to misuse political power for one's own selfish purposes (p. 133).

It should be obvious from this brief sampling of his thought that Roepke refuses to accept the "sterile alternative between laissez-faire and collectivism," an alternative that too many Christian economists have been unable to move beyond. Anyone who is willing to consider a "third way" will find the work of Wilhelm Roepke—economist, policy advisor, and Christian—an excellent place to begin. And I can think of no better starting point than this new edition of *The Social Crisis of Our Time*. ACE President William Campbell's new introduction serves as a helpful guide to Roepke's thought and contains a complete listing of Roepke's works which have been published in English. Those, like myself, who find Roepke's analysis and vision compelling will want to continue their reading with his more well-known work, *A Humane Economy*.⁴

ENDNOTES

- 1 G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, G.K. Chesterton Collected Works, Volume IV (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987, p. 39).
- 2 Chesterton, *What's Wrong*, p. 41.
- 3 See Michael Novak, "Saving Distributism," Introduction to G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987). Novak argues that the U.S. system of

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democratic capitalism embodies the basic principles of Distributism, properly understood.

- 4 Wilhelm Roepke, *The Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960). ■

Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism

by Ronald H. Preston

London: SCM Press, 1991. ISBN: 033-402305-x, £12.50.

In the preface to this work the author states: “I am not, of course, writing for economists.” Instead, he notes that a key aim of the book is to bring “the basic themes of Christian theology alongside a competent analysis of the economic issues of our day and to let the one illuminate the other in a reciprocal relationship” (p. 1).

The book is described on the back cover as an “illuminating, non-technical study which is of vital relevance to all those concerned with the future of our society.” However, this is not the type of book appropriate for a person who is a relative novice to either the field of economics or that of theology and church history. Instead, this is one of a category of many books where theologians with an interest and/or some training in economics make pronouncements on a variety of economic issues. I have nothing against this type of book, and many of them are quite useful in interpreting the Biblical message and developing basic principles relevant for a Christian perspective toward economics.

What makes this book different from many is that the author stresses throughout the work the “autonomy” of economics, and makes no real attempt to use the Bible as a basis for recommendations for economic policy. He instead clearly states that “the economic realities of our world cannot be deduced from the Bible, or the history of Christian thinking on the main doctrinal themes. They can only come from empirical investigations; and that requires adequate tools” (p. 2). This statement left me

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wondering two things: one, what will be our guide through the world of economic issues; and two, what tools does the author deem necessary to conduct such empirical investigations.

Throughout the book I found little direction as to what guided the author's various policy prescriptions. They often seemed to be *ad hoc*, based on a page or two of information concerning the problem at hand. There was no obvious framework used systematically to analyze issues. As a result I found myself agreeing with some of the prescriptions suggested but disagreeing with many others. There is also no great use of empirical or theoretical analyses from professional economists. This is not to suggest that we economists are the only ones who can divine the solutions to economic problems, but instead to point out how the author may fall short of his own stated goal of using empirical investigations and adequate tools.

Throughout the book I found that the author remained consistent with his conclusion that the Bible itself cannot provide much guidance in dealing with the economic issues of the day. He dismisses the neo-Calvinist approach to economics (which he describes as wanting an economics that is Biblically controlled and not autonomous) as a return to the "medieval position" and "mistaken." In reviewing Alan Storkey's book, *Transforming Economics*, Preston notes that Storkey argues that all knowledge involves commitments of faith and belief, and Preston criticizes this approach because he believes that as a result "there can be no autonomy for economics: each religion and philosophy will have its own brand." I believe Preston underestimates the effect that faith and belief (or worldview) have on the approach to the study of economic issues. As a result, I believe he overestimates the possibility for agreement on policy prescriptions based on empirical analyses. My reading of the correct discussion of economic issues is that the same economic

information or statistics can be used to generate radically different policy proposals (the issue of poverty is an excellent example). To attempt to ignore differences at the foundational level will not result in a step forward in economics, but a giant step back. Instead, the level of first assumptions is where Christians can use the revelation of the Bible to help provide answers on both how the world "is" and how it "should be."

This book also includes a historical survey of the doctrines of Marxism, including an interesting section on parallels between Marxist concepts and Biblical themes. However, there is little attention paid to the thinking of the liberation theologians (a subject that would have been quite appropriate). It is hard to understand the purpose of this chapter in relation to the rest of the book. Indeed, the author concludes the chapter by saying that we no longer need to turn to the theory of Marxism to appropriate useful information; "no secure guidance is to be found there." With this conclusion I find myself in agreement.

The most interesting section of the book is an appendix entitled "Usury and a Christian Ethic of Finance," which provides a history of the development of policies toward the use of interest in both the Catholic (especially) and Protestant traditions. Preston is able to demonstrate how the idea of the sterility of money could not be maintained in the face of increased trade and the expansion of markets. The conclusion he draws from this history is consistent with his notions in the rest of the book, that the Bible is not foundationally useful in developing a specific approach on how to deal with economic issues.

My conclusion is not that this book has nothing to say about the economic problems of our times, or that it is not possible to find interesting pieces of information throughout the book. There are many useful descriptions of various movements

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of social theology and synopses of the work of a variety of different authors. However, I find that it provides little guidance for Christians who begin with the Biblical message in order to develop a framework for decisions in all of life. How are we to use this message to understand economic life and frame our decisions? The author finally suggests that Christians need to continue to discuss these issues in the hope of arriving at some broad consensus on the direction that we want to go. I believe that this is more easily done when we use Biblical revelation as a starting point for our discussion, as opposed to the author's suggestion of bringing it alongside a presumably independent analysis.

Yet I sense that there is ambiguity in Preston's position. While he often accepts the results of economic analyses, he also wants to question the assumptions involved (for example, the assumption of individualism inherent in the market). He strongly argues for Christians to develop competence in economic affairs, yet states twice that economics should be taken seriously, but not too seriously. The tension the author seems to experience can only be overcome, in my opinion, through the development of an economics that concentrates on how both individuals and institutions respond to the Biblical notion of stewardship. ■