

# THE DYNAMIC OF THE WORD OF GOD IN ECONOMICS



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Later on this year we hope to publish this important article in a brochure. This issue carries the first instalment of Dr. Goudzwaard's article.

by Bob Goudzwaard

## INTRODUCTION

There is something rotten in our Western society. We know it, we see it all around us, yet we don't know what to do about it. Instead of activating us, the situation seems to paralyze us. A society which has chosen to live an autonomous (i.e. self-governing) life, is now staggering towards its autonomous death. And such a death can only make you feel quite helpless.

Am I too gloomy, too pessimistic? I don't think so. In our cities the garbage trucks are busily picking up the leftovers of our consumptive society. They are gathering the remnants of our half-eaten cakes and cream tarts. And at this very moment the refuse carts in Bombay and Ethiopia are collecting the bodies of men, women and children who died last night in the streets and fields of hunger and misery.

In our own "great" society thousands of workers are forced to perform monotonous, mind-killing tasks only to serve the often prefabricated, dehumanized needs of our modern leisure activities. We see the dead fish and the darkening shadows in our streams and lakes, results of the endless and meaningless hunt for new detergents and chemicals. We witness costly preparations for further future space flights, but little if any preparations for the future of America's black youths. There is a hopeless juvenile protest against this repressive — tolerant technocratic society in which nonsense consumption is a national duty and in which increased production has become a self-legitimizing issue. There are also the young people who try to escape the one-dimensional consumers society by turning themselves into drug-dreaming, zero-dimensional consumptive animals.

The riots, campus fights and demonstrations of a few years ago are, I believe, only the partial eruptions of a much greater more explosive volcano underneath.

How could we let things go this far? What is at the root of all these destructive developments, these seriously unbalanced situations in our

so rationally balanced society? And what should our position, our Christian attitude be in such a world? Is not everything we do, including all our labour, at the same time a confirmation of the very direction of that society, a further establishing of the establishment, a compromise with what we reject? Would it not be better for Christians to just abandon the whole system and escape from it?

These are serious questions, and our answers had better be serious as well.

In attempting to find possible answers we would do well to remember that the challenge of appreciating the world's socio-economic predicament is not a new one. Of course, I realize that this problem today has new dimensions which are characteristic of our time. But it would be foolish to ignore the fact that the Christian church throughout the ages has been wrestling with its appreciation of economic life. We can learn from this struggle, since it will help us understand that the communion of saints goes beyond not only the limits of our day and age, but also the borders of our present closed society. In *that* communion we are not one-dimensional but four-dimensional. We are living before the face of the Almighty God as well as in front of a cloud of witnesses comprising the saints of all ages.

I will divide this article in three parts. In the first place I will try to present a birds-eye view of the evaluation of social economic life by the early Christian church, the medieval church and the church of the Reformation.

Secondly, I will attempt to explore the new elements which have entered social-economic life since the days of the Reformation, especially in relation to their religious origins and how these elements produced our present unbalanced society.

Thirdly, I will endeavour to make an appreciation of present social-economic life and outline the Christians' attitude in modern industrial society.

## 1. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

*"No servant can be the slave of two masters. You can not serve God and money."*

*"Sell all what you have, give it to the poor and follow Me."*

*"You who have great possessions, weep and wail over the miserable fate descending on you. You have lived on earth in wanton luxury, fattening yourselves like cattle, and therefore the day of slaughter has come."*

*"The love of money is the root of all evil."*

## THE EARLY CHURCH

These are all texts of the New Testament referring to the temptations of money and riches. How did the early Christian church read these Scripture passages? We can say that the early church, especially during the period between the second and the sixth century, adopted an attitude of *negation* towards social-economic life. This aspect of life was generally considered to be something *sinful in itself*. You could not participate in it as producer, consumer or merchant without defiling yourself one way or another. To be a radical Christian you indeed had to sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor; you had to reject everything beyond the bare necessities of life.

*The following penetrating letter recently appeared in The Hamilton Spectator.*

## THE RICH GETTING RICHER?

The president of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, E.K. Turner, made a statement to the U.S. National Association of Wheat Growers in Omaha last week which deserves wide attention.

According to the papers, Mr. Turner said, "It is not in the best interests of exporting countries to squeeze the last nickel out of each bushel of wheat when demand is strong, then bid each other down to distress levels when supplies are more readily available."

I would like to voice a strong support to Mr. Turner's remark and urge the Canadian Wheat Board to pay close attention to it. We now appear to be facing a situation in the immediate future in which we stand to be able to reap enormous profits because the Americans have allowed their wheat reserves to fall to too low a level. Some predict prices may soar to as high as \$10 a bushel because of the demand. We've already sold a large order of wheat to the Japanese recently (35 million bushels) for just under \$6 a bushel.

This kind of pricing for a basic commodity is not only unwise from a global economic point of view, it is also reprehensible morally.

It is strange that while there has been all kinds of anguished outrage at the Arabs and other members of the oil-producing states for tripling and quadrupling their crude-oil prices, hardly a voice is raised against tripled wheat-export prices (ours have tripled to foreign buyers in the last two years). Thus, while we cry about the cost to us of higher-priced oil — we who are among the richest people in the world — we raise no voice against the prices we charge to foreign buyers of our grain, who, in a good many cases, are among the poorer nations of our world. In the final analysis, we can afford the higher prices, but they most definitely cannot.

Canadian farmers are entitled to a fair return for their time and investment, and no one could argue that they weren't entitled to better returns than they were getting for a long stretch of time. But the current high prices of wheat and a number of other grains and commodities are unconscionable in a world in which a high percentage of the population lives perpetually on the edge of famine.

The Canadian Wheat Board must be made aware that they are in business not simply to extract the largest sums possible in a market heavily weighted toward the seller. As representatives of one of the richest countries of the world, with an enormous grain surplus, and in a world with appalling human need, they have a very serious moral obligation to deal humanely with the very essential commodity placed into their trust. Even a very limited sense of justice and compassion would compel them in that direction.

Harold Jantz, Winnipeg

## DEATH AT MOUNT WRIGHT

Mount Wright, the northern Quebec construction site where seven men fell to their deaths 14 months ago, remains a cause célèbre for Quebec's labour movement despite a coroner's verdict that said no one in particular could be blamed for the accident.

The unions, however, remain convinced there are guilty parties to be singled out for punishment, namely the companies involved in the project — Mannix Quebec Ltd., a subsidiary of Mannix Co. Ltd., a Calgary contracting firm; and Quebec Cartier Mining Co., a subsidiary of United States Steel Corp.

The inquest became a battle ground with the unions picturing the accident as a classic example of a big company's reducing its costs by cutting corners at the expense of safety and the lives of workers.

And they refused to accept as final the verdict of Judge Roch Lefrançois of Sessions Court, who recognized that the case was filled with irregularities but decreed that the evidence does not justify charges of criminal negligence or intent.

The accident took place November 17, 1972, at the mining site near the Quebec-Labrador border, 200 miles north of Sept-Îles. The site was being developed by Quebec Cartier as a processing center for iron ore from nearby deposits.

Six 90-foot silos were being built to hold the ore until it could be processed through a concentrator, also being built at Mount Wright. From there, the iron was to be shipped to steel mills in the United States.

On November 17, the concrete silos had been erected. The last to be finished was No. 3, and it was there, at the 84-foot level, that eight men were at work on a wooden platform on top of a scaffold, removing the metal forms into which concrete had been poured to form the silo walls.

Without a warning, a metal support beam on the scaffold gave way.

The platform tipped sharply, hurtling the eight men and tons of metal to the floor below.

One man, Andre Pelletier, survived. But it has left him physically and emotionally scarred. When he came to testify before the hearing he said he could remember nothing of the accident. But, he added, there are many other things he does not remember. The inquest was the second on the accident.

The first was held on February 20, 1972, presided over by Coroner Alban Flamand. It lasted one day and reached a verdict of accidental death with no blame attached.

The unions, who had been pressing a campaign for increased security precautions on construction sites, refused to accept the verdict and launched a successful campaign to have the Quebec Justice Department re-open the case.

The new inquest began on March 26 and continued to November 23. This time there was a judge on the bench specifically appointed by the Solicitor-General. And championing the union cause was Michael Chartrand, fiery leader of the Montreal central council of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU).

There is undoubtedly a neo-platonic influence behind this attitude. Neo-Platonism holds that sin is somehow closely linked to matter and the human physical body. More importantly, however, that lifestyle led to a *dualistic* approach to economic life. For — and I hope you will notice the relevance of this problem — economic life had to go on. The common man with a family could not easily withdraw himself from his job and other economic activities. Therefore, according to the clergy, he was *obligated* to sin, he was delivered to a life of defilement. It is significant that during that period we see the rise of cloisters and monasteries. These institutions were considered areas of the church where *radical* christianity was practical, and as such its inhabitants could do penance for all those other christians who were forced to defile themselves with economic activities. *There just could be no escapism without dualism*; a double morality was inherent in the early church's view of economic life.

## MIDDLE AGES

This outlook on social-economic life, however, underwent a significant change during the Middle Ages. To be sure, no change took place in the church's opinion about the many temptations facing a Christian participating in social-economic life. A medieval legend tells us of a traveller who, visiting a cloister, found a host of devils sitting in corners, windows and staircases. But when he went to the marketplace, he saw only one devil comfortably and lazily perched on a high pillar. The moral of the story was that a cloister needs an army of devils to tempt the monks; in the marketplace, however, there is no need for them since everyone working there is already a devil. The story indicates that there is no change in the basic evaluation of economic life. The change occurred in the sense that economic life now could have a useful albeit minor place in the Kingdom of God, *provided* that it was sanctified (made holy) by the sacramental means of grace of the church.

The scope of this article does not allow a detailed elaboration of the medieval scholastic view of society. It is important, however, to point out that the scholastic doctors saw society as a static whole in which everyone had to remain in his "God-given" place. Within this context you can also understand the scholastic regulation of economic life by the doctrines of the just price (*justum pretium*) and the prohibition of interest. These doctrines served as instruments to maintain the static character of medieval society. They prevented the merchant class from obtaining a more important and prevalent position then could be admitted in a society of Christians.

In summary, the basic appreciation of medieval social-economic life was not that of negation but of *sanctification*. There remained, however, a deep distrust of all dynamic tendencies in social-economic life.

## THE REFORMATION

Finally, we must examine the attitude of the church of the Reformation. And I believe that attitude can be of special importance for us in our far more complex and bewildering society. A first, though minor, aspect in the reformers' appreciation of social-economic life was their protest against the medieval domination of society by the institutional church, a church which laid many burdens on the believers, yet exempted itself from these burdens. To quote Saint Bernard when he gazed at

the splendour of the buildings, pastures and dominions of the church: "Oh vanity of vanities, yet no more vain than insane! The Church is resplendent in her walls, beggarly in her poor. She clothes her stones in gold and leaves her sons naked."

The basic appreciation of social-economic life by the church of the Reformation was not of negation or sanctification but of *vocation*. It was an appreciation which did not start with the sinfulness of economic life, but with the confession that it is an integral part of God's creation. Therefore, the reformers, especially Calvin, rejected the notion that social-economic life was sinful in itself. Instead, the reformers emphasized that all of life fell within the scope of Christ's redemption. Economic activities were not less holy, less sanctified than spiritual or ecclesiastical activities. According to the reformers, economic life should break its scholastic shackles and begin its *own* development in harmony with its own peculiar character.

At this point some readers may object: "Don't you know that it is precisely this development of economic life according to its *own* laws which has led society into its present chaos? And were the early church and perhaps the medieval church too, not closer to the truth than the church of the Reformation, at least in their practical views?"

Such a reaction, though understandable, would be premature. For there is another side to the Reformation's approach, a side less known perhaps, but essential for an understanding of the 16th century's appreciation of economic life. And we will see that this second aspect of the reformers is just as relevant for us today as their assertion that economic life, as a part of God's creation, must have its own growth and development. In André Biéler's book *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, we find a clear picture of Calvin's thought about economic life. Calvin took his starting point in God's creation of mankind and of the earth's many resources. In many respects God indeed created men very differently. But this inequality was *not* an inequality *in value*. On the contrary, He created men differently so that they might communicate with each other as equal-valuable beings and might serve each other, also in economic matters. Men created with different capacities, talents, needs, insights and potential skills are equally obligated to interact. And that means an obligation to maintain solidarity. For that is the purpose of economic life as a whole, it ought to be *l'expression de la solidarité humaine et signe de la communion spirituelle* ("the expression of human solidarity and a sign of spiritual communion"). Only in that way does it have meaning. Economic exchange and interaction should be the expression of the fact that God gave the riches and resources of His earth to the *whole of mankind*. They must serve the community of *all* men. That is the first condition we find in Calvin's approach.

The second one concerns the idea of *stewardship*. Vocation (or calling) is not just an empty term. It involves a *mandate*. God's mandate to man is to love God and neighbour. Man may not use the earth's resources as if man is the ultimate possessor and sole owner. *Every private possession has a social mortgage which you have to pay off before you may use it for yourself*. In a beautiful passage Calvin illustrates what this means for the relationship between the rich and the poor. Not the pope but the poor is Christ's deputy on earth. For Christ has said that He will consider anything which is done on earth in favour of his poor children as done to Himself. So the poor in this world have the task to remind the rich that Christ is still hungry and suffering among them. His hunger, nakedness and suffering will continue, as long as the rich neglect the needs of the poor.

The prime union target was the absence of a fully-fledged security officer at the construction site. The closest thing was Abbé Jean Poitras, a priest from the nearby company town of Gagnon, who was brought to Mount Wright to act as chaplain to the 950 workers, and incidentally, as security officer.

When called on to testify before the inquest, Abbé Poitras admitted he knew little about construction safety, having read only one brochure on the subject. And in his judgement, Judge Lefrancois remarked that the priest was more concerned with souls than with safety.

The inquest also heard conflicting testimony from experts about the stability of the scaffold, both in design and construction. It questioned the thoroughness of supervision on the site and focussed on the inherent dangers of having a unilingual English project supervisor directing French-speaking workers as was the case at Mount Wright.

In the end, however, the judge observed that the accident had been the sum of a series of little errors here and there that would not necessarily have been prevented by the presence of a security officer.

He added a number of security recommendations that he urged should be instituted at construction sites. The measures included such things as more inspectors and foremen who speak the language of the workers they direct — suggestions the unions have been pushing for some time.

A CNTU spokesman agreed with the recommendations but charged that the coroner's verdict was completely unjustified in view of the facts presented to the inquest.

Representatives of the Quebec Federation of Labour, the CNTU's biggest rival in the province, agreed in part and insisted they would continue the legal battle to bring charges against the companies.

Inter-union rivalry flared up as a QFL representative accused the CNTU of having jeopardized the possibility of a favourable verdict with its intensely political and free-wheeling court room manner.

"Every time our lawyer made a point," Jean-Marc Leblanc said, "Chartrand started yelling and turned it into a farce. He made a circus of the whole hearing and that hurt our case. It wasn't only disrespectful to the families of those who died, but it also turned the judge against the unions."

Michel Bourdon, head of the CNTU's construction sector, disagreed: "Everybody has his own style. The QFL has theirs and Chartrand has his. The next thing he'll tell you is that Chartrand was in cahoots with the company and that he was criminally responsible for what happened."

To make an inquest a battle ground for rival factions is an example of the sorry state of union affairs in Quebec.

Thus another chapter was added to the black pages of the sad Mount Wright deaths.

SDJ

## GET \$13,100, WANT \$16,000

It all sounded so familiar. Negotiations had been proceeding since October and the parties were unable to agree on any issue. Ontario's Labour Minister, Fern Guindon, had been asked to appoint a conciliation officer.

But there is a difference in this dispute. The employees are 38 regional staff representatives of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and the employer is the union which represents more than 140,000 federal civil servants.

The regional reps now receive a maximum of \$13,100 and want about \$16,000.

William Doherty, PSAC vice-president, who is bargaining with the reps, said they want the best of both worlds. They want to negotiate independent terms and to pick up any additional benefits that may be gained in bargaining between the PSAC and the Treasury Board.

Be that as it may, the action of the reps gives us some insight into PSAC's idea of a "work community", if it has any. SDJ

## OVERWORKED?

CUPE Local 1328, representing 300 Toronto clerical workers employed by the Metro Separate School Board, recently decided to walk out after 6½ months of contract negotiations.

The union represents office workers and technical staff, including audio-visual technicians and computer programmers, of 178 separate schools across Metro.

The major issues in the strike are money, job classifications and work assignments, the usual stuff that often grinds the collective bargaining machinery to a halt.

The issues, however, also include the work loads of assessment revisers, employees who approach Roman Catholics to have them switch their tax dollars from public school to separate school support (this is legally possible).

CUPE says they are overworked . . .

This is Canada, with thousands of citizens who gladly overwork themselves to have public school tax dollars re-directed (as they should! ) to public christian schools, if this were legally possible, which is not the case (yet)! SDJ

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Economic life then, is a creation of God and forms an integral part of man's calling. As such economic life is entitled to have its own development. But it may never be divorced from its *purpose* and *destination* to be an expression of genuine solidarity between men, nor from its *obligation* to serve God and neighbour, an obligation which is inherent in the calling to stewardship. The moment economic life is severed from this purpose and obligation, it turns into a deadly and devilish temptation, a cause for sin. Then money indeed becomes a Mammon and man bows in reverence before that god.

## RELEVANCE FOR TODAY

Earlier in this article I raised the question why our world is in such a deplorable social-economic situation. I believe we have found at least a partial answer. The evils, miseries and irrationalities do not originate from economic life itself. No, they are a result of man's deviation from the true goals of and laws for economic development. Man declared the autonomy of economic development and proclaimed economic progress to be a universally valid end *in itself*, regardless of its direction and irrespective of human or natural sacrifices.

The idea of an autonomous development of economic life has deeply influenced our Western societies. Since the end of the 16th century a number of ideologies took hold of western economic thought and began to dominate the development of our culture. These ideas include the morality of "no moral rule beyond the letter of law," and the morality of the prevalence of self-interest in all economic matters. Out of this new morality arose, for instance, the enclosure movement uprooting the lives of many in rural England only because the common land on which they lived could yield greater economic returns to the landlords by turning them into private possessions. That same morality caused the Industrial Revolution to become an industrial dehumanization; any understanding of the social mortgage in the hiring of labour was structurally absent. Not Christian solidarity but the realization of human self-interest was considered to be the goal and destiny of economic life.

(to be continued)

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