

OTHER THINGS EQUAL

Christian Economics?

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Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?

*Shew me the tribute money... Whose is this image and superscription?
Caesar's.*

*Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the
things that are God's.*

I only recently became a Christian, at age 55. I've been an academic economist since I was 20. Is it possible to be a Christian (or Jew or Moslem or Buddhist or Hindu or whatever) and an economist at the same time?

What I can say at least is that the conventional opposition of Christianity and economics is not necessary. The progressive Christian feels that God and Mammon are necessarily opposed. She feels guilty if her Sunday-morning identity doesn't chide her business Monday through Friday (Saturday is too busy for chiding). The marketplace is felt to be dirty, or at any rate the opposite of sacred. Should a Christian woman shine as a light unto the world or retreat into a desert hermitage? Should a Jewish man stick to his cobbler's last or spend his waking hours at the House of Study?

My reply is the conventional one, that on the contrary the virtues should balance and interpenetrate, that we should be charitable on the job and businesslike at Vestry Meetings, at least if we have resolved to be in the world (and "being in the world" happens even in a nunnery). But I go a little further than is common. I say we *already* are charitable on the job and businesslike in the Vestry Meeting. Not perfectly so, but more than is commonly thought. The two worlds *already* balance and interpenetrate.

Economics since its invention as a system of thought in the eighteenth century has spoken mainly of the middle virtue of the seven cardinal virtues, Prudence, an androgynous virtue counted good in both men and women as stereotypically viewed. (The word "Prudence" is a useful, long-period compromise among the wisdom-words from *phronêsis* in Aristotle to "maximization" in the modern economist.)

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Prudence is a virtue. In the last two centuries Prudence has come to be seen as mere selfishness, the sort of behavior one could assume as lamentably normal in a commercial society, hardly a "virtue." But the ancients I think had it right. We want to have people around us who are prudent, who can take care of themselves—every parent knows that. (Of course we also want our children or our friends and fellows to be courageous, temperate, just, loving, faithful, and hopeful.)

The way most economists do their job is to ask, Where's the Prudence? Adam Smith asserted in 1776 that "what is prudence in the conduct of every private family can scarce be folly in that of a great kingdom." A splendidly useful principle. The blessed Smith, however, understood that we want people to have a balanced set of virtues, not merely Prudence. He was not a particularly religious man, it seems, but was a professor of moral philosophy, and took his job seriously. I believe he was forming in all his works, especially in his two published books, an ethic for a commercial society.

But his ethic was not Prudence *Über Alles*. After Smith's death his followers came to believe precisely that: Prudence, or Utility, rules. Their single-mindedness was part of a wider rhetorical development since around 1700 in some circles that has elevated Prudence to the master virtue, the Platonic juice. (At the same time in other circles Prudence was being reduced to the master vice, drummed out of the virtue corps.) You will find people in business schools arguing that the reason to be loving or temperate is that it is prudent—virtue makes money, doing well by doing good. When some years ago the Harvard Business School was given \$20,000,000 to study ethics it started courses that collapsed the virtues into the one good of Prudence, all the virtue that money could buy.

My point is that Smith was right and the later economists and calculators have been wrong. You can't run on Prudence alone a family or a church or a community or even—and this is the surprising point—a capitalist economy. Courage and love and the rest figure in any human group. It has been discovered mathematically that games cannot be played with Prudence-only rules; they unravel (or if infinite are indeterminate). And off the blackboard it is becoming increasingly clear that real economies depend on real virtues. If one performs economic experiments on students and other hired victims the love, justice, temperance, faith, hope, and courage come pouring even out of the laboratories.

An economic actor must have a social stage, since no contract can be explicit about every aspect of a difficult transaction. Even in buying a newspaper the agent trusts that you won't suddenly snatch the money back and run out of the store. When I moved in 1980 from Hyde Park in Chicago to Iowa City I was startled by the reduction in transaction costs, and noticed them going up again when I moved back to Chicago for a time in 1999. Every transaction in Iowa is easier. Checks pass, grocery clerks smile, auto mechanics do what they say they are going to do. You can't run human groups on Prudence alone.

What I'm saying is that prudent, economical, capitalist, market-oriented behavior within a balanced set of virtues is not merely harmless—it is virtuous. Even, I am bold to say, in God's eyes. By contrast, the Prudence-only behavior celebrated in economic fable is bad. Bad for business. Bad for life. Bad for the soul. We call it avarice.

Look around at your own workplace. How does your office or factory actually operate? Really, now. With monsters of Prudence running around taking care of *Numero Uno*? No, not really, though in many economics departments there are one or two people who believe that Our Model proves they should defect. We find the cartoon strip Dilbert funny because the avaricious behavior of some of its characters is over the top, crazy funny, unacceptably prudent. Workplaces are more like homeplaces (more's the pity, some have noted, for they tempt men away to a guy-dominated place, *The Job, The Office*). We are morally offended when our workmate complains about our harmless little dog in our office: what a nasty thing to do, we think; doesn't he realize that Janie is important to me; doesn't he love me? A wholly prudent worker would not be capable of such sorrow and indignation.

The ethical wholeness of actors in a capitalist marketplace is not a minor, supplementary matter. When the unionized teachers of Philadelphia quarreled with the superintendent recently over reward-by-result their anger came from the insult as much as from a prudent regard for their tenure: are we, we professionals, to be trained like seals? Their indignation cost the school system millions of dollars and its chance to teach the children to read.

The writer Don Snyder tried construction work to survive one winter in Maine:

There were six of us working on the crew, but the house was so large that we seldom saw one another Once I walked right by a man in my haste to get back to a second story deck where I had been tearing down staging [The contractor] saw this, and he climbed down from the third story to set me straight: "You can't just walk by people," he said. "It's going to be a long winter." [Snyder, 1997, 74]

Even in a workplace of men—Snyder speaks of the corner of the basement in which the crew ate lunch as a "locker room, the kind of male sanctuary where we would have been less surprised to hear gunfire than a female voice" [*ibid.*]*—an avaricious, businesslike Prudence can't be all there is.*

In other words, *it's not the case that market capitalism requires avaricious people.* More like the contrary. Markets, I would claim, exhibit behavior that Jesus would have approved of—in fact, behavior that he did in some places, textually, approve of. I am not making the Jesus-as-Salesman argument, the pocket-sized God comforting to Babbitt. I am merely noting that Jesus the carpenter lived in a thoroughly market-oriented economy and did not ask all the fishermen to drop their nets and become fishers of men. He offered salvation in the marketplace, not in the Temple. He dined with taxcollectors. Christianity was in its first centuries an urban religion, appealing to high and low in a market economy.

The Gospels of course are filled with attacks on wealth, unusually harsh attacks among the world's canon. It is not surprising that Christian Europe invented the idea of socialism. In *Passage to England* an Indian professor of English, one Chaudhuri, noted the contrast between the Lord's Prayer requesting merely our daily bread and the Hindu prayer to Durga, the Mother Goddess, "Give me wealth, long life, sons [*sic*], and all things desirable." My uninstructed reading of Confucius finds an emphasis on

love and temperance, justice and courage; the *Analects* are a celebration of the gentleman, not the "small man" in the market. Its occasional snobbish attacks on wealth, however, do not have the edge and frequency they have in Jesus' commands to store up your riches in heaven, into which a rich man squeezes as a camel through a needle's eye.

Yet I do not think I distort the Gospels in saying that love is being recommended as the greatest virtue but not the only one. "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" is the law and the prophets, but recommends all manner of good. Jesus for example admires courage. He commends temperance (and St. Paul elevates it still more). He is stern for justice. And faith and hope are companion theological virtues to the master virtue of love.

And above all Jesus counsels Prudence for the ages. The very forms of his (or more accurately, his followers') attacks on worldly wealth use prudential metaphors: "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal." He uses the rhetoric of Prudence to recommend holiness.

Jesus' prudent advice to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's is the one sentence in the Gospel of Mark that the coalition of biblical scholars known as the Jesus Seminar regards as certainly authentic. Of the other nine authentic sayings of Jesus in the gospels (the Seminar treats a collection of Jesus sayings compiled by "Thomas," discovered in 1945 in a Coptic manuscript, as a fifth gospel), five commend love (turn the other cheek, give to the poor, blessed are the poor/hungry/sad, love your enemy, the good Samaritan), but the four others, like "Render unto Caesar," recommend Prudence (God's rule as leaven [Lk 13:20-21, Mt 13:33], the shrewd manager [Lk 16: 1-8], the workers in the vineyard [Mt 20: 1-15], the mustard seed [only in the spare version of Thomas 20:2-4 does the Seminar regard it as fully authentic]). It's 50/50 for Prudence and love.

The Seminar proposed a "final general rule of evidence" in the search for the historical Jesus. "Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you" [Funk et. al, 1997, 5]. I do not mean here to suggest that only authentic remarks by Jesus constitute Christianity, or that it follows from Jesus' prudential rhetoric that he would have admired modern capitalism. I mean merely to counter the assumption that Jesus was doubtless hostile to the propensity to truck and barter. Jesus is entirely congenial neither to socialist nor to capitalist. Nor for that matter to many a self-described Christian.

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