

The Roots of the Focolare Movement's Economic Ethic*

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The Focolare Movement is an emerging global ecclesial community. Since 1991 it has been engaged in promoting a radical alternative to the dominant neoliberal capitalist vision—the “Economy of Communion”—involving a global network of small- and medium-size businesses committed to Christian principles. The roots of this proposal, however, stretch back to the very beginnings of the movement during the 1940s in Italy. This article explores the early historical and philosophical roots underpinning the specific vision of economic life that emerges from the spirituality of the Focolare and some of the consequent economic practices that have emerged. The article asks whether such normative visions present in the new ecclesial movements could represent a “new Weberian thesis” capable of redirecting the capitalist economy in more sustainable directions.

The Focolare Movement is a new ecclesial community, which has been present in the Catholic Church since the 1940s, and in other Christian traditions since the 1950s. More recently, it has begun to emerge in other world religions, and now numbers several million adherents in 180 countries.¹ The specific aim of the movement is to contribute toward the fulfillment of Christ’s prayer “May they all be one”²—through working for greater social and spiritual integration, or “communion,” above all through personal and communal witness. From its origins in Trent, the Focolare has exhibited a distinctive vision of the relationship between the “economic” and other dimensions of human life.³ Since 1991, it has given rise to a global economic project called the “Economy of Communion,”⁴ involving businesses in a radical renewal of

Christian values within the workplace in view of a more socially and environmentally sustainable economic system. The aim of this article is to examine the origins of the Economy of Communion in the early years of the Focolare Movement and to ask whether such a proposal could point the way to a “new Weberian thesis” capable of redirecting global capitalism in more socially and environmentally sustainable directions.

Spiritual Roots

The origins of the Focolare Movement date back to the experience of Chiara Lubich and her companions had during World War II in the city of Trent in northern Italy. It was an experience that altered their deepest perceptions of who they were in relation to God, to other people, and to their place in the cosmos.⁵ During the war, Chiara Lubich understood in a new way, through a series of personal experiences, which have since been confirmed by several theologians as “mystical insights,”⁶ the immanence of God’s presence in human existence. While being infinite, she began to perceive him as being within the realm of human experience. Perhaps the most striking thing about the conversion experience of Chiara Lubich is that it resulted in a new understanding of the personal love that God has for her and for other people. She began to see God “present everywhere with his love.”⁷ Above all, she understood that the core of the message of the Gospel does not relate primarily to a series of moral directives that have to be followed. The core of the message lies, above all, in the revelation of God’s love, as a father who is very near to his children. In the midst of the war, in which God was being blamed for the atrocities that were being committed, or for not stopping them, she seemed to discover a different God who is present in every circumstance, even in the suffering of the war. It was this profound experience/belief in the love of God that she called the “inspiring spark.”⁸ It was so real to Chiara Lubich that it challenged the perspective that she had on every aspect of human life, including economic and social realities. Every circumstance, every meeting, every happy and painful event, is willed or permitted by God. She communicated this new understanding to other people who were so convinced by her personal experience that they, too, began to change how they viewed reality, and to follow her.⁹

Trust in Providence

This unbounded trust in God's love and providence was a defining feature of the early experience of the Focolare Movement. It had practical implications on the emerging economic vision of the movement. The term *providence* is one that appears throughout the Bible and, in particular, within the Old Testament.¹⁰ It is used to mean that God, the Creator, did not merely decree what should be and then "retire to heaven" to watch what inevitably must come to pass in the universe created by him. Rather, in infinite wisdom and power, God mysteriously governs all circumstances, making all things work together for the accomplishing of his own will. Whereas in the Old Testament the emphasis of providence is on how God blesses the good and punishes the wicked, within the New Testament the emphasis is on the mercy of God who makes the sun rise and set on everyone. The revival of a profound belief in providence is underlined in many texts from the early days of the Focolare.¹¹

During the war, the initial group associated with Chiara Lubich had been forced to give up their ordinary occupations due to the war and had to earn their living in temporary jobs. They decided to give away all of their possessions to the poor, keeping only the bare essentials for survival. When they did this, they began to receive items of all sorts from other people who had heard about how they were trying to help the poor in the city. People arrived at their flat with bags of food, clothing, firewood, and other items so that they could distribute them to the poor. This pattern of distribution and help continued throughout the war. This help, which seemed always to arrive at the right time, was seen as Providence: a visible sign of God's blessing on the work being done. Several stories about providence form the oral history of the early days of the Focolare. The first story is known as the "size 42 shoes":

Jesus assured us: "Ask and you will receive" (Matt. 7:7; Luke 11:9). We asked for the poor and we were filled with every good from God: bread, powdered milk, jam, firewood, clothing ... which we took to those who were in need. One day—and this is a fact that is always told—a poor man asked me for a pair of shoes, size 42. Knowing that Jesus identified himself with the poor, I asked the Lord this prayer in church: "Give me a pair of size 42 shoes for You in that poor person." I came out, and a lady gave me a packet. I opened it: There was a pair of shoes, size 42. Millions of similar episodes like this have occurred through the years.¹²

This episode demonstrates how the spiritual and economic dimensions of life are intrinsically bound together in Chiara Lubich's understanding. Economic facts are interpreted as substantive proof for God's intervention in human life. The action that they had undertaken to help the poor was not viewed as an optional appendage to the "religious" act of praying but as an expression of spiritual life into other dimensions of social and economic life. They believed that if they did their part through living evangelical poverty and giving themselves to their neighbors, God would provide the necessary means for helping the poor since he had said so in the Gospels. He himself would be present through their love for each other. Their part was to trust in his providence and to create the underlying "conditions" of mutual love so that the promises in the Gospels could be fulfilled. In this way, through the various experiences in the war, they began to understand that within the Gospels there is a kind of "economic logic" that is unique.

They associated the amount that they gave away to the poor with the amount they received from providence. In their understanding, this was as a result of the promises that Jesus had made in the Gospels and not simply a coincidence:

There were eight of us Focolarine and every afternoon we went with lots of suitcases to take things to the poor. Someone could but wonder: *Where did so many things come from?* I had nothing and my companions, the first Focolarine, were more or less like me. But providence kept arriving and in such quantities! The corridor of my house was always full of sacks of flour and potatoes. And there we were, distributing the goods to one or other of the poor people, according to their needs.¹³

This tradition of believing in God's providence has continued throughout the Focolare down the years and still remains a key point in the understanding of the interrelationship between economic affairs and spirituality. Within the movement as a whole and in the individual Focolare houses, Providence (in the form of unexpected gifts and donations) is even calculated formally as a part of the overall budget. Calculations and decisions regarding future developments of the movement are made on the basis of such providence arriving.¹⁴ If the necessary resources do not arrive, this is taken as a sign that a given development is not in God's will. In this way, the Focolare institutions have evolved without the accumulation of debt. More recently, it has taken a major step forward with the creation of "Economy of Communion businesses" that attempt to put this ethos into practice within capitalist, economic structures.

Such a belief in Providence is antithetical to a rationalistic mindset and raises some important issues. In particular, how does such a deep-rooted belief in Providence avoid association with superstition, magical tendencies, luck, or fantasy? How does it avoid association with an Old Testament mind-set that sees riches as a blessing and poverty as a curse? A strong belief in Providence is wrought with risks of reductionism, accompanied by positive reinforcement of a selective reading of historical facts. In particular, in analyzing the relationship between economic action and spirituality, there is a high risk that Providence could be seen as a magic formula, a mechanism through which success can be guaranteed. Within the Focolare, the risk of such a mind-set is present, particularly in the Economy of Communion, as will be seen further on, and has not escaped the attention of those studying this phenomenon. The dominant vision underlying the Focolare spirituality, however, can be interpreted as providence as a sign of God who is accompanying his people.

The “Communion of Goods”

The other phenomenon, which occurred in the early history of the Focolare, is that, from a disparate group of persons, a community was formed in which everything was shared out according to the needs of each one. One consequence of the unity of heart and soul, the result of reciprocal love among the community, was a communion of material goods. The first Focolare community was fascinated by the first Christian community in Jerusalem after the death and Resurrection of Christ, and consciously started to mirror their life on the passage from the Acts of the Apostles that describes the nature of the first Christian community.¹⁵ In a commentary on this passage, Chiara Lubich highlighted the strong link that she makes between material giving and living the Gospel. She also outlined many of the key ideas on which the movement is based.¹⁶ What emerges is a vision of Gospel living that is not only as a form of spiritual edification but also a means of emancipation for the poor. Living the Gospel had far-reaching social and political implications that led individuals to “review” the relationship that they have with the various institutions and to make concrete changes to how they live.

The “heart of the problem,” in Chiara Lubich’s view, was the desire to claim possessions for oneself as opposed to feeling connected to others as a family. Whereas the distribution of wealth is perceived as an economic matter, the question of being brothers and sisters is regarded as a spiritual one.¹⁷ The Gospel offered a means of bridging this divide and bringing about a peaceful social revolution in which greater equality would be achieved through the

charity that imbued people's hearts. In this way, "evangelical poverty," which had been seen as a form of asceticism in traditional spiritualities, took on a new function within the Focolare. It was not an end in itself but a means of serving other people and creating greater equality. Reaching this equality became the main aim of the first Focolare community in Trent.

Not long after the start of the movement, Chiara Lubich explained in detail how this redistribution took place in the community of Trent:

The spirit of unity in charity was the ever-living flame that kept this fraternity alive.... In some ways it was similar, in others dissimilar, to that first Christian community. In fact, whilst having the same aim, it did not require everyone to sell all that they had and to bring it to unity, but rather, that everyone gave what they possessed, depriving themselves of what they could without causing themselves harm.... This was possible amongst us who are already trained at living out in a radical way the first great principle: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Luke, 10, 27). Everyone brought the extra that they had, above all in money, and committed themselves to giving a monthly sum. The donor and the amount promised remained secret. With the money received, the Committee would help, month by month and in secret, those families in the community in need, carrying out this delicate task with the greatest charity and discretion. This was our aim: To reach the point where there would be no more people in need, and that everyone would have enough to live on.¹⁸

From this article, what emerges is how the community of the Focolare even at that stage was structured so as to help those in need while protecting the identities of those who were helped and those who gave. People were primarily helped by the Focolare house itself, through a central fund, since those who had dedicated their entire lives to the community were arguably in the best position to know the needs of people in the community as a whole. Even at this very early stage of the Focolare, the key to this was *trust* in the people who were carrying out the redistribution, based on their total commitment to the community and their understanding of the needs of the various members. This image of the first Focolare community, mirrored on the life of the first Christians, has remained like an icon for Focolare communities all over the world.

The Economy of Communion

The most recent development in the Focolare's economic vision emerged in 1991 and is known as the "Economy of Communion."¹⁹ This project, which emerged in Brazil in 1991, aims to offer a global Christian response to the pressing problems of poverty and injustice through challenging the underlying ethos of business and finance. It involves business people, animated by the Focolare spirituality, setting up a new kind of enterprise based on a Christian ethos.²⁰ These enterprises, while operating within the free market and abiding by the business regulations and standards therein, put the Focolare vision into practice. They do this principally through dividing the profits they make into three parts: One part goes to the poor, one part for reinvestment in the company, and a third part for the formation of people according to this spirit.²¹ The businesses also try to apply certain ethical guidelines within the business.

These guidelines are mirrored on the "seven aspects" of spiritual life that underpin the Focolare's spirituality.²² In the course of the past ten years, 769 small- and medium-size businesses from all economic sectors have become Economy of Communion businesses. There are 246 businesses in Italy, 233 are in the rest of Europe (of which 60 are in Eastern Europe), 176 are in Latin America, 48 in North America, 40 in Asia, 15 in Australia, and 9 in Africa. The majority are small- and medium-size companies, but 10 of them have over 100 employees. There are 194 engaged in productive activities, 156 in commerce, and 343 in the services sector.²³

Some of the businesses have been located in purpose-built business parks near the twenty-five "model towns" that witness to the spiritual vision of the movement throughout the world. The creation of purpose-built business parks to house the Economy of Communion businesses was seen as an important element of the project from the start.²⁴ The first park to be set up was near Sao Paulo, in Brazil, where six companies are now operating. The holding company for the industrial estate, ESPRI S.A., was set up by Focolare members in order to buy the land and oversee the development of the park. It has widespread ownership amongst 3300 small shareholders, many of whom are, themselves, relatively poor. The second business park was set up near O'Higgins in Argentina.

Other business parks are already in progress in Tuscany, and one is planned for the State of New York. Such business parks have proved an invaluable resource for the Economy of Communion, both in terms of their capacity to generate wealth and in their ability to serve as "exemplars" for the whole of the Economy of Communion network and beyond. The existence of these

parks has facilitated the growth of sectoral and cross-sectoral collaboration within the Economy of Communion networks both on a regional and international level. They have also fostered the sharing of skills, knowledge, and technology transfer to developing countries.

Providence in Business

Within the Economy of Communion businesses, the same trust in Providence present at the origins of the Focolare is a central element of the corporate culture. Within the context of the commercial world, the workings of Providence are regarded principally as a response to good ethical choices. Such choices range from a decision not to cheat on competitors, not to accept bribes or cook the books, choosing practices that do not harm the environment, and so on. In many instances, the business people interpret unexpected incomes from other sources, such as orders that arrive in advance or the inspiration behind an innovation, as a direct response from God confirming their ethical choice. This is rooted in a widespread belief that the Economy of Communion project is one that has been blessed by God. Many of the business people talk of an “invisible Shareholder” who has “a bank in heaven,” and supports the businesses through difficult times.

On the whole, this form of thinking and acting has resulted in the positive reinforcement of ideal motivations and encouraged the development of the project. In a small number of cases, however, such interpretations may have contributed to the failure of several companies and disillusionment. Through these experiences, however, the Economy of Communion has acquired a more critical sense of the relationship between spirituality, ethics, and economic action. In particular, the importance of adequate preparation in terms of professional assessment of the projects to be undertaken, is an essential prerequisite to any business. It has also led to a heightened awareness of the risks involved in any business enterprise and the need for prudence, especially given the high levels of trust within the Focolare community. Despite these risks, a tenacious belief in Providence, however, underpins the whole of the Economy of Communion.

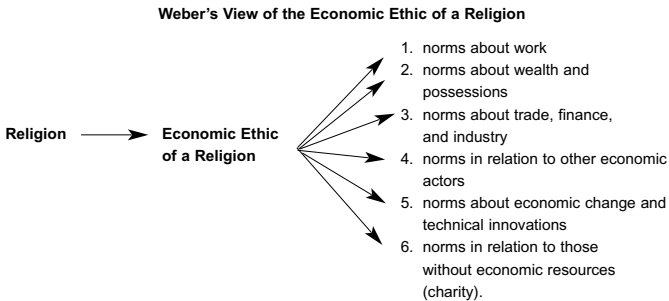
A New Weberian Thesis

The root of this economic project is a renewed awareness of the ethical content of the Christian message and its relevance to economic action. It has led to the adoption of a spirituality rooted in communitarian values, and in partic-

ular trust, within a sphere of life dominated by instrumentalism. Such an application has a strong resemblance with the Weberian idea of the “economic ethic of a religion” illustrated in Figure 1. According to Weber, individuals attach meanings to economic action bound up with their religious beliefs, making it possible to discern different economic rationalities deriving from religious belief systems.²⁵ Weber, for example, made the distinction between such rationalities in operation within Catholicism and Protestantism, based on the premium each placed on ascetic lifestyle within these two traditions prevalent at the time. In his view, since Catholicism placed emphasis on “absolution,” this was a deterrent to engaging in economic activities. The “philosophy of avarice” underpinning capitalism was legitimized through the premium that Calvinism placed on asceticism.

Weber’s approach has been severely criticized; in particular, its logic in relation to the rise of capitalism.²⁶ Many have argued that his explanation of how religious beliefs influence economic action—the actual ways in which the doctrine can become action—is disputable. Weber offers little explanation as to how doctrines, which are applied in practice by individuals, are then adopted as an “ethic” by a group.²⁷ As a consequence, many have argued that there is little power in the Protestant ethic thesis as an explanation of the rise of capitalism.²⁸

Figure 1



Source: Swedberg (1998: 138)

Despite these criticisms, there is still much scope for development of Weber’s ideas, especially in the way that he relates economic rationalities to specific religious beliefs.²⁹ In some ways, the strength of Weber’s thesis lies not so much in his attempt to attribute the rise of capitalism to one particular

religion as in his development of intermediate concepts that link culture and economic action. The Weberian idea of “economic rationalities” is a valid one in the determination of intermediate concepts in order to understand the cultural meanings that are attached to economic action. “A link between culture and economy through the mediation of subjectivity might be specified by the concept of economic rationality. By this is meant the ‘logic of economic action,’ understood as the reasons people have for behaving in certain ways as economic agents....”³⁰

Much of the theological work in this field has focused on the role of doctrine and interpretations of the Bible with regard to economic action,³¹ as opposed to how it is applied in particular places and situations. The multiplicity of interpretations of religious teachings makes this task practically impossible, a fact compounded because the application of such principles in economic practice is mediated by different agencies and varies from place to place. The difficulties of this kind of approach are illustrated in the work of Daly and Cobb (1989) and Daly (1996), who adopt a biblical perspective in order to examine the way that Christian teachings could offer insights into a more sustainable future.³² They base their insights on Scripture, deriving economic concepts from those presented in the Bible. In particular, Daly focuses on the cluster of values expressed by “sustainability-sufficiency-equity-efficiency”³³ and the way that these can be derived from Scripture.

Although highlighting a number of important principles and traditions that underpin a Christian worldview, which can have an impact on modern economic life, their approach actually highlights the enormous difficulties in deriving modern economic practices from those preached and practiced in Palestine two thousand years ago. Daly is aware of this difficulty: “Everyone claims biblical support for his own pet economic ideas. Like the devil, the economist can quote Scripture to prove what he wants to prove.”³⁴

Another approach, which can be adopted in relation to the Economy of Communion, relates to the interface between doctrine and experience. One can study how Christian (or indeed other religions) experience interprets doctrines and relates them to specific economic actions. Religious ideas and motivations draw on doctrine, but what is most interesting is how they shape actions, attitudes, and things “on the ground,” taking on grounded significance, giving rise to different concepts that can be related to economic action. These could range from different concepts regarding the meaning of money and work, to the place of sharing of resources within the market economic system. In this way, it is possible that there could be a space within in the modern globalized economy for the emergence of new systems to appear that

are deeply mystical and that form alternative bases for ethical decisions to be made. This is a view that is shared by Wuthnow, who recognizes the need for research into the way that the two “realms” of spirituality and economics inter-relate: “Such an analysis would emphasize the symbolic distinction between the two realms, the ritual activities that dramatize this distinction, and the symbiotic relationship that binds the two together.”³⁵

Economic Ethic of the Focolare

Using this framework, it is possible to discern certain principles within the Focolare vision, which form the cultural matrix against which all other dimensions of human life, including the economic, have to be measured. The instrumental economic rationale, in a sense, is subdued or “framed” by the communitarian ethic in practice. This gives rise to new concepts and principles that shape economic choices. What is interesting is that the Focolare’s vision is not a negation of the capitalist system *per se*. It represents both a critique of the current capitalist system, and a positive vision of the place of wealth and business. Rather than basing itself on an ascetic vision that rejects money, it is directed out toward the world in a highly positive vision of the redemptive power of Christ working in the community.

In a way similar to Weber’s, within the Focolare movement there are powerful signs of an economic rationality that is framed by important religious principles driving a new form of capitalism. At the same time, the Focolare’s economic vision brings to the fore certain elements and concepts that are not so obvious in Weber’s original thesis. In particular, the place of God’s providence, the environment, and the community-building dimension of economic life have a prominent role, as Figure 2 shows.

Figure 2

Some Key Elements in a Focolare “Economic Ethic”

Work

People are *co-creators* with God and the creative capacity of people has to be advanced. Work is a source of personal fulfillment and service and plays an important function in building the community. It also entails sacrifice, which can be united to the abandonment of Christ. Work represents the principal will of God.

Trade, Finance, and Industry

Christians, and people of goodwill, ought actively seek to appropriate the means of production so that these can be used to good ends, such as the redistribution of wealth to the poor. Debt is generally avoided within the institutional structures

of the Focolare Movement. It is strongly discouraged for all members of the movement. Abandonment to God's will also means trusting his ability to intervene in the practical circumstances of life, also in having the material resources to carry out that will. Nevertheless, the value of certain forms of low interest micro-finance are valued and alternative financing structures have been promoted.

Wealth and Possessions

In general, there is a positive view toward wealth, with people expected to maintain a living standard and level of security appropriate to their function in society. Possessions, however, are generally put at the disposal of the common good. Poverty has a positive and negative value. On the one hand, as the involuntary deprivation of essential basic needs, it is regarded as an injustice that has to be addressed. At the same time, it is seen as a virtue: an essential prerequisite to spiritual fulfillment. Material attachments can form an obstacle to one's relationship with God and neighbor. The voluntary deprivation of surplus resources is encouraged through the communion of goods. This encourages simple living, avoidance of clutter, with important environmental implications. *Trust in Providence*: God will accompany us in our journey and will show his will through circumstances.

Relations with Other Economic Actors

The market retains its basic function as the most efficient form of exchange in an open economy. This, however, is set within the wider framework of the market as a "meeting place" between two or more ethical subjects. The social function of economic interaction comes to the fore. The normative aim of every economic encounter is communion. Within the Focolare, the rationale of economic activity serves to build up the human community.

Economic Change and Technological Development

Environment

As stewards of God's creation, protection of the environment is an essential part of economic activity on a personal and corporate level. Progress and technology derive from the innate creativity of the human person, made in God's image.

Relation to Those Without Economic Resources

Those without economic resources are *brothers* and *sisters*. The redistribution of wealth ought to occur from the grassroots upward as well as from the top down, emphasizing the importance of subsidiarity. Sharing is seen as a practical sign of love for Christ and our neighbor. The practice of *tithing* is revived through the Economy of Communion. It is an essential part of building God's kingdom in the world: envisaged as a community of love. The practice of a communion of goods, drawing inspiration from the first Christians, is a key part of building the Mystical Body.

The Focolare spirituality, therefore, gives rise to an economic ethic that is beginning to enter into capitalistic structures through the Economy of Communion businesses in particular. Within these businesses, the flashpoints between a rationalistic worldview and this powerful spiritual vision are apparent. The relationship with providence has already been mentioned. Another related aspect also merits a further mention: attitudes toward debt. Throughout the history of the Focolare, as outlined above, the general principle is that debt is to be avoided at all costs. Within the realm of business, such avoidance is practically impossible given the extent to which credit is a governing principle of capitalist economic life. Despite the strong link that exists between the belief in providence, acceptance of God's will and avoidance of debt, many of the Economy of Communion businesses have to accept debt as a reality of business life. Moreover, they have recognized the value of providing low-cost financing to those in need, through operations such as the credit union and micro-financing. Such schemes can offer a unique way of helping people out of poverty and promoting small-business initiatives. A distinction, therefore, is made between unsustainable debt that is used to finance a consumer lifestyle and debt that is putting capital at the service of the poor. Although the general principle of avoiding debt is adhered to, therefore, within the Economy of Communion there is a degree of flexibility in adapting to current conditions.

A Catholic Ethic

The sense of engagement with the free-market economy that underpins this spirituality, moreover, in many respects is in tune with Novak's (1993) understanding of the "Catholic ethic," which draws on Catholic social teaching. Novak highlights the fact that the teaching of Catholicism on "creation" makes it highly compatible with an economic system that emphasizes free enterprise. He argues that, although Weber was right in his understanding that religions can give rise to a particular economic ethic, his understanding of "rationality" and how it gave rise to capitalism is inherently flawed. Weber's understanding of rationality sidelined the value of creativity. Economic thinkers throughout the twentieth century such as Schumpeter, Hayek, and Kirzner have repeatedly stressed creativity as central to the continuation of the market. Novak's understanding of the Catholic ethic draws on the rich theological anthropology of "creativity" within the Catholic tradition. He says that the moral strength of capitalism (and democracy) lies not so much in its ability to distribute wealth fairly but in its ability to promote human creativity. It is also interesting to note that Novak also predicted that such an ethic would be most

likely to appear in Latin America since it has traditionally been the source of progressive Catholic thinking.

The attitudes and actions of the Economy of Communion business leaders display many of the central elements of Novak's Catholic ethic, especially in Brazil. Through the promotion of Economy of Communion businesses, initiative, and enterprise have become qualities that are promoted throughout the Focolare in general, harnessing the creative potential that Novak sees as central to the development of the market economy. Through the Economy of Communion, the art of association is promoted, especially at local levels, through encouraging local communities to take stock of their needs and to begin to work to fulfill these needs. The Economy of Communion also engenders a sense of public spiritedness and civic responsibility within individuals and in corporate groups that decide to participate in the Economy of Communion. This could be seen, above all, in the attitudes of the business leaders toward the various communities of which they were a part. The Economy of Communion provoked a sense of looking outward from the business itself as a source of profit to the place of the business in the wider local community and beyond.

Conclusions

To what extent does this vision challenge the dominant vision of neoliberal globalization? Does it point the way to a new Weberian thesis capable of redirecting the forces of globalization in more socially and environmentally sustainable directions? First, the existence of Focolare and the Economy of Communion is a timely reminder that alternatives do exist and that such alternatives are not necessarily bound to local contexts or local communities. The global nature of the Economy of Communion testifies to the fact that socially and environmentally sustainable alternatives, while rooted in local contexts, can also exist at a global level. The empirical evidence of such alternatives, while quite limited in themselves, can have powerful multiplier effects. For example, they can strengthen the case for innovative policy proposals based on principles of communion or other Christian principles. When one considers the impact of the "jubilee" campaign and its roots in the biblical principle of the Jubilee year, one could also foresee a revival of other communitarian Christian principles through communities such as the Focolare. The idea of a yearly redistribution of surplus practiced by thousands of people linked to the Focolare, for example, could have a powerful impact in the formation of a culture of sharing. The idea that businesses are adopting a voluntary, tripartite

system of profit sharing that balances production and redistribution could also be more widely spread within the commercial world.

Such a vision is both a creative witness to the values of the kingdom and a prophetic critique of the underlying rationale of mainstream economic activity in the commercial world. It offers a different vision of a globalized ethic based on market-oriented wealth creation and distribution, governed by principles of solidarity and caring for one's neighbor. Through explicit reference to a communitarian Christian spirituality, it manages to break free of the "iron cage" of instrumental economic rationality and to offer an example of an alternative economic ethic. This ethic is set in a broader framework to the current understanding of economic rationality and is inseparable from the sociocultural context in which it emerged. Such an ethic, moreover, is not wholly antithetical to the dominant rationale. There are potential flashpoints—such as strong attitudes to debt—but there is a willingness to compromise on such issues, recognizing the positive potential of certain kinds of financing structure within open economies. The widespread adoption of such an ethic, moreover, is not restricted to Christians. While the theological roots of the Focolare spirituality are Christian, over the years the Focolare has developed a strong capacity to dialogue with other religions. Such dialogue emphasizes the commonality of a religious ethic capable of transforming economic action. In this way, it plays an important part in the establishment of an alternative global ethic from the grassroots upward.

Notes

- * This paper originated as part of my Ph.D., which was funded by the Faculty of Social Science, University of Glasgow, the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, and the Cross Trust. The Economic and Social Research Council funded the transformation of the Ph.D. into publications.
1. Frank Johnson, *Focolare Movement* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2002).
 2. John 17:21.
 3. Chiara Lubich, "Lezione per la Laurea Honoris Causa," in *Economia di Comunione: verso un agire a misura di persona* (Milan: Edizioni Vita e Pensiero, 2000), 17–18.
 4. Also known as the "Economy of Sharing" in some English translations, especially when discussing the practical applications of the idea to a more business-oriented audience.

5. Franca Zambonini, *Chiara Lubich: L'avventura dell'unità* (Cuneo: Paoline, 1991), 45.
6. Marisa Cerini, *God Who Is Love in the Experience and Thought of Chiara Lubich* (New York: New City Press, 1992).
7. Chiara Lubich, *May They All Be One* (New York: New City Press, 1984).
8. Cerini, 11.
9. Zambonini, 161–62.
10. See, for example, Daniel 4:32, 35; Psalm 139:7–18; Isaiah 41:21–31.
11. Many of the original sources such as personal letters have since been lost or destroyed. Edited versions of the remaining original sources from 1943–1954 have been published in Italian in Chiara Lubich, *La dottrina spirituale* (Rome: Mondadori, 2001).
12. Lubich, (2000).
13. Ibid.
14. Giosi Guella and Oreste Basso, *The Communion of Goods and Work Guidelines: Part I*, Internal Focolare document, Focolare Centre, Rome, 1984.
15. Acts 4:32, 34–35.
16. Edwin Robertson, *Catching Fire* (Guilford: IPS, 1993), 57.
17. Chiara Lubich, “Letter to the Focolare Communities in Italy,” *Gen 6*: ([1944] 1968): 1.
18. Chiara Lubich, “Erano un cuor solo e un anima sola,” *Amico Serafico* (1948): 236–37.
19. General references to the Economy of Communion can be found on the Focolare’s webpage: Focolare Movement (2002) *Economy of Communion Webpages*: www.focolare/en/eoc and the EoC website: www.edc-online.org.
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21. Chiara Lubich, *Economia di Comunione: storia e pensiero* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2001).
22. The seven aspects, also known as the “rainbow,” form an integral part of the spirituality. See Gold, 271.
23. Information from the Economy of Communion office, Focolare Centre, Rome.

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