

Christianity and the Economic Order

Is anyone in the Association of Christian Economists open to a discussion of the thesis that the Bible has *nothing* to say about the organization of secular economic systems?

It seems to me that the contrary belief is doing great harm. On the one hand, it is hindering the search for effective solutions to social problems by diverting public discussion away from the actual working of social institutions and into posturing and name-calling. On the other hand, the belief that the Bible contains significant advice for the restructuring of economic institutions keeps Christians from reading the New Testament seriously and recognizing that the teaching of Jesus is not some impossible imperative to be fulfilled only at the end of time, but rather realistic instruction to the people of God about the conduct of their life together.

Neither the Old Testament nor the New contains advice for the organization or reform of economic institutions in the United States today, because both are addressed exclusively to the people of God. Notice that I do not say they are addressed to *individuals*. This is a false issue. Of course the Bible speaks to individuals; but it tells us individuals how we are to live together.

Here is how the New Testament says we are to organize our life together: We are to give to anyone who asks without expecting anything in return; we are never to condemn or reject but to forgive without limit; we are to do good to those who harm us; we are not to worry about our future financial security. These principles are supposed to find exemplification in the gathered community, the people of God, those who acknowledge that God's reign has begun among them and that Jesus is now Lord in the new society planned by God, the contrast society that is to serve as a light to the nations, the society through which God is hallowing His Name, inaugurating His kingdom, and accomplishing His will on earth.

It should be immediately obvious that these principles cannot be used to order a secular society such as the society of the United States today. Not the meek but the unscrupulous would inherit the earth if all Christians began giving whatever any others requested; if Christian judges handed out nothing but suspended sentences to convicted criminals; if Christian teachers assigned grades on the basis of personal need; if Christian bankers never required a financial statement prior to making loans. Attempts to transfer the principles of the

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Christian society into secular society simply invite exploitation of the weak and generous by the strong and selfish. The ethics of the family of God cannot be applied to social transactions among people who do not recognize each other as members of a common family with the rights and obligations peculiar to family members. And so all attempts to "christianize the social order" must begin by diluting and deradicalizing the Christian message.

Why do so many Christians insist that the Bible does contain principles for the reform of secular society? That question and its answer are closely linked with another question: Why have so many Christians neglected and even rejected the clear New Testament principles for the ordering of their own life together? In answering one question, it seems to me that we answer the other. Christians have rejected the clear teachings of Jesus because they have found them impossible "in this world"—as indeed they are. But they were not intended for "this world"! In supposing that the social teachings of Jesus have applicability to secular society, we have abandoned our proper calling, the call of the Gospel into an exemplary community, and we have interfered in often pernicious ways with the organization of secular society.

The fatal turn was the Constantinian turn, when the state claimed the title *Christian*. From Constantine to the present, the rulers of the Western world have called themselves Christians. Some of them actually were. But even the most sincere and conscientious among them have never been able to *rule* by Christian principles, for the very simple reason that the Gospel excludes all forms of human domination. Jesus said: "The rulers of this world exercise dominion; it shall not be so among you."

Insofar as this world *must* be governed by human beings exercising dominion over others, it must be governed by the principles of Romans 13—not Romans 12. By reward and punishment, as St. Paul asserts. By tit for tat. By statutes and ordi-

nances. By supply and demand. Christians can and should participate also in this word—we really have little choice about the matter. And as citizens of a democracy we can and should work to make the governing institutions more effective, which means less inefficient and less unfair. Christian economists can help, but only by being good economists. Please note that I am not endorsing the claim that there is some kind of gulf between ethics and economics. The positive-normative distinction is in my view mostly flim-flam: philosophically indefensible and subversive of integrity. Because values influence all scientific work, the work of Christian economists will be influenced by their values.

But our economic arguments should not be shaped in any way by our *theology*, which we should leave at home when we enter the public arena. The rulers of this world do not, as a matter of fact, take our theological assertions seriously when we marshal them in support of particular economic analyses or policies. They know full well that the policy conclusions come first and the theology is massaged to conform. When we offer them some theology, they accept whatever suits their objectives and deploy it as a device to question the good faith of their opponents. I do not see how this can have any other effect than to pollute both the Gospel and public discourse.

When Christians attempt to influence public policy, they should employ exclusively arguments appropriate to public discourse. Theological arguments are not appropriate in public discourse. As for "Christian social witness," we should recognize and admit that the only effective witness to the secular society is the witness provided by Christian communities: the witness of those who live together as if they were justified by nothing but the grace of God, and who by that witness invite others to join their community. The world ought to see how we love one another, not how cleverly or forcefully we argue. ■