Foreword by Jonathan J. Bonk

CHRISTIAN MISSION & ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

A Critical Survey of the Cultural and Religious Dimensions of Economies

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Editors

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EXCHANGE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND RECIPROCITY: LIVING AS A CHRISTIAN IN A CAPITALIST WORLD

Eloise Meneses

> *[With] the collapse of Marxism as a world power … the ideology of the free market now has nothing to limit its claims. There is no visible countervailing power. There seems no sign of a check to its relentless advance. And its destructive potential, both for the coherence of human society and for the safeguarding of the environment, are formidable. The ideology of the free market has proved itself more powerful than Marxism. It is, of course, not just a way of arranging economic affairs. It has deep roots in the human soul. It can be met and mastered only at the level of religious faith, for it is a form of idolatry. The churches have hardly begun to recognize that this is probably their most urgent missionary task during the coming century.*
>
> Lesslie Newbigin (1995, 94–95)

The syncretization of the gospel with culture can take many forms, but perhaps the most insidious is when it affects Christian praxis. Typically this is unconsciously done. The baseline assumptions of the larger sociopolitical and economic world formulate Christian discourse so thoroughly as to make Christian living seem impractical or unrealistic within the particular context. In the case of capitalism, an

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Enlightenment-based theory of human nature legitimizes the notions that actors must involve themselves in self-interested exchange and that "the market" (personified) must be allowed to operate according to its own principles. Yet there is a significant literature in the social sciences to demonstrate that there is nothing inevitable about market exchange or capitalism.[1] The original form of human exchange, reciprocity, weaves together economic with social concerns in ways that mirror injunctions in the Bible to consider one another. In practice, even people in capitalist systems moderate their economic relationships to avoid the harsh social realities that fully marketized exchange would create. Thus, rather than exhibiting a natural element in human behavior, the self-interested and calculating "economic man" proves to be a *product*, rather than a precondition, of capitalism (Mauss 2005, 98).

In the current circumstance of American-dominated globalization, there is a danger that Christians in ministry may unconsciously find themselves promoting a gospel of capitalism together with, or even above, the gospel of Jesus Christ, his church, and his kingdom. This is not to say that there can be no benefit from a selective involvement in the marketplace and in the world of economic development. Christians have always cooperated with human systems, whether social, political, or economic, for the purpose of meeting people's needs. But an open consideration of the fundamental propositions of those systems is critical to maintaining an independent stance as Christians and to involving ourselves in practices that are truly reflective of the kingdom of God. In this chapter I will examine the nature of market exchange, contrast it with reciprocal exchange, and compare the underlying principles of these two types of exchange to biblical ones. A case study on the market women of India will bring out the complexities of living

1 The literature on the history of capitalism and the social construction of the market is truly voluminous. It begins with the classic theorists, such as Marx (1992) and Weber (1947, 1978), and extends to contemporary sociologists (Wallerstein 2004), anthropologists (Appadurai 1986; Carrier 1997; Plattner 1983; Sahlins 1972), historians (Polanyi 2001; Tawney 1972), economists (Blaug 1980), and even theologians (Temple 1977). All of the above works demonstrate the contingent nature of people's economic systems and behavior.

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between the two types of exchange in a developing economy. The results will be applied to the work of Christians in ministry under capitalism generally, with a view to finding a model for incarnating the economic aspects of the work without abandoning biblical purposes.

MARKET EXCHANGE

At its most basic level, market exchange consists of the transfer of money, goods, or services between two parties according to a negotiated agreement. In the negotiation, both parties are expected to know and represent their own interests, and neither is expected to consider the other's interest where it might interfere with his or her own. The result is an open contest for the price, or the terms of the exchange, between the buyer and the seller. In large markets with standardized goods, this contest is at the aggregate level over time, as consumers choose to buy or not to buy and producers adjust their prices accordingly. But the result is the same—the exchange is determined by a direct haggle for the rates.

This model for exchange is not a simple, practical reality emerging from a natural self-interest. It is an ideal form of the exchange that is commonly transgressed and that must be reinforced lest the transgressions hinder the functioning of the larger system of which it is a part. For instance, if a customer were to offer to pay an additional amount to a store clerk, the result would be confusion and a fear of misdealing. The clerk would almost certainly refuse the extra. Why should this be so, if self-interest is the only principle governing the transaction? The customer would be thought foolish at best, perhaps suspected of a criminal plan at worst, for breaking the first principle of the market exchange—to represent one's own interests. The rules of the game dictate that the seller should bid high and the buyer bid low. To cross over and think of the other is to complicate the interaction with non-utilitarian motives, perhaps to offer a bribe.

Yet people in fact do exactly this. In the simplest example, merchants trying to create long-term relationships with customers will add a small amount to the agreed-upon sale, a "gift" intended to

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produce further sales by socially obligating the customer to return. In a more significant example, merchants will give their long-term clients a standard cut on the price and clients will forgo shopping elsewhere as signs of their mutual commitment. The purpose here is still economic for both parties, but a social cement is used to seal the deal, including chitchat about families, expressions of concern for one another, and politeness in the bargaining itself. Even high-level business negotiations are promoted with social interaction. Note that few people can manage to sell at full rates to their families. Minimally, they will drop the price for a family member; maximally, they will give away the product or service for free. The moral obligation to avoid a self-interested struggle is so strong with kin that merchants commonly move away from family, and even deny their ethnicity (a form of extended family), in order to avoid going broke (Foster 1977).

Yet market-style exchange is necessary to an economic system built on the ownership of private property, the specialization of skills, and the need to exchange for purposes of utility. Thus the rules of the game (some informal and some codified in law) protect the system by *insisting* that the parties to the exchange behave in self-interested ways. In most American states, lawyers and real estate agents are required for large purchases, lest buyers and sellers either be misinformed or inadequately represent their own interests. Contracts function to solidify agreements partly by *preventing* the eye-to-eye contact that might soften the arrangements.

There is a positive side to the ideal for market exchange: it is that people may represent their own interests, and even defend them vigorously, without fear of social shame or punishment. In traditional societies this is not possible due to strong taboos on the appearance of selfishness. The taboos fall especially hard on subordinate groups such as women, lower castes, younger people, or ethnic minorities. For such people the market can provide a means of economic escape from social oppression through producing and selling goods or finding paid work. Even a focus on the utilitarian advantage of the exchange itself can be liberating to those who have had to always consider the social implications of pursuing their own interests. Furthermore, there are

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other values associated with market exchange that benefit society, such as honesty, freedom, hard work, and inventiveness. Because the exchange itself requires these values, disclosure and anticorruption laws are developed to enforce transparency and fair play.

Yet, in the main, most people in traditional societies—and many in modern ones—view the naked struggle for personal advantage inherent in market exchange with alarm. This is not because of any perceived natural human goodness that is being destroyed by an evil system. In fact, most traditional societies believe people to be naturally selfish. Rather it is a fear that the social fabric that restrains people's selfishness is being corroded, even destroyed, by a system in which pure economic self-interest outranks moral obligations. In a subsistence agricultural village, for example, the market is only used for the sale of subsidiary goods such as crafts, and these are only sold to outsiders. As the village becomes more and more incorporated into the wider market system, first crops, then labor, and then land become saleable by market exchange. Villagers typically experience this process as demeaning of things formerly considered sacred, especially the land. We, as outsiders, may deride traditional views of the land, but in certain cases we too believe that the market demeans its commodities. A clear example would be the purchase and sale of people. Slavery is the ultimate commodification of a resource. In a lesser example, the shift from "sister-exchange," in which lineages exchange women for women as wives, to bridewealth, in which money is exchanged for wives, has been experienced as demeaning of women even by elder men in West Africa (Bohannan 1959). Money is a convenient means of exchange, but it is also a symbol of the loss of moral relationships in favor of utilitarian self-interest.

Certainly no one can dispute the many material advantages that have been gained, in the aggregate, from the advent of market capitalism. The simplicity, flexibility, and directness of market exchange makes it possible for societies to develop more complex and coordinated forms of specialization. One could say that the loss of social obligation is the gain of economic efficiency and coordination. The result has been an explosive rise in material goods, new technologies, food production,

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