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Theology, Economic Symbols and the Environment

1. Nature Theology

Over the past forty years environmental theologians have done admirable work inspiring people to take greater care of the natural world. They have used biblical ideas like covenant and stewardship. They have proposed that we regard nature as sacred. Ecofeminists have shown connections between patriarchy and environmental degradation. Liberation theologians remind us that environmental problems disproportionately affect poor people. Deep ecologists have encouraged us to imagine a world of meaning that lies beyond our experience as human beings.¹

Religious thinkers have also contributed to a more realistic sense of humility concerning our ability to reverse the effects of technology and growth on the environment. Larry Rasmussen memorably argues that the planet is more like a room that needs to be made safe for infants than it is like a spaceship with a competent pilot at the controls.²

This effort to find more compelling metaphors that might reshape our relation to nature has been important in my development as a citizen. At the same time, the

¹ A much more thorough consideration of these ideas can be found in my book. Malcolm Clemens Young, *The Invisible Hand in the Wilderness: Economics, Ecology and God* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2014).

² Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

way human beings act in social situations may be more important to the environment than our genuine sense of care for it. Pollution and other forms of environmental degradation do not occur because a majority of our population supports such practices, but because many of our socially formed goals and aspirations remain fundamentally incompatible with a thriving natural environment.

Social values relating to status, success, power, security, material acquisition, birth control, economic growth, freedom and our ideal of the good life may represent even more fundamental barriers to a healthily functioning world than our regard for nature. Although cultivating a greater sense of care for the environment may be one way to redirect human activity, closer attention to social forces and the power of historically formed values could be a more effective means of bringing about significant change.³

2. Economics

In our time economics is the primary symbol system for describing humanity's relation to the material world. We use economic stories and symbols everywhere to understand our own individual behavior and that of society. Governments, law courts, tax offices, in business and education these methodologies have become second nature to us.

³ The influence of business interests in politics also profoundly affects the environment. It is not merely a matter of free markets.

In the twenty years after the fall of communism in Europe our collective faith in markets has vastly expanded. In the United States we have become used to selling naming rights for public stadiums, giving gift cards instead of actual gifts, seeing advertisements in schools and on airport and gas station televisions, local school districts that pay their students for good grades and test scores, concierge medical doctors for the wealthy, human sterilization incentive payments for the poor, a campaign financing system that disenfranchises ordinary citizens.

Market values have expanded into realms of life where we used to believe they did not belong. We use economic methodologies to make an increasing range of decisions. We are outsourcing police and military actions to private security firms and making similar policy decisions with regard to schools, hospitals, government and prisons.

This change in culture is correlated with an increase inequality (in wealth and income). In the past, wealthy people had better access to luxuries like fine jewelry, expensive dresses, European vacations, private jets, large mansions, etc. Increasing inequality means that today in many situations money is the only way to have access to the political system, medical care, education and even general safety. When everything is bought and sold, poor and middle class people cease to fully participate in society and our relation to the natural world is necessarily distorted.

With this encroachment of economic values into every sphere of modern life has come an increasing faith in the ability for markets to solve virtually every kind of

human problem. After the 2008 mortgage crisis in the United States and the unscrupulous banking and investment practices that led to it nearly resulted in a global financial meltdown, Americans by a two to one margin regarded this as the fault not of finance executives but of the federal government.⁴

George Akerlof and Robert J. Shiller make the case that macroeconomic explanations of the last forty years have depended too much on unrealistic accounts of human rationality and not enough on the way that our stories affect the aggregation of human behavior. They write, “Finally, our sense of reality, of who we are and what we are doing is intertwined with the story of our lives and of the lives of others. The aggregate of such *stories* is a national or international story, which itself plays an important role in the economy.”⁵

But economics does not just identify stories that function as an input into human understanding – it is itself a story about human flourishing and the world.

Members of society to some degree or other tacitly agree to abide by its rules and values. We become so comfortable with these symbols that we fail to recognize their metaphorical quality.⁶

⁴ Frank Newport, “Americans blame Government More than Wall Street for Economy,” Gallup Poll, 19 October 2011, www.gallup.com/poll/150191/Americans-Blame-Gov-Wall-Street-Economy.aspx. Cited in Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 12.

⁵ These italics are in the original. George A. Akerlof and Robert J. Shiller, *Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why It Matters for Global Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 6.

⁶ In 1744 Zedler's Encyclopedia defined market as “that spacious public place, surrounded by ornate buildings or enclosed by stands, where, at certain times, all kinds of victuals and other wares are offered for sale: hence the same place is also called market-place.”⁶ Today we speak of market research, market shares, market socialism, currency and futures markets, market-clearing unemployment, market mechanisms, market demand curves, market value, market forces, marketing executives, free markets, market baskets of goods, marketization, monopoly markets, market goods, market failures, black markets, market prices, overseas markets, market

3. The Social Construction of Economics

Economics as a social scientific discipline derives power from simplifying assumptions about human nature and social behavior. In ubiquitous introductory economics classes students learn to assume that individuals act rationally and predictably. No matter how much Homo Economicus has, “he” cannot be satisfied and always wants more. Students learn that price is equivalent to value and that virtually all things can be compared on that basis. Economics teaches about the nearly miraculous power of markets for influencing production, coordinating behavior, and distributing goods.

David Graeber even argues that economists have origin stories like the ancient myths of Mesopotamia that explain the beginning of economic behavior. Introductory economics textbooks include a story about the origin of money as a way of resolving what happens when there is no coincidence of wants (person A owns grain, person B has extra leather belts money helps exchange to occur even when neither A nor B wants exactly what the other person has). Graeber argues that this myth has no basis in the reality of how Neolithic peoples act. Barter was not normal behavior that happened within Neolithic tribal groups but was how a tribe interacts with strangers. Money, the economy, is not what naturally happens when people are left to their own devices. The economy is a

economies, market equilibriums, all as a result of a simple abstraction made by Adam Smith. Our use of this same symbol 250 years later indicates the extent to which this word has come to mean far more than a geographical location, as commerce and economic exchange have come to play a more dominant role in our lives. To regard our use of the term 'market' merely as the best possible means of describing human behavior under conditions of scarcity is to neglect its history and its power as an abstraction invented by human ingenuity. *Invisible Hand*, 158 (ms).

construction of modernity required when societies are so large that they can no longer make decisions together about work and the use of objects.⁷

Economists frequently view their constructs as models whose success depends on correlation with “the real world” and in their ability to predict behavior. The late philosopher Richard Rorty (1931-2007) would have described this as a “mirror of nature” orientation to knowledge. This self-conception of economics as an academic discipline makes it difficult to fully understand the role these symbols and ideas play in constructing an experience of reality.

In his article “The Economic Sense of Pollution,” Larry Ruff writes, “But as important as technology, politics, law and ethics are to the pollution question, they are bound to have disappointing results, for they ignore the fact that pollution is an economic problem.”⁸

This provides two important insights into how we understand the usefulness of economics as a tool for understanding environmental degradation. First, we can read it as a wise recognition of the important role that economic thinking plays in our treatment of the environment. Ruff clearly sees the powerful impersonal forces of the market in necessary opposition to a healthy environment. He points out that according to our market models pollution makes common sense as a means for a competitor to force costs onto others (by not paying for pollution abatement technology, etc.,) thus lowering cost and increasing profits.

⁷ David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (NY: Melville Publishing, 2011).

⁸ Larry E. Ruff, “The Economic Common Sense of Pollution,” in *Economics of the Environment: Selected Readings*, ed. Nancy S. Dorfman and Robert Dorfman (New York: Norton, 1972), 3.

Second from this quote we learn that Ruff believes that economics is simply the way the world is. He believes that the market impulse necessarily represents a deep natural drive which can not be explained or understood in terms of technology, politics, law and ethics.

In other words, for him economics is not merely a language, alongside of several others, for understanding environmental degradation. According to Ruff, economics is simply the way human beings necessarily are. In Ruff's world, economics does not represent a response to social life learned as a result of historical and cultural circumstance (and expressed through symbol) but rather a natural human drive that we have only recently come to understand in its complexity.

This article's view of economics as the natural state of human society suggests that our economic presuppositions are about as invisible to us as theological presuppositions were to the thinkers of the Middle Ages. Our faith in markets to resolve environmental problems may make as much sense to future generations as the divine right of kings does to us.

4. God

Economic thinking is the most compelling system of meaning in our time. Its universality and the energy that we devote toward achieving its ends make it far more important than almost any other means for making sense of the world. This system of symbols regards evil for lack of a better word (such as inflation,

unemployment, trade deficits, low output, inefficiency, theft etc.) as incarnated in chaos. It describes the human project as the creation of order in the world through the prevention of waste, the encouragement of productivity and the fair distribution of goods.

Every month, quarter and year we publish new statistics which make news themselves, especially measures which economists expect to influence interest rates and thus bond yields. Our efforts to fight inflation or to battle the budget deficit or to compete successfully in world markets direct our energy in the way that military campaigns once did.

Profit and possessions, personal and national income, growth and development, production and consumption have become ends in themselves. Unfortunately this is no benign illusion. Even if the material needs of most people alive today could be adequately met according to this system of social rules, the requirements of future generations, the demands of a healthy eco-sphere, the hopes of other species and the preservation of beautiful wilderness can not be.

These symbols have become habits of thought which have so pervaded the institutions in our society that few alternatives exist which can even serve to criticize our consumer culture.

The symbols which interpret the commercial world have an unstated theological meaning for modern people. This system of thought provides us with orientation. It directs our attention and shapes our desire. It assigns to us our

most deeply felt goals. It structures our perception of the world. It creates the context for our political and social experience, all without our conscious awareness of the profound extent of its influence.

In the past, these functions were all part of our religious heritage as people looked to tradition to provide guidance for life's daily decisions. Perhaps in some senses, a society without a theology is not possible. Perhaps we need sublimated theologies to decide how we will commit ourselves.

Through history the idea of God has been profoundly related to our understanding and experience of meaning and commitment. Careful thought has gone into discerning what standards should be employed to judge how we can best devote our tremendous energies, talents and interests. The theological idea of idolatry as misplaced worship, as a mistaken devotion to temporary and fallible symbols, has been a helpful concept for making moral judgments about our commitments. In Abrahamic religions the idea of "God" gives us a way of criticizing the way we often devote ourselves to idols.

In one sense, "God" is a word. In another, it points to something that far transcends the possibilities of our immediate experience. What do we mean by the word "God" as a symbol that refers beyond the limits of even our imagination? How does it enable us to better understand our relation to the physical world and to each other?

Paul Tillich writes that God is not an object among other objects but rather the presupposition for what exists, what he calls “the Ground of Being.” Karl Rahner states that the word God refers to part of humanity's spiritual and intellectual existence rather than to ordinary experience.⁹

The symbol God, does not refer to a tangible thing that always lies immediately at our disposal, in the way the oak tree outside my window does, but to something that we cannot understand in its completeness. If we want to explain our religious tendencies to someone else, we cannot merely point to God, and expect that other person to experience the same thing we do just as we can not explain our decision to get married by merely pointing at love.

Although it is easy to recognize God as a word, it indicates something that most believers argue cannot be adequately represented. This symbol does not refer to something that lies under our control but rather to something that directs us. It is an odd symbol our language. We use it to express the idea that in the sentence structure of the universe human beings are not always in the subject position. It describes how the universe makes use of us. In some senses it subverts the whole idea of utility. Perhaps this aspect of the symbol is what makes it so powerful in any conversation about the environment.

⁹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 45.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I am not suggesting that we abolish economic thinking. These symbols evolved along with human societies and have important value and use. However, we cannot continue to treat them as merely the inevitable expression of human nature. With changing technology, and as we struggle to reverse the damage human beings have done to the planet, our social symbols need to be more carefully scrutinized.

As the whole field of religion and ecology matures we will continue to move beyond the effort to merely encourage a love of nature. I hope that scholars of religion with their advanced abilities to interpret symbols can introduce students to a more critical experience of economic ideology.