

# Voicing God: Theological Injunction to economic issues

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## Introduction

At the aftermath of Zuma's Nkandla scandal where he was alleged to have mismanaged more than 250 million rand while renovating his private residence, the Chief Justice of South Africa, Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng said that to avoid corruption, South Africa needs leaders with moral integrity (Raborife 2016). He went further by saying that:

[*Ethical leadership is a*] national imperative because when you are a leader you have the authority to influence those that you lead, and it is what you do that largely determines what those who follow you are likely to do. (n.p)

Commenting on the current national sentiments, he explained that we 'are where we are as a result of what unethical leadership did to us as a nation' (Raborife 2016).

Though given outside the purviews of theology, the Chief Justice's words beckon the intervention of theology in matters of economy and politics. Can theology speak to economic activities?

The events of the last 50 years after World War II (WWII), focusing on rebuilding global economies after years of self-destruction due to wars, placed the study of economy as the main focus on most modern societies. The year 1989 is important because it spells the demise of communism and the triumph of global capitalism (Fukuyama 1989:3). Within this context, due to global capitalism, the modern states lost their power. Claus Offe (1984:35) and Susan Strange (2002:121) are of the opinion that, within the context of global capitalism, states are applying 'crisis management' through administering the welfare system. The negative effects of capitalism, since the dawn of the Enlightenment, which includes a growing inequality, were not fully envisaged (Hokheimer & Adorno 1972:6). These negative effects were felt much more within former colonial countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia where the postcolonial era showed little dividend for the livelihoods of the people because global capitalism is stronger than local markets (Touraine 1971:14). Today we live in a global capitalistic environment, characterised by economic policies that favour the rich at the expense of the poor. Within such a context the question is how we ensure the fair distribution of our local or global limited resources in a way that allows all people to live better lives. To answer this question, this chapter traces two strands – one of complicity and the other of disavowal to capitalism. The chapter concludes by suggesting that theology, while drawing its impetus from Jesus of Nazareth, should focus on a moral economy of fairness and justice, thus establishing its voice among the poor.

## First strand – In support of capitalism

There are always challenges when we use the terms theology and economy in the same sentence. The first challenge is that economy, as a social science, is a much younger field that started recently in the late 18th century with the rise of the Enlightenment and the nation states (Hall 1996:185). Its emergence coincided with the disintegration of feudalism across Europe. Economics as a science and a younger discipline, one would naturally expect that it ought to listen to an older field of study such as theology. Before the rise of economics as a science for example, during feudalism, economics was embedded within other spheres of society such as theology and politics. This is why the feudal kings were both political and religious figures – thus, theology was the all-encompassing glue that provided the moral tapestry and direction to society (Hall 1996:185).

As mentioned earlier, economy as a social science, and independent of other social disciplines, is a product of the Enlightenment and state formation (Brown 1996:90). By the end of the 1700s, the vast lands of Western Europe, up until then controlled by feudal

kings and the church, began to metamorphose into fragmented states (Held 1996:56). The Enlightenment, by questioning tradition, provided the ideology to critique and contest feudalism. People wanted freedom from the feudal kings and the church. Thus, the context under which states were formed was one characterised by the desire for freedom and spaces for self-determination. However, like any other ideology, feudalism did not disappear overnight. In the book, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of the nations*, which became the hymnbook for those who clamoured for capitalism, Adam Smith (1976:351), the father of modern economics, wrote that to benefit all, a new economic paradigm, was needed. His writings can be seen as protest against feudalism, which he accused of creating a hierarchical social order in which the majority of peasants paid tribute to the kings, lords and the church. Anchored by the desire for freedom, Smith suggests that the economy should benefit all through promoting the 'invisible hand'; the ripple effects of various economic practices that ultimately benefit entire societies. For example, if one person is interested in trading with shoes, this would benefit many small industries such as people who are involved in rubber, nails and glue. Smith's theory resulted in other perspectives to emerge, especially those that discuss questions concerning supply and demand. One such is John Maynard Keynes, whose views came to be known as the Keynesian theory (Brown 1996:90). It should be noted that Smith's ideas were relevant to pre-industrial communities. He was, however, misunderstood by people such as Karl Marx, who, while he lived in industrial societies, found Smith less critical of economic inequality (Brown 1996:90).

However, the important fact derived from Smith (1976:351) is the need for the economy to benefit all, which will be attended to in more detail below. In protest against feudalism, the theology of those days supported the liberalisation of the economy, though, firstly by associating labour with purpose or a design. For example, Max Weber ([1930] 1992:19) remarked that work is a 'vocation', that is, a calling by God. One's choice of work is linked to one's freedom to choose or have freewill. As free human beings, people have the freedom of personal choice which was denied them by feudalism and by denying freedom, feudalism was construed as ungodly. Contemporaries of Weber, such as De Tocqville, John Mill and John Locke, regarded freedom as the foundation of modern societies (Porter 1990:12). They celebrated the human will to decide and choose. The birth of nations, thus assisted to bring about a theology that propelled the engines of personal freedom and self-determination.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the nation states, also referred to as the economic and war entities, brought theology and economy much closer by construing the nation as an imagined, self-defined entity of people within the same geographic and cultural space (Anderson 1991:7). In anticipation of imperialism, a nation embodied sacredness. Its activities were seen as sanctioned by the gods or God. Consequently, as industries developed, the need for raw materials increased. European countries such as Germany, Portugal, England and France extracted the raw materials, from far-away regions such as

Africa, Asia and the Americas. Stuart Hall (1996:216) has described how the West assigned biblical themes to their colonies in the Americas. The discovered lands were regarded as God-given. Theology provided the myths for imperialism and later colonialism. To conjure up a sense of innocence, the discovered lands were described in biblical scenes such as the Garden of Eden (Hall 1996:216). Underlying the imperial project was the idea that the discovered lands were God-given; virgin lands which had not yet experienced the exploitation associated with industrialism and wars. As such some European expeditions were described with metaphors of 'new Canaan' and the imperialists as children of God who go to occupy what God has given them. As such, the people were painted nude projecting the original myth of innocence associated with the Garden of Eden (Hall 1996:216). Clearly, theology provided the mythical worldview for imperialism and colonisation, by presenting the discovered regions as God-given lands. To some extent, even some of the old traditional hymns may give a glimpse into how people regarded themselves as sent by God to annex the promised lands. For example, the songs *Onward Christian Soldiers*, and *Stand up, stand up for Jesus ye Soldiers of the cross*, conjure such images.

As Western imperialism expanded, so did economic plunder, injustice and ecological injustice (Giddens 1990:40). The writings of the Frankfurt school especially that of Horkheimer and Adorno (1972:6), and later by Jean Lyotard (1993:1) in his *Libidinal economy*, criticised the hegemony of Western epistemology, due to its inequalities and injustices. The Enlightenment turned into Western hegemony the rest of the world over. It divided the world between the rational West and the rest of the world (Hall 1996:184), in the process, widening the gap between the rich and the poor (Touraine 1971:16). Ecologically, it destroyed nature (Giddens 1990:40).

## ■ Second strand – Moral economy and the critique of liberal economy

In reaction to the exploitation that took place under modernity, a different theology emerged, which responded to the evils of colonialism and capitalism. The negative effects of the Enlightenment caught the attention of many theologians. Many of the early voices centred on economic injustice and the need for peace and order after WWII. The critique of capitalism based on a moral economy was slow, but the moral seeds already existed in most peasant societies across the globe. In England, the moral economy was popularised by James Scott (1990:12) and E.P. Thompson (1971:76), who observed that rural English peasants were comfortable with the fair price of commodities rather than the market price. The fair price was determined by the needs and affordability within the village, never driven by profit (Scott 1990:12). The moral economy, which undergirded subsistent communities for generations, was based on virtues of justice, fairness and promotion of life. In fact, Adam Smith's (1976:15) critique of feudalism was not meant to promote

capitalism, to the contrary, writing from the context of pre-industrial England, Smith criticised those who accumulated wealth at the expense of the poor (positional goods). We find similar injunctions against greed and injustice throughout the mediaeval period in various movements such as the Franciscan and Dominican orders. Equally, in France during the dawn of industrialisation, a Roman Catholic Jesuit father in France, Luigi Taparelli, challenged the owners of industry to, instead of focusing on maximising profit, give their workers a decent income (Burke 2010). Instead of profit, Taparelli said those with means must share and are accountable for the needs of the less privileged. These examples show the friction between the emerging economy driven by profit and the traditional worldview that undergirds subsistent economies.

Important for this chapter is the maxim that moral economy provided the seeds for liberation theology; the theology of the poor. Liberation theology was born at the intersection of the exponential rise of instruments that measure human rights in the 1950s, post-colonialism and the self-determination of former colonised states (Elliot 2007:343). After WWII, because of the loss of authority of the national state and the church, and the rise of universal human rights, the individual assumed greater importance and sacrality. Life, food, water, education, and health became human rights. The image of Jesus, which emerged after WWII, was as a campaigner for human rights.

For example, in Latin America, a Peruvian priest, Gustav Gutierrez argued that God has preferential treatment for the poor. Equally, Jon Sobrino (2005:254) argued that, through feeding, healing and exorcism, Jesus was constructed as the champion for the poor. Jesus was viewed as one who incarnated and assumed the pain of the poor. Through suffering, Jesus calls us to reorder the social and the economic status quo. In Germany, Bonhoeffer, a student of Reinhold Niebuhr, observed that in the black churches in America, the kind of Jesus they preached was socially committed (Rasmussen 2005:130). On his return to Germany in 1933, he applied the ideas of a socially-committed Jesus to critique the evils associated with the Nazis regime. He opposed the infiltration of Nazis in the church and advocated social justice and peaceful resistance. Similar movements in the form of black theology exist in South Africa.

## The moral economy of Jesus

At this juncture, it is important to point out that, besides the perspectives of freedom and justice, other perspectives such as human rights provide a significant ideological tributary in our construction of Jesus. Zorodzai Dube (2016) remarks:

The 1950s are significant in that, not only do we witness a world healing from the aftermath of World War II, but the universal campaign for other forms of freedom. The desire for universal human freedom should be understood within the matrix of postmodernity, which is a worldview and mindset that promotes individual freedom and choices. In this regard,

institutions – family, church or state – should not be prescriptive, instead they should be engaging. A leading voice concerning this topic is Michael Elliott (2007:343). In an article, *Human Rights and the Triumph of the Individual in World Culture*, Michael Elliott (2007:343) explains that the discussions about universal rights are a process which ‘is driven by a broader world culture where the individual is increasingly regarded as sacred and inviolable. (p. 1)

The need for a just and moral world, as advocated by the sentiments of human rights and postcolonial advocates, influenced the construction of Jesus from the 1970s onwards. Jesus was labelled as pro-poor, which shaped the way in which the first century was interpreted. From the 1970s, several biblical scholars embraced the idea of a socially committed Jesus which they buttressed with insights from archaeology and social scientific criticism. Ched Myers (1991:42), for example, in his *Binding the strong man*, says that Jesus reacted to economic and political oppression by calling for the redistribution of the economy and a revamp of the hegemonic social structures. More vocal in this regard is Richard Horsley (2001:177), who has suggested that, disgusted by the abject poverty of the poor, Jesus competed against the hegemonic Roman Empire by reviving the kinship’s reciprocity cultural values that underpinned Israel’s collective identity. In (re)constructing first-century Palestine, a majority of New Testament scholars believe that, demographically, Jesus’ movement comprised of the poor, the displaced and disfranchised (Levine 1992:xx; Neyrey 1995:129; Rohrbaugh 1995:183).

Evident from these biblical scholars is that ideas about human rights and freedom were and currently are heuristically used in the construction of an image of Jesus. Jesus was accorded agency, and this reconstruction of the first-century Palestinian context resonates with the worldview of postcolonial context. Jesus as the champion of freedom was extended to other areas of life such as gender which is evident from the rise of literature that constructs Jesus as pro-women, and in support of alternative sexuality (Moxnes 2003:177; Nortje-Meyer 2002:118).

Where traditional institutions such as the household could not be transformed from construction, Jesus left the household by creating a new kind of fictive kinship. This is the main thesis of Elliott (2002:75) and Moxnes (2003:177), who put forward the idea that Jesus exited the traditional household and community, imitating a new exodus; forming alternative household communities in which the economical outcasts built fictive kinship ties based on God being their Father. Moxnes’s perspective should be understood from the background of ideas of non-violence which are associated with Oswald Mosley in Britain and Mahatma Gandhi in India, the American peace brigade and the Abraham Lincoln Bridge. Again these ideas construct an individual who is an agent and can influence economic and political processes. Thus, unlike John Elliot (2002:75), Richard Horsley (2001:177), Halvor Moxnes (2003:177) and Ched Myers (1991:42), constructed a Jesus who is against oppressive institutions such as patriarchy and other gender practices that oppress women and men.

## ■ Is a moral economy possible in South Africa?

We are living in a global capitalistic world and yet espousing a Jesus of fairness and justice. How do we balance the contradiction? Importantly, what forms or strategies can be expressed or lived through the moral economy? From the above brief historical survey, for the most part, the theology which emerged after WWII was critical towards issues of economic disparity by calling for peace and justice. Is this kind of moral economy possible or is it mere rhetoric? If possible, how and under what conditions? To answer these questions, an understanding of the South African context needs to be foregrounded.

South Africa is not an island; its economy and social issues are intertwined with global events. In 1989 the world witnessed the demise of communism and a world ushered into adopting liberal economies (Fukuyama 1989:3). In Fukuyama's article 'The end of history', he sees the end of communism as indicating that capitalism has no other rival; it has won as the global economic policy. Fukuyama's (1989:4) position is problematic, because capitalism does not predominate in most Islamic countries and China. However, there is truth in Fukuyama's point of view because the 21st century global economy has been propelled by West European countries, and North America. Wallerstein (1991:184) adds to this by predicting the world will be governed by mega and multi-cooperate capitalistic systems. Capitalism has become the global culture (also see Jameson 1991:45). Capitalism exists in different forms, and its main fertile soil has been where a government has limited regulation of economic activities. Can this kind of moral economy be nurtured in South Africa?

Perhaps we should start with the question of whether the state, though compromised, can intervene to cushion the household from global capitalism? Anthony McGrew (1996:239) noted four types of state intervention, namely, (1) the strong interventionist welfare state (e.g. Sweden, Norway, Austria and Finland; here the state has extensive social policies and is committed to full employment); (2) soft compensatory welfare states (e.g. Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, and to an extent France, Germany, Ireland and Italy; here the state offers generous social entitlements but with low commitment to full employment); (3) full employment-oriented small welfare states (e.g. Switzerland and Japan; here the state offers low social entitlement but is committed to full employment) and (4) market-oriented welfare states (e.g. Australia, Canada, the United States of America, United Kingdom, and New Zealand; in these cases the state has limited social rights and a low commitment to full employment) (McGrew 1996:239).

South Africa most probably falls into the second category of a soft compensatory welfare state because of its commitment to offer housing, providing funds towards education, and attempts towards a state-sponsored healthcare. Welfare from the state is an attempt by the state to lessen the effects of capitalism by providing services to its people, or, as Claus Offe (1984:35) explains, 'crisis management'. The crisis comes from

global capitalism which has rendered the state redundant. For example, Susan Strange (2002:121), notes the declining power of the nation states due to globalisation and capitalism.

With reference to South Africa, the findings by Claus Offe (1984:35) Susan Strange (2002:121) that the state has little power, places the responsibility at the door steps of the church. Historically, the ecumenical bodies such as the South African Council of Churches have voiced concerns over various social ills, including growing inequality, poverty and lack of housing. In the post-apartheid period, the church has been vocal over issues such as corruption, and has been involved in helping people who suffer from HIV and AIDS. Recently the church was on the forefront in condemning the excessive corruption associated with President Zuma (Tandwa 2016). But, is this enough?

## **Buttressing a moral economy**

In this final section I brainstorm the various elements that should be in place for the church to be firm in its calling for a moral economy which is based on fairness and justice.

### **Biblically based**

Due to postmodernity, where truth is multifaceted and the Bible is one of the many sources of truth, the church faces the danger of spreading a message that has no biblical foundation. I argue that a moral economy should be based on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The message of Jesus regarding a fair and just economy came from his understanding of God who created us all equal. Thus, lack of fairness and justice violates the foundation on which creation is anchored. The scriptures, though having gone through various stages of ideological interpretation have one central message – do unto others as you want them to do unto you. Most cultures have similar ethnical teachings of fairness and justice. For example, ubuntu teaches that our humanity is intertwined; meaning that inhumanity to others is injustice to oneself. If our economic practices are based on fairness and justice, then we succeed to overcome the temptation of greed and self-gratification.

### **The collective**

Secondly, to preach a moral economy of fairness and justice, the church, despite its various forms should be one united in purpose. Throughout history, lack of ecumenical voices has curtailed the effectiveness of the church in influencing important political and economic decisions.



## Lead by example

Thirdly, to preach a moral economy, the church should lead by example. The church cannot be wholly different from its context, but the manner in which it models and practices fairness and justice gives impact to its message. The current postmodern context, which is characterised by a libidinal economy, presents danger for the church to lose its relevancy. Already there are fears that merging African Pentecostal movements are more of business enterprises than the preaching the message of Christ. If the church leads by example, it avoids what Adam Smith calls ‘positional good’; a status based on materiality. Jesus had similar harsh words for people who use materiality for selfish reasons. Commenting on several New Testament texts, including Mark 6:13–14 and Luke 13:32–33, Moxnes (2003:17) argues that Jesus was not against being rich, but he criticised those who failed to uphold the kinship values of sharing.

## Theological training should be multidisciplinary

Lastly, an interdisciplinary approach will ensure that theology does not remain an ivory tower. In 2013, Dube (2013:1) proposed a multidisciplinary approach to teaching the Bible. He is convinced that one way in which theology can make a sound contribution to issues in the public space is through commitment to the world behind the text and an awareness of the current context. This does not mean that theologians should be trained in economics or agriculture, instead, Dube advises that theologians should have a good grasp of major critical theories because practices are based on particular theories. If one knows a theory, then one has the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular ideological position. To students of theology, knowing theories places emphasis on ideologies underpinning the various knowledges that we have about Jesus and the Bible. Therefore, students immersed in multidisciplinary perspectives are able to wrestle with questions such as: What affects peace, currency, trade, welfare, and justice? In this regard, our prayer would come from a position of knowledge about the current issues.

## Conclusion

The chapter demonstrates the various instances in which theology and economic issues intersect. I noted that whenever theology sides with capitalism, it abandons its cause for the poor. In this regard, theology has the crucial role to play of ascertaining that economic activities are done within a fair and just society. This is important given that, within a global capitalistic context, the state has lost its regulative power which has potential to leave a large section of our society suffering from the injustices of capitalism. Due to postmodernity, there is real fear of realising that institutions such as households and states that used to bind people together have lost their relevance. Given this, there

is fear that the rich will continue to amass wealth while the poor suffer, which in the past has resulted in protests in many sections of our society. This study argues that Jesus' moral economy remains central to our generation. To be effective in its role as custodians of a moral economy, the church should remain biblically relevant, united and interdisciplinary in its epistemology.

## ■ Summary: Chapter 5

Taking a socio-historical approach, this chapter traces history from World War II (WWII) and illustrates the various instances in which economics and politics intersect with theological themes. After WWII the dominant paradigm in theology tilted towards a moral economy by focusing on issues of fairness, justice and peace. This chapter argues that, in view of the triumph of global capitalism since 1989, the future and relevance of theology is located within spaces that provide ethical and moral influence towards fairness and justice, thus agreeing with the central message of Jesus of Nazareth.

## ■ Chapter 5

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