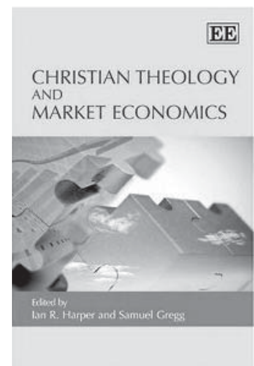
Christian Theology and Market Economics



by Ian R Harper and Samuel Gregg (eds)

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reviewed by Eve Poole

I love edited collections. I think Gen Y's Attention Deficit Disorder is catching, so just having one article to read at a time helps me to process, particularly in an area as complex as theology and economics. As the editors of this collection point out, there was a time when theologians and economists knew much more about each other's work than they do now. They have set about re-uniting these two disciplines, drawing together contributions from experts in both fields, and across the denominations and time-zones, to create a rich and thought-provoking mixture. In the UK, the list of contributors includes our own Peter Heslam and Philip Booth.

The joy of well-edited collections is the sort of introduction here provided by Harper and Gregg. In it, they provide a potted summary of the book, which enables a magpie like me to pick and choose while not missing any of the themes that arise from the collection as a whole. In addition, I should have liked the editors to have chanced their arm and written some concluding reflections to draw the collection to a close, but I appreciate their point that this sort of 'reconciliation' is beyond their scope. But for the purposes of this review I will try to give you a flavour of where the book left me, in case it helps you in deciding whether or not to request it in your local library. (The price is a bit steep!)

First, I really liked the inclusion in the collection of three chapters on Christianity's contribution to economic thought, as this aspect is so often neglected and/or underestimated in the mainstream literature. Rooting this section in a discussion of Aristotle's science of economics also helped to earth the collection, and to remind the reader that seeing the activities of economics and theology as intellectually separate is a peculiarly modern thing to do. The middle section of the book then sets up areas of convergence and dispute between these two fields in a particularly useful chapter by the economists Geoffrey Brennan and Anthony Waterman, before moving on to an unusual contribution by Gordon Menzies. He uses the dramatic device of a 'Platonic dialogue' between Economic Man and Theological Woman to explore the concept of identity. His sad conclusion is that the two cannot get married, and at this middle point in the collection I started to fear its collapse. However, the final part moves on to more applied terrain, discussing the morality of business, particularly in a globalised world, and in relation to the challenge of poverty. This final section starts with the now-traditional apologia for business, ably argued by Michael Millar, before Philip Booth contributes a Roman Catholic perspective, and Peter Heslam argues for the transformative role of business as a means of addressing global poverty, using the fifth version of H Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* model, viz: Christ the transformer of business.

One quibble – I was confused by Harper's use of 'affluenza'[1] in the chapter he writes in this final section with Eric Jones. The authors qualify this in a footnote, explaining that they use it here to describe the risk that affluence

1 The word 'affluenza' came to prominence with the book of that name by psychologist Oliver James: *Affluenza*, Vermillion, 2006.

diminishes the work ethic, while they acknowledge that in recent times the term has come to mean precisely the opposite, referring instead to the sense of meaninglessness that arises from workaholism. I have a vested interest here. I was recently part of a Church of England symposium on theology and work that addressed this matter explicitly. We looked at affluenza both in the context of the theological danger of letting work become an idol, and because it represents a crisis in executive mental health.

I therefore leapt on this chapter in particular, and found it rather puzzling. Why, if affluence makes us lazy, is there so much overwork? And the psychologists would argue that consumerism is the ultimate addiction. The conversion of this insatiable desire into a yearning for spiritual goods has been touched on in the modern period by Kenneth Adams, Richard Harries, Rowan Williams and John Hughes (whose *The End of Work* I reviewed in FIBQ 12:1), and is behind many efforts to use Benedictine concepts of work and leisure to correct work/life imbalance. The selfishness of overwork in a world where there are so many people out of work relates to this debate, as does the debate on sustainability where a misplaced ethic of consumerism drives the over-production of trifles and skews the market in the rich's favour. While Harper and Jones drift into this second understanding of affluenza, concluding as do the authorities above that the antidote is a renewed focus on non-material values, they would have had time to spare for a development of this extremely important and timely debate if they had got there more quickly.

Finally, I was left wondering whether there were any other voices we should be hearing. The editors have sourced contributions mainly from the usual suspects: the US, the UK and Australia. While the substance of the contributions ranges beyond the geographical borders of their authorship, I wondered what it feels like to wrestle with these issues in the BRIC nations: Brazil, Russia, India and China, particularly in the context of Christian theology and development economics. So can we have another book please?

Eve Poole

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Good news. Jesus has moved the stone. There is hope for our work life. Jesus said, *"I came to seek and save that which was lost."* (Luke 19:10) The empty tomb is proof of a mission accomplished. As pointed out by Ed Silvoso, author of *Anointed For Business* the key question is 'What was lost?' Too easily we read this declaration by Christ as meaning his mission was merely to resuscitate our souls. In this reading, we are saved, but our work is left behind. It is unsalvageable. To know what Jesus saved, however, you have to identify what was lost. In Genesis 3: 17-18, one of the consequences of the fall is the cursing of human work. The ground would be tilled, but only amid the pain and entanglements of thorns.

If our work was part of what was lost, then it is part of what is saved. If it was part of the fall, then it is part of the resurrection. As for those thorns that cursed the ground, Christ bore their curse on

His own head just as surely as He bore our sins. The thorns of the curse penetrated the created body of the Son of God so that creation could be free of their barbs. The thorns no longer have any dominion over our work, just as death no longer has dominion over our bodies.

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