

INDIAN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

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CONTENTS

Editorial.....	277
Lucien Legrand, MEP <i>Christmas Meditation</i>	281
P. Joseph Titus <i>Gleaning Laws: A Measure to Protect the Poor in the Law Codes of Pentateuch</i>	285
John Kurichianil OSB <i>To Pray or not to Pray?</i>	323
Konrad Noronha SJ <i>The Equity of God</i>	341
Anthony Dias <i>Synodality and Liturgy</i>	359
Book Review.....	391
Contents of Volume LX – 2023	397

THE EQUITY OF GOD

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1 INTRODUCTION

Religion and spirituality affect mental and physical health. It is also known that poverty increases various mental and physical illnesses. It can also be a person's image or concept of God. Empirical studies have consistently proven better mental health, reduced stress, and increased life satisfaction, with high rates of religious commitment and activity.¹ In considering equity and its interface with theology, philosophy and faith, poverty is an important topic. A question for reflection could be about how faith shapes an organization's identity and growth. Catholic Social Teaching teaches that the good of the human person is at the center of God's will, therefore the Church is obliged to be concerned with both the spiritual and temporal affairs of people.²

¹ A.F. Shariff, A. Norenzayan, "Priming God Concepts Increases Prosocial Behavior in an Anonymous Economic Game," *Association for Psychological Science* 18/9 (2007): 807.

² A. Bolante Ojo, "Catholic Social Teaching and Poverty Alleviation: The

Gaudium et Spes (1965) states clearly that in spite of there being enough resources for all in the world, there are numerous persons who are plagued by hunger and are illiterate (no.4). Economists too have been addressing this subject that has been so central to the history of religion.³

Studies of religion promise to enhance economics at several levels: generating information about a neglected area of “nonmarket” behavior; showing how economic models can be modified to address questions about belief, norms, and values; and exploring how religion (and, by extension, morals and culture) affect economic attitudes and activities of individuals, groups, and societies.⁴

How human beings organize themselves, especially in terms of economic organization, is not stated specifically in early scripture, it appears to have evolved.⁵ The economic issues become theologically relevant if it is objective and has values. This is relevant as there can be a blurring of the boundaries of the temporal and the spiritual.⁶ Knowing these boundaries is important for growth of all, on a global as well as local platform. Poverty indicates lack of growth.

Nigerian Perspective,” *JORAS* 9 (2019): 51-67, 53.

³ R.H. Nelson, Ann. L, “Sustainability, Efficiency, and God: Economic Values and the Sustainability Debate,” *Ecol. Syst.* 26 (1995): 135-54, 145.

⁴ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Economics of Religion, Introduction to the Economics, of Religion,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, XXXVI (1998): 1465–1496, 1465.

⁵ D.S. Tucker, T.G. Drake, S. Adragna, “The Image of God and the Economics of Exchange,” *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* 20/1 (2017): 39.

⁶ David B. Doty, *Christ at Work: Reflections on Market Economics and the Mission of God*, A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in World Mission and Evangelism. (Wilmore, Ken.: Ashbury Theological Seminary, 2006), 3.

The market is pervasive and complex, touching virtually every person on the planet and it is resistant to simple fixes for troubling global and local economic problems. An issue often is whether there are any values in economics. The value system of economics begins with the fact that economics is a social science, and is about the interactions of people, their welfare.⁷

Equitable growth is critical because it alleviates material scarcity in the world, especially poverty. Poverty indicates lack of cooperative behavior, or lack of concern for the other. This is seen differently in different cultures. A phenomenon of interest to social science is the relationship between religious beliefs and cooperative behavior in different cultures of which understandings of the market and its impact on culture and society, is one.⁸ This is so because growth or sustainability of an economy is dependent on decisions that unrelated persons, in different parts of the world, with different cultural backgrounds take, for others. Faith and religion can and should influence decisions for the common good, as is indicated by Tucker, Drake and Adragna when they state:

Economic theory has constructed economic systems around the idea of *homo economicus*, or economic man. Economic man is a utility-maximizing, profit-maximizing machine that is constantly measuring the marginal benefit of any transaction (or action) against the marginal cost of that transaction. Theologians, of course, recoil at this assumption. Economists stick with it because it generates very good predictions as to what

⁷ R.H. Nelson, Ann L, "Sustainability, Efficiency, And God: Economic Values and the Sustainability Debate," 138.

⁸ Azim F. Shariff, A. Norenzayan, "Priming God Concepts Increases Prosocial Behavior in an Anonymous Economic Game," *Association for Psychological Science*, 18.9 (2007): 807.

people will do in any given situation...the economic institutions of a society should be constructed for human beings as they are created, not human beings as we wish them to be. Human beings are not created to serve the economic system, but the economic system should be created and designed to serve human beings. This point is inspired by Jesus' statement, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27, RSV).⁹

Economics cannot be insulated from faith, and theology. They need to come together. As a discipline economics needs to be open to something more than rational choice theory, profit maximization, utilitarianism, and the like. This is a challenge to the study and practice of economics and requires an interdisciplinary approach.¹⁰ An alleviation of poverty and suffering witnesses to the transforming power of Christ. Therefore, market mechanisms and concepts should be applied redemptively to reflect the heart of God in compassionate and just ministry to the world.¹¹ This is clearly demonstrated by the vision and mission of God carried out by Jesus Christ.

2 JESUS' VISION AND MISSION

Jesus applied contemporary filters to the words of Scripture through eyes conditioned by culture and experience. In that way he made it more relevant to the real life of that time. A strong focus of all his work on earth was the poor. He

⁹ Tucker, Drake, Adragna "The Image of God and the Economics of Exchange," 36.

¹⁰ P.J. Casarella, ed. "Profit Maximization and the Death of God: Theology and Economics in Benedict XVI's Charity in Truth," [*In Jesus Christ: The New Face of Social Progress*] (Grand Rapids, Mic.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 91-98.

¹¹ David B. Doty, *Christ at Work: Reflections on Market Economics and the Mission of God*, 4.

was constantly addressing poverty. This was evident in his inaugural speech and the other sermons and parables he told. Jesus' synagogue reading was both inspirational and programmatic. It was also political. It outlined what God wants for his beloved community. We see in Jesus the hunger of the entrepreneur and the compassion of the social reformer whose strong focus were the economically poor, without omitting those who were spiritually poor as well.

3 MISSION TODAY: WORKING AND EARNING FOR GOD

Humans work for the mission of God. The mission of God, the *Missio Dei*, is the redemption of the whole of creation (Acts 3, Romans 8). It is through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that God and man have been reconciled (2 Corinthians 5), once for all. This reconciliation was needed because there was a divide between the ways of man and the desire of God expressed well in the great commission of Jesus.

The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 implies a twofold response to receiving the good news of God's Kingdom: baptism and obedience. The first is the entering into new life in identification with Christ. The second is to carry out acts in keeping with Jesus' teaching, calling and leading, both spiritual and temporal, including those on being economically and socially just.¹²

It is known that the cultures of many secular business organizations are indifferent to the reality of God.¹³ Therefore, economics and business are potential contexts

¹² Casarella, "Profit Maximization and the Death of God: Theology and Economics in Benedict XVI's Charity in Truth," 95.

¹³ M.E. Cafferky, "Apologetics Without Apology: Developing Arguments for the Existence of God from Business and Economics," *JBIB* 22.1 (2012): 48.

for the work of defending the faith. This can happen if there is an unequal distribution of wealth, often expressed as those who ‘have’ and those who ‘have not.’ This results in scarcity. Scarcity in the world, implies unequal distribution, and with regard to the poor, it is unequal distribution of wealth. This is an issue of justice and common welfare of the poor. Catholic Social Teaching addresses concerns with the social condition of people, through an examination of the functioning of persons, systems and structures.¹⁴

Pope Benedict XVI makes specific mention of justice issues in society. He expresses it in terms of commutative and distributive justice. In *Caritas in Veritate* (CV) he says that what is demanded is not just commutative justice, but also distributive and social justice. He writes, “In fact, if the market is governed solely by the principle of the equivalence in value of exchanged good, it cannot produce the social cohesion that it requires in order to function well” (CV, no. 35). He explains that God is to be considered in economic exchanges, and that these exchanges are forms of communion that impact our lives and those of others.

The poor do not exist in isolation, society is collective. *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) has clearly stated this when it said that only when there is political, social and economic order at the service of humanity, the dignity of individuals and societies will be established (no. 9) and that excessive social and economic disparity is “a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace” (no.29). When there is more equity, there is more dignity, and that leads to community and communion (*koinonia*). This *koinonia* (communion) is not merely an act that two people perform

¹⁴ A. Bolante Ojo, “Catholic Social Teaching and Poverty Alleviation: The Nigerian Perspective,” *JORAS* 9 (2019): 51-67, 58.

when they trade with each other but is a way by which the numerous and various needs of every being, are supplied, by which self-sufficiency and mutuality of life and human society are achieved, and by which social life is established and conserved.¹⁵

Economic dignity and reform can be measured by its impact on the most vulnerable of society, the poor, especially women and children.¹⁶ What is more clearly measured is the “common good” (Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, 65). Therefore, systems should be supportive and supported by the individuals in that system to bring in a more equitable distribution of wealth. The economic system is one such system where such justice issues need to be addressed.

4 GOD AND EQUITY

The Bible is filled with messages of hope and redemption as well as of the wrath of God being visited upon the earth. Today both messages can be found within the broad field of economics.¹⁷

The starting point of economic analysis is the concept of scarcity. Scarcity in economics does not mean human beings have zero resources. The term scarcity in economics just means that there are not enough resources available for everyone to have everything they want at a zero price. It means that there is a cost to everything. Today scarcity exists because the resources for any particular person or any particular project at any particular time are always limited.

¹⁵ Casarella, “Profit Maximization and the Death of God: Theology and Economics in Benedict XVI’s Charity in Truth,” 91-98.

¹⁶ Ojo, “Catholic Social Teaching and Poverty Alleviation: The Nigerian Perspective,” 58.

¹⁷ Nelson, Ann, “Sustainability, Efficiency, And God: Economic Values and the Sustainability Debate,” 150.

God did not leave his people without any resources, but the resources are limited, they must be managed, and all must work to bring them into productive use. This requires that choices are made about how to allocate the resources and use them.¹⁸

A system should allow each individual to make full use of the ability to think and choose. It should also allow for peaceful relationships between humans and their God, fellow humans, and creation. Theology and Scripture informs followers about the way their lives are to be lived and the structures constructed with regard to life in community and the meaning of God in economic institutions. Pope Benedict says that the goal of economic life is true communion.

Today humanity appears much more interactive than in the past: this shared sense of being close to one another must be transformed into true communion. The development of peoples depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who live side by side. *CV*, no. 53

This was forcefully stated in the opening statements of the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* of Pope Paul VI (1967) where it is stated that,

The progressive development of peoples is an object of deep interest and concern to the Church. This is particularly true in the case of those peoples who are trying to escape the ravages of hunger, poverty, endemic disease and ignorance; of those who are seeking a larger share in the benefits of civilization and

¹⁸ Tucker, Drake, Adragna, "The Image of God and the Economics of Exchange," 41.

a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are consciously striving for fuller growth.¹⁹

The natural reality is that we are dependent on each other.²⁰ There is the need for compassion for the poor and disenfranchised. A delicate balance must be struck between acts that alleviate the immediate suffering of the poor and those acts required to create self-sustaining economic growth and strength in local contexts. The former requires a continuous supply of donated funding. The latter necessitates planning, funding, implementation and patience.²¹ Ultimately, how equitable distribution occurs, and how justice is implemented in an equitable manner, depends on how persons and systems operate in relevant and sustaining ways.

5 RELIGION AND ATTITUDES

Persons of faith live their lives in accordance to their faith tradition; their norms, attitudes, dogmas and doctrine. There is a relationship between religion and economically relevant behavior, but no comparable relationship between religion and its impact on people's behavior and attitudes with regard to life in society or impact in a specific culture.

People's religious affiliation or degree of religiosity seems not to influence their attitudes concerning capitalism, socialism, income redistribution, private property, free trade, and government regulation. For every religious tradition or denominational grouping ...

¹⁹ Pope Paul VI, "*Populorum Progressio, On the Development of Peoples*," March 26, 1967. https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html

²⁰ Casarella, "Profit Maximization and the Death of God: Theology and Economics in Benedict XVI's Charity in Truth," 93.

²¹ Doty, *Christ at Work: Reflections on Market Economics and the Mission of God*, 3.

one finds a bewildering variety of economic statements emanating from the representative bodies and leading thinkers... It would seem that every religious tradition and sacred literature contains enough ambiguity to justify any number of economic positions.²²

Therefore, what needs to be considered in societies and cultures is how can more be helped and how can there be more equality, equity and universality. There are various models discussed in research. One model is an economic system of voluntary exchange is the economic system best suited for human beings. Voluntary exchange allows human beings to more fully develop their ability to think, choose, and engage in peaceful relationships.²³ Another model is through a process of co-creation, which is the Bottom/Base of the Pyramid (BoP) approach, development can occur.²⁴ This could require a change from the top-down approach to the bottom-up approach. In this way the actual needs of the poor would be considered, rather than what is thought to be their needs. A third way is by focusing on raising the productivity capacity of the poor, and not the consumption capacity.²⁵ These models have their proponents and detractors. Whatever be the way one looks at the poor, the bottom line is that when there is more, there should be more sharing resulting in less scarcity and more growth and communion. Some means of application through an economic-theological lens are through religious

²² Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Economics of Religion, Introduction to the Economics, of Religion," 1465.

²³ Tucker, Drake, Adragna, "The Image of God and the Economics of Exchange," 37.

²⁴ T. London, "The base-of-the-pyramid perspective: A new approach to poverty alleviation," *Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings*, 1, (2008) DOI:10.5465/AMBPP.2008.33716520.

²⁵ Aneel Karnani, "Marketing and Poverty Alleviation: The Perspective of the Poor," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review* 2.1 (2017): 1, Article 5. DOI: 10.23860/MGDR-2017-02-01-05.

prime, life style changes, and developing more faith in the marketplace.

5.1 RELIGIOUS PRIME

Religious prime, or behavior-priming also known as ideomotor-action, is the activation of perceptual conceptual representations that increases the likelihood of prosocial goals, plans, and behavior consistent with positive representations that persons have. One such prosocial concept is God who is associated with acts of generosity and charitable giving. Therefore, those who believe in God may automatically behave more generously when these concepts were activated. The religious prime could also arouse an imagined presence of supernatural watchers, which then increased prosocial behavior. “Although religions vary profoundly, central to all faiths is the idea of one or more omnipresent and omniscient moralizing agents who defy death, ignorance, and illusion; who demand costly sacrifice; and who arbitrate behavior in groups.”²⁶

5.2 LIFESTYLE

Biblical messages were, delivered by priests, ministers, and clergy. Messages of importance today are carried on mostly by biological, physical, and social scientists. Both are needed, faith and reason. It is how the believer lives his or her faith that is important. The consistent lifestyle of a believer, provides an important, visible expression of faith that skeptics cannot discount. This is what is called witnessing to the faith. Faith in Christ is not merely assenting intellectually to the truthfulness of certain propositions (James 2:19). It is the commitment of the whole heart, the whole being, to following Jesus Christ (Matthew 10:38;

²⁶ A.F. Shariff, A. Norenzayan, “Priming God Concepts Increases Prosocial Behavior in an Anonymous Economic Game,” *Association for Psychological Science* 189 (2007): 807.

Mark 8:34; Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9). Witness to faith should emerge from the action of presence, concern, and service. The content spoken and the context experienced should be congruent and validate each other.²⁷

5.3 FAITH IN THE MARKETPLACE

Economics is not just a matter of objective facts and scientific laws alone, unaffected by moral judgments.²⁸ The common good needs to be addressed. It requires a sharing of burdens and blessings. What is needed in the marketplace is that decisions are made and people organize themselves for productive purposes. This is also true when moral issues come into play in the marketplace. How a believer responds to moral issues in the marketplace is important, which would lead to integral human development, moving from “less human conditions to more human conditions” (Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, no.14). This can bring in the element of sin, which can be a stumbling block for many.

5.4 SIN

Research in economics indicates that positive rewards can encourage cooperative behavior when there is an opportunity to form social relationships. It has also been found that a punishing God and the threat of divine punishment, rather than any loving or compassionate traits, are responsible for keeping adherents from crossing boundaries in situations where they would be otherwise tempted. Research on punishment and reward has found that punitive deities may be more effective at keeping anonymous strangers from cheating each other, whereas rewarding deities may be

²⁷ Cafferky, “Apologetics Without Apology: Developing Arguments for the Existence of God from Business and Economics,” 47.

²⁸ Nelson, Ann, “Sustainability, Efficiency, and God: Economic Values and the Sustainability Debate,” 135-54.

more effective at encouraging more trust and cooperation within groups of people who interact recurrently.²⁹

The closeness or distantness a devotee has with the God of his or her understanding is dependent on whether the relationship is with a God who is punishing, compassionate or loving. In all faith traditions transgressions are considered sin, the implication being that there is some form of punishment. Depending on how a believer views the God of his or her understanding, he or she will view the punishment. This could determine how a person conducts his or her life. In the economic sphere, there could be sin when a person acts in an unrighteous manner, whether overtly, intentional or out of ignorance.

God is just and expects the fair distribution and sharing of wealth which implies the pursuing economic justice in various ways, thus helping overcome material poverty. The free market is one of the ways which could serve a redemptive function in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God by demonstrating the love of God through the intentional alleviation of poverty. God concepts, activated implicitly, increased prosocial behavior even when the behavior was anonymous and directed toward strangers.

6 A FOLLOWER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ assures us of the continuity between what was, is, and is to come.³⁰ Jesus' embodiment, enfleshment, and incarnation are the boundaries within which a follower determines why he or she is following Jesus. Jesus'

²⁹ Shariff, Norenzayan, "Priming God Concepts Increases Prosocial Behavior in an Anonymous Economic Game," 94, 807.

³⁰ Graham McFarlane, "Living on the edge - moving towards the Center: The Place of Jesus Christ in Our Quest for Personhood," *Evangelical Quarterly* 78.1(2006): 37-50.

disciples actively learn from Him. Faithfulness is the mark of true discipleship, which requires the disciple to stand by his/her master in thick and thin. True discipleship is thus determined by a person's commitment to practicing the values and principles learned from reflecting on Jesus Christ and to reflect Him in the way he or she lives.

Jesus fulfilled his mission in and through his obedient humanity and that is what is expected of his disciples, as it is in and through the humanity of Jesus Christ that human personhood is realized. It is within the boundaries of the life, death and resurrection that social and economic constructions were shaped. The quest is the story of creation and Church, redemption and Kingdom. "It is located in relationship with the Living God, through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ and empowered and realized in communion with the distinctive economic and political criteria of the people of Christ."³¹

7 DISCIPLESHIP AND THE REIGN OF GOD

Jesus' core message was a very simple and clear one, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel," according to Mark 1:15. Jesus has used words that could be construed as being frightening to followers, for who would want to be insulted, persecuted, killed, and have evil things said about him or her? Yet, that is what is demanded of a follower of Jesus, because disciples live in the kingdom as presented by the leader (Jesus) and discipleship entails following in the steps of the one who reigns in that kingdom. This is not accepted by those who reject God's reign because allegiance to Jesus clashes with society's most treasured investments; the stability of a home, being loyal to family above all else, being accepted

³¹ McFarlane, "Living on the edge - moving towards the Center: The Place of Jesus Christ in Our Quest for Personhood," 49.

in community, living peacefully, preserving one's life. Following Jesus might mean forfeiting these things.³²

8 BARRIERS TO DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus clearly instructs his disciples about flaws in character formation, through the parable of the Sower. The assumption is that the four persons represented by the soils, all hear the truth. The difference lies in how they hear the good news and the kind of heart they should have to follow the life and teachings of Jesus. Through the parable we understand at least five major barriers to discipleship that can hinder disciples in their heart formation into Christlikeness. They are:

Dismissive Barrier (resistance to truths that seem impossible to us), Discrepancy Barrier (professed values that are not character deep), Distracted Barrier (a lifestyle slowly drifting off course), Disconnected Barrier (not regularly abiding in Jesus), and Distressed Barrier (an initial moment of troubling emotional stress that is not addressed and becomes debilitating, excessive worry).³³

Throughout life, followers need to be open and aware of what hinders their being disciples and becoming more like Jesus and following his teaching. This then leads to owning the teachings, confessing it to God, and inviting God to help the follower be more responsive to receiving God's truth. Jesus tells his followers to put "words of mine ... into practice" (Matt 7:29) and to "learn from me" (Matt 11:29). This is the call of a leader to his disciples. The two

³² L. Ann Jervis, "All for Jesus: the cause, character and role of discipleship suffering in Q," *Pro Ecclesial* 1 (2002): 41-56, 53.

³³ K. Issler, "Five Key Barriers to Deep Learning and Character Formation Based Primarily on Jesus' Parable of the Four Soils," *Christian Education Journal* 9 (2012): 138, 155.

questions in Mark 8:36-37 are comments on the sayings on discipleship, “What profit is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet be punished with the loss of his life? For what can a man give in exchange for his life?” (Mark 8:36–37). For followers of Jesus, it is much better to follow him and to lose life now but to gain eternal life in the age to come (Mark 10:30).

However, the more applicable notion comes from those who point to living as an act of worship and self-sacrifice. Life is made up of time, relationships, pursuits and resources. Christians are called to set aside their own agenda to follow the agenda of Christ spending their resources - serving and loving God and others. Life is God’s gift to a Christian and thus, it has economic value, just as do material resources, educational training and professional endeavors. All these may be made offerings to God, especially when spent for the sake of others.

9 CONCLUSION

The marketplace is pervasive and complex. It reaches every corner of the earth and challenges the Church toward cooperation and critical engagement. We must address the ongoing problems of poverty and inequality, especially as a means of grace to present a living Gospel and to make disciples of all nations. And in the face of the tensions and difficulties, we seek economic justice for all people, and thus we will see Christ at work.³⁴

Disciples always imitate their leaders, whether it be in words or in action. Charismatic leaders do not just influence their followers but also enable them to be true to themselves embracing the teachings of the leader, and making choices

³⁴ Doty, *Christ at Work: Reflections on Market Economics and the Mission of God*, 72.

accordingly. Jesus' charisma had an almost inexplicable aura: fascinating to followers, and was provocative to opponents. The radical nature of the call to follow Jesus can have dramatic consequences because it is a call which is to be prophetic, messianic, and eschatological. He created a bond with his followers as they then committed themselves to him and became the proof the continuity of his work and mission. Human beings are made for thought, choice, and peaceable relationships. If this is a faithful interpretation of the image of God, then economic systems should be designed in order to build upon or work with those characteristics of human beings. To do otherwise is to make it much more difficult for human beings to engage in those peaceful relationships that are the manifestation of the image of God.

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