

Ethics and Economics

After the Market: Economics, Moral Agreement, and the Churches' Mission

Malcolm Brown

Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2004 (321 pages)

Reviewing a book that is so much about contexts and traditions, it is perhaps appropriate to begin with its own history. Malcolm Brown's preface tells the story of his background in the Industrial Mission in England and various para-church bodies concerned with economic issues, his encounter with the case for market economics, and the intellectual struggle that eventually led to the book. It was also a Ph.D. thesis at Manchester University, supervised by John Atherton.

The argument for market economics according to Brown is something like this. We live in a world of moral plurality; people have different and conflicting ideas of what is right, and there is no way these disagreements can be rationally resolved. Given this, markets seem to be the only way we can live freely and peaceably. We must bracket our moral commitments as we trade in markets. For Brown, the problem with most Christian discussion of economic matters is that it does not take moral plurality seriously enough and thus fails to engage with this type of argument for markets. Christian social ethicists criticize the morality of markets, but the whole point, many of the defenders of markets say, is that they have none. Brown helpfully places the argument about markets in the wider context of debates about liberalism and locates church organizations with the communitarian critics of liberalism.

The book seeks a way out of this dispute between liberalism and communitarianism. Brown looks to Alasdair MacIntyre, because the latter criticizes liberalism and yet has publicly rejected the communitarian label. Drawing on MacIntyre, Brown offers a

model, “dialogic traditionalism,” which he claims is a way forward for Christian engagement with economic issues. One of the strengths of the book is a practical focus, and Brown discusses at length what this model might mean for organizations such as the Industrial Mission and the Anglican Board of Social Responsibility in Britain.

As a reader who avoids such church organizations and is from outside Britain, I found chapter 2 on the history of these organizations and their place in church engagement with economic issues interesting and helpful. The different histories and institutions of Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia, not to mention the countries in Asia and Africa, make the engagement of Christianity with economics take a different shape in each. Brown’s account of the background to his intervention in the debate is thorough and perceptive.

Sadly, the same cannot be said of chapter 4 on the engagement of economists with moral questions, which seems to be the result of a quick and unsympathetic skim of a random selection of the secondary literature on Christianity and economics. The long middle section of the book, chapters 5 to 8, discusses various writers within what the author calls “social theology”—including Ronald Preston, Michael Novak, John Milbank, Stanley Hauerwas, Ulrich Duchrow, and especially Ian Markham, Andrew Shanks, Peter Selby, Duncan Forrester, and Jeffrey Stout, from whom he collects elements of his model of dialogic traditionalism. This cross section of contemporary writing may not be the best place to look for a way forward in relating Christianity and economics. Older Christian traditions may offer more, as Oliver O’Donovan has argued in relation to politics in his *Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and other places.

A longer historical perspective could also have enriched the diagnosis of the problems of organizations such as the Anglican Board for Social Responsibility. It is no accident that these organizations have difficulty coming to grips with market economics, as they are the descendants of the reaction within the church to the rise of political economy in nineteenth-century Britain. (For further details see the introduction and the articles by Edward Norman and Anthony Waterman in my edited volume *Economics and Religion* [Elgar, 2003]).

What then is “dialogic traditionalism”? It is defined as “neither liberal or communitarian in the accepted sense but draws from one its insistence on cross boundary dialogue and from the other its commitment to the exploration of identity” (222). Brown emphasizes “the principle of dialogue” (222) that comes from its Christian identity rather than any tradition-transcendent narrative. Much of what characterizes this dialogic traditionalism is sensible and unexceptional. I find the claims for novelty overblown and question the need for another new term in the already heavy vocabulary of the social ethics literature. My main concerns are about what was missing, and I am uneasy about the vagueness of the doctrinal content of Brown’s “traditionalism.” This doctrinal skimpiness and vagueness would undermine the dialogue with other traditions that Brown is so keen on. Dialogue tends to be more fruitful if one comes with commitments as well as good will. Nevertheless, the call for dialogue is welcome and

preferable to the delusion that there is enough agreement about values to sustain something like Oldham groups, or to derive middle axioms. Dialogic traditionalism is essentially a modest update of the British social ethics or social theology tradition.

Despite the prominence of Alasdair MacIntyre in Brown's argument (chapter 3 is an exposition of his ideas, and there is much commentary elsewhere), I struggled with the role he plays. Much is made of MacIntyre's notion of an epistemological crisis and parallels drawn between crises of traditions and the current problems of church bodies engaging with economic issues. I am not sure that these bodies are traditions in MacIntyre's sense or that anything is gained by the comparison. In my view, these bodies are in crisis, full stop. Another parallel is between the middle way MacIntyre supposedly offers between liberalism and communitarianism and the middle way Brown offers with his dialogic traditionalism. Surely he is offering a middle way, full stop—the comparison with MacIntyre adds little. Other aspects of MacIntyre's thought seem to undercut Brown's argument. Brown's search for "fragments" (223) and "limited substantive agreement about ends" (228) seems exactly the sort of moral project MacIntyre objects to in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre demands larger coherent stories and ultimate ends.

The strengths of the book are its largely correct diagnosis of the problem of church organizations' commenting on economic issues, the link to wider debates over liberalism, and the emphasis on practical implications of the ideas for church organizations. I have reservations about Brown's use of MacIntyre and am unconvinced that dialogic traditionalism offers any new way forward. Rather than new models for church organizations commenting on economic issues, perhaps we need completely different structures for fruitful engagement between economics and theology.

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Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins

Miguel A. De La Torre

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004 (280 pages)

This textbook, intended especially for the college classroom, "seeks to open Christian ethics to the rich diversity found among those who are usually excluded." From the beginning, the author exudes passion for those left out. De La Torre is correct, at least in my experience, that many of our students (indeed—most of us) are blind to the least among us. He sees his task, both as a teacher and as a writer, as raising our consciousness about those on the margins. Further, his goal is not simply to change the way his students and readers think, but also to bring about a new way of life.

I find myself in deep agreement with De La Torre on these goals, and I was initially impressed by the passion and zeal that he brings to these purposes. My hopes turned rather quickly to dissatisfaction as he unfolded his means to accomplish those worthwhile goals.