

Lutheranism and the Nordic Spirit of Social Democracy: A Different Protestant Ethic

Robert H. Nelson

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Author Robert Nelson, it is sad to say, passed not long after the publication of this book, bringing to an end the important contribution of a wonderful scholar and a keen researcher on the nexus of religion and economics. I never got to meet Professor Nelson. I wish I had, because his writings introduced me to the work of Frank H. Knight, founder of the Chicago School of Economics, who became such a revelation for me I ended up writing a book on Knight myself in Palgrave's Great Thinkers in Economics series. This series was purposively named such, rather than "Great Economic Thinkers," to tease the nuances of economic ideas and history from the highly contingent ethics, and cut and thrust, of economic policy. Knight did this, and Nelson did so also.

On one level this book is an engagement with the Lutheran alternative to the Protestant spirit of capitalism, in dialogue with sociologist Max Weber. On another level it is an engagement with the Nordic strain of capitalism in dialogue with social democracy in the light of recent commentary looking from the United States to the Nordic countries as an alternative way to do capitalism from the American way. There are three strands to follow in this study: Lutheran, Weberian, and Nordic.

In the Lutheran strand Nelson admirably reveals the discomfort Luther felt about economic issues, which is less felt by Calvinists who have embraced capitalist economics more deeply. In the Lutheran scheme, the dissonance of economic and theological reflection represents the old and new Adam in conflict; we should wrestle with our economic life, knowing it will not create ultimate answers in this world. The Lutheran understanding should ideally lead to knowledge that our economic decisions and approaches can reveal our theological instability rather than be any cause of such dissonance. Weber was woefully ignorant of Luther (or woefully ignored him as inconvenient) and focused on Calvin. His flawed approach, however, became the basis of much theological study and the dogma of social science. It was an approach that was never reciprocated by economists.

The Weberian strand, meaning the Protestant work ethic, was a problem for economists in the twentieth century as they were very set on making their work a hard science and value-free, making it hard to admit any encroachment from theologians or ethicists. However, the troubling complexity of our modern life, and the influence of behavioral economists, has happily been changing all this. Winston Churchill joked, "If you put two economists in a room, you get two opinions, unless one of them is Lord Keynes, in which case you get three opinions." The quip reflects the view that economics is not a robust science. Knight understood this. Nelson also understood this.

In the Nordic strand, Nelson tackles the notion that we can find a balance between capitalism and socialism, and find equilibrium between domestic and global economic pressures. This strand rides the wave of interest over the past decade or so in America that perhaps Nordic social democracy is a model for America to follow. It came to a

head with the 2016 Bernie Sanders presidential campaign, and appeared almost as an economic revelation for those yearning for a different economic way of managing society in America today.

The Nordic model promotes high levels of public provision of social services and investment in human capital. It also promotes a strong social safety net. The American model stresses the individual, linking back to the Calvinist strand and Weber's Protestant work ethic, and does not generally endorse safety nets, or at least if there is a safety net it should not become a trampoline. The two models also stress different tolerance levels toward the sharing of social risk. The Nordic economic ideals, in Nelson's argument, draw from the Lutheran strand and give the Nordic model a particular nature. Thus, Nelson makes an illuminating case for rooting this Nordic social economy in the Lutheran tradition of the region as an explanation of its apparent success.

This success—if that is what it is—comes at a price that would make most Americans' eyes water, namely, the high tax rates: 61.85 percent in Sweden and 55.8 percent in Denmark, making 38.52 percent in Norway almost bargain basement. While Nelson does well to argue a link between the remaining implicit Lutheranism of the economic approach of the Nordic countries, it does not really do much to answer the American problem, given the skepticism toward social nets and a distaste for high tax rates. This said, America has long had rather more socialism than it likes to pretend, even in the heady days of Reaganomics.

This was not intended to be Nelson's final work—I am sure he had more to say—but this narrow focus on Nordic economics does leave us with a useful and detailed palette with which to paint some new economic possibilities, as well as to explore more deeply and productively the relationship between theology and economics. The economy reflects society, and America's problems are deep and various, and arguably what is needed is a greater sense of community and a vibrant spirituality. This has been possible in the Nordic context, with smaller populations and narrower cultural mix, but America is one great big melting pot.

However, just as America has more socialism than one might like to admit, the Nordic economy has less socialism than is usually purported. The Nordic countries have an economic management approach based on free-market economics that repudiates the policy of a minimum wage and is financed by high taxes and generous government entitlement programs. Also, before people get too excited by the Nordic model, we should note that Nordic economies, like those in America and elsewhere, are consuming resources at an unsustainable rate.

As globalization changes and impacts the Nordic countries, they are being weighed down by new challenges. Their economies, possibly apart from Denmark, have succeeded largely thanks to extractive industries: oil (Norway), iron ore (Sweden), and forestry (Finland). Environmental factors limit their food production capacities and create reliance on imports. This raises questions about the carbon footprint of their economy, and whether it can withstand the rise of today's environmental and progressive agenda. Perhaps like Nordic Lutheranism, the Nordic economic spirit will find itself at odds with social change

and the whims of political fashion. Sadly, we have lost in Nelson a unique and insightful guide to what will be a fascinating journey of economic change as the environmental and progressive agenda evolves.

—David Cowan
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God, Hierarchy, and Power: Orthodox Theologies of Authority from Byzantium

Ashley M. Purpura

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In *God, Hierarchy, and Power*, Ashley M. Purpura seeks to demonstrate how the Byzantine tradition of hierarchical theology situates all true power as derivative of God and that these “theological ideals of hierarchy and power . . . have great relevance for contemporary Orthodox Christian conversations engaging the exclusive, inclusive, and power-based challenges of hierarchy” (17). Largely a work of historical theology, Purpura’s book dedicates one chapter each to the life and work of four Byzantine theologians: (Pseudo-) Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Niketas Stethatos, and St. Nicolas Cabasilas. Her last chapter puts the common contours of the Byzantine thearchical conception of power and hierarchy in dialogue with modern theorists of power, namely Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler. While the constructive content in her final chapter and conclusion is less careful than her historical work that precedes it, I recommend the book for its contribution to historical theology.

Purpura sums up the extent and limitations of power across her four historical sources as follows: “Each author limits the authority of the visible earthly hierarchy and its individual members when its participants are not believed to communicate divinity. Moreover, Dionysius, Maximus, Stethatos, and Cabasilas directly and indirectly identify power as residing in the relational activity of communicating divinity rather than inhering in a particular office or human person based on ecclesiastical position” (132). As already mentioned, all four authors stress the divine nature and origin of true power: “With the theological starting point that all power belongs to God and this power is manifest through condescension in order to elevate others, Dionysius, Maximus, Stethatos, and Cabasilas configure hierarchy as the divinely given and uniquely structured means of mediating and participating in divine power” (138). All of these authors were aware of shortcomings in their own contexts within the visible, institutional church hierarchy as well, tempering their otherwise idealistic conception: “Acknowledging the human participants within the hierarchy and the varying degrees of divinization among them, the ecclesiastical Body of Christ is both already divine and ever in a state of becoming divine” (142). The concretely imperfect hierarchy of the church in the process of “becoming divine” is reflective of the celestial hierarchy and meant to facilitate the divinizing ascent of those who liturgically participate in it, in whatever rank or office they may occupy.