

EdC – from Living City May 2006

Focus on the Human Person

Why do we need an Economy of Communion?

BY LORNA GOLD

NOWADAYS THERE IS A WIDESPREAD perception that somehow religion, as a portent of ethical and moral values, can stand apart from the economic choices we make everyday. Historically speaking, this is a very recent phenomenon.

Religion, however, through the process of modernity, has been re-defined as a private affair. Its realm of influence should extend no further than the personal. After all, in a pluralistic society in which everyone has embraced freedom and democracy, no one religion can claim the right to dominate public affairs. This is well and good. Gone are the days when merchants had to carry out their affairs outside the city walls because their trade was thought to be less than human. Gone, too, is the belief that allowing access to credit is tantamount to usury and, therefore, sinful. Economic organizations have managed to extricate themselves from the direct control of religious functions, yet traditional teachings still exert normative pressure on the way in which economic affairs are conducted. Indeed, few other aspects of culture have such far-reaching implications as religion, in that religion “purports to add and alter the meaning of all realms of human activity including work and money,” as sociologist Robert Wuthnow, Director of the Center for the Study of Religion (CSR) at Princeton University, wrote.

Yet the privatization of religion from economic thinking and action has had other important consequences. Over the past two hundred years, economic advances have revolutionized every aspect of human life. Technology and communications have offered untold possibilities to those who have access to them. Humanity is richer than ever before and has more than what is needed for everyone to live comfortably.

At the start of the 21st century, however, we find ourselves facing global problems which, in no small part, have been created by the excesses of the economic model that has been allowed to dominate and which fails to take our relationship with others seriously.

Many of the global problems we are facing today —poverty, environmental destruction, conflict over resources, organized crime, corporate corruption—are also linked in some way to the prevailing vision of the economy. It seems to many writing in this field that there is a flaw in our understanding of what markets are, how they work, and how human beings influence them. Economic literature around social capital, relational capital and trust has demonstrated time and time again that human beings are far more complex than we ever imagined—and that one ignores this complexity at their peril.

Yet, opting for a return to state-centered economy and laying the responsibility on governments is by no means the solution. In my current job, my role is to encourage governments to take responsibility—and a lot more can be done there. Yet, the critical questions today are often left unanswered by the policy debates about development. Those debates have a tendency to seek technical solutions to the world’s problems, but sometimes miss the underlying question of social justice and ethics. Reaching solutions to these problems presupposes a sense of responsibility and an ethic of care towards the other—be they near or far. Our modern economic and political system, it seems, precludes such an approach if it threatens to intrude on our own comfort zone.

At the basis of this is a vision of the human person underpinning the market—that of rational economic man—which is wholly inadequate both in terms of its explanatory power and as a normative model. Adam Smith, the first Professor of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow University, in his other major work—the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*—reveals the moral context in which his *Wealth of Nations* should be read. The first passage of this more difficult book reveals one striking passage: “That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane.”

Perhaps Adam Smith was too optimistic in his assertion that such empathy was ‘too obvious’ to require the burden of proof. What he took for granted as the unspoken bedrock of a wealthy society, the capacity to suffer with others, has been profoundly weakened by the over stretching of self-interest as the organizing principle for society today. The speed of globalization and the quest for financial profit has somehow blinded us from this simple reality. The market not only has the capacity to create growth and jobs, but if only driven by a simplistic logic of self-interest, it also has the capacity to destroy the very values on which it is based.

Recent economics literature—but also a good dose of common sense—tells us that the well-functioning of markets relies no less on self-interest, than on people who are able to relate to each other and put into practice that quality Adam Smith called ‘sympathy.’ They depend on social capital—that intricate network of social relations—that underpins every society. They depend on a vibrant civil society to build strong institutions. Yet the philosophical foundation of our free society positively excludes such niceties as love and compassion from the public sphere.

This leads us to some very difficult questions that have puzzled economists and philosophers alike for over a hundred years. How does one somehow re-inject that sense of responsibility for others into economic life, while retaining the good of what we have?

It challenges fundamental assumptions of the economic model we have today, based as it is on a uni-polar understanding of the human person. It seems that in our quest to rid economics of any kind of humanism, we have opted for a de-humanized economy. Yet to challenge that uni-polar vision requires a different vision of who human persons are, where they are going and what it means to be human. In the words of Joan Tronto, a professor of political science at Hunter College, “whether we can conceive of a way to think of our morality that extends some form of sympathy further than our own group remains the fundamental question for contemporary life.”

Re-engaging with Traditional Wisdom

Precious insights and moral resources for answering these searching questions have traditionally been provided by the great religions of the world. Yet attempting to re-connect, let alone reconcile, economic life and religion is a profoundly daunting task. Economics has developed in such directions as to make discussion of religion seem irrelevant, though there is growing interest in the topic in certain circles. Economic rationality and value-oriented behavior often seem at odds with each other. In attempting to draw together religion and economics, one runs enormous risks. One only has to think of the religious justifications given to all sorts of economic and political projects. Religious thinking can be used to justify practically anything, and abused to suit all ends. In the words of economist Herman Daly, “Everyone claims biblical support for his own pet economic ideas. Like the devil, the economist can quote Scripture to prove what he wants to prove.”

Yet to abandon the wisdom of religious teachings can be a loss for society. As in other times in history, insights can often come from a spiritual impulse and not from the inside of a particular discipline. It is here that the experience of the Focolare Movement, that has given rise to the Economy of Communion (EOC), comes into play.

The Economy of Communion

The EOC emerged in Brazil in 1991, against a backdrop of massive wealth and poverty. For years, the Focolare Movement, which numbers around 200,000 in Brazil, had been working through social service projects to fight poverty. During a visit there, Chiara Lubich noted the work of the Movement, but recognized that something more was needed. It was then that she launched the idea of an EOC: an economy based on the principles of entrepreneurship, but also embracing a communitarian spirituality in all its dimensions. The project took off, and over 800 businesses throughout the world have adopted this vision in their day-to-day operations. There are now two business parks in Brazil and Argentina, and two under construction in Italy and the Philippines, where the project is implemented. Part of the project involves a redistribution of profits—as a concrete expression of communion with those who are in need. But it is much more than a simple transaction. The aim of the project is the total transformation of the business into a place of communion: a community of persons.

In conclusion, I would say that addressing injustice requires a rethinking of the role of business, a redefinition of business and its place in society. The principle need today within the economy, as in society, is to recover our humanity—not as producers and consumers—but as persons in relationship with each other, with the capacity to feel the sorrow of the others, no matter near or far, and act on it. It is to set the market within a wider framework that respects the person, each person, totally.

While the terminology of this proposal may sound quite strange at first sight—more suited to the pews than a business school—it is a concept which, in my view, is long-overdue and essential to humanizing the economy and overcoming some of the chronic problems of injustice we are facing.

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