



Demythcizing the Myth of Economism, for Earth's Sake!

John Cobb, Richard Norgaard, and the Common Good
by
Ted Peters

Abstract. *Economism* is the term elected by theologian John Cobb and economist Richard Norgaard to describe the insidious way in which free-market ideology has so imprisoned the global mind that it can no longer address urgent matters such as injustice or climate change. Economism is an invisible yet idolatrous religion that is leading the planet to eco-destruction. This essay amends this description of economism by calling it a *myth*, and then offers a prophetic critique in the form of *de-mythologizing*. Only by de-mythologizing--actually, demythcizing--the myth of economism combined with the vision of a planetary common good can the public theologian ready us for a just, sustainable, participatory, and planetary society..

Key Terms. economism, religion, myth,, common good, public theology, planetary solidarity, prophetic activism, climate justice, *Laudato Si*, Richard Norgaard, Milton Friedman, John Cobb

Resistance to economism is like fighting Goliath with only two small stones in a sling. It seems hopeless. Hopeless or not, here we will carefully select two stones to attack the giant. We will select

demythification plus the common good and then sling them toward the monster.

The Goliath in our contemporary situation is economism. The Philistine enemy is ourselves. We the human race, befuddled and staggering toward ecocide, are our own enemy. We hire the mercenary giant, economism, to protect us with a rhetorical opiate that calms our fears and lulls us into a painless self-obliteration.

The first stone is analytical, a demand for transparency. In what follows, I will analyze economism and show how it functions as a myth. The myth of economism has become an invisible religion for modern society, eliciting within our minds a false consciousness. Regrettably, this myth provides cultural justification for human economic injustice along with environmental neglect. To make visible what is virtually invisible, I will rely on the detailed work of eco-economist Richard Norgaard along with theologian John Cobb to parse the tenets of the neo-liberal doctrines which constitute the myth of free market capitalism. Some tenets of this myth are demonstrably incompatible with the Christian emphasis on neighbor-love. And, by raising an ethical superstructure on pillars of the common good--especially the work of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*--I intend to strengthen the moral ramparts of a just, sustainable, participatory, and planetary society. In our battle with this giant myth, the first stone we sling will de-mythify the tacit religion of economism, while the vision of the common good will follow as the second stone.¹

These two--demythifying economism combined with lifting up a vision of the common good--belong in the arsenal of a public theology that incorporates eschatological political theology

¹ Elsewhere I have argued that we earthlings should think of the Milky Way as a galactic common good. Ted Peters, "Toward a Galactic Common Good: Space Exploration Ethics," *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophy and Public Policy*, ed., David Boonin (New York: Macmillan Palgrave, 2018) 827-843; <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-93907-0> . In this treatment, advancing to a terrestrial common good inclusive of all humanity embedded within the ecosphere will suffice.

partnered with prophetic activism.² "Political theology calls on the church to think *politically*," writes Cobb. "This entails understanding itself and its thought in the concrete socio-historical situation perceived on a global scale."³

I incorporate this dimension of political theology within the more comprehensive public theology. Regarding *public theology*, three methodological points are relevant. First, I largely follow David Tracy by advocating that public theology be conceived in the church, reflected on critically in the academy, and meshed with the wider culture.⁴ Second, of the various models of political theology available, I embrace most fully *eschatological political theology*, which begins with a vision of God's kingdom of love and justice and then renders judgment against all temporal societies, rendering their social achievements as provisional only.⁵ Third, *prophetic activism* resists existing provisional systems when they idolatrously demand final allegiance.⁶ Justice embedded in the common good provides the norm.

As previously introduced, our methodological home here will be public theology. Within the frame of a public theology buttressed

² Ted Peters, "Public Theology: Its Pastoral, Apologetic, Scientific, Political, and Prophetic Tasks," *International Journal of Public Theology* 12:2 (2018) 153-177; <https://brill.com/abstract/journals/ijpt/12/1/ijpt.12.issue-1.xml>.

"Public theology in a postcolonial frame of reference can be undertaken by a critical analysis of the economic, political, and cultural development linked to ecological degradation." Paul S. Chung, *Postcolonial Public Theology: Faith, Scientific Rationality, and Prophetic Dialogue* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2016) 199-200.

³ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Process Theology as Political Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982) 83.

⁴ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 3. Hak Joon Lee delivers marching orders: public theology "reminds secularism of the religious foundation of human existence and civilization, while assisting in channeling religious passion and energy constructively to the common task of justice and peace." Hak Joon Lee, "Public Theology," *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, eds., Graig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 44-65, at 63.

⁵ "When the Church is faced with the modern political systems," observes Johannes Metz, "she must emphasize her critical, liberating function again and again, to make clear that [human] history as a whole stands under God's eschatological proviso." Johannes B. Metz, *Theology of the World*, tr., William Glen-Doepel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 118. Eschatological political theologies based on visions of hope exploded in the 1960s in Europe with the Theology of Hope and in Latin America with liberation theology. These more aggressive social transformers appear to be has-beens, at least according to the new political theologians. "Political theology is dominated by and even assumed to be Christian discourse. At least, it was." Julie Clague, "Political Theologies Ten Years after 9/11," *Political Theology* 12:5 (October 2011) 645-659, at 646

⁶ "Prophetic activism is fundamentally concerned with the well-being of the marginalized...A person's well-being is fundamentally determined by their access to basic human rights, which rest on a universal understanding of the dignity of all human beings." Helene Slessarev-Jamir, *Prophetic Activism: Progressive Religious Justice Movements in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011) 8.

by eschatological political theology coupled with prophetic activism for the sake of Planet Earth, I plan to pose two ethical questions that are difficult to ask within the mythically structured language of economism: (1) should the rich help the poor? (2) does a vision of the common good compel a human response that could save our planet's fecundity?⁷ In sum, as a public theologian I plan to sling two stones toward the Goliath, economism, and try to precipitate a revolution, or at least a reformation.

Is Economism a Religion? a Myth? or Both?

"Why are you wearing black?" I asked my teaching teammate in the Energy and Resources Program at the University of California at Berkeley and the Graduate Theological Union, Professor Richard Norgaard. He was wearing a black shirt, black pants, and black shoes. I bet his socks were black too, but I didn't check. We were co-teaching a course dealing with religious and ethical perspectives on environmental science. It had just dawned on me that this was the wardrobe he routinely wore to every class. I suddenly realized that I can be slow to observe the obvious.

"I'm in mourning for our planet," he answered.

"In mourning? Are you without hope?"

"Since the year 2000, I wake up each morning and ask myself what I should wear. When the thought enters my mind that today, just as yesterday, our nation is still in the grip of economism with

⁷ The annual Earth Day tradition began April 22, 1970. The threshold of scientific ecology was crossed in 1972 with Donella H. Meadows, et.al., *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books, 1972). The concept of eco-feminism was formulated in France in 1972. In the United States, Susan Griffin introduced eco-feminism in her 1978 work, *Woman and Nature* (New York: Open Road, 1978). By 1980, Richard Norgaard's Berkeley colleague, Carolyn Merchant, had published her landmark book, *The Death of Nature*. Merchant hints at the idolatrous role of economism with her term, "reverence," in this work. "Both the women's movement and the ecology movement are sharply critical of the costs of competition, aggression, and domination arising from the market economy's *modus operandi* in nature and society. Ecology has been a subversive science in its criticism of the consequences of uncontrolled growth associated with capitalism, technology, and progress--concepts that over the last two hundred years have been treated with reverence in Western culture." Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper, 1980) xvi.

its unrestrained greed and disregard for the future of our planet, I decide once again to wear black. I mourn."

Economism is Richard Norgaard's term to describe economic theory as a religion in disguise, and a destructive religion at that. *Homo sapiens* on Planet Earth have entered the *Econocene era*, he says, the stage in human evolution where human minds, beliefs, daily aspirations, institutions, and measurements of history are filtered and framed through a single dominating lens, namely, the economic narrative regarding what constitutes reality. Economism provides the twenty-first century with its conceptual set, its worldview, its myth through which we understand ourselves and interpret the course of both personal and political events. Because of the totalization of the economic metanarrative, economism functions nearly invisibly as *the* religion which unites America if not the world across ethnic boundaries.

Even more forcefully, theologian John Cobb views economism as an idolatrous religion. "Economism functions today as our shared religion....From a Christian point of view, it is the idolatrous worship of mammon."⁸ Might Norgaard the economist agree? Yes.

Economist Norgaard has reluctantly found himself in the business of religion. He'd like to convert from economism to something better. Whereas the religion of economism estranges the human race from Earth, Norgaard lifts up a vision of an as-yet-unnamed global moral renewal that readies us for reformation, or better, for supersession. Might public theologians and ethicists aid in this vision construction?

I offer one modest amendment to Norgaard's description of economism as a religion. Although describing economism as a religion helps illuminate some aspects of our present situation, one point I wish to make is the following: if we employ the term, *myth*, as an analytical tool, we will gain more direct access to the near invisible manner in which economism governs today's culture. I

⁸ John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) 1.

recommend we think of economism as a myth, as a cultural mindset, as a frame of interpretation which heavily influences our view of reality.⁹ My employment of *myth* overlaps largely though not exhaustively with Norgaard's term, *religion*, and I hope it adds illumination.

Once designated a myth, economism becomes subject to demythologizing, to an interpretation that exposes its existential and moral underframe. The myth metaphor will prompt us then to demythologize--perhaps better, de-mythicize--economism, breaking its grip on the modern mind. In place of this myth I offer a prophetic vision of God's promised future, a transformed future prefigured in Isaiah's vision of the Peaceable Kingdom where the lion lies down with the lamb. This prophetic vision opens the human imagination to ask two key ethical questions: (1) should the rich help the poor? and (2) does a vision of the common good bridge God's eschatological promise with today's economic possibilities? I will answer both of the questions in the affirmative.

These questions are important because postcolonial critics of the global economy liken the market to an enslavement from which we need to be liberated. According to R.S. Sugirtharaja, the postcolonial "task today is not territorial emancipation but freedom from the control of the market."¹⁰ The role that economism understood as religion or myth plays is akin to an opiate, as Marx and Lenin might aver, to inoculate us against the pain of environmental degradation.

The economic-environmental crisis drove John Cobb along with his colleague Herman Daly to produce a most prescient book in 1989, *For the Common Good*. The delusion of *Homo economicus* as

⁹ Where I employ the term *myth*, Charles Taylor uses *social imaginary*. With this term, Taylor intends "something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode...rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations." Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 171.

¹⁰ R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 134.

an individual with no regard for the welfare of the larger biosphere needs to be corrected with a new global economic system, they contend. "We call for rethinking economics on the basis of a new concept of *Homo economicus* as person-in-community."¹¹ Each of us is a person-in-community, in community with the entire web of life that makes our planet green with fertility.

Economics as hidden religion? Really?

Why might one even suggest that economics could be compared to religion? After all, economics deals with the material world whereas religion deals with what is spiritual, right? In addition, economics does not enlist church memberships or belief systems or moral codes, right? Economics is based on science, whereas religious people live out of faith, right? Economics can be sharply distinguished from politics and culture, right? No, none of this is right. In fact, all these assumptions kick up a cloud of dust which hides the invisible religious character of economism. Here is how Norgaard describes economism.

Our concern here is with economism as a widely held system of faith. This modern religion is essential for the maintenance of the global market economy, for justifying personal decisions, and for explaining and rationalizing the cosmos we have created. This uncritical economic creed has colonized other disciplines, including ecology, as ecologists increasingly rely on economic logic to rationalize the protection of ecosystems. More broadly, economism often works syncretically with the world's religions even though it violates so many of their basic tenets. A Great Transition is needed to replace economism with an equally powerful and pervasive

¹¹ Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon, 1989) 164.

belief system that embraces the values of solidarity, sustainability, and well-being for all.¹²

Even though economism is most dominant in the United States, Norgaard observes that economism has reshaped diverse cultures to become for the planet its "modern secular religion."¹³

Theologian Cobb provides a parallel definition: *economism* is "the belief that the economy is the most important dimension of human life, that the whole of society should be organized around it."¹⁴ Once we get the economist and the theologian to agree on nomenclature, we are ready for creative mutual interaction.¹⁵

Within the frame of public theology, my own method for dealing with economism as a secular religion includes a *hermeneutic of secular experience*, a method I have employed elsewhere to analyze the structure of myths that model reality for modern and emerging postmodern culture. The hermeneutic of secular experience identifies hidden or disguised dimensions of ultimacy which lurk below the surface of secular practices or ideologies, dimensions of ultimacy which interpret reality in such a way that they enlist faithful adherence.¹⁶ I then de-mythicize the myth that governs social and cultural thinking.¹⁷

¹² Richard Norgaard, "The Church of Economism and Its Discontents," *Great Transition Initiative* (December 2015), <http://www.greattransition.org/publication/the-church-of-economism-and-itsdiscontents> (accessed 4/6/2016). See: John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and Davis Sclosberg, *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹³ Norgaard, "Church of Economism." In the tradition of Paul Tillich, Francis Ching-Wah Yip describes capitalism as a religious phenomenon. "Capitalism (or its spirit) is the unconscious faith or religious substance of bourgeois society and has the holy and ecstatic qualities that give it a religious character." *Capitalism as Religion: A Study of Paul Tillich's Interpretation of Modernity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) 53.

¹⁴ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Spiritual Bankruptcy: A Call to Prophetic Action* (Nashville TN: Abingdon 2010) Chapter 7.

¹⁵ I assume an important rejection of the secularization hypothesis as articulated by Lutheran theologian Guillermo Hansen, "after the great transformation of modernity, religion does not disappear—it only camouflages itself under a new disguise." Guillermo Hansen, "Money, Religion and Tyranny: God and the Demonic in Luther's Antifragile Theology" *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 1/23/2014 - See more at: <http://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/35#sthash.uJ5VITkU.dpuf>.

¹⁶ Alternatively, I could call my method *political theology* in the sense this term is used by followers of Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, tr., George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Accordingly, theological tools are employed to analyze the tacit theology at work in the nation-state. Another alternative would be the socio-theological method, which parallels the political. The "sociotheological turn means

Of the four main social drivers--economics, politics, culture, and communication--the church and other religious institutions may lack economic or political power but they have access to culture. The path to public policy for the church is through culture, and demythicising economism is the first step to influencing public reaction to, if not resistance to, the economy.

With this method in hand, we turn now to economism in more detail to uncover the mythical framework through which existential and moral questions get posed. That we are dealing with the dimension of ultimacy is clear when we recall the rise of the discipline of economics over the last century. One of the founders of the market-oriented Chicago school of economics, Frank Knight, already in 1932 declared that economics would have to become the equivalent of a religion with basic tenets hidden from public view. "There must be ultimates, and they must be religious" contended Knight. He went on to propose that if someone were to question the purported "objectivity" of economic tenets the questioner should be treated as if in violation of what is sacred. "To inquire into the ultimates behind accepted group values is obscene and sacrilegious," he added.¹⁸ We today can see how nearly a century ago the discipline of economics was deliberately taking on dogmatic status with an authority that relegates criticism to heterodoxy. *Move over religion! Economics wants to take your place!*

When in religion a dogma is proclaimed, then it becomes easy to identify heterodox alternatives. This does not exactly apply to economism, however. What turns economic theory into the religion

incorporating into social analysis the insider-oriented attempt to understand the reality of a particular worldview."¹⁶ Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Sociotheological Turn," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81:4 (December 2013) 939-948, at 944. To my knowledge, there does not yet exist a correlative *economic theology*.

¹⁷ See: Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Seabury Crossroad, 1976) 151. Developed from the work of Paul Tillich and Langdon Gilkey, the hermeneutic of secular experience was the method I employed for uncovering the structure of the *gene myth* during the era of the Human Genome Project. See: Ted Peters, *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2nd ed., 2003). For a delineation of types of myth, see: Ted Peters, *God in Cosmic History* (Winona MN: Anselm Academic, 2017) 96-99.

¹⁸ Frank Knight, "The Newer Economics and the Control of Economic Activity," *Journal of Political Economy* 40:4 (1932) 448-476, at 455; cited by Norgaard. See: Frank H. Knight and Thornton W. Merriam, *The Economic Order and Religion* (Mansfield CT: Martino Publishing, 2015).

of economism is not outright dogma; rather, it is the power of its submerged myth to screen the questions society asks. Its presupposed conceptual set functions to filter language and ideas in such a way that our mental assessments and values become pre-structured, so to speak. Relentless economic discourse fogs our minds with interpretations of reality offered hourly in radio, television, and internet communications. The televised Sunday morning worship services of the 1950s have been gradually replaced with stock market reports, economic projections, and investor hand ringing. Hunting bear has been replaced by bear markets, and milking cows with bull markets.

Economism's Tenets of Belief

The core force at work in the comprehensive myth dominating the econocene era is that all issues become translated into economic formulations. At least two competing schools of thought vie with one another: the totally unregulated or free market school versus the government regulated school. Both are dialects of the one language of economese.¹⁹

Within this more comprehensive academic and political structure, we find the specific form of economism Norgaard and Cobb detest, namely, the exclusively market-oriented neo-liberal school of economics. As Moses is to biblical religion and Gautama to Buddhism, Milton Friedman (1912-2006) at the University of Chicago is to the religion of economism. Friedman received the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 1976 and became chief economic advisor to U.S. President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Friedman has not distributed the equivalent of Moses' Ten Commandments or Buddha's Four

¹⁹ Both John Neville Keynes and Milton Friedman agree on a key distinction between positive economics and normative economics. *Positive economics* aspires to be scientific and explains *what is*. *Normative economics* prescribes *what ought to be*. Economism is a myth enveloping global consciousness which presumes that virtually all important human values must be translated into economic values, a normativity which appears to be scientific at the level of assumption.

Noble Truths, yet the faith of economism has become creedal and its tenets apodictic.

Each tenet--what I call a *mythologeme* or plank in the myth's platform--begins with a surface faith statement accompanied by a somewhat dangerous shadow side. In public debate, the missionaries for economism jockey to keep their faith tenets in the lime light so as to keep their shadows out of sight. Below are some tenets of economism which illustrate the economic faith at work.²⁰

- 1. *Freedom and the market require each other.* "Economic freedom is...an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom," contends Friedman.²¹ In the econocene era, we experience our freedom most clearly at the shopping mall or when searching for good deals on the internet. Existentially, we construct our self-identity through consumption, by purchasing merchandise which identifies us with an economic class, with in-group fashion, or World Series Champs. Because we experience choosing what to buy, this convinces us that we have freedom of choice. Further, those who protect the market become viewed as our champions of freedom

Lurking in the shadows, however, is the dim awareness that even though we can choose what to buy we cannot choose what is put up for sale. Such awareness reveals the difference between consumers and producers. By buying freedom of choice in the retail market, shoppers end up buying unencumbered freedom for the producers.²²

²⁰ I have benefited in part by two differing lists of economism's tenets. One is offered by Richard B. Norgaard, Jessica J. Goddard, and Jalel Sager, "Economics, Economism, and Ecological Crisis," in the *Routledge Handbook on Religion and Ecology*, eds., Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (London: Routledge, 2016). The other is offered by Cobb, *Earthist Challenge to Economism*, 28-30.

²¹ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, 2002) 8.

²² "The popular embodiment of economism is consumerism." Cobb, *Earthist Challenge to Economism*, 1. "The freedom of enterprises to monopolize the market likewise reduces the freedom of consumers to choose." Robert B. Reich, *Saving Capitalism For the Many, Not the Few* (New York: Random House, Vintage, 2015) 14.

- 2. *Freedom is individual.* Freedom belongs to the autonomous individual who needs to be liberated from dependencies on government, family, tradition, and even neurotic habits. "Cooperation is strictly individual and voluntarily provided," says Friedman.²³ Because fashion shops offer such a variety of merchandise and because we assume that choice is individual, our purchase choices either reinforce our family identity or liberate us from it. We become self-made through what we buy. The shadow accompanying individual freedom is denial of our relational interdependence not only with human community but also with the natural world. The question--should we value the natural domain as a common good?--cannot get asked. There is no room for the common good in economism.²⁴ We cannot coherently ask whether Aldo Leopold was correct or not when he declared, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."²⁵ Leopold's moral maxim simply cannot be admitted into economism's calculus.

²³ Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 14. Freedom is not for everyone. "Freedom is a tenable objective only for responsible individuals. We do not believe in freedom for madmen or children." Ibid., 34. The individualist understanding of freedom, from the contrary perspective of Cobb, is inextricably tied to solidarity with the entire human race. "We are individuals, but we are individuals who participate in one another and cannot be saved in isolation." Cobb, *Process Theology as Political Theology*, 96.

²⁴ "As liberals, we take freedom of the individual, or perhaps the family, as our ultimate goal in judging social arrangements." Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 13. In Friedman's theory, the basic economic unit can be the household, not necessarily the individual. Be that as it may, the libertarian autonomy of each economic unit implies political anarchy, according to critic Andrew Chrucky. The very idea of independent individuals or households at liberty to initiate economic relationships could at best apply to pre-modern rural economies, not a modern industrial economy where every sector is already in interdependent relationship. Friedman "cannot be talking about any present industrial society: there are no societies with independent households in the industrialized world; all such societies are found in primitive, i.e., unindustrialized communities. So, he is imagining either a primitive society, an ideal one, or a purely fictitious one." Andrew Chrucky, "Milton Friedman's Hidden Anarchism in *Capitalism and Freedom*" (April 8, 2008) <http://www.ditext.com/chrucky/friedman.html> (accessed 4/8/2016). Friedman would defend himself by advocating that some government is needed to enforce law and maintain justice. "The consistent liberal is not an anarchist." *Capitalism and Freedom*, 34.

²⁵ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac—And Sketches Here and There*, Special Commemorative Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949, 1989). "Without a healthy natural ecology there is not a sustainable economy and vice versa. They are inevitably interdependent," theologian Mary Evelyn Tucker reminds us. Mary Evelyn Tucker, "Climate Change Brings Moral Change," *For Our Common Home: Process-Relational Responses to Laudato Si*, eds., John B. Cobb, Jr., and Ignacio Casteura (Anoka MN: Process Century Press, 2015) 187-189 (188).

The shadow cast by this individualistic and anthropocentric figure so darkens the human community and hides our inextricable dependence on the biosphere that our relationships recede from our sight. We need a spiritual insight to see once again that we individuals belong within a larger web of life. At least according to Cobb and his scientific colleague Charles Birch. "Humans should recognize that their arrogance and their efforts to manipulate their environment are destructive of the web of life. In this perspective the need is for a deep spiritual transformation that will lead human beings to experience themselves simply as a part of the whole web and not as agents of purposive change."²⁶

- 3. *Cost-Benefit analysis applies to every dimension of living.* Everything has a price. If we can't afford it, we become defined by our economic limits. If we can afford it, we believe we can enhance our freedom to become what we choose to be. This invisibly persuades us that the value of all things is determined by their price. Ethically, we become forced to choose between price and dignity. Philosopher Immanuel Kant made this clear more than two centuries ago: everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. "A thing has a *price* if any substitute or equivalent can be found for it. It has *dignity* or worthiness if it admits of no equivalent."²⁷ The reduction of all things to the market's cost-benefit analysis systematically eliminates dignity; it eliminates the very concept of intrinsic worth.

Here is the shadow side: even the environment has a price. We purchase a healthy environment by sacrificing jobs

²⁶ Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Liberation of Life* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 65.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, tr., H.J. Paton (New York: Harper, 1956) 36. To confront the ecological crisis, we must break the cost-benefit mythologeme to ask again about intrinsic value. "Discover and value the functioning of ecological systems and the biosphere to achieve their common good—their sustainability—now and into the future." James Schaefer, "Valuing Earth Intrinsically and Instrumentally: A Theological Framework for Environmental Ethics," *Theological Studies* 66:4 (December 2005)783-814 (812).

for workers, we are told. A healthy ecosphere can only be the result of a trade-off, allegedly. According to the economist myth, the health of our ecosphere is something to be purchased if the price is right. Any other value system which might treasure beauty, knowledge, health, longevity, or moral integrity for their own sakes becomes folded into the exclusive means of evaluating exchange, cost and benefit. What frustrates Norgaard is that within the myth of economism one cannot get enough conceptual leverage to combat anthropogenic climate change on behalf of the future of our planet.

Daly and Cobb provide the leverage with an alternative model for economic thinking. "We call for rethinking economics on the basis of a new concept of *Homo economicus* as person-in-community," and that community includes the common good shared by the entire web of life.²⁸

Similarly, Pope Francis provides that leverage by converting to a religion other than economism. The Holy Father says flatly what needs to be said: §23. "The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all."²⁹ Though cost-benefit reductionism threatens to devour us, the Holy Father trembles not; he challenges the myth of economism, so the common good and the health of our ecosphere become valued for their intrinsic worthiness. With the pope, dignity is back.

²⁸ Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 164.

²⁹ Pope Francis, "*Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*," http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed 4/8/2016). See: Ted Peters, "Anticipating the Renewal of the Earth: Theology and Science in *Laudato Si'*," ed., John Clapper, *Interface Theology* 1:2/2015 (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2017) 31-44. Since the 1970s, eco-ethicists have sought in vain to replace market values with the common good. "The snowballing effects of population growth, industrialization spreading to the Third World, the increasing exploitation of non-replaceable fossil and atomic fuels, the continuing push in all parts of the world to increase per capita consumption, the increasing reliance on chemical fertilizers and biocides to boost agricultural yields, are surely problems less in the realm of technique than in the realm of values.... [We need a] fresh vision of man's place in and the common good of the biotic community of life in the future, for which we yearn and to which we make our present commitment." Merle Longwood, "The Common Good: An Ethical Framework for Evaluating Environmental Issues," *Theological Studies* 34:3 (September 1973) 468-480 (479).

- 4. *Personal transcendence is achieved through greed.* Greed is the gasoline that runs the global economy. The human person understood by economists as *Homo economicus* is engaged in a never-ending competition for resources. Money without morality becomes the exclusive orientating value. Individual greed becomes institutionalized without social responsibility, without factoring in the common good. Rhetorically, Friedman excludes from the myth any alternative to making money.

Few trends could so thoroughly undermine the very foundations of our free society as the acceptance by corporate officials of a social responsibility other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible. This is a fundamentally subversive doctrine. If businessmen do have a social responsibility other than making maximum profits for stockholders, how are they to know what it is? Can self-selected private individuals decide what the social interest is?³⁰

Purportedly, the competitive greed of all the individuals put together produces a well-oiled and harmonious global machine that spits out advancement, achievement, wealth, and meaning. Greed becomes morally justified because it contributes simultaneously to one's own material advance as well as the growth of the world's wellbeing. An *Invisible Hand*, according to Adam Smith, transmutes individual profit motives into economic health for the entire society. "Every individual...intends only his own gain, and he is...led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention....By pursuing his own interest he frequently

³⁰ Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 133.

promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it."³¹

Daly and Cobb fear what the doctrine of unbridled individual pursuit of wealth devoid of social responsibility supports. "Calvinism encourages other-regarding behavior as truly Christian even while warning against believing too readily in its reality. Catholicism encourages other-regarding behavior as a natural virtue. When Christianity was dominant, these forces checked blatantly self-seeking activity, although they certainly did not prevent it. But economists have taught us to think that checks on self-interest are both unnecessary and harmful. It is through rational behavior, which means self-interested behavior, that all benefit the most."³² But, as climatologists attest, this is not working. The invisible hand seems to be slapping us rather than guiding us.

The unrecognized shadow here is that greed is a form of sin. Greed is an ancient foe, forsworn to work us woe. Two characteristics of greed make it a destructive threat that will never go away on its own: (1) mimetic desire--desiring what others desire only because others desire it--that propels greed beyond need in such a way that rivalry and then violence result; and (2) the satisfaction of wants becomes impossible because greed is insatiable.³³

³¹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) cited and discussed at <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/i/invisiblehand.asp> (accessed 4/10/2016). John Paul Rollert, now teaching economics at the University of Chicago, reports that his students "already take it [Smith's invisible hand] as gospel," believing that "self-interested pursuits in the commercial sphere tend to benefit the common good not because of the intentions of participants, but despite them." This worries Rollert. "To my mind, this is the greatest danger of a crude interpretation of the invisible hand. It's all too easy to reduce Smith's logic into a very convenient philosophy: Don't worry about your actions. Do whatever you want, and good will inevitably follow." "Of Morals and Markets," *The University of Chicago Magazine* 108:3 (Spring 2016) 28-31 (31).

³² Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 6.

³³ This renders false the assumption on the part of many economists that the economy is a competition for scarce resources. Even without scarcity we would have competition and violence. Because of mimetic desire, argues René Girard, "violence is thus generated." René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed., James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 2002) 12. Martin Luther personified insatiability as Sir Greed. "Sir Greed is such a jolly guest that he does not let anyone rest. He seeks, pushes, and hunts without stopping, so that he cannot enjoy his precious property for a single hour." Martin Luther, "The Sermon on the Mount," *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vols. 1-30,

- 5. *The American Dream is attainable by anyone who works hard.* Freedom, according to the myth of economism, includes the opportunity for prosperity and success in terms of upward social mobility regardless of one's status at birth. Historian James Truslow Adams gave this faith a name, the *American Dream*, in 1931: life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.³⁴ The American Dream is made up of two components. First, the dreamer must be deserving of reward. Hard work is the purported criterion by which deserving virtue or merit is measured. Second, the economic system--the market--can be relied upon to distribute rewards to the deserving. Whereas premodern religion relied upon the judgment of God to reward virtuous lives or meritorious works, in modern economism the secular market has taken over God's role. God has lost the job as judge, and now the market separates the deserving sheep from the undeserving goats.

The shadow side is that the American Dream can become a frustrating nightmare for the so-called undeserving. Since the early 1980s, the class structure in the United States has been changing so that today only 1% of the population holds between 34% and 39% of private wealth, and the top 5% hold between 66% and 72%. The middle class is shrinking while the lower class is expanding.³⁵ Working two jobs becomes the mark of the undeserving lower class, while windfall profits from hedge funds identifies the deserving.

The situation is worst for an African American who is tacitly designated "undeserving" by an underlying racist ethos.

edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing Company, 1955-1967); Vols. 31-55, edited by Helmut T. Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1955-1986) 26:16.

³⁴ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (New York: Simon, 1931). "The American dream is basically nothing other than the transferal of the European dream of America to American soil." Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, tr., M. Douglas Meeks (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984) 148.

³⁵ Gary Dorrien, "No Common Good," *The Christian Century* 128:8 (April 11, 2011) 22-25 (25). "I believe that the most regenerative and human forms of social praxis embody the moral values of prophetic religion and democratic socialism." Gary J. Dorrien, *Reconstructing the Common Good: Theology and the Social Order* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1990) 162.

"I have seen that dream all my life," writes Ta-Nehisi Coates. "It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways."³⁶ But, this dream is limited to those of the purportedly deserving race. "The nigger, the fag, the bitch illuminate the border, illuminate what we ostensibly are not, illuminate the Dream of being white, of being a man."³⁷

Even though hard work is the theoretical criterion of the deserving according to the American Dream, in practice the market discriminates against hard-working persons who may be born into the wrong race, gender, or other marginal group. For those who in their own strengths confide, their striving turns to losing.

- 6. *Growth is our savior.* Continued and uninterrupted economic growth belongs to our destiny and will over time provide all that the human race needs: good health, financial security, maximum freedom, national dominance, and luxury. "Economism is the belief that primary devotion should be directed to the expansion of the economy...it is argued that economic growth makes possible improvements in health and education....market activities that make for economic growth also lead to democratic governments and civil rights," observes Cobb.³⁸

Economist Herman Daly dubs this *growthmania*. "Economic growth is both the panacea and the *summum*

³⁶ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015) 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁸ Cobb, *Earthist Challenge to Economism*, 28, 29, 30. "One problem with growth is that it requires endless production and, its close cousin, endless consumption. Unless we want more and more things and more and more paid experiences, growth will eventually stall. For our economies to keep moving forward, we must be insatiable. The basis of modern economics is that our desire for stuff is limitless. Yet in our heart of hearts we know that way lies madness." David Pilling, *The Growth Delusion: Wealth, Poverty, and the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Random House, Tim Duggan Books, 2018) 5.

bonum. It is growthmania."³⁹ Daly's alternative is a Steady State Economy with throughput and output within the limiting conditions of "finitude, entropy, and complex ecological interdependence."⁴⁰

Existentially, our zeal for economic growth elicits within us trust in Adam Smith's "invisible hand" which, some day, will hand us the same wealth we see touted by the billionaires in the daily news. Quiz shows and biographies of Silicon Valley heroes or billionaire presidential candidates inspire confidence in a myth which, regrettably, is for the majority only a frustratingly untrue narrative.

On the shadow side, the idea of uninterrupted growth becomes a smokescreen that covers up current economic injustice. The alternative to growth would be immediate government administered distributive justice which appeals to a morality that transcends the economy. But distributive justice administered by government would be anathema, as the next faith tenet of economism as shadow religious myth makes clear.

The shadow cast by trust in economic growth is so dark that eco-theologian Chris Doran dubs it idolatry. "Economic growth is not merely Western culture's new religion, but perhaps its chief idol. If we make appropriate sacrifices, then consider what economic growth is supposed to give us: a higher standard of living, more participatory democracies, significant alleviation of world poverty, and more leisure time are among its principal promises."⁴¹

- *7. Government restriction on freedom of production is evil, plain and simple.* "To the liberal," writes Friedman referring more precisely to the libertarian, "the appropriate means are free

³⁹ Herman E. Daly, "The Steady-State Economy: Postmodern Alternative to Growthmania," *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*, ed., David Ray Griffin (Albany NY: SUNY, 1988) 107-122, at 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴¹ Chris Doran, *Hope in the Age of Climate Change* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2017) 107.

discussion and voluntary cooperation, which implies that any type of coercion [especially governmental coercion] is inappropriate."⁴² The question is not whether government restrictions are wise or fair; rather, the mere existence of government influence is to be denounced. "He who governs least governs best," is the libertarian slogan. Today's economism is a holdover of the *laissez faire* capitalism of the nineteenth century robber barons.

The shadow side of the utterly free market is this: once government removes itself from governing, the robber barons will immediately reappear. The free market will overnight become unfree. The Christian view of human nature, which includes the concept of sin, makes elementary the forecasting a world which devils fill.

The idea of a free market is a myth, and its mythical role casts a shadow that renders enlightened understanding difficult. "The free market is a myth," contends former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich.⁴³ This myth misleads us into formulating the issue as an alleged conflict: free market versus large government. In fact, the size of government is irrelevant. What is relevant is the list of rules for the market set by the government. Today's growing disparity between rich and poor is due to the influence of large corporations on government which, in turn, legislates market rules favoring the rich and disfavoring the working class. If capitalism is to be saved, warns Reich, the government's rules must be reset so as to insure a more equitable distribution of wealth.⁴⁴

As Reich suggests, some social force in addition to the market is necessary to structure manufacturing and commerce around the common good? Would that force be government? This question does not prompt theological critics

⁴² Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 22.

⁴³ Reich, *Saving Capitalism*, 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 218-219.

of economism to leap immediately to total government control. "On the one hand, a strong case can be made...for the position that at least some autonomy of the economic realm *vis-a-vis* the political realm is a necessary condition for political and therefore even religious freedom," writes David Ray Griffin. "On the other hand, this separation has encouraged all sorts of disastrous consequences...neither the present capitalist system nor some form of Marxist socialism...is acceptable."⁴⁵ This leads Daly and Cobb to proclaim, " Our hope is to move forward to a new type of economy different from either capitalism or socialism as they have been understood in the past."⁴⁶

This list of tenets of economism constitute faith commitments, Norgaard says. They do not rest upon reason or historical precedent, nor do they adhere to any ethical theory which envisions a future oriented toward the common good of all creatures. Quite obviously, these tenets express the faith of the rich and those who aspire to be rich. If we interpret our everyday life solely through the lens of economism, we will become blind to the injustice borne by the poor and deaf to the cry of the environment.

Injustice done to the poor or unwillingness to pay for a sustainable environment do not in themselves constitute the religious dimension of economics. As mentioned above, there's a struggle going on between two schools of thought: the totally unregulated or free market school versus the government regulated school. Here's the point: both are dialects of the one language of economese. It's the fact that matters of justice and sustainability are presumed to be matters of economics that constitute the religious character of economism.

Economism constitutes a tacit religion because it has become culturally dominant; it has become our personal meaning-maker.

⁴⁵ David Ray Griffin, "Introduction: Postmodern Spirituality and Society," *Spirituality and Society*, 1-32, at 19-20.

⁴⁶ Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 15.

By *religion* we refer to the meaning-making capacity of culture, and economism has assumed the role of meaning-maker for much of the modern West. "What the secularists forgot is that *Homo sapiens* is the meaning-seeking animal....Religion has returned because it is hard to live without meaning. That is why no society has survived for long without either a religion or a substitute for religion."⁴⁷ Economism is a substitute religion, a myth.

The myth of economism is so pervasive in its meaning-making that it infests the inner soul. Despite one of its names, *neoliberal*, economism imprisons rather than liberates. Cornel West resists: "This neoliberal shift produces a culture of raw ambition and instant success that is seductive to most potential leaders and intellectuals, thereby incorporating into them the neoliberal regime."⁴⁸

The Anthropocene, Capitalocene, or Econocene?

How do we diagnose the ecological crisis which is crippling us? We know the symptoms: rising global temperature, melting glaciers, species diebacks, oceans beset with floating plastic, nuclear waste spills, and countless eco-calamities. "If we continue on our present paths, future generations, if there are to be any, are condemned to misery."⁴⁹

Those are the symptoms. Would it help in the diagnosis to dub our geological era the *Anthropocene* as Paul Crutzen did in the year 2000? With this term we can see that the eco-crisis includes an anthropogenic cause.⁵⁰ However, the growing use of the term, *anthropocene*, is meeting with resistance. Critics ask rhetorically, should this term describe an entire geologic period?

⁴⁷ Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015) 13.

⁴⁸ Cornel West, *Black Prophetic Fire* (Boston: Beacon, 2014) 162.

⁴⁹ Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 21."

⁵⁰ *Anthropogenic evil* is "evil that arises indirectly through the growth in human populations, industrialization and the economy, leading to the production of pollutant wastes which then have devastating impacts on other species and on human populations through processes such as climate change and habitat destruction." Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2008)116

What are the objections to the term, *anthropocene*? First, it connotes hubris. To name an entire geologic era after ourselves overrates our significance. "It was just such a anthropocentric worldview that got us into this predicament in the first place," complain the editors of *Scientific American*. Secondly, "Anthropocene' implicitly blames the entire human race for a crisis caused by a relative few." Conversation about the anthropocene era, thirdly, tends to hold *human nature*, not just polluting human beings, as responsible. This makes little sense to anthropologists, who note that people can make decisions and take actions leading to changed behavior. We are not condemned by our nature to destroy ourselves by polluting ourselves.

So, what's the alternative? Try *Capitalocene*, proposed by Andreas Malm. It was capitalism that developed the "economic system predicated on perpetual territorial expansion....capitalism established global systems of manufacturing and trade that consumed nature at unprecedented rates and is only now bumping against planetary boundaries."⁵¹

Whether *anthropocene* or *capitalocene* or *econocene*, the term matters less than the global crisis facing the present generation. The global environmental crisis is difficult to diagnose because it's shrouded within the myth of economism. So, if the term, *capitalocene*, demythicizes the myth, we could count it as an accurate diagnosis. With such a diagnosis, could we prescribe a cure?

Two Unaskable Questions

Here are two ethical questions that cannot be asked within the mythically structured language of economism: (1) should the rich help the poor?⁵² (2) does a vision of the common good compel a

⁵¹ The Editors of *Scientific American*, "Rethinking the 'Anthropocene'," *Scientific American* 319:6 (December 2018) 10.

⁵² Among the emerging industrial and especially post-industrial states, the U.S. stands out as the paradigm of economic inequality. This is due to political efforts on the part of the wealthy classes during the Ronald Reagan

human response? Because economism functions as a myth in contemporary society, economism invisibly admits into public discourse only selected pathways to thinking while excluding others. These two questions are systematically filtered out by the myth of economism.

Regarding the first question--should the rich help the poor?--the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops clearly embraces an affirmative doctrine in its 1986 pastoral letter on "Economic Justice": §16 "All members of society have a special obligation to the poor and vulnerable."⁵³ In its 1999 social statement, "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All," the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adds, "The rich are expected to use wealth to benefit their neighbors who live in poverty here and throughout the world."⁵⁴ In short, this inherent obligation of all society's members to care for the poor and vulnerable is obfuscated if not obliterated by the myth of economism. In order to ask whether the rich should aid the poor, one must step out of the myth of economism and enter the framework of theology.

Our second question--does the vision of the common good compel a human response?--is also frustrated by the myth of economism.⁵⁵ Again, the U.S. Conference of bishops weighs in.

administration in the 1980s which emphasized dropping government regulations on business and breaking the back of labor unions. "The U.S. has the highest level of economic inequality among developed countries. It has the world's greatest per capita health expenditures yet the lowest life expectancy among comparable countries." Joseph E. Stiglitz, "A Rigged Economy," *Scientific American* 319:5 (November 2018) 56-71, at 57.

⁵³ "Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy" (1986) U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, http://www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf (accessed 5/30/2016).

⁵⁴ "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All" A Social Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1999); http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Economic_LifeSS.pdf?_ga=1.130908236.232821864.1462997417 (accessed 5/30/2016).

⁵⁵ Economists approach this problem with the term, *The tragedy of the commons*, referring to "an economic problem in which every individual tries to reap the greatest benefit from a given resource. As the demand for the resource overwhelms the supply, every individual who consumes an additional unit directly harms others who can no longer enjoy the benefits."

Tragedy Of The Commons Definition | Investopedia <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/t/tragedy-of-the-commons.asp#ixzz46nUgVVsu> (accessed 4/24/2016). The concept of the common good implies more than what is assumed to be merely a scarce commodity unevenly distributed.

§115. The common good may sometimes demand that the right to own be limited by public involvement in the planning or ownership of certain sectors of the economy. Support of private ownership does not mean that anyone has the right to unlimited accumulation of wealth.

§125. The Christian vision is based on the conviction that God has destined the human race and all creation for "a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love, and peace."⁵⁶

Or, in the words of Daly and Cobb, "the well-being of a community as a whole is constitutive of each person's welfare."⁵⁷ With this presupposition, Cobb makes clear that liberal Christian theology dedicated to the common good requires an alternative economic framework. "Liberal theory tends to use double images of human beings. There is *Homo economicus*, on the one hand, who rationally calculates private economic advantage. Then there is another kind of rationality of public *servants* who are dedicated to the common good."⁵⁸ On behalf of the common good, the rich should help the poor while caring for the planet.

⁵⁶ "Economic Justice." The complementary watchwords are *justice* and *sustainability*. The first, *justice*, includes care for the poor. "Measuring justice in a community means examining the lives of the poorest and most marginalized from their perspective." Alison M. Benders, *Just Prayer* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2015) xvii. Justice is then connected to planetary sustainability. "Just as the absence of acknowledgment of community in economic theory has led to the destruction of human community in economic practice, so also the neglect of the physical world in economic theory has led to its degradation in *economic* practice." Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 190. The second, *sustainability*, requires intentional planning that learns from ecomimesis, from imitating nature. "Ecomimesis is a design paradigm that uses the earth as a template. Its goal is to design a human community so that its ways of life do not interfere with nature's inherent ability to sustain life in the earth's biosphere and minimize disruptions to nature's ecosystems. Its primary goals are to re-establish ecosystem stability, preserve regional biodiversity and habitats through continuity of functions and connectivity, and conserve, repair, and improve existing ecosystems." Lillian C. Woo, "Tending This Fragile Earth, Our Island Home: The Pope's Encyclical in Dialogue with Ecomimesis, a Design Model for Conservation Stewardship," *Anglican Theological Review* 100:4 (Fall 2018) 745-766, at 747.

⁵⁷ Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 164.

⁵⁸ Cobb, *Process Theology as Political Theology*, 102, Cobb's italics.

Planetary Solidarity

Concern for climate justice is urgent. The planet is in peril. Those who are marginalized by the global economy feel the peril first. the seventh president of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997-1992, Mary Therese Winifred Robinson, draws a map of the injustice. "Those suffering the worst effects of climate change: drought-stricken farmers in Uganda, a president struggling to save his sinking island South Pacific island nation, Honduran women pleading for water. They come from communities that are the least responsible for the pollution warming our planet, yet they are the most affected."⁵⁹ Planetary health and human equality, like a Maple tree and a birds' nest, belong together.

Since 1979 the World Council of Churches has lifted up a trichromatic vision of a *just, sustainable* and *participatory* society.⁶⁰ To this list, I add *planetary*. The political theologian needs to cultivate planetary solidarity. According to Heather Eaton, *planetary* refers to "this interactive, infinitely dynamic, complex sphere of life that characterizes planet Earth....The first, and primary, meaning of *planetary* is the biosphere."⁶¹ The second meaning of *planetary*, I believe, is that the entire human race constitutes a single community of moral deliberation. Planetary implies solidarity. "Solidarity means active resistance to oppression and constructive efforts for justice and equality."⁶²

The responsibility of a just, sustainable, participatory, and planetary society is to pave the highway to distributive justice aimed as a vision of the common good. But the free market on its

⁵⁹ Mary Robinson, *Climate Justice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) 2.

⁶⁰ World Council of Churches, *Justice, Peace, Creation*; <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/hist-e.html>. *Sustainable economics* challenges the market system as such, "by making production decisions not on the basis of market or consumer demand, but on the basis of the rate at which resources could be replenished." Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, 21.

⁶¹ Heather Eaton, "An Earth-Centric Theological Framing for Planetary Solidarity," Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda B. Koster, eds., *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Change* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017) 19-34, at 20.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 21.

own is unable to do the paving.⁶³ In short, access to the common good--the high good for all individually and collectively--requires guidance by a government or other center of power apart from the market. If the myth of economism will not permit asking questions regarding the poor or the common good, then public theologians along with other peoples of good will must ask this question within public discourse.

A Prophetic Critique of Economism

When demythicising the myth of economism, we first expose a pair of problems: social injustice combined with lack of responsibility for planetary health. "Our socio-economic model," avers Graham Peebles writing for the esotericist journal, *Share International*, "is a decrepit global system propped up by the guardians of the status-quo, who are intellectually bankrupt, have no answers to the issues of the day but, desperate to cling on to power, use all their tools of control to resist change."⁶⁴ What is missing in what I dub the *myth of economism* is "the principle of sharing," argues Peebles. What we need is "a shift...to a sustainable, participatory, and just way of living."⁶⁵

When demythicising the myth of economism, we uncover a still deeper problem: idolatry. The market now functions as a substitute god.⁶⁶ Pope Francis identifies the problem posed by

⁶³ "Distributive (or ministering) justice refers more expansively to what the whole, acting through its government and other centers of power, owes to its parts in addressing the rights and needs of citizens and in supporting their access to common and high goods," is the assessment of William F. May, *Testing the National Covenant: Fears and Appetites in American Politics* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011) 101.

⁶⁴ Graham Peebles, "Sharing is key to a new economic and democratic order," *Share International* 37:10 (December 2018) 4-5, at 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁶ In addition to the idolatry of the market, ecowomanist theologians identify the basic force at work to destroy our ecosphere as domination. The same impetus to domination at work in colonialism and white supremacy is at work in the domination of earth. "Rather than using normative paradigms or pathways of environmental activism, such as the *dominant social, exploitative capitalist, romantic environmental, or new environmental* paradigms...[ecowomanism] problematizes the conceptual base of these paradigms, based on their reliance on normative assumptions of white privilege, and exposes how the history of white supremacy is woven into the

idolatry as he struggles to lead our planet toward a new vision of the common good, a vision of Earth as our common home.

§56. In the meantime, economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment. Here we see how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked. Many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is. As a result, 'whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule'.⁶⁷

Standing in the way of a healthy relationship between the human race and Planet Earth is the idol, the deified market.

In their opposition to idolatry, prophets are in the business of projecting a vision of a transformed future which renders judgment against the unrealistic delusions governing the present. Sallie McFague reminds today's prophet "to suggest some visions of the good life that are not consumer dominated, visions that are just and sustainable."⁶⁸ Such a vision of God's promised future has been lifted up by the ancient prophet Isaiah in the passage we've come to think of as the "Peaceable Kingdom."

conceptual frame of ecological colonialism." Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2017) 46, Harris' italics.

⁶⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*. *Laudato Si'* has a "number of blind spots," contends Hindu theologian Rita Sherma. Pope Francis "refrains from speaking of the injustice of androcentrism that is the cause of the near absence of one half of the human species from leadership in religion, politics, and economics." Rita D. Sherma, "A Hindu Response," *For Our Common Home*, 358-367 (360). Christian theologian Andrew Sung Park concurs: "this encyclical is silent on the issue of sexism." "A Bright Hope for the Depressed Globe," *Ibid.*, 69-73, at 72.

⁶⁸ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008) 95.

Isaiah 11:6-9: The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (NRSV)

Norgaard similarly envisions a peaceable kingdom in the future, a kingdom which will arrive beyond the transition he is calling for. The success of this reformation of the religion of economism...

...will depend on a diverse collection of efforts, including urging negative population growth, supporting sustainable consumption and degrowth, promoting the commons paradigm, working with religion to foster an ethic for an equitable and sustainable planet; furthering justice, improving the sciences; promoting agroecology; facilitating local markets, encouraging progressive forms of corporate ownership, governance, and practice, and warning of limits, and the possibilities of tipping points.⁶⁹

The hinge on which the prophetic critique of economism swings is eschatology. God's eschatological promise becomes the criterion for judging the inadequacy of economistic utopianism. The element of prophetic eschatology is what gives to political theology its critical bite and its hopeful promise for a transformed future. Because of this future orientation, the transformation the prophetic activist seeks will be a new one rather than a return to a previous state.

⁶⁹ Norgaard, "Church of Economism."

Not *revolution*, but rather *provolution* inspires the prophetic public theologian. Words that begin with *re* such as *revolve* or *reform* or *revive* all suggest a circular return, a retrieval of something past. Yet, because the eschatological God in whom Christians place their hope creates new things, the *novum*, we can place our hope in a future that is genuinely new. With this in mind, Jürgen Moltmann replaces *revolution* with *provolution* so as to anticipate the new that is coming. "In provolution, the human dream turned forward is combined with the new possibility of the future and begins consciously to direct the course of human history as well as the evolution of nature."⁷⁰ The prophetic political theologian relies on a faith commitment, namely, God's future is open to what will be new. "'Future' must mean ontological possibility and anthropological freedom."⁷¹

Cobb has less hope than Moltmann, yet he still recognizes the potential for newness and transformation the future provides. "We stand...before a radically open future with no assurance that our efforts for justice will succeed or even that human history will long continue."⁷²

The prophetic public theologian works with a vision of a future Planet Earth that is healthy, fecund, and sustainable. Today's eco-ethicist can place confidence in this future by working backward from a vision of the eschatological kingdom of God where the common good of the cosmos obtains. Here is the way two theological eco-ethicists put it: "Christians are called to live in a way that announces the future kingdom of God, and to model the reality that, at least in part, the kingdom of God is here already, while realizing that it will only be brought about completely by the decisive intervention of Christ's return."⁷³

⁷⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, tr. M. Douglas Meeks (New York: Scribners, 1969) 32.

⁷¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Hope and Planning*, tr., Margaret Clarkson (New York: Harper, 1971) 181; See: Ted Peters, *GOD--The World's Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 3rd ed., 2015) Chapter 14.

⁷² Cobb, *Process Theology as Political Theology*, 78.

⁷³ Nick Spencer and Robert White, *Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living* (London: SPCK, 2007) 94-95.

The Common Good as Middle Axiom

On the one end, we approach the problem of economism from faith-active-in-neighbor-love. On the other end, we approach the same problem prophetically from our vision of God's eschatological kingdom. What we need is a middle axiom that bridges the gap between these two highly generalized anchor points, on the one hand, and to public policy and practical action, on the other. A middle axiom would bridge the eschatological promise that God's judgment must prevail with the courage we need now to countervail. Although it does not come in axiomatic form, I recommend we use the common good to construct our bridge. Here's the common good as His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI pens it.

§7. To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of all of us, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the *common good* and strive towards it is a requirement of *justice and charity*.⁷⁴

Christians can thank the non-Christian thinker, Cicero, for prompting the idea of the common good for a republic such as Rome: "a people is not any collection of human beings brought

⁷⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009); http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (accessed 5/7/2016). Bernard Laurent fears that the pontiff falls short of defending the common good because he inadequately analyzes the injustices endemic to existing economic institutions. "By framing the problem as he does, Benedict turns the Church's focus away from the interplay of structural forces and gives primacy, as never before, to individual responsibility." "*Caritas in Veritate* as a Social Encyclical: A Modest Challenge to Economic, social, and Political Institutions," *Theological Studies* 71:3 (September 2010) 515-544, at 515.

together in any sort of way, but an assemblage of people in large numbers associated in agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good."⁷⁵ Four centuries later, Augustine turned Cicero's concept of the common good into a middle axiom to connect the City of God with the cities we actually live in. A true republic "cannot be governed without the most absolute justice," writes Augustine in *The City of God*. Because justice has never reigned in Rome, Rome has never been a republic in the full sense of the term. "The fact is, true justice has no existence save in that republic whose founder and ruler is Jesus Christ."⁷⁶

What legacy does Augustine leave us? On the one hand, it is reasonable to expect a high functioning society could be oriented around justice and perhaps even love while, on the other hand, it would be too much to expect that such a society would itself constitute the kingdom of God. "Following this definition," comments David Hollenbah, "the quality of the life of a people will be directly proportional to the qualities of the loves they share in common. Societies united by great and noble loves and dedicated to high standards of justice will be superior to those with lower goals and cultural values."⁷⁷

Hollanbach builds the bridge with the middle axiom we're looking for when he describes the healthy tension between a pluralistic society and the common good it shares. "One can draw principles that support the legitimacy, indeed the necessity, of institutional pluralism. None of the concrete forms of human community in history, be they familial, associational, economic, political, or religious, are capable of embodying the *summum bonum*, the full human good. Only the kingdom of God can do that. This theological affirmation has a political correlate. None of these

⁷⁵ Cicero, *De republica* 1, 25, 39.

⁷⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, II:21.

⁷⁷ David Hollenbach, S.J., "The Common Good Revisited," *Theological Studies* 50:1 (1989) 70-94 (83). See the parallel discussion by Michael S. Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013) 273.

historical forms of community can exhaust the temporal, this-worldly common good either. The historically achievable common good will demand that the pluriformity of human community be respected, and such respect should be institutionalized politically, legally, and economically."⁷⁸ In short, our vision of the eschatological kingdom of God stands before us as a beacon, guiding us toward the common good even if today and tomorrow we fail to realize it in its fullness.

One knotty problem that persists for us is the connection between cultural pluriformity and social unity. More. Social harmony must include not only human pluriformity but the biosphere as well. Christine Fire Henze reminds us that the common good requires inclusion of our entire planet. "Feminist economics seeks to accurately and justly relate care and market economies; ecological economics works to connect market and natural economies by reframing market theory and practice in light of the finitude, noncommodifiability, or nonsubstitutability (by capital or technology) of land, biota, biosphere, and natural resources."⁷⁹ Then, "here Catholic commitments to solidarity with the poor and a decent livelihood for all complement the commitments of ecological economists."⁸⁰ Solidarity with the poor and the planet becomes a proleptic manifestation in the present of the eschatological justice promised by God.

Formulating a middle axiom between an eschatological vision and practical possibilities prompts Lutherans to follow with a plan

⁷⁸ David Hollenbach, S.J., "The Common Good Revisited," *Theological Studies* 50:1 (1989) 70-94, at 93.

⁷⁹ Christine Firer Hinze, "Economic Recession, Work, and Solidarity," *Theological Studies* 72:1 (Mar 2011) 150-169, at 168

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 169. "Solidarity is a task realized by human subjects through, with, and in community." M. Shawn Copeland, "Body, Race, and Being," in *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*, ed. by Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 97-116: 115. "Solidarity expresses a realization and analysis of inequalities and patterns of injustice, and a commitment to social change to remedy these inequalities. As a theological concept, solidarity refers to the (Catholic) notion of *koinonia* (the communion of saints). It is about building stronger communities where power is shared and relationships are formed." Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda B. Koster, "Introduction," *Planetary Solidarity*, 1-18, at 6.

of action wherein the church becomes a cultural and, indirectly, an economic leaven in the larger social loaf.

We commit ourselves as a church to: • hire without discriminating on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, age, disabilities, sexual orientation, or genetic factors; • compensate all people we call or employ at an amount sufficient for them to live in dignity; • provide adequate pension and health benefits, safe and healthy work conditions, sufficient periods of rest, vacation, and sabbatical, and family-friendly work schedules; • cultivate participatory workplaces, support the right of employees to organize for the sake of better working conditions and to engage in collective bargaining, and refrain from intentionally undercutting union organizing activities, or from permanently replacing striking workers.⁸¹

Such policies represent a finite proleptic or anticipatory participation today in the future promised by God.

Conclusion

When loading our sling to fight the giant whose rhetoric diverts our attention away from planetary self-obliteration, must we choose between either economics or ecology for allies? Why not both? According to John Cobb, it appears at first that we must choose. But, then, he suggests we might get both. "More and more people have been blaming climate disasters and other ecological problems on capitalism itself. For corporate leaders to continue to support persons who reject the scientific consensus that greenhouse gases are a major factor in climate change adds fuel to the fire of anti-capitalism. It is in the interest of the financial elite to show the

⁸¹ "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All."

world that a response to this crisis, narrowly defined, can be consistent with capitalism."⁸² Despite the apparent rift between the market and the planet, Cobb nevertheless offers a glimmer of hope that a reformation within economism might expand our present myth to include the health of the planet's biosphere. Perhaps both economics--reformed economics--and ecology could ally with the common good.

How should the prophetic activist initiate resistance to the religious myth of economism? Before we fire the revolutionary shots, we need to get clear on the analysis. Richard Norgaard has provided us with a protean metaphor for analyzing economism as a religion in need of reformation. We immediately feel the threat in Norgaard's point: the economic mind-set is so powerful that traditional moral thinking is dwarfed and squashed and even discarded. Economism is not only a force in the world but also within our soul.

The problem within economism which cries out for reform is found in both its form and substance. The amoral form of economism is found in the categories it imposes on our thinking, on our false consciousness: everything becomes subjected to cost-benefit categories, thereby marginalizing the tender values of intimacy, caring, sharing, and building. Similarly, the amoral substance of economism fosters just the opposite of what the Christian religion advocates: greed instead of charity, individual freedom without responsibility for the common good, anarchy without unity. If economism is in fact a religion, then it needs at least a reformation if not a supersession.

After having said this, in my judgment, the term *myth* more accurately describes what Norgaard is talking about. With the term *myth* I refer to a conceptual set, a set of presuppositions which frame the suppositions of a theoretical or existential scheme. The myth frames data that reinforces an assumed worldview, perspective, or ideology. According to this definition, a myth is not a

⁸² Cobb, "Preface," *For Our Common Home*, i-viii (iii).

story per se. Rather, it's a commitment held at the level of presupposition rather than stated. The myth of economism has become the myth of the America Dream, the myth of the worldwide media, the myth within which national and international questions are formulated and decisions are made.

What the public theologian--in this case, the critical theologian of culture--needs to do is demythicise. Recall how Rudolph Bultmann employed a similar term when referring to biblical exegesis. "Its [*de-mythologizing*] aim is not to eliminate the mythological statements but to interpret them. It is a method of hermeneutics."⁸³ Rather than demythologize scripture, I recommend we demythologize economism. Or, perhaps more accurately, we should *demythicize* economism; we should so shock modern consciousness that the myth of economism becomes transparent to its own lack of moral foundation. By taking away its mythical status, we would deprive it of its sacral power.

Public theologians along with ethicists of all stripes should marshal their respective insights to separate out the idolatrous religion of economism from those other cultural mythologemes of neighbor-love. The secular religion of economism is ready for reformation, perhaps even supersession.

Our society needs economic theory, to be sure; but we don't need a pseudo-religion parading as a scientifically validated economic policy. This is to say, the church's prophetic task is to take the myth apart, examine its pieces, select what is salvageable, and then re-contextualize all of this within a healthier worldview that draws its meaning from a vision of the common good. This would constitute the reformation of economism, for Earth's sake.

Perhaps we could close with some words of assurance once penned by John Cobb. "In conclusion...be faithful, affirm life, have

⁸³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) 18. I prefer the modern method of "demythologizing" over the postmodern method of "deconstruction," because the latter limits itself to exposing power interests while avoiding the existential meanings uncovered by demythologizing. I believe Paul Chung gets me right when he notes, "Peters' approach to a postmodern holism is differentiated from postmodern deconstructionism in the fashion of Jacques Derrida. Rather, holistic postmodernism aims at recovering meaning, not its deconstruction or dissolution." Chung, *Postcolonial Public Theology*, 131.

confidence, stand fast in a Christian vision of reality, enter more deeply into Christian existence, be assured."⁸⁴

⁸⁴ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Liberal Christianity at the Crossroads* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1973) 97.