

*The intellectual animus towards capitalism, both within and without Christendom, has led to a perspective subjugated to secular worldviews. It is time to change the dialogue to engage Christians realistically and productively on economic matters.*



# ECONOMIC WORLDVIEWS AND A PROPOSAL FOR CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

BY DAVID COWAN

## Introduction

Today there are essentially two worldviews about the economy and they are centered on big government versus the market. Behind this crude division lies a host of supporting economic arguments, often ignored and rarely fully understood by those professing the faith of “government” or “market.” This crude division also leads to a rallying call to determine who is “liberal” and who is “conservative.” This is not just a political division, since Christians have become part of this argument, with a link that you either have to have a government or market point of view to be a true believer, thereby dividing Christians economically into a

left and right. There are two problems with this, one economic and the other theological.

The economic point can be made quickly and without further ado. The economic issue is that those who attack “big business” and “selfishness” are not attacking impersonal forces or out of reach individuals. They attack us all. If a company makes a loss, or a big settlement is forced through the law courts, those costs have to be met somewhere. Where do they get met? Price hikes, lower employee salary and wage rises, and, higher insurance premiums are all good places to start. Meanwhile, those who attack government face underplaying the critical role government plays in the economic infrastructure and in international economic matters. When a government responds to what is popular they are often avoiding the



unpopular but necessary economic decisions that need to be taken. We cannot have a successful economy so long as we attack business, and we cannot have a successful country so long as we have a government that only does what is popular. In a sense this government versus market is a false division, because the reality is that there is no such thing as a government or market economy. We all know our economy is mixed and is based on a rudimentary capitalism. The real debate is about where one tips the scales, toward government or towards business. As the Austrian Capitalist Ludwig von Mises argued, we should give capitalism a try.

Turning to the theological problem, this dichotomy leads some believers into thinking there is a Christian view of the market. The Christian “Right” highlights individual effort and responsibility, with fear of government using power to pursue a perfect state on earth. The Christian “Left” highlights collective effort and responsibility, fearing that big business uses power for individual ends and greed. The two sides use the Bible to proof text and shore up their secularized arguments. The Christian left says, “Blessed are the poor” and they suggest the “communism” of the early Christian community can be put forward as a Christian ideal. In fact, it is blessed are the poor in spirit, and the “communism” was a result of state oppression of Christianity. The Right say, “Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” and remind us that “the poor you will always have.” Yet, we can only seek to be spiritually rich; our salvation is not tied to our economic status. We are also called to help the poor and offer charity. The Bible, as it is so often, is inconvenient for defending a secular worldview.

The fall of communism makes the notion of such a divide even more clearly false. The role of communism is important for it was a fundamental part of the dichotomy that existed for much of the 20th Century, namely that between

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capitalism and communism. While there was communism it could be imagined there was an alternative possible economic world, even though somewhat belatedly many realized this was not such a desirable alternative. Communism was something those picking an ethical fight with capitalism could point to and argue there are alternatives, even if they did not like that alternative. With the end of communism, the new dichotomy is now portrayed as market economy versus socialistic thinking. Yet the failure of communism, and the lack of an overarching economic alternative system, may just perhaps suggest the lack of any viable alternative.

Thus, when we look at the economy now there is but one worldview, which is capitalism as brute economic fact, like gravity or aging. Within this there are shades on a spectrum defining the demarcation of government and private entities, with a major shift in recent years towards private/public partnerships. The market economy is what we have, and like much else in our world falls far short of the Christian ideal, but it does mediate different belief systems and different expressions of conflicting needs. We should not seek to rule the world, politically or economically, by the Gospel; to paraphrase Martin Luther, if you’re going to try and do this, then fill the world with real Christians first.

### ***The Intellectual Theological Problem***

In spite of the compelling evidence that capitalism works, and the alternative was punishing to the human spirit, there is still a yearning among intellectuals for a “nicer” way to do economics. There remains also a bias against business and capitalism, a residual sense that there is something immoral about it all. I will return in a moment to why this is the case, but first let’s understand where the intellectual bias comes from.

The late Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick said intellectuals, both on the Left and Right, morally oppose Capitalism out of a fundamental animus because they are not rewarded in the market economy, having grown up in a middle class intellectual economy of reward at school and university, progressively earning candy bars, A grades and finally doctorates. They have won the intellectual competition as they grew up, but once in the capitalist economy they find they are not so competitive, so their sense of entitlement to the share of success is frustrated by business people and other successes in the market economy who seem to be over-compensated, especially since they are not “as clever” as intellectuals. Nozick suggests this animus leads them to oppose the market even when arguments are raised that demonstrate the validity of the market; they simply move the goalposts and argue a new point, he observes.

I agree with Nozick, and further suggest we can detect an animus among the theological intellectuals and church leadership. Theologians tend to approach the market economy seeking not to ask what really happens in the economy but to ask how matters can be better arranged. In this quest economic realism is passed over in favor of a prevalent suspicion towards commerce and the economy with an implicit moral objection. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall theologians have become a little more engaging in their approach to the market economy, but theological engagement with economic matters and the market remain lopsided. What we need is a more realistic basis on which to conduct conversations if the Christian community is not to remain either simply partisan or irrelevant to the discourse.

To return to why there is a sense that capitalism is immoral, we have to look at what it does and realize in economics there is no “nice” way to deal with scarcity. We compete for resources, and we do not all have the same values or agree on solutions to a problem. Human society is also about power, and the economy is a place to gain and express power. The



Marxist idea is that capitalism is the cause of power abuse, selfishness and other human bad behaviors, and so the workers had to rebel and the capitalist machine destroyed. This is to look down the wrong end of the gun barrel.

Capitalism reflects who we are. It measures what we truly care about and it measures our position and power in society, reflecting who we truly are. If we don't like the reflection, smashing the mirror is not going to make us look any prettier. Apart from attacking big business, there are regular condemnations of consumerism and what is seen as excess of the market economy, all of which puts the market economy in the dock.

The materialist philosophies of Marxist, Communist, Welfarist and Socialistic worldviews are very much at odds with Christianity, which teaches us that human beings are fallen in nature. The ills of capitalism and consumerism that are read off like an incantation by critics are just another chapter in the book of who's been naughty and who's been nice. In fact, the notion that the economic system makes us greedy consumers lends itself more to socialist ideology than it does to Christianity. This is because the welfarist views, as we can collectively call them, teach abdication of individual responsibility, whereby the problems in our lives or our community can somehow be solved by passing them on to the state, while we can sit back and enjoy our life and wealth. We don't need to care for extended family, we can get the state to care for them. We don't need to worry about the neighborhood, we can move on and the state will take care of it all.

While the debate raged in the 20th century over the morality of the economic system, liberal theologians and church leaders sided against capitalism. This is hardly surprising, because in the 1960s theologians, who had been busy killing off God and giving enhanced confidence to the secular Leftist critique of religion, were politically motivated. This was the era of political and liberation theologies.

The new religion of secular salvation took off, as people sought to build a better world. In the words of C.S. Lewis, theologians put God in the dock. They accused God, and wanted to redeem humanity. However, the destruction of the hopeful aspirations of the radicalized 1960s idealism and of Communism has restructured the old lines of leftist demarcation, which have now regenerated along fault lines of poverty, environmentalism, anti-globalization and anti-market. The market economy has a range of interest groups and opponents, secular and Christian, holding hands and teamed up against capitalism. However, as I tell students, holding hands and singing Kumbaya does not create economic solutions, it simply makes middle class people feel much better about themselves.

### ***Three Practical Ways to Change the Conversation***

The economic woes of our time are many and complex, but wishful thinking does not help us to tackle the real problems of wealth and poverty in our modern world, and this article is offered as a call to engage realistically. To engage realistically,

and for Christians to have a productive say on economic matters, I propose three ways in which we can seek to change the conversation. My aim here is not to offer a Christian economy, rather to help Christians to live better in the real economy.

#### ***1. Promote informed discussion in the church and workplace***

People in business need to do a better job of explaining what they do and why they do it. Bible classes and discussion groups in church are a good place to discuss the relationship between faith and the economy. The economy is a tool used for political, social and other ends. It also reflects what we find important. It tells us about scarcity and wealth. It tells us a lot about ourselves, and highlights the gap between the demands of discipleship and the everyday realities of work and business. This will always be a struggle, and so we should embrace it together and try to learn from each other about economic realities and what role we each play in the economy.

Being a responsible investor, a good business manager, a caring supervisor, a hard worker - these are all vocations in the economy. A productive economy is one that can solve problems based on wealth, and we all play a part in this wealth creation. At the same time, we recognize that because of our fallen nature we will always have the poor, but rich or poor is not what defines our road to salvation, rather how we act in the economy, as in all parts of life, is a reflection of our discipleship.

#### ***2. Review our approach to stewardship***

Humanity has struggled with scarcity, wealth and inequality since the dawn of the ages, but interestingly what capitalism does is put a number, a measurement, on this struggle. If we are willing to pay \$200 for an NFL ticket or \$2000 on a holiday, but only put \$20 in the collection plate of our church, then I suggest this puts a number on our interest; or, to put it crassly, we are putting our money where our mouth is. If we speculate with our savings, flipping houses or increasing our consumer credit, how effective is our stewardship? Loans to spend on things that end up in the garbage for lack of use are unproductive loans. They may make us feel better for a little while, but has the loan added anything to our life? Our stewardship of money and loans means making good use of our resources with one eye on the future. Loans can be effectively used as leverage, but consumer loans generally have little leverage. Stewardship is not just a moral question, it is a question of practical economic realities, and there is a balance between our spiritual and financial balance sheets; so go ahead and draw up yours, what does it look like?

#### ***3. Recognize the difference between policy options and faith***

Church leaders need to understand the difference between policy options and faith. We can share a faith concern over poverty, but there is not a Christian policy to solve the problem. Liberals, conservatives, capitalists and welfarists can



agree that poverty is a problem, because where they differ is in what policy option will best solve the problem, knowing that grand schemes are all too often defective because they rely on the will and power of humanity and its sinful nature. A market solution will approach this in one way, a welfarist approach it in another. Both proponents can be good people of faith, so let's recognize the difference and negotiate the solution accordingly. The problem with our current economic and political discourse is that it is divisive, and progressive change is forced through by powerful liberalizing forces rather than as an outcome of engaging dialogue.

### **Conclusion: Sharing the Guilt**

It's easy to point the finger at the Wall Street bankers and blame them for the market chaos of recent years, but do we not all share the guilt? The economy is very good at rewarding, and very good at punishing. The thing is, we don't hear anyone complaining when they are offered good deals or the value of their property rockets. No one is pointing fingers then. Once the economic laws of gravity kick in, and what goes up in price falls, then the blame game kicks in big time. The fact the markets over-heated was obvious for some time before 2008. What we can see is how badly banks had been managing their business and how exposed they were to the property market. The economy punished them big time. However, individuals did the same and need to reflect on their own exposure, and their own motives and behaviors in the market.

The market economy is what we have, and like much else in our world falls short of the Christian ideal, but it does mediate different belief systems and different expressions of needs. In short, the worldview that condemns the excesses of capitalism needs to be heavily qualified, both in terms of what they set up as alternative idols, and in terms of the implications for the utility of the market economy. Defenders of capitalism likewise must recognize that happiness is temporal and others do need help. Both sides need to recognize their economic or political worldview does not bring them salvation.

If greed and selfishness are the bases of our behavior, this is expressed in many ways, not just in the economic arena. The idols of welfarism and capitalism are idols that stand in the way of relationship with God. It is easy to create rivals to God. For different people this will entail different idols: designer brands, celebrity status, protest, academic recognition and a host of other powerful motives. To project that onto the market economy is, for me, again looking down the wrong end of the gun barrel. What the economy does so well is to show us a mirror of our society. It's not the economy, stupid; it's the people in the economy, stupid!

### **About the Author**



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