

God's Good Economy: Doing Economic Justice in Today's World

By Andrew Hartropp

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Concise readable reflections on economics written from a clear biblical perspective are in short supply. (Notable exceptions are Donald Hay's *Economics Today* and Alan Storkey's *Transforming Economics* but they were written over 30 years ago and neither is easy to find without trawling second-hand sites on the internet.) So this short book from Andy Hartropp is to be warmly welcomed and commended. The author is the only person I'm aware of on the planet who has separate doctorates in Economics and in Theology. In fact his theology doctorate was an academic study of economic justice in the bible, subsequently published in 2008. So the author is well qualified to tackle a Christian perspective on economics, particularly one that is rooted in a Christian understanding of justice and informed by his earlier academic study. But do not be put off by these impressive credentials – this is a highly readable and accessible account, written with a non-specialist Christian reader in mind.

It is perhaps also important to be clear about what the book is not trying to do. It is not trying to be an introductory economics textbook for the Christian. And, although there are practical suggestions, it is also not a 'how to' guide for business people,

social entrepreneurs and support organisations wanting to practise economic justice. So there is a risk that a business reader, hoping to find a practical, biblically based guide on

in economics or studying it at school or university might well have found themselves thoroughly depressed by the utilitarian underpinnings of rational economic 'man'. So Christians in this position should find this book useful and uplifting. Rebuilding economics to do justice is an important task in furthering the Kingdom of God.

After a key chapter setting out the biblical perspective on economic justice, the book adopts a thematic approach to the subject-matter. A first group of chapters addresses key themes in relationships in economics – buying and selling, employees and employees, church communities. A second group of chapters examines doing economic justice in wider society, focusing on firms, on the banking and finance system, and on the role of government and non-governmental organisations.

What is immediately apparent from the opening chapter "What is Economic Justice?" is that the Bible is replete with material on economics and on just economic relationships.

The emphasis is not only on explaining what justice might look like, but also on doing justice. As Hartropp explains, this latter aspect is what makes a Christian perspective on justice distinctive from



socially responsible Christian business practice, might find the author's approach quite broad-based and, where there are ideas for reflection, preaching to the converted. Anyone interested

pluralistic secular perspectives on defining justice (allocative, distributive and procedural). Justice is integral to God's intentions in creation, and his expectation is that his people will not merely seek just outcomes, but will "put on justice" (Job 29:14). A biblical perspective on justice is concerned with the quality of relationships (am I treating people well?) as well as the nature of outcomes (who gets what?). For me, although not explicitly for the author, this connects closely with the resurgence of interest in virtue ethics, exemplified in the writings of NT Wright, Stanley Hauerwas and many others. Seeking to do justice, particularly in business, places attention not only on actions but also on the qualities and character of those making those actions. Doing justice in economic life should focus on how we treat people and on the nature and quality of our relationships with others. So it is immediately apparent that a very different and normative vision is being offered here from that found in 'positive' economics textbooks, where the focus is on 'efficiency', achieved only when rational economic actors behave in their individual best interests.

In the remaining chapters the author covers a lot of ground in a short space. Much will be familiar to thoughtful Christians, and of course much more could be said. As consumers we are encouraged to reflect on how we do justice in what we choose to buy.

There is encouragement to think more generally about the dominance of 'consumerism' and to think beyond merely 'shopping ethically'. Workers are encouraged to think about what it means to be God's stewards, working not for monetary reward but to achieve the restoration of the creation. This contrasts sharply with 'standard' economic models, which treat work as a 'bad', the opposite of leisure, only necessary to allow consumption of goods and services in a purely transactional sense. We are also asked to consider the implications for working relationships. For leaders and managers, how do you do justice in the workplace? Hartropp answers this question in particular by looking at questions of personal behaviour such as the setting of salaries, decent working conditions,



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or good career development. Outside economics these are all familiar issues, both in the Christian and the secular worlds. The promotion of decent work as a formal concept has been on the agenda of bodies such as the International Labor Organization and the European

Union for over two decades, and closer to home the Living Wage Campaign has made a lot of recent headway. The wider discussion on socially responsible firms is important but not groundbreaking. Christians in business should know this stuff!

I do however welcome the author's framing of the church as a vehicle for doing justice. Churches rarely, if ever, think about their economic impact and influence. These are questions which deserve wider consideration. Hartropp comes down firmly on the side of arguing that the poor deserve special attention in God's Kingdom; and that the way that the church works to support the poor and needy is both a sign of the seriousness with which it takes a biblical view of justice, and an opportunity for blessing.

In the second part of the book, the issues get trickier. The Bible is not an instruction manual on how to run a modern banking system or how modern states should govern economic activity. Some of this visits issues already addressed by other Christian thinkers who have sought to reflect on the fallout from the 2008/9 global financial crisis, and the moral and ethical lessons to be learned from this. As Hartropp is ready to point out, these issues of economic justice across wider society are not necessarily easy to resolve. However I applaud his efforts to apply biblical material, including for example reflection on how the ancient principle of Jubilee might apply to modern society.

In summary *God's Good Economy* is an excellent introduction for those who want to begin thinking about the important questions of economic justice in the contemporary world. It is intended to stimulate wider inquiry and reflection, activities that are even more urgent for the church in the strange and unsettling times of a global disease pandemic.  



Andrew Henley is Professor of Entrepreneurship and Economics at Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University. Over 35 years he has written and published extensively on the economics of labour markets, small business growth and entrepreneurship and regional development issues. He has worked extensively with business owners and served as a policy advisor. He is a Fellow of the Learned Society of Wales.