

# From Ecclesiastical to Political Economy

## The Rise of the Social

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In response to Hannah Arendt's claim that the social realm originates with the modern age, this article argues for its roots in the early Christian, ecclesiastical concept of *oikonomia* or economy. The first part shows how economy first exceeded the *oikos* (household) into the public sphere within the society of Christian believers. The second part focuses on the passage from ecclesiastical economy to political economy that coincides with the emergence of modernity. The last section concludes by emphasizing the continuity between ecclesiastical and political economy, despite the phenomenon of secularization.

## Introduction

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that “the emergence of the social realm, which is neither public nor private, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincides with the emergence of the modern age,”<sup>1</sup> and that the emergence of society,

the rise of housekeeping [“*Oikonomia*”], its activities, problems and organizational devices—from the ... household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of this article shows that economy first exceeded the *oikos* (household) into the public sphere inside the society of Christian believers within the framework of what is termed ecclesiastical economy. After presenting a definition

of the meaning of economy (*oikonomia*) in Patristic texts, I discuss how economic activity is organized in time and in space according to this concept. Based on this discussion, the article then argues that a number of the structural features of ecclesiastical economy correspond to Arendt's description of modern society.

The second part focuses on the passage from ecclesiastical economy to political economy that coincides with the emergence of modernity. A re-reading of Arendt's account of the rise of modernity, taking into account the rise of the social that took place in the fourth century AD, suggests that the process of the church's expropriation of its property accompanied the transition from ecclesiastical to political economy.

The last section suggests that although the process of the secularization of society involved a radical transformation in the nature of economic activity that occurred within society, several structural characteristics of this realm remained intact. In addition to the continuation of these structural aspects, it is argued that the principle of movement that inspires ecclesiastical economy was adopted by political economy from its outset.

## Ecclesiastical Economy

The Christian history of salvation marks the year of the incarnation of God the Son in the flesh of Jesus as the moment at which economic activity exceeded the threshold of the household. Unlike history from Arendt's perspective, economic activity first exceeded the household into the world not with the removal of economic activity from the earthly household but rather from the *proto oikos*—the first and original divine household where God the Father, God the Son, and the God the Holy Spirit dwell. As surprising as it may sound to modern ears, the church fathers used the concept of economy to describe the manifestation of the divine in the world, and not, as maintained by Arendt, to describe the appearance of the life process in the public sphere.

What, then, is the meaning of *oikonomia* according to the church fathers? The concept is a polysemic one, and its meanings are context dependent: "in the most learned translation, the word *economy* ['Oikonomia'] is rendered by different terms such as *incarnation, stewardship, plan, design, administration, providence, responsibility, duties, compromise, lie or guile*."<sup>3</sup> The term *oikonomia* appears only nine times in the New Testament, and in its most general terms,

"economy" refers to the plan made known in the coming of Christ. It is the actualization in time and history of the eternal plan of redemption, the providential ordering of all things, a certain order (*taxis*) marks the economy that expresses the mystery of God's eternal being (*theologia*).<sup>4</sup>

The use of the term became more common as the church fathers were increasingly exposed to the Gentile world, and it appears thousands of times in the writings of the Greek church fathers in various contexts. In itself this fact is not surprising because the use of the term *oikonomia*, namely to describe prudent management, was widespread in the Greek-speaking world of that time.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the growing use of the term, which took place alongside the beginning of the formation of Christian doctrine, contributed to the increasingly central place of economy in the Christian faith. In what follows, I will try to delineate how *oikonomia* functions as a concept of time and of space in Christian thought.

## Economy as History of Salvation

Economy as a concept of time renders it synonymous with history. The understanding of economy as a concept of time gives rise to an understanding of history that differs from its modern understanding, as described by Arendt in her article, “The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern.”<sup>6</sup> Christian history spans between a beginning and an end: the beginning of the economy of salvation—that moment at which the divine exceeds the *proto oikos* into the world with the incarnation of the Son of God—exists alongside the end point of history (the eschaton). The economy of salvation expresses the idea that human history spans, to use Arendt’s much-loved terms, the “no longer” and the “not yet.”

The history of salvation itself extends between the Christ event and the end of the world, and it is composed of all the moments of transgression of human-linear time. That which is revealed in those moments that constitute history is the economy of God, this time in the sense of God’s plan of salvation. These moments are not only the beginning and the end points of history, but they also appear throughout history. The sacrament of the Eucharist, in which God and his salvific plan manifest themselves in the world, is an example of such a moment.

It is important to note that the same processes that take place in space that are at the center of this article’s attention—that is, the rise of the social—also take place in regard to conceptualizations of time. That is, the secularization of time, like the secularization of space, did not give rise to an entirely new concept, either of time or of space. Rather, this secularization presupposes a concept that is Christian in origin though emptied of its divine content. The resemblance between Arendt’s claim that with the rise of the social realm the life process was liberated from the circularity that nature imposed on it,<sup>7</sup> and the liberation of time by Christianity from the circularity imposed on it by the Greeks is striking. The liberation of time from circularity occurs with the emergence of a Christian concept of economy as the history of salvation in the sense that human *history is no longer incarcerated*

in a circular framework of time but *that history is progressive*. The secularization of history—the evacuation of the manifestations of God from time—liberated time, in turn, from the structure that the Christian concept of time still imposed on it. Paraphrasing Arendt, one may say that it is only in the absence of a divine force’s guidance of human history that history itself could be attributed as the force to compel human action and that it could be released from the origin and the end point between which it oscillated in Christian thought.

## Economic Space

Economy as a concept of time was used by the church fathers to alter the ancient Greek concept of space; as well, the economy of salvation is more than just the sum total of those moments in which the continuity of linear time is fractured. The most significant characteristic of these moments is that they are moments in which spatial infringement occurs. These are the moments when the divine exceeds the *proto oikos* and manifests itself in the world. To put it differently, the economy of salvation is the history of these infringements beginning with the incarnation of God the Son in the flesh and up until the whole of humanity is divinized at the end-point history of this world. This infringement—economy—takes place in the world and in a specific space. The decisive moment in its formation was the introduction of the distinction between economy and theology in the fourth century AD.<sup>8</sup> It was at that point that a distinction was created between God in himself—existing outside of the world, about whom nothing can be said with certainty and who is the subject matter of *theology*, and God as he is who reveals himself in the created world, that is, economy.

At first glance, the distinction between theology and economy seems to establish a clear demarcation between what is in the world and what is outside of it, but this distinction gives rise to a radical transformation within the world itself. The novelty exists in the idea that on the other side of the demarcation between the divine and the secular lies economy—the space of appearance of the divine in the world. Economic activity, the appearance of the divine in the world, and the new space in which *it appears*—the society of believers—give rise to a new spatial distinction in the world. Society as the space in which economic activity takes place, which exceeds the classical Greek categories of the *vita activa* that Arendt enumerates,<sup>9</sup> namely, labor, work, and action, cannot be contained by the spaces that were intended for those activities: the earthly household, the workshop, and the marketplace. Arendt describes the emergence of this new spatial distinction in the world as follows:

It has been rightly remarked that after the downfall of the Roman Empire, it was the Catholic Church that offered man a substitute for citizenship which had formerly been the prerogative of municipal government. The medieval tension between the darkness of everyday life and the grandiose splendor attending everything sacred, with the concomitant rise from the secular to the religious, corresponds in many respects to the rise from the private to the public in antiquity. The difference is of course very marked, for no matter how “worldly” the church became, it was always essentially an other-worldly concern which kept the community of believers together.<sup>10</sup>

Economy is precisely the “otherworldly concern” that takes place *in* the world. Economic activity, from the moment it exceeded the divine *oikos*, began to establish a new space for itself. This activity takes place in society—in the society of believers, and it is maintained, amongst other apparatuses, by the church as the space of appearance of the divine, by pastoral government, by the sacraments made present in the icons, and by testimony of the martyrs. As a result of the rise of the society of believers in Christ’s economy, space undergoes a triple partition: (1) the theological, or the divine in itself; (2) the economic, or the divine as it manifests itself in the world and in the society of believers; and (3) secular life that includes the political and the private managed in the world crafted by men.

The new social realm, which blurred the old borderline between private and political, has also changed the meaning of the two terms almost beyond recognition. In the case of the political, as Arendt remarked, it is grasped as a means to a higher end.<sup>11</sup> Another characteristic of this new space is that its borderlines are in principle unstable and that it has the tendency to grow.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the positioning of the borderlines of economic activity became the subject of prolonged controversy amongst those seeking to expand them and those seeking to contain them. Two examples can clarify these positions. Augustine tried to contain the space of the appearance of the divine Trinity as much as possible within the domain of the human soul. In contrast, the iconophile movement sought to expand greatly the space in which economic activity takes place.<sup>13</sup>

As can be seen, society as the space in which economic activity takes place is not a modern phenomenon, and its emergence can be traced back to the pre-modern Christian world. Moreover, the society of believers in Christ’s economy possesses several of the structural characteristics that Arendt associates with the social in the modern age: In both instances, society is a new realm that emerges as a result of a historical event. In both, society is a space with undefined borders, and this space blurs the borders between the public and the private, and both Christian and modern society tends to grow. One of the great differences

between modern consumer society and the society of believers lies in the nature of the economic activity that takes place in it, which is itself the result of the *oikos* that it exceeded.

## The Birth of Political Economy

Among the three historical events that Arendt enumerates as standing at the threshold of the modern age (which coincides with the birth of political economy) and determining its character,<sup>14</sup> she views the expropriation of the church's property—an event she claims was preceded by the Reformation—as the most closely related to the emergence of the social. It seems plausible to suggest that the church was not only expropriated from its tangible assets but was also expropriated from its most important intangible asset, an expropriation that Arendt fails to account for. I am referring to the church's retraction from the sphere that it created—that space within the world in which the divine appears as part of ecclesiastical economy. According to Arendt, Luther's and Calvin's attempts to restore the uncompromising otherworldliness of the Christian faith resulted in world alienation.<sup>15</sup> In light of the fact that alienation from the secular world is not a new phenomenon within Christianity, as Arendt, repeatedly quoting Tertullian on this matter, makes us well aware,<sup>16</sup> one must infer that the alienation Arendt is referring to is alienation from the space of the appearance of the divine in the world. This claim finds support in Arendt's own words: "When the Reformation finally succeeded in removing everything connected with appearances and displays from its churches ... the public character of these ecclesiastical spaces disappeared as well."<sup>17</sup>

The church's expropriation from the space intended for economic activity paved the way for a different kind of economic activity—first the earthly one and later all human activity.<sup>18</sup> The process by which the economic activity that takes place within society was transformed—from the divine to the earthly—is, like other processes of expropriation, a modern story that extends over hundreds of years. I believe this process is similar to the one that I attempted to demonstrate with regard to the economic concept of time. In both cases what we are dealing with are not purely modern creations *ex nihilo*, but a world evacuated of divine content,<sup>19</sup> which the moderns replenished with a very earthly content. That which appears in society was completely transformed; in a superbly modernist inversion, the divine was replaced by the earthliest of all human activities as the content of this space. Despite this radical transformation, a number of characteristics of the Christian sphere were maintained in the modern social sphere. In addition to the structural characteristics already mentioned—and first and foremost the

existence of a social sphere that is neither, strictly speaking, public nor private—it seems that another important characteristic remained intact in political economy: ecclesiastical economy’s principle of movement.

## Economy’s Principle of Movement

Arendt relies on Montesquieu’s taxonomy of the nature of governments and their principles of action: “the nature of government makes it what it is, and its principles make it act and move.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore in her analysis of totalitarianism, she constructs her argument thus: totalitarianism is a novel form of government, and she attempts to characterize its nature and its principle of movement.

In order to decide whether political economy drew its own principle of movement from the classical *oikos* or from the ecclesiastical *economy*, or, conversely, if a novel principle of movement emerged, one must first distinguish between the two premodern principles of movement. For this, one must appreciate how the relationships between the head of the *oikos* and its members were organized. The relationship between God and man in ecclesiastical economy represents an entirely different relationship than between the head of the household—the *oikodespotes*—and its members in antiquity. What significantly distinguishes the ancient economy from ecclesiastical economy is the end to which economic relationships serve, an end that, in both cases, lies beyond economy itself. In classical Greece the members of the household were enslaved by its head to allow the latter to rise above the bare necessities of life and to participate in politics and/or engage in philosophy.<sup>21</sup> In Christianity, on the other hand, the economy of salvation aims at allowing every member to rise above this life and to partake in a more noble realm that lies beyond the world altogether. From its earliest references in the New Testament, *oikonomia* does not point to a relationship of *servitude* between the members of the household and its head. Instead, in ecclesiastical economy the head of the *oikos* enslaved himself for the *well-being* of its members. This is, of course, an opposing relationship to the one between the master and his slaves in antiquity.

This principle of action is expressed in what is *the* most significant economic event in the Christian history of salvation—the incarnation of God the Son in the person of Jesus Christ. According to Christian faith, Christ redeemed the sins of man on the cross and prepared the grounds for the individual salvation of all. Thus, in ecclesiastical economy, the head works for the members and not the other way round. What is more, according to Christian economy, God labors for each and every one equally, and his work enables every human being to fulfill his or her potential and bring forth individual salvation. In other words, in the framework

of the economy of salvation, God works for everyone equally so that each individual may fulfill his or her unique potential. Thus, the difference between the two ancient economies can be defined as such: While in the ancient Greek household the principle of movement is all for one, in ecclesiastical economy the principle is One for all.

From its inception,<sup>22</sup> the predominant question that determined political economy's agenda thus became to what extent the one who stands at the head of the economy acts according to this Christian principle of movement. From the moment of its emergence on the world stage and until today, the issue that lies at the kernel of political economy has been the fulfillment of the head of the state's obligation toward the members of the political body. The questions that determined the agenda of those dealing with political economy and that still concern them today are all derived from this question of how the head of the economy should attend to the welfare of all and enable each member to realize his or her inherent potential or, in other words, what is the best way to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

This is suggested in the first appearance of the phrase *political economy* in modernity, found in a text written by Turquet de Mayerne in 1611 that testifies to this claim about the principle of movement and its origin:

the sovereign power of one person exercised equitably, over persons who are free ... we set as a final goal ... in our political economy, in which each is provided with the grounds and means to achieve by virtue and by knowledge, the door not being closed nor access refused to anyone ... each according to one's own capacities, by which one may improve one's condition, which is an equality that has been required by the real Royal and paternal government; the intentions and the management of which are in no way aimed at the convenience of the one, or to please the appetites of the few, but for the well being and profit of all, as much for he who commands as for those who obey.<sup>23</sup>

The liberal political economists criticized the paternal and all-intrusive mercantile political economy. They focused their critique on the means by which the goal of political economy is to be achieved. As they argued, a higher level of well-being and profit for all will be achieved if the one who commands will limit his exercise of power. Instead of exerting his power, the sovereign ought to allow those who obey to practice their purchasing power with the minimal level of supervision and hindrance on his behalf.

The liberal limitation of sovereign power was criticized in the twentieth century. At first, the Keynesians argued that the one in power ought to keep a vigilant watch over the economy and use his purchasing power whenever the accumula-



tive use of it on behalf of the governed falls short of achieving the goal. They also argued that in some sectors of the economy the well being of all would be secured when managed by the one who commands and not by those who obey. Soon after, the neoliberals articulated a second line of criticism (with the demise of the Keynesian program in mind) suggesting that the one who commands has to constitute and preserve the optimal settings that will allow those who obey to freely practice their purchasing power in an otherwise sovereign-free economy.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

On the surface, it seems difficult to trace similarities between the Christian society of believers and modern society, and between ecclesiastical economy and political economy, as the divine that made its appearance in ecclesiastical economy was replaced in political economy by life necessities and earthly desires. However, as shown in this article, despite this essential difference in the nature of the thing economized,<sup>25</sup> there are clear structural similarities between ecclesiastical and political economy as well as between the Christian society of believers and our modern society. In both cases, society is a sphere whose borders are not clearly demarcated, and in both the rise of the social blurs the borders between the public and the private. Moreover, in both, the economy has a clear tendency to grow, and both economies are designed so that the concern of the one heading the society is for the welfare of all members of society.

## Notes

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), 28.
2. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 38.
3. Marie-Jose Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 13.
4. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 25.
5. For a masterful and a detailed account, see J. H. P. Reumann, “The Use of *Oikonomia* and Related Terms in Greek Sources to about A. D. 100” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1957). Much of the dissertation was published subsequently in *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 60, nos. 3–4 (1978): 482–597; *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 61 (1979): 563–603; *Ekklesia kai Theologia/Church and Theology* 1 (1980): 368–430; *Ekklesia kai Theologia/Church and Theology* 2 (1981): 591–617; and *Ekklesia kai*

- Theologia/Church and Theology* 3 (1982): 115–40. For a shorter account, see Dotan Leshem, “Oikonomia in the Age of Empires,” *History of the Human Sciences* 26, no. 1 (2013): 29–51.
6. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books 1977), 41–90.
  7. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 47.
  8. See Gerhard Richter, *Oikonomia: Der Gebrauch Des Wortes Oikonomia Im Neuen Testament, Bei Den Kirchenvatern Und In Der Theologischen Literatur Bis Ins 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 233.
  9. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7–11.
  10. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 34.
  11. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 132.
  12. For elaborated discussion, see Dotan Leshem, “Embedding Agamben’s Critique of Foucault: The Pastoral and Theological Origins of Governmentality,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 32, no. 3 (May 2015): 93–113.
  13. See Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 69–170.
  14. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 248.
  15. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 251.
  16. See, for example, Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 74; Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 136; Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 153.
  17. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 142.
  18. For further discussion, see Dotan Leshem, “Aristotle Economizes the Market,” *Boundary 2* 40, no. 3 (2013): 39–57.
  19. For the first sense of secularization in Charles Taylor’s typology, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press), 1–2.
  20. For the most elaborated discussion, see Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 63–69.
  21. For a discussion of ancient Greek economic art and theory, see Dotan Leshem, “The Ancient Art of Economics,” *European Journal for the History of Economic Thought* 21, no. 2 (2014): 201–29; and Leshem, “Oikonomia Redefined,” *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 35, no. 1 (2013): 43–61.
  22. On the meanings that were attached to *oikonomia* in early modernity, see Germano Maifreda, *From Oikonomia to Political Economy: Constructing Economic Knowledge from the Renaissance to the Scientific Revolution* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 183–212.

23. See James E. King, "The Origin of the Term 'Political Economy,'" *Journal of Modern History* 20, no. 3 (1948): 230–31.
24. On mercantile and liberal political economy, see Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 255–363, and the first part of Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1–100. Neoliberal economic thought is dealt with in the second part of Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 101–317. On the subject, see also, Leshem, "Embedding Agamben's Critique of Foucault."
25. For a comparative discussion between classical Greek and modern economics, see Leshem, "Aristotle Economizes the Market."