

Month 2 Day 2

ECONOMIC WITNESS

We must call them to account

The way that the resources of the Earth are divided between the people of the planet is the stuff of economics. The economic system decides who earns what for doing what. This is not an automatic or technical matter. It is the result of decisions made by political policy-makers. The system is man(kind) made, and it can be changed by mankind. There is nothing inevitable about it.

The way the resources of the Earth are divided between people is also the stuff of the gospels, and of the scriptures of all world religions. Jesus of Nazareth, the Buddha, the Prophet Mohammed, and the Jewish prophets representing Yahweh all speak unequivocally of the need for sharing as a function of God's abundance. They have clear ideas about how the resources of the Earth should be used and shared so that we may reach our fullest potential as co-creators with God.

It is not only a matter of God's morality: it is about our fundamental belief about the character of mankind itself. The economic system profoundly affects the character of a society and the people living there. Economics is about power relationships in society. Power relations affect the way people think and behave towards each other, their aspirations and their values. The morality of a society – the human and spiritual relationships between people – cannot be separated from the way the economy works.

For example, market domination based on global competition has a number of effects on the human psyche. Worldwide it has vastly widened the income gap. Alongside huge wealth live excluded people who have failed to compete successfully, and literally lack food and shelter. Their material poverty becomes accepted

by the rich as natural; and it destroys the sense of human solidarity.

Other kinds of poverty follow. People living with failure, poverty and insecurity do not often make happy families in which children are cherished and supported. Parents worried about survival are inclined to quarrel; families break up. Children who grow up with anxiety, violent adults and physical deprivation are stunted in their emotional and physical growth. Mental illness is highest in the US, the home of the worship of competitiveness. Suicide is rife in all 'advanced' countries.

Not only very poor families experience financial insecurity. Worldwide, few middle and professional class people feel in control of their livelihoods. You can have a good job today and tomorrow something happens at the other end of the world that shatters your prospects. Employers guard against unexpected blows by putting everyone on short-term contracts. It is called 'flexible' labour; and it has profound effects on family life and security.

Gross income inequality creates a profound sense of injustice. That is the cause of the urban terrorism that threatens everywhere. If people do not have access to justice, they think they have nothing left to lose. Street violence arises where vulnerable people are ravaged by impersonal economic forces. Mad snipers, serial killers and random shooters, apparently 'motiveless', are the understandable outcome of an abused childhood and a sense of societal injustice – all outcomes of an economic system.

Where material consumption is the sign of success, personal greed becomes the driving force. Life at the top is a jungle where personal integrity has no chance against the requirement to obey, flatter, cheat, destroy colleagues and toady for advancement. The stakes are high: galactic incomes or the sack at a moment's notice. How do such people remain sane as they go home to families

where love, trust and mutuality of care are expected – and to church on Sundays where personal morality is preached?

The commercialisation of public life, another aspect of market domination, eats into public morality. Commercial sponsorship of political party congresses is common. Democratically elected governments hold exclusive functions to which rich people – lobbying for their own interests – can buy access.

So people are affected profoundly by the economic system: Kibbutzniks have a different worldview from New Yorkers; welfare-state nurtured Swedes do not see life like Singaporeans. Tibetans' traditional philosophy has little in common with Britons'. It is not about genes, but about their economy. The current dominance of international competitiveness is producing a uniform tooth-and-claw callousness and a destruction of community values. The economic system is changing the expression of human nature.

So economists are more powerful than they think. They must begin to take responsibility for the implications of the policies they advocate. Like the physicists who invented the nuclear bomb, they tend to wash their hands of the consequences of their discipline. We must call them to account.

Prayer

Dear God, you are the source of everything we have.
Yours is the vision of abundance,
and the light of our vision:

Bless our longing for your Kingdom,
our hunger for shared bread, wine and joy;
and our striving for their incarnation.
Amen

Margaret Legum