

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND ECONOMICS

A Study Guide to M. Douglas Meeks' book God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy

Background:

The Faith, Global Economics and World Peace group decided to begin its study with Meeks' book. (For details of this group see "Beginnings of SAGE".) He is a theologian who was teaching at Vanderbilt University when this study took place between July 2003 and January 2004. We selected his book since it deals with the flawed assumptions underlying our current economic system and puts this system into a moral context. Far too many efforts at humanizing this system ignore these assumptions and hence (at best) create only limited change. The group found Meeks' book challenging to read but a rich source on the critical economic/religious issues that need attention. One group member noted: "we need to be transformed before we can be transformational". The following is a summary of the group discussion of some of the main points of each chapter. It tends to oversimplify the rich complexity of Meeks' views for the benefit of those (like this writer) who are neither theologians nor economists.

Introduction:

Current Economic Theory: Meeks (p.2) notes these are based on allegedly unassailable concepts. It is significant that even the Nobel prizes have now been extended to economics as if it were a true science. The irony is that current corporate economic ("neo-liberal") theory, which now monopolizes economic discussions, tends to be "normative economics". It is geared to showing what is desired more than what is. (Factually based studies are actually known as "positive economics".) A major flaw in neo-liberal thinking is this tendency to be utopian under the guise of pure science. The Congressional Budget Office economic reports are an example. But so far, progressives have done little to point this out.

Scarcity: Meeks (p.12) reviews the critical issue of scarcity. The current definition of economics is the study of human behavior in the allocation of scarce goods. (Think what a difference it would make if it were defined as the allocation of plentiful goods.) Scarcity is a major myth in neo-liberal thinking. Scarcity is tied to price. With this approach the costs to society of polluting our plentiful air and filling our plentiful water sources with industrial waste don't have to be included in product prices. In the United State coal is relatively scarce compared to water. So the cost to society from filling up our streams with the tops of mountains is largely excluded from the price of coal. Corporations to a large extent pass along these social costs to society. (As the economist Paul Hawkin notes, we know the price of everything but the cost of nothing.)

Changing Our Economy: Meeks (p.3) argues that economics should be focused on the necessities of life, not profits. He notes that all people have rights to these. Beginning a national discussion on rights may be an effective place to start the process of building an alternative to neo-liberalism. A cornerstone of our present system is property rights. We need much more discussion about how these ought to compare to human rights. Oxfam and the United Nations have developed useful lists of human rights. More people need to realize that our present political system is now based more on voting with money than on one vote

per person. Since those opposed to neo-liberalism do not have large financial resources, their efforts at change will need to rely more on people power.

Chapter One: God's Economy and the Church

No Viable Alternative Theory of Economy: On p.15 Meeks reflects on an issue that a number who seek changes in the system have commented on. We do not have well developed alternative economic models to replace the existing neo-liberal one. For example, the Clinton administration continued to support many of the neo-liberal policies of prior Republican administrations such as NAFTA.

A Theological View of Economy: The starting place to assess an economic system should be at the bottom, not at the top as neo-liberals do. (Think of all the publicity about how wonderful our system is because of the life styles of those who primarily benefit from the system.) Christ's concern was primarily focused on the poor. Old Testament stories about the Jubilee and Sabbath traditions reflect ways we can use to deal with our tendency to accumulate wealth. It is no accident that neo-liberal theory has received stronger support from churches that in the past supported slavery. Any effective attack on neo-liberal theory is likely to bring a strong response from the corporate world. In that sense working through churches can provide some protection and perhaps support. For example, Meeks notes that seeing the world as the household of God can destroy support for current property rights theory.

The Role of Churches: Churches and their members have to recognize how they are supporting existing economic ideas before they can take any effective change actions. Pogo's maxim that "we have met the enemy and they are us" summarizes our situation. For example, pastors and church members need to see how their retirement funds support the existing system.

The Power of Scarcity: Meeks notes the corrupting effect of the idea of scarcity on human behavior on p.17. The contrast between the biblical story of the loaves and fishes (and current studies by people like Francis Lappe) and the constant media attention to alleged world food shortages is striking.

Chapter Two: Reconceptualizing God and Economy

Common Language of Economic and Theology: Meeks on pp.29-30 notes the overlap of language between theology and economics such as faith words (fidelity, fiduciary, etc.), salvational words (redemption, saving, security, etc.) and debt. He makes the surprising statement that "Biblical God language is fundamentally economic" (p. 29)

Concept of Household: Meeks notes (p.33) that God's household can be our personal one, a community one, a national one or a global one. Hence everyone is really part of our household. The Hebrews had experience in being excluded from the household but hoped for the future. They felt obligated to provide hospitality to the stranger who was viewed as having the same rights as they did. Theirs was an inclusive view of the world. A group member reported visiting California recently and being struck by the number of gated communities there with guards in the entrance stations. This is an example of an exclusive view of the world that helps make possible the increasing loss of our civil rights since 9-11.

Social Impact of the Market: Meeks (p.35) notes that current economic practices (where the market largely decides the distribution of goods) has led to the domination of nature and governments as well as continuing the old dominations of race and gender.

Key Questions For An Economy: On p.34 Meeks lists these as

1. Will everyone get what it takes to live?
2. Will nature be given its rights or must it die in protest?
3. Will the world be mutually habitable by the peoples of the earth?

Our current system fails on all 3 counts. One way to think about this is to ask, does a newborn have the right to adequate food, shelter and medical care by virtue of its birth?

Key Question for World Peace: Meeks on p.32 asks how long hundreds of millions of people can seriously be expected to continue working to transfer their resources to their rich creditors? How much longer will they continue to buy the World Bank and IMF commands to tighten their belts? Iraq is one example of how the neo-liberal policies can be enforced. All empires have required a strong military to enforce their extractive economic activities. Current foreign policy in the United States seems to follow this same pattern.

Market Myths: Meeks notes on pp 37-38 that he is not trying to attack the market itself but two major myths about it. One is that the market is free of controls. The reality is that those with the most capital have the greatest influence. A second is the pretension that the market is a complete system for distribution of all social goods. It is presented today as the fundamental way of organizing all of life. A corollary of this is that everything at all scarce is a commodity that carries a price (people, coal, wheat, etc.). Hence the importance in neo-liberal thinking of turning many governmental activities over to the market through privatizing public functions.

The Area for Transformative Efforts: Meeks on pp.41-42 urges that efforts for change need to start with the same people that Jesus focused on: those who have been denied access to God's household. "Theology should find its context among those whose freedom is denied by existing economic arrangements." But on p.44 he warns against developing a theology only for the poor. Meeks says we need a theology that also liberates the oppressors since we are all caught in the current system that dehumanizes us all. We need to try to avoid as much we/they thinking as possible. A model is the communication that finally opened up between Ms. Butterfly-Hill (who lived in a CA redwood tree for over a year) and the CEO of the lumber company which was trying to cut it down.

Chapter Three: God and the Market Logic

Central Myth of the Market Society: Meeks notes on pp. 51 & 56 that the market is supposed to provide a democratic means of distributing scarce goods and services. This is allegedly done through people making choices out of their own self-interest. Hence one of the great fascinations of our current market is that this distribution can allegedly be done without domination or coercion, a great improvement over previous methods. This helps to tie the idea of freedom to the market. This has become a powerful selling tool. which masks the newer form of domination thru capital.

This is a key point at which to mount an intellectual attack on the market system. This alleged freedom provides a defense against the state or church getting involved since it seems unnecessary. But such an attack will be a long-term effort. It will require both these institutions to begin taking a role again in limiting the excesses of the market society. Meeks notes the liberal philosophy of the Enlightenment (that demanded the private/public, individual/social and equality/hierarchy partitions of life) helped free the private sector to grow into the controlling position it has today. He notes (p.49) that “Devising a market so pervasive that it has produced a “market society” is the great modern revolution.”

Meeks Narrow View of Religion: He talks mainly about the Trinitarian God but does not bolster his arguments through drawing on other religious traditions. For example, a stronger case could be made by also viewing the market from a Muslim perspective. The modern market system is largely a Western invention. This makes our interventions in the Middle East more complex. No one in the group knew of studies or books written from this broader religious perspective.

Supply-Demand-Price: Meeks notes on p. 49 that this mechanism created a “peculiar” kind of economy. Higher prices theoretically result when demand exceeds supply and lower ones in the reverse situation. Everything has a price if there is any demand and supply present. Hence they become commodities. Things that we have had in abundance like clean water and clean air have no value since they had no price. Once we pollute these, then they have value since companies can sell services to clean them up. The pollution creates the demand for services and the worse it gets the greater the demand.

The father of the market economy, Adam Smith, looked at the classic case of water and diamonds. Water had no value then (before pollution created the bottled water industry) but was absolutely essential to maintain life. Diamonds had high value even though they were totally unnecessary to life. Hence we have the increasing tendency in the market society to devalue the basis of our lives. The destruction of our earth, its resources and its people is a logical extension of this “peculiar” economy. Land (nature) and labor (people) are “only” commodities and can be dealt with like other commodities. We no longer have legalized slavery. But when people are still considered commodities (“human capital” in current economic language), companies can move factories around with little regard to the impact on people and their communities. Any company moving their operations can provide the economic rationale for this. The social cost is outside their calculations.

Alternatives to Commoditization: The ancient understanding of economy was that it was primarily concerned with livelihood. This has been replaced in modern times largely by a focus on exchanges that involve choices about prices. Meeks details the cost to society of this shift.

The concept of the great generosity of God (the opposite of the market stress on scarcity) should also be involved when considering alternatives. For example, when you total all the calories of the food produced in the world there is enough to provide every person with about 2700 calories per day. Meeks points out that the real “scarcity” in the market is the access to livelihood, not resources. World starvation is not a problem of resources. The current Christian right in the United States emphasizes God providing plenty. But the “prosperity gospels” stress providing our daily wants, not needs. This appears to reinforce the market

view of people as consumers. This wing of the Church has become caught in the political structure so it has had little impact on humanizing the economic structure.

The view of Native Americans that Mother Earth nourishes us is in marked contrast to the market view that nature is a commodity to be bought and sold.

Chapter 4: God the Economist

Overview of Chapter 4: Meeks begins with the Greco-Roman world. Since these societies were oriented toward governmental power, God is conceived as a ruler, a powerful king. On p. 79 Meeks notes that today, when economic power is even more powerful than that of governments, referring to God as an economist is very fitting. These concepts are in marked contrast to the servant God of the Jews.

Toward a New Economic System: In chapter 4 Meeks begins to provide arguments that can be used to begin to turn our system around. On p. 80 he emphasizes that an economy that is right for the poorest is an essential marker for an economy that is right for all. This bottom up approach is in marked contrast to the current neo-liberal top down one. Neo-liberals start with an idealized person and by deduction work down to their system. But since no one meets this ideal standard, the result is an oppressive system.

Meeks urges us to build a system that starts with the livelihood of the poor. Hence we should start with subsistence farming and the right to livelihood of the poorest. This would include access to land (and sea for those on coasts) sufficient to sustain life and to ensure enough surpluses to purchase goods that cannot be made at home.

There are three major views around which to organize an economy. The first is scarcity. Our current system in theory is based on this (but with resources like oil it operates like the next approach). The second is that there are more resources available than we could ever want. (It should be noted that the only resource that is not finite is the sun's energy.) The third is sufficiency. This is really the opposite of scarcity. Sufficiency sees enough resources available for everyone to meet their needs but not all their wants. Meeks finds this the best organizing principal.

The Necessity of Redistribution: Meeks notes that mal-distribution of goods will always occur. The Torah includes laws that are aimed at reducing this problem. On pp. 85-87 he describes the strict controls placed on charging interest and the seizure of property for debt, gleaning rights of the poor (to take part of the harvest from others' fields), the tithe for the poor and the rights of hospitality (of the poor and travelers for food and shelter). The redistribution was also to be achieved through the institutions of the Fallow Year, the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year. It is important to note that all these approaches were not seen as charitable efforts but based on rights given to all by God. (Contrast the great emphasis today in churches on charitable acts. But we forget that if you have a high degree justice you don't need much charity.)

Even the most just system will require some redistribution. But in the U.S. we are moving in the opposite direction. An example is the recently rescinded estate tax. Governments have often been the primary source of redistribution. As corporations have gained increased power over the public sector, the bias of their economic theory (to serve the interests of the

wealthy) becomes more prevalent. Thus, we are likely to get further erosion of mechanisms for redistribution of resources and income. In Tennessee the long struggle to create a less regressive tax system is also illustrative of the power of neo-liberal thinking. This power is also seen in the popularity of “trickle down” economic thinking despite decades of proof that there is very little “down” in this approach. . In neo-liberal theory, the wealthy’s role is to buy more excess products which will then provide more jobs (such as for yacht builders). In reality, their excess income goes largely into speculation, not creating jobs

Our Identity with the Jewish Slaves: On p. 80 Meeks notes this is the most important economic fact of our lives. Our identity with them is essential if we are to achieve a just economic system. Without this, we end up doing good works for “others” which are tied to oppressive, unjust economies.

The Role of Religion with Economic Power: One reason it is important to study books like Meeks’ is to become aware that all economic systems need the support of religion to function efficiently (p.79). WTO policies for example need the support of churches for myths such as people are poor mainly because of their own behavior. Without such religious support economic powers are forced to use increased military/police effort to support their system. In the long run this can lead to decreased legitimacy for the economic powers. Iraq provides a current example. The Bush administration hoped that the mullahs would support the invasion. Their lack of support has increasingly led to more forceful efforts to maintain the western economic system the Bush leadership is trying to install there.

The Importance of Community: Meeks on p.83 notes the importance of community for carrying out God’s laws in the Torah. This is also carried through in its economic views. In more recent times the emphasis on the law began to be replaced by a focus on grace (particularly by the Lutherans) and later by the concern for “I-Thou” relationships. This last development has led toward privatizing religion and reducing the role of religion in affecting world issues. The modern focus on the individual and their rights further undermines the Torah’s emphasis on community. Meeks seems to suggest that without a reemphasis on community, economic change will be more difficult. An example of this can be found in the programs of the Grameen Bank started in Bangladesh, which uses community groups as the vehicle for its successful micro lending.

Theology and A New Economy: Meeks on p. 90 notes that everyone has a claim on what is necessary to fulfill being human. A new economy must be rooted in economic and political rights as well as theological reflection (p. 91). Such reflection is necessary to answer what life is all about and more practical matters, such as who owns the earth and its people. Answers to questions like this should underlie a new economy. We need to discuss these kinds of issues with those in other religious traditions to work toward a new global economy, not just a western oriented one. The western view of ownership of property implies domination. But are we not really stewards rather than owners?

Biblical history suggests that the New Testament reflects God’s attempt to try to get this thinking across in a different way since the Old Testament approach did not work well. It is difficult to understand the New Testament without understanding the Old Testament and its complement, the Torah. The Muslims see their religion as a third attempt at this redefinition.

In the United States the question for religious organizations is can they become a focus for economic change as they were for change in civil rights? Change often comes more from

the pews than church hierarchies. Just as in civil rights, when a significant number of church members withdraw their support for the existing economic system, change will be more likely.

Chapter 5: God and Property

Property Rights: “Human beings cannot live without property, and yet they can hardly live with it.” (p. 99). Meeks notes property rights are rooted in our concepts of God. In cultures where everything belongs to a God who is a ruler, often everything belongs to the earthly ruler. The ruler then can give property to others as he sees fit. Hence in colonial days, the English kings could give charters to those they wished to control trade or rule parts of the empire. In colonial New York the Dutch government gave all the land to a wealthy family. Anyone wishing to obtain land there had to buy it from this family.

Meeks notes the two types of property: exclusive and inclusive. Exclusive property is controlled by an individual (my clothes, toothbrush, etc.). Inclusive property is that held in common. This form has the important function of allowing access to livelihood. In our western world the exclusive form has become dominant. Presently a number of world conflicts have the tension between these two forms as an underlying issue. Iraq culture has more emphasis on inclusive property. Not even the Iraqi government owns much property. Part of the U.S. occupation there is to install our exclusive property system. In Palestine there is a similar emphasis on inclusive property while Israel follows our form much more.

Outside the United States, peoples who lived in “slash and burn” societies (where they lived in rotating areas) lost land because it was not “occupied” at the time. An important issue in our treatment of Native Americans in the U.S. is this different view of property. Like many nomadic tribes, Indians used land in common then moved on to other land. The modern labor theory tradition of exclusive property is that if you make improvements and work on the land, this becomes a claim for ownership. Since Indian tribes often made no permanent “improvements” on their land, it became available to the western settlers.

There are many other examples in our country of the conflicts stemming from different views of property. The homesteading laws of the West were a transfer of public lands (often expropriated from the Indians) to exclusive private ownership of the settlers. The current struggles in Washington are partly tied to neo-liberal efforts to transfer or obtain use of public lands for corporate gain. Zoning laws reflect our limited support for community restrictions on property. In many communities they are too weak (or ignored) to slow the onslaught of urban sprawl.

The neem tree in India is a good example of the clash of rights to use the commons (inclusive property) with biotech firms’ right to develop products (exclusive property). For centuries the neem tree has been used at no cost for a variety of health uses from brushing teeth and making soap to making contraceptives. In 1994 a patent was issued in the United States to the Dept. of Agriculture and W.R. Grace on a fungicide made from neem tree oil. Several Indian organizations successfully sued Grace noting that their claim of new knowledge actually was based on knowledge developed over centuries by Indian farmers and healers. (For further details see pp.142-3 of Francis Lappe’s excellent book, Hope’s Edge.) In the past, new discoveries about the neem tree were returned to the commons for everyone’s free use. Exclusive property rights emphasize secrecy that after a patent can be used for profits.

Meeks' Suggestion For A Christian View Of Property Rights: On p. 124 he stresses the right to livelihood that is tied to access to property. Hence people need a sufficient level of inclusive property to ensure this. He also stresses the importance of social rights that provide limits on exclusive property rights. Clearly the system we have been developing in which exclusive rights become a major block to livelihood for many is unacceptable. It is important to avoid the two poles of everything being owned exclusively by individuals or by the community. Meeks seems to argue for a middle course in which private ownership of property is allowed but that it does not carry an exclusive right to be used or sold without community limits. "Faith sees property as a function of God's will for human beings and the creation" (p. 123).

Other Views of Property: On p. 115 Meeks notes that God "owns by giving". God became known to the Israelites because of his gift of saving them from captivity. The concept of the "Indian giver" in our culture is actually based on the Indian practice of rotating gifts. The Huron tribe had a ceremony in which gifts are given to the chief who later returns them to tribe members. This is not so different from the Israelites giving praise back to God for his gifts.

When the earth is seen as part of the community, then the issue of community restrictions becomes much broader. Covenants in property deeds are an example of these restrictions. These represent the community's views on the use of property. (At times of course these have been perverted into ways to keep minorities out.) But the same idea could be applied to the land mined by a coal company, to prevent the massive environmental destruction so often associated with mining. The use of eminent domain powers by governments is a reflection of community limits on use of private property. The fact that this at times is a contentious process demonstrates the hold that exclusive property rights have in our society.

The early church thinker, St. Augustine, stated that not sharing property with the poor was equivalent to thievery. In contrast are the Bush tax cuts that gave unneeded resources to the rich. These will be paid for by borrowed money that will have to be paid back by the next generations.

Closure of the Commons: The commons in Europe was open to anyone for hunting, cutting wood and other activities that supported family life. Meeks does not cover the end of these areas during the 17th and 18th centuries. The growth of industrial agriculture was a major factor in this shift. In industrialized nations, we are now living in an era at the other extreme with very little commons.

Chapter 6: God and Work

The Nature of Work: Meeks seems better at setting out the problems with our view of work than at solutions. His effort on pp. 133-134 to use a Trinitarian model of work seems to be a real stretch. It is also too narrow a view if we are concerned about developing a global perspective on these issues. Meeks notes (p. 127) that work is a "central theological issue" because nowhere else are issues of authority and subordination more apparent.

He points out that those who want to control work must control what a society teaches about the value, meaning, incentives and distribution of work. A current example is the

proposed World Bank model for trade liberalization. The Bank alleges it will create a \$500 billion increase in wealth and many jobs by 2015, with the bulk of this increase going to poor nations. All one has to do is look at the effect of NAFTA on jobs over the past 10 years to raise serious questions about this rosy scenario.

Other examples of this control include the way neo-liberal economic theory deals with unemployment and the Gross National Product. In this theory there is no such thing as involuntary unemployment. Hence idle labor never shows up in the calculations of the neo-liberals. The hidden assumption is that there is always work available, even if it is sub-poverty wages at Wal-Mart. Almost all of the federal economic activity figures use this assumption. Our GNP figures also do not include food raised by a farmers for their own use or the value of unpaid women's' work at home since these are not bought and sold.

The Role of Ideology: Ideology is more effective than guns for enforcing policies. Meeks challenges churches to create alternative ideologies regarding work but never quite pulls this off himself in chapter 6. He thinks one place to start is in institutions like churches that are working for social justice. An important issue is opening up access to power for all workers. On p. 154 he discusses some criteria for this, including shared information, the power of workers to remove their leaders, and real participations in rules governing the work.

A key to understanding the economic ideology in any country or region is to look at their commonly held concepts of God. In the West, the idea of God as "Father-taskmaster" and the ultimate worker (p. 140) has provided justification for a succession of myths about work:

- 1.The laissez-faire entrepreneurial concept that one can do anything they wish.
- 2.A paternalistic freedom to use the work of others for one's own gain.
- 3.Later, the freedom to make one's own destiny exclusively from one's own work.

The cruelties of the laissez-faire system seemed to be moderated by the development of paternalism (p. 141). Actually this was recreating the dependent relationships of medieval times. However, neither laissez-faire nor paternalism was very effective in motivating workers.

The freedom to make one's own destiny, the success ethic, came later. It maintained parts of the laissez-faire and paternalistic views of work and added the Protestant work ethic to achieve the predominance of today. It seemed to provide a better motivating concept for work. Hence the widespread use of Horatio Alger type stories. But a basic false assumption of this view is that poverty is no obstacle to achieving success. This in turn creates the norm that anyone who is not a "success" has only themselves to blame. Like laissez-faire, the success principal discourages charity since too much can interfere with people improving themselves through work (p. 142). In neo-liberalism, poverty is one reason for progress since it is a strong motivator for people to work.

The most powerful ideology is that which we are never aware of learning. Hence the power of the thousands of commercials seen by kids before they ever get to school. But the same can be said for the subtle (and not so subtle) messages adults get constantly from the media.

Redefining Work: Meeks emphasizes the right that humans have for meaningful work. The question is how to combine this right with a market economy. This is not just a Christian concern since it was also faced by the Israelites among others. How do we create non-compulsory work that is meaningful? But livelihood is broader than work. It helps to provide meaning in our lives. The two extremes of work create difficulties: work provides all the meaning in our lives or none of it. One possible way out of this is to make work more of a family and community activity as in the past.

The real wealth of the world is in the people who are willing to get up every day and provide some service to the community. A key question is how to liberate this activity in ways that do not involve the opposites of sloth and domination. If we are going to change our view of work we need to keep in mind the present view: to earn money so that we can then spend it on stuff. We also need to keep in mind that our present economic theory does not see unemployment as lost capital.

As globalization has progressed, more and more Americans are getting the message their work is worthless as their jobs move overseas to cheaper labor markets. A well-used tactic of those who control work is to create divisions between workers. Globalization has expanded the divisions of class, race and ethnicity so that the American worker is now pitted against the Mexican worker under NAFTA. Now the Mexican worker is increasingly pitted against cheaper labor in China and elsewhere. Globalization is really just a dressed up word for economic imperialism. The key “soldiers” are economists. They create and sell the policies that largely benefit the rich as if they benefit everyone. They also monitor economic activity in a way that obscures the real results.

What we need is a globalization of compassion, a way to stop pitting the workers in one country against another, a global way to strengthen environmental protections, a global way of supporting living wages (rather than creating a race to the bottom on wages) and workers’ rights, and a global way of supporting community growth in the nations of the world.

Chapter 7: God and Needs

Summary of Chapter 7: Needs can be a way to allocate resources in a society. For example, discussions about changes in the Medicare system can be framed around the needs of citizens. The risk in this is that issues of justice can get separated and the needs argument co-opted to meet the needs of corporations.

Churches’ Role: They must add discussions about physical needs, consumption and distribution of goods to their activities if they are to engage in decisions about the distribution of social goods (p.157). Meeks challenges them to move beyond their common focus on spiritual and emotional needs. Often the church assumes that it is a “need-meeting institution” (p. 158) and allows itself to be shaped by the public discourse on needs (which often support corporate needs) rather than also seeing itself as a real participant in this discourse.

The Needs Trap: A number of current anti-globalists espouse the virtue of minimal consumption. This can lead to an elitist stoicism. It makes sense for many in a rich nation like ours, but is obviously not a solution for poor nations already experiencing such minimal consumption that thousands are dying daily of starvation and preventable diseases. Hegel

saw needs as the glue of modern society. But needs can be corrupted by the addition of inappropriate values. A good example is our modern view of work as meeting our needs for income. Ignored are the even more crucial needs that work can provide. On p. 160 Meeks notes that the “traditional person of few needs” has been replaced by one “for whom needs are the source of meaning and order”. David Korten in The Post-Corporate World also notes the danger of excluding personal responsibility when discussing needs. This omission can lead to more fruitless clashes of left and right ideologies.

Social Norms versus Needs: In the past needs were viewed in the context of social norms. But in the current market economy the tension between norms and needs is overwhelmed by the needs argument. This is partly due to the addition of the supposed insatiable element to man’s nature (p.161). Our market economy has elevated individual needs far above social considerations and requires the insatiability of needs to bolster its (destructive) goal of ever expanding production.

Specialization in Economics and the Church: The field of economics appears close to bankruptcy as an academic discipline. Most economists today use one model (neo-liberal) of economy and spend all their time looking at the transactions within this one model. This is turning the field into one of mathematical applications. The field should be studying various forms of economy and building general principals from this review. As engineering applies principals of physics, economics is drifting into an applied science of what used to be economics. A more general problem of current academic life, specialists tending only to talk to others in the same field, adds to the problem of economists knowing more and more about less and less.

This specialization is also common in churches, which focus largely on individual spiritual and emotional needs. Currently there is little training in other areas in seminaries. Meeks’ major theme is that churches must also get involved in economics and its associated social issues.

Summary of the Economic Arguments of Neo-liberal Free Market Supporters: On p.162 Meeks notes this group stresses the key of individual choices based on individual needs. Supposedly these choices are made without coercion and provide the base for an efficient, growing economy. Without the language of needs this theory would lose its logic. The net effect of this approach allows corporations and their economists to avoid taking any responsibility for their actions. In theory they are only responding to what people need or want. Issues of social norms and justice are entirely omitted from the discussion.

If everyone were really equal with equal skills in negotiation, this market system might work. Los Vegas provides an interesting analogy. If the skill level is only 50 ½ % to 49 ½ % in favor of the casino operators, over many transactions the casino will always win. Hence they need only a very small margin to be profitable. This also allows enough winning by customers to keep them coming back. But if you apply the same concept to the many economic transactions consumers make every month, they are at more of a disadvantage. For one thing, the price of goods is not always tied to their quality. And the price is seldom related to the real costs of production such as pollution. Free market advocates who like to stress the freedom of choice of the consumer also ironically ignore the impact of the enormous advertising campaigns they conduct to make these choices anything but free.

Conclusion:

Meeks notes on p.181 that economic actions are not an end in themselves (as often seen today). They can be a means toward all humans having adequate resources and living in community with democratically developed policies. Economy must be “fundamentally concerned with livelihood”. He advocates that the current western market economy should be blocked in parts of the world where work, property and distribution are seen quite differently. He thinks the future of human society depends on restoring many parts of our economy to “community accountability”. Religions have a key role in creating this.

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