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Economy of the Cross

Spencer Bogle

Crosses are not good for the economy. Or perhaps another way to state this is that whenever there is a market for the cross, there is most likely a severe misunderstanding concerning the nature of the cross. Or to turn the issue on its head, perhaps it is best to say that an economy that values the cross of Jesus Christ challenges the values of market economies that dominate our world today.

To even pose the question of the economy of the cross is to enter into an interdisciplinary conversation. On a daily basis the news is filled with celebrations and warnings, prognostications and explanations concerning the economy: our economy is strong, it is in danger, it is volatile, etc. In an age of high-speed commercial travel, where instantaneous global communication serves as a means of trade, virtually no market is untapped. In this paper I will refer to an economy as a system of ordered values. While there are myriad different perspectives on the best or most efficient ordering of values, there are several underlying terms at the heart of contemporary economics relevant to this conversation.

Contemplation of the relationship between theology and economics is a fairly recent phenomenon, as the field of economics has developed into its own discipline, distinct from politics and religion.¹ Yet the Christian church has long utilized economic terms to describe God's work in the world and human participation in that work. Language of the economic Trinity has been employed to describe how God relates with God's creation, and how humanity might negotiate relationships, informed by the ordering of values demonstrated by God in relationship with creation. My aim in this brief article is to first identify possible points of connection between theology and economics and to then consider how the cross might inspire Christian economic imagination.

Economy and the Air We Breathe

The definition of economics as a social science provided by Lionel Robbins in the 1930s continues to hold crucial import for understanding contemporary economic relationships: "Economics is the study of human behavior as a relationship between given ends and scarce means that have alternative uses."² In order to begin

1. For a helpful and relatively concise narration of the development of economics as a science and field of study in its own right, see Agnar Sandmo, *Economics Evolving: A History of Economic Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). Until the Enlightenment, religious and state institutions largely controlled economic systems. Economics was subsumed under both politics and religion. Sandmo writes, "The economists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not draw any clear borderlines between economics and the field that is presently known as political science, and in general expositions of the subject they also took up many problems that we now think of as belonging to philosophy, sociology, or psychology" (2).

2. Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: MacMillan, 1935). See also Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). Sen notes that in this essay, when Robbins "argued that 'it does not seem logically possible to associate the two studies [economics and ethics] in any form but mere juxtaposition,' he was taking a position that was quite unfashionable then, though extremely fashionable now" (Sen, p. 2). In his book Sen provides a framework for the possibility of interdisciplinary dialogue between ethics and economics that is also quite helpful for considering what is at stake in the dialogue between theology and economics.

the conversation concerning the economy of the cross, if it is to connect to the realities of the world today, it is helpful to engage this definition and to make some basic distinctions concerning economic language. At the heart of economics is the economic phenomenon, the negotiation of value as it relates to goods of any kind, which can be used for any number of alternative uses. Goods can but need not be material; a good can be time, particular relationships, or even how one defines something such as spirituality. Economics is the study of economic phenomena. An economy is a system of ordered phenomena, and an economic system is a particular way of organizing an economy.³ One of the first things that must be acknowledged in this conversation for those who confess Christian scripture as an authority is that our world, wherever we might find ourselves, is ordered in a much different way than the world of the people of Yahweh wandering in the desert after being freed from Egypt, or than people of first-century Palestine.

One of the primary characteristics of the economy today is its global reach.⁴ The computer on which I type these words was composed of raw materials from Africa and South America, assembled by labor in Asia, then sold and now being used in North America. In addition, while there is much talk about globalization and a global economy, there are also ways in which economies are ordered quite differently around the globe.⁵ It is important to understand that the condition referred to as *globalization*, or *global capitalism*, cannot be divorced from complex histories of trade, conquest, and colonialism. Within this global context there is not simply “a market” but what seems an infinite number of markets, and these markets are comprised of not only goods, but also agents who hold varying degrees of power to influence negotiation within exchange.

Some markets contain goods that trade hands among villagers in rural Africa, while some goods—like a computer—are items from companies with shares sold on stock exchanges. The markets for different items are connected to overlapping national and international histories, and these histories impact labor, production, distribution, and allocation. What is consistent within the present economic age is that these markets are functioning within a global capitalist system.⁶ Such an environment is not only much different from any context one might find in the Bible, but also much different from capitalism as it was presented by early classical economists such as Adam Smith.

Connecting the Dots

While it is important to acknowledge complexity in discernment of faithful economic action from biblical resources, it is just as important to acknowledge that the God who acted in the Bible continues to act as the one God whom we have come to know through the revelation of Jesus Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. God’s action as witnessed by both Old Testament and New, and emphasized by segments of the Christian church throughout its history, is ordered toward creating, redeeming, and sustaining life in the world that God loves. Such order gives particular attention to how churches discern “given ends,” and how churches value the lives of those struggling with poverty, those facing alienation, and those suffering on the underside of

3. I am indebted to my friend and colleague Nathan McLellan, an economist and theological ethicist, who convinced me of the importance of these distinctions at the forefront of this interdisciplinary conversation. Nathan emphasized these distinctions for a class we co-taught at Southern Methodist University. See his articles for Regent College at <http://marketplace.regent-college.edu/ideas-media/business-economy/christian-vision-for-economic-life> (accessed September 1, 2015). Sandmo also provides helpful definitions of economics as a social science and cumulative science (p. 3–7).

4. See Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Anchor, 2000). Friedman provides an excellent description of the new system of globalization in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, which he defines as “inexorable integration of markets, nation states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before” (9). One of the helpful points that he emphasizes in this book is that “globalization has its own defining structure of power” that is built around “three balances:” The balance between nation–states, the balance between nation–states and global markets, and the balance between individuals and nation–states (13–14).

5. See Peter L. Berger and Samuel P. Huntington, *Many Globalizations* (Oxford: Oxford, 2002). See also Frederic Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, *Cultures of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

6. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Hardt and Negri make a distinction between the empire of capital as a new form of sovereignty and world order, marked by no boundaries and no center, and imperialism as an extension of sovereignty of European nation–states beyond their own boundaries.

powers of domination.⁷ In particular, how is this contingent of the population involved in the production of wealth and value on a societal scale? The word *economy* is derived from the Greek *oikos* and *nomos*, which literally translates to “household laws.” It seems that in considering an economy of the cross, the most basic questions are how the event of the cross informs the ordering of values within a particular household, and how household boundaries might be determined. Fundamentally, the event of the cross is consistent with household laws that God provides to God’s covenant people as it pronounces a certain way of life in a world tormented by violence, domination, and oppression.

While we previously acknowledged that the order of economies and households is much different today than at any point within the biblical literature, in this section the challenge becomes envisioning the households in which we live. I live in the household that resides on West 2nd Avenue in Durango, Colorado, with my wife and two boys. This household consists of constant negotiation around values of rent, heat, bread, and vegetables in relation to Legos®, Batman minifigures, and candy. However, these negotiations function within a town where the trade of oil and gas, favorable tourist industry, proximity to a ski resort, and length of growing seasons have impact on prices for rent and food. Durango sets policy in accordance with the structures of the state of Colorado, and Colorado works within the structures of the United States of America. It is rapidly becoming apparent that the United States functions within the global household of humanity. Each of these represents a “household” that is ordered in a particular way. Many of these households overlap, and the walls and borders that we construct resemble semi-permeable membranes more than impermeable walls, which makes discernment of boundaries quite complex.

In addition, I am a member of a church in Durango that lives in accordance with the tax code of Colorado. At times our church household values differ from our family household values, and at times our church household values differ from stated values of the United States of America. While I may not agree with the values that order a particular household in which I live, it is of little use or benefit to deny that the order of any of these larger households have bearing on my action.

What seems to be a consistent connecting point between the current situation and narrative themes of the Bible is that the well-being of those struggling for life in our own context—contemporary widows, orphans, aliens, and sick living threatened and without safety nets—is crucial to faithful ordering of church values and involvement in larger economic structures. Their lives, survival, and dignity serve as a litmus test for ecclesial economy; is the church aligned with economic realities of the poor or with imperial economic ideologies that order our global context? The tension inherent in this question comes to a head when Christians start to speak of the cross, as it marks an imperial, religious, and social judgment on Jesus because he aligned himself with those who did not correspond with the values of the institutions of his day.

Jesus lived within a context of conflicting values. In a way, conflicting values are constitutive of finitude, where scarcity of resources is a reality. God is infinite and God’s love is infinite, but that infinite love is demonstrated within the context of scarce resources. Denying human scarcity by claiming divine abundance undercuts certain tensions within economic negotiations. Perhaps it may be constructive to envision the incarnation as a demonstration of how God, through infinite love, engages scarce resources in a particular way, consistent with God’s values. The cross, then, is a statement of what often happens when God enters into situations of scarcity, of life marked by negotiations among overlapping households. In order to explore implications of the *economy* of the cross, let us turn to some basic proposals of what the cross is.

The Cross

For the purpose of clarity, I will identify three features of the cross that impact discernment of general economic involvement. First, the cross is the event that marks the death of Jesus Christ. It is crucial that the death of Jesus Christ be understood in the context of his entire lifespan, from incarnation to resurrection. The

7. See Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). Tanner warns that the strategy of arguing for Christianity’s economic import on the basis of values “can easily suggest, however, that Christianity is primarily concerned with personal morals and not in any direct way with the structures and organization of economic life” (3). In hopes of avoiding this pitfall, I am using values not as a moral term, but as a site of negotiation concerning goods on a structural level.

cross holds significance because it is the sentence of death given to God incarnate by political authorities, religious authorities, and the masses demanding the release of Barabbas and the death of Jesus. The event of the cross is neither the first nor last word in the lifespan of Jesus, but a definitive moment in which the values of God are made explicit. In the cross, Jesus makes explicit that God will be who God will be. Jesus provides an image of God's love for the world and for the covenant life to which God has called Israel.⁸ The cross reveals what happens when that covenant life is embodied, when it contests values of empires, states, and religious institutions driven by powers of domination. The life of Christ reveals that God will not play by the rules of death.

Second, the cross is an event in history. As mentioned in the first point, the death of Jesus on the cross is a moment in the special history wherein God has become one of us, in the flesh, providing an image of unprecedented accessibility to human senses. Yet, the cross is not only a statement of God's presence within history, but also a statement about the moment into which God became human. For that reason, the particularity of Christ as a person, negotiating values with others in first-century Palestine, under Roman rule is significant; the cross cannot be extracted from the political and economic context. Within that context the cross is an instrument of death and, as an instrument of death, it is both a political and economic statement that powers of domination are not to be threatened; it is a warning sign to those who do not align themselves with the dominant economic system, to those who do not assume their proper place in the political order. Thus, the cross is a symbol of power orientation—whether in the office of an emperor, a magistrate, or a CEO, or in a contagious love for the other that demands justice. As a symbol of domination, the cross signifies death as the end to all who contest the order; through the resurrection, God provides an unprecedented reorientation of power as life, as that which overcomes death.

Third, the cross communicates values: values of the state, values of God, and values of humanity. For powers of state and powers of domination, the cross communicates the supreme value of institutional or personal survival. Through the cross Jesus demonstrates values of love for another, truth, and integrity above one's own survival. The event of the cross demonstrates not only the conflict of values between human institutions of domination and God, but also differing means of negotiating values. Some primary values expressed through Jesus's life that led to the cross are setting right relationships that have been broken on account of oppression, exploitation, and violence. Jesus reconciles the sick and the outcast to societies that have cast them out. Jesus reconciles misconstrued images of God (as a supporter of empire and institutions of domination) to people in need of love, survival, and life. Such values are non-possessive amidst realities of scarcity.

Scarcity and the Cross

The underlying question, then, is what it means for the cross to have bearing on household economies for those who profess the lordship of Jesus. How does the cross impact the ordering of values? Such a task requires a great deal of imagination. Obviously, the cross cannot be made into an economic model in which death becomes a desired end. As Jurgen Moltmann states so directly in the opening lines of *The Crucified God*, "The cross is not and cannot be loved."⁹ The cross is not a glorification of death or sacrifice, but the event that points to life in every direction by exposing the powers of death; the cross is a symbol of the pursuit of life, not simply for the individual, but for humanity, at all costs. The value is life.

The language of an economy of the cross, then, might be particularly helpful as an image of how God deals with situations of scarcity. Many contemporary theologians have emphasized the abundance of God in

8. Richard Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). In the first part of this book Horsley explores political and economic covenantal themes in support of rights and as alternatives to (often-centralized) economic exploitation. The second part of the book identifies Jesus's ministry within the way that the "covenant and economics go closely together in his prophetic preaching and teaching" (99).

9. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 1.

response to capitalist articulations of scarcity as negotiations of limited goods amidst unlimited desire.¹⁰ These theologians present strong arguments challenging capitalist assumptions of limitless desire, as well as situations in which churches might affirm abundance of resources and goods because of the abundance of God's grace. While arguments for human participation in God's abundance are helpful within a theology of creation, rarely do they address particular situations of real scarcity; the argument for abundance is a macroeconomic argument. An economy of the cross holds microeconomic potential, wherein scarcity is not an evil in itself, but a reality of finitude within a fallen world. What structural changes might be possible when churches negotiate value from the particular situations of those suffering from current realities of scarcity for the sake of changes in larger institutional structures?

Albino Barrera presents a different posture towards scarcity, not rejecting it in favor of God's abundance, but rather "that scarcity provides an occasion for taking part in divine providence."¹¹ Drawing from Thomas Aquinas, Barrera identifies chronic material destitution as "a condition that human beings bring upon themselves in deviating from God's providence."¹² Such a statement should not be understood as individualistic, but as a reflection of decisions made by overlapping households negotiating values and alternative uses for goods.

Perhaps situations of scarcity are the hinge points for imagination of alternative economic possibilities. As Jesus enters into our situations marked by scarcity of goods, he teaches us that imagination of alternative economies may very well lead to a cross. It seems that it is in situations of scarcity we discover where we are situated in relation to the cross (and in today's world it would be naïve to imagine that we occupy only one position), and that because of this the cross is essential to our economic imagination. As families and as churches, are we defending ourselves, our positions, our security, or our wealth against voices challenging our rights to ownership? Are we ensuring our own survival, or perhaps simply our luxury, through means of domination and death? Are we on the cross because we are challenging powers that be, prophetically speaking and acting with and for the poor, the outcast, for the common good and rights of life to all? Are we witnessing our friend on a cross, under a lynching tree, or in a jail cell because of work in resistance to economic powers of domination? Regardless, we are the ones invited to participate in economic imagination of negotiating meaning and values that we see in the resurrected Christ in relationships that extend from our own particular households and contextual economic structures to our human brothers and sisters struggling for life around the globe. The value is life that might be proclaimed, affirmed, and resurrected wherever the church finds domination and death.

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10. See William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, "Scarcity and Abundance" (Chapter 4) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Daniel Bell, *The Economy of Desire* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 111–112; Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenantal Self*, "The Truth of Abundance: Relearning Dayenu" (chapter 9) (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 12. These arguments provide helpful and needed critiques of contemporary forms of capitalism as well as promising alternatives. Here I am simply proposing that there is potential in envisioning scarcity not as an evil within capitalism but as a reality that is part of the created order. The denial of scarcity is implicitly a denial of the ontological divide between God and the created order. In this way, conceptions of scarcity and abundance might work together, providing a more consistent coherence between the theology of the cross and a theology of creation.

11. Albino Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), xiii.

12. *Ibid.*, 38. He cites Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q.5 a.7.