

market price extends only long enough to provide an expert evaluation, according to the ruling of Rabbi Meshullam of the tenth or eleventh century Rhineland: "My answer is that since the purchaser has waited for longer than it should have taken him to show it to an expert or to his relatives, the law of *ona'ah* does not apply, even if the overcharge was more than one-sixth of the market price."

After evaluating the various rulings on just price, Tamari summarizes the implications for the present as follows:

*Viewed in the perspective of a modern, sophisticated economy, the law of ona'ah would seem to demand a public policy requiring full disclosure of the market prices of basic commodities. Furthermore, in those cases where a monopolistic situation arises, even a temporary one, legal redress would have to be provided with respect of even those goods not normally considered essential ones, since the community is faced with an economic form of duress.*

Tamari's analysis provides many insights into possible applications of the biblical texts and principles to economic issues. The Jewish community has a tremendous wealth of experience attempting to apply Old Testament teachings to practical situations. Because Christian communities that have seriously attempted to govern themselves by biblical law have frequently placed particular emphasis on Old Testament law (Calvin's Geneva, Puritan New England), the Jewish interpretation of those laws yields significant insights for the Christian understanding of practical economic issues. In some places Tamari's analysis appears to provide an overly positive interpretation of the various rabbinic rulings—as when he interprets the rabbinic decision that one's teacher should always be paid ahead of all other financial obligations only as an indication of the high place of education, without noting that the teachers who stood to benefit from the ruling were the same ones making it. In other cases, the analysis appears to be excessively legalistic—as in his elaborate discussion of the various legal forms by which commercial interest bearing loans can be made without violating the rule against taking interest while maintaining that a violation would occur in the same transaction without a proper legal form. But in general, I recommend the book for its illuminating discussion of a wide range of economic issues as they relate to biblical commandments and practical real world concerns.

## *Economics and Ethics*

by J. Philip Wogaman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 160 pages, \$9.95.

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J. Philip Wogaman, who is professor of Christian social ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C., has a message for economists: economics is more than a set of technical puzzles to be solved along the lines of an engineer seeking feasible solutions to a particularly difficult construction problem. It contains, unavoidably, an ethical dimension, though professional economists often ignore this aspect of the discipline. Of course technical problems are not unimportant (and Wogaman recognizes this), but their solutions should not be seen as ultimate ends in themselves, but only as means to achieve some greater end. For example, we seek to understand the causes of inflation not because ending inflation is itself a worthwhile goal but because we believe that ending inflation would promote other desirable ends (e.g. a more stewardly use of the earth's resources).

Thus the very notion of a 'problem' presupposes some knowledge of why the present state of affairs is undesirable and would be better replaced by some alternative state. This draws us into the realm of 'values' and leads us inexorably to the recognition that we cannot totally divorce economics and ethics. Unless we are willing to advocate acquiring knowledge for its own sake (which is itself a value judgment), we must recognize that the very *raison d'être* for our discipline is the betterment of the human condition. By its very nature, economics is a policy-oriented discipline, undertaken for the purpose of guiding us in this task of human betterment. But what do we mean by human betterment? Technical economics alone cannot answer this question so we are bound to move beyond the narrow confines of our discipline to the field of (Christian) ethics.

One of the practical implications of this is that economic policy debates should not be closed to all those except the technically trained economists. "... economics is too important to the human enterprise to leave in the hands of economists alone." As Wogaman reminds us, "... economic choices are not usually between the stark alternatives of good and evil. More often they force us to decide among possibilities, each of which is relatively good." The short run tradeoff between inflation and unemployment is just one obvious example of this. Of course

economists, alone, will not make such decisions whether we like it or not. In fact it is more relevant to consider whether or not we exclude ourselves altogether from public policy debate, or render ourselves effectively irrelevant, insofar as we make our discipline inaccessible to all but the most mathematically sophisticated. Wogaman calls this to our attention and we would do well to pay him heed.

All of this is contained in the 13 pages of chapter one, entitled "Economic Problems and Human Values." Had this chapter appeared as a self-contained article (making those points described above), I would find myself searching for areas of disagreement. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Having shown that societies must establish social priorities, Wogaman proceeds to discuss who should set these priorities and how theology can be applied in this enterprise. He prefers democratic decision-making to decision-making by 'elites' or by the free-market, the latter being responsible for: "The exploitation of child labor (and of the labor of men and women), hazardous working conditions, dehumanizingly long hours of work, low wages, periodic times of depression with high unemployment, shoddy and dangerous products, ruin of the natural environment, racial, religious, and gender discrimination . . ." This sets the tone for much of what follows as he goes on to consider five specific priorities: adequate production; equity and security; employment and educational opportunity; conservation; and a new world order." In these chapters Wogaman appears far less concerned with opening up a dialogue between economists and ethicists than he is with denouncing free market economics and all other things conservative. His policy proposals are pretty standard left-liberal fare: the government as employer of last resort; "governmental income and price policy [to] set broad parameters within which wages and prices can fluctuate"; more money for education and transportation, less for the military; "generous transfer grants from prosperous to poor countries"; and control over multinational corporations, to name a few.

Here the central message of the book is clear: the wedding of economics and ethics means, practically speaking, the rejection of "laissez faire" and the adoption of the political agenda of the left. Those whose politics incline more to the right will find little (nothing?) here to their liking and will probably find themselves (as I was) left incredulous at some of Wogaman's statements. For example, regarding the relative productivity of capitalism vs. socialism, he states that, "I am not sure the dispute between

capitalists and socialists on this point can yet be resolved." In support of this claim he observes that, "the Soviet Union . . . seems to have the second largest Gross National Product in the world!" Thus, in a new twist on the moral equivalence theme—perhaps we should label it "economic equivalence"—we are told that, "there is no reason why we have to be dogmatic about how society should meet its production priorities."

Further examples abound, but I'll limit myself to just one more illustration of a statement which left me scratching my head:

*Why should symphony orchestras and theatre groups in medium-sized cities . . . have to struggle so much year by year to maintain their existence, while there are so many fine musicians and actors who are unable to find adequate employment in their preferred occupations? Is it because the musicians' and actors' efforts are needed more in consumer production? That, if true, might be reason enough. But what about the high unemployment rates in Western European and North American countries? Does that not mean that we are close to saturation as far as our employment needs are concerned in industry, and that it is time to explore other areas of community enrichment more seriously? (pp. 103, 104)*

But far more disturbing than any of this is Wogaman's failure, in my view, to fairly and accurately represent the conservative position (or, to use his word, the neoconservative position, since he has the annoying habit of labeling all who are pro-market as neoconservative; thus we have both Ayn Rand and Michael Novak labeled neoconservative). Indeed one gets the impression from Wogaman that all conservatives are monolithic in their underlying philosophy, their attitudes towards the poor and their unflinching support of the free market. For example, he attributes to (apparently all) neoconservatives a Lockean view of property which leads to the position that all government welfare programs are immoral because they "take property away from some, who have earned it through their labor, to give it to others who have not done anything to deserve it."

To be sure, there are some conservatives who hold this position. But it is a gross misrepresentation to attribute this view to all conservatives and especially to (true) neoconservatives such as Michael Novak. In a similar vein, there are conservatives who are committed to an ultra-individualism. Yet again it is hard for me to imagine how anyone who has read Novak could make the following statement about neoconservatives:

*But the neglect of our social nature is a fatal error. Turned into an economic or political philosophy, it invites a kind of*

*principled selfishness wherein people are led to believe that social good is only a byproduct of individual good and that it is a sufficient goal for each person to look out for him or herself. (p. 21)*

One may, of course, disagree with Novak's treatment of our social nature, but it can scarcely be said that he neglects it or that he even implies "that it is a sufficient goal for each person to look out for him or herself." One can only conclude that Wogaman's motives are more polemical than instructive.

All of this should not cloud the point made earlier in this review. We economists need to see our discipline in broader terms and recognize the inevitable ethical

component in any policy debate. Unfortunately, though understandably, readers trained in economics (and especially those with a free-market orientation) may lose sight of this essential point as they work their way through Wogaman's analysis of various policy issues. Of course we cannot expect that a book written for 'the masses' will contain economic reasoning sophisticated enough to appeal to the professional economist. Yet we do have a right to expect that an author will fairly represent opposing viewpoints and give serious attention to the positions of mainstream economists. Failure to do so can only strengthen the belief—widely held by economists—that the works of social ethicists can be safely ignored. Wogaman does little to dispel this notion.

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*Editors' note: We reprint below an updated and edited version of the bibliography from J. David Richardson's recent article "Frontiers in Economics and Christian Scholarship" (Christian Scholar's Review, June 1988). This bibliography represents a comprehensive list of recent sources dealing explicitly with economics and Christianity. Future issues of the Bulletin will contain a new feature, "Bibliographic Update," to provide information on new publications of interest in Christian economic thinking.*

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