

Theology and Economic Ethics: Martin Luther and Arthur Rich in Dialogue

By Sean Doherty

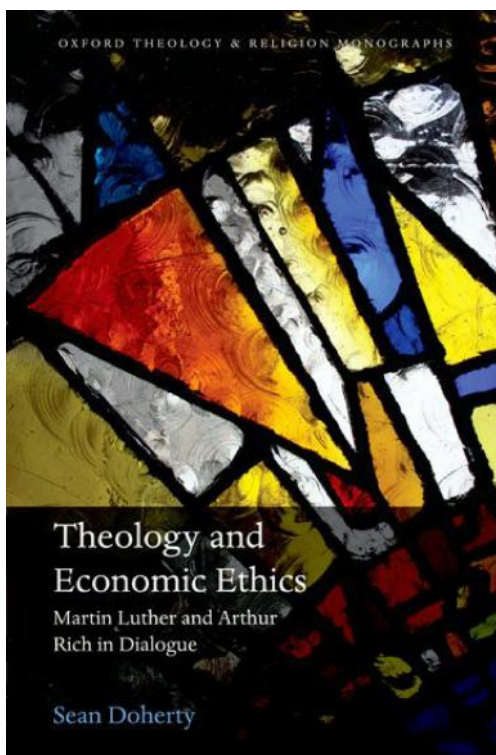
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Sean Doherty shines in the firmament of academic ethicists. Doherty is Lecturer in Ethics at St Mellitus College in London, and is in demand as a speaker and author across the spectrum of ethics. I first met Doherty when he was an undergraduate at Oxford. He made an immediate impression on many older students with rare intelligence, scriptural soundness, and worldly wisdom. So I asked him to be President of the student Theology Society after me, knowing he was destined to be a thought-provoking pioneer. Over the intervening years I then lost touch with him as he married and raised three children alongside the calling of ministry and teaching.

Theology and Economic Ethics is a book based upon Doherty's doctoral thesis, so when I was asked to review the monograph, I had high expectations. This book exceeds expectations: it is indeed a pioneering work which reflects Doherty's complex thinking and crisp simplicity of expression.

Doherty's work is pioneering because he revisits Luther in the light of recent scholarship to take Reformation theology "seriously as a resource for reflection on *economic* matters." He is also one of the first to critically appraise 20th century Swiss ethicist Arthur Rich in the English language. In terms of

method, Doherty draws on "the pre-modern Luther as a resource for interrogating the possible strengths and weaknesses of Rich's own method" (p.2). In so doing, he aims



to avoid what he describes as tunnel vision in being constrained to only one time period.

Doherty's complex thinking is demonstrated from the outset. Methodologically, the book is a skilful exponent of meticulous research. Why juxtapose Martin Luther and Arthur Rich's theological methods? There is an atmosphere of

apple and pear with the two theologians. Luther is the apple – liked by many, memorably colourful, and universally recognised. Arthur Rich is the pear, less widely appreciated, harder to digest, and not known outside academic circles. The differences are considerable. Luther (1483 – 1546) was a child of the Renaissance and father of the Reformation whereas Rich (1910 – 1992) grew up in Switzerland between the world wars, postulating a postmodern, scientific, ethical method of doing economics. Luther's emphasis on scripture was inherited from Erasmus and Renaissance scholarship; Rich's roots came from Weber, Marx and Rawls but also Barth, Pascal and Zwingli. Yet context aside, Luther and Rich share similarities which serve to hone Doherty's dialectical comparisons. Both Luther and Rich were pastors, writers and professors who were concerned with the intersection of faith and contemporary society.

Doherty's simplicity of expression is due to his focus. He takes Luther's 1519 *Sermon on Interest* as his primary text, demonstrating "Luther's first methodological step is to hold up the gospel against contemporary practice for comparison. His second assumption is that the gospel has inherent moral import" (p.13). Third, Luther has a