



Economy of Grace

KATHRYN TANNER

In my book *The Economy of Grace* (Fortress, 2005), I tried to show the way in which basic Christian beliefs are able to provide a whole new vision of *economy*, one that abides by fundamental economic principles very different from those of our everyday economic lives. This vision of an alternative economy, I suggested in that book, has the potential to expand our economic imaginations and to offer a practical path beyond the present trying economic times.

It might not seem that Christianity has had very much directly to say of a systematic, overarching nature about economics, and that this is the end of the story—no vision of an entire alternative economy here. To be sure, there are important papal encyclicals and church documents—bishops’ statements and church position papers—on economic issues. In the past, Christianity has made some pointed criticisms of usury—of interest-bearing loans—although that criticism tended to fall away after the Reformation. There are minority appeals in Christianity (especially in the Radical Reformation in Europe) to the so-called primitive communism of the early church, in which an ideal of commonly held property held sway. There are now and then attacks on money in Christian history—for example, among ascetics who withdrew to the desert in the first few centuries C.E., or among members of the early Franciscan movement who refused, despite their living in the world, to engage in monetary transactions or to own real property. The Jubilee traditions in the Hebrew Bible and their extension into the New Testament

Instead of regarding economics as a religion, with its own “gods” and ultimate concerns, we might consider the whole Christian story to be a story of economy: a kind of system for the production, circulation, and exchange of goods. But this turns out to be a very unusual, noncompetitive economy.

suggest the need for the at least periodic forgiveness of the debt on loans. And there is, of course, a long-standing tradition of Christian concern about the corrupting influence of wealth, and concern for the poor. But this attention to economic issues often seems to form merely a second tier of theological preoccupation, an optional addition or supplement to strictly God-oriented questions of more central concern to theology as a discipline. Direct attention to economic questions also seems to emerge only piecemeal in Christian history, as occasions warrant, without any clear systematic interconnection among the various Christian pronouncements and warnings. And what the main theological claims of Christianity—Christology, the doctrine of God, and so on—have to do with these economic judgments often remains rather opaque even in those contemporary theologies that have a decided political or economic slant.

THE CHRISTIAN STORY AS A STORY OF ECONOMY

As an antidote to these impressions, which I believe are mostly correct, I suggest that the whole Christian story is a story of economy, with every basic Christian belief making a contribution to it. Embedded within the fundamentals of the Christian story about God and God's relations to the world is an account of a kind of system for the production, circulation, and exchange of goods, starting with God, the highest good, and extending the good of God's own life to the world, from the beginning of the story—creation—to its end in redemption. The Christian story, after all, is a story about God as the epitome of all good, the highest, supreme, and all-comprehensive good, a God constituted by exchange among the persons of the Trinity, a God who aims in creating the world, in producing the finite goods of the world, and in saving it, to distribute to it the good of God's own life to the greatest degree possible. This is an economy made up of distinctive forms of distribution, circulation, and exchange. And the principles according to which goods from God are produced and exchanged in this economy—the basic principles that underlie all the ways God offers the good of God's own life to creatures—seem, to say the least, decidedly odd. Fundamentally at stake in this Christian story are new principles for the production and circulation of the good and what these principles mean for human life as God intends it.

On my way of looking at things, then, every Christian claim or teaching is directly and from the first an economic one, about economic issues; every basic Christian belief about God and the world goes to form a Christian view of the best way for goods to be produced and exchanged.

This way of bringing theology and economics into conversation is unusual. The usual way of bringing theology and economics into conversation involves considering economics to be a religious matter. Theology and economics can converse—they meet head on—because economics has its own gods, its own ultimate concerns of a broadly religious character, which theology is, therefore, entitled to critique. The gods of the economy, its ultimate concerns, amount to money, the

amassing of material wealth, and the never-ending pursuit of economic profit. Like some sort of perverse counter-religion, the market offers its own brand of salvation—heaven on earth—through worldly means; for example, by way of a capitalist engine of growth sufficient to meet the material needs of everyone on earth.

The usual way of bringing theology and economics into conversation involves considering economics to be a religious matter. But I take the reverse approach. Both theology and economics are considered under the rubric of “economy” in a very broad sense.

But I take the reverse approach. Both theology and economics are considered under the rubric of “economy” in a very broad sense. They both concern, in a broad sense, systems of exchanges, transfers, substitutions, and means of production. What they both discuss is economy in a way suited to their respective fields or arenas of human life that center around distinctive sorts of goods, and that common economic concern is what allows theology and economy (in a more narrow sense) to be considered together. On the one side, there is a theological economy for the circulation of grace—by which I mean all the ways God’s favor is expressed towards the world in benefiting it, from creation through redemption; the way these goods of God’s grace are formed and circulate: an economy constituted by fundamental principles for the production and circulation of the goods of grace as the Christian story of God and the world relates them. And on the other side, there is economy in the more usual, narrow sense—the way goods are produced and exchanged in, say, capitalism: an economy made up of principles governing financial transactions, industrial production, competitive pricing, and so on. Theology and economics enter the same universe of discourse—discourse on economy—and directly address one another on that basis.

This sort of approach to the conversation between theology and economics, just because it means interpreting basic Christian beliefs—indeed the whole Christian story—in economic terms, might not seem a very good idea. From my point of view, it makes sense to place religion—along with all the other arenas of human life—within a very general economic frame by talking, as many sociologists do, of religious interests and investments, and efforts to monopolize grace. It is appropriate to talk of specifically religious forms of capital. One can say that every field or arena of human life, including religion, is defined by some sort of good or value specific to it. In the case of Christianity, the good or value that defines the religious field is *salvation*—that is what is ultimately being produced, distributed, and exchanged; that is what everyone who enters the field is after. In any field or distinct arena of human life, participants are organized, positioned differently with respect to one another within the field, according to their abilities to gain that good, by their capital—by whatever it is that enables one to achieve the goods of the field. In

the Christian case, grace and the means to grace would constitute these field-specific resources or capital: grace is what gets you the good of salvation. But isn't this way of talking about grace liable to cheapen religious concerns by translating them into terms foreign to them? Isn't it likely, in fact, to reduce the economic implications of Christian belief to what we ordinarily think economic life is all about—maximizing one's own enjoyment of the good over against that of others? Whatever the good is, salvation included, the whole point of participating in a field is to have as much of that good as possible and to distinguish oneself from others on that basis.

AN UNUSUAL THEOLOGICAL ECONOMY

It therefore becomes very important to see how unusual this theological economy is. It is still an economy, even though it is like no economy we know in that it does not involve efforts to maximize one's own enjoyment of scarce resources, resources, that is, that one needs to hold for oneself against others. Indeed, I would argue that a theological economy of grace is a fundamentally noncompetitive economy and for that reason very different from economy in any ordinary sense of the word.

Clearly in the history of Christianity one finds competitive struggles over who has grace and controls its distribution, over who has access to it and how—struggles among priests, prophets, and religious laypeople. Prophets who have the gift of the Spirit, for example, can bypass those with religious standing because of their religious office or educational certification. They have a religious standing to rival priests or clerics or doctors of the church because they have direct access to God and the personal religious prowess to prove it. By virtue of that fact, they attract their followers by offering to other people the hope that they, too, can achieve the same sort of religious standing for themselves. Priests counter such challenges to their own religious standing by offering a kind of democratization of grace. *Grace* is not a rare or difficult achievement requiring great personal discipline or heartfelt devotion to God: all one has to do is go to church and partake of the sacraments. But the mediation of a priest is necessary to receive the sacraments, and very few people can become priests. Those who appeal to the unmediated gifts of the Spirit can, therefore, in principle, offer a wider distribution of very high forms of spiritual achievement. The attractiveness of that might, indeed, garner for them the highest religious standing as founders of a new religious movement.

But in the historical record one also finds something else: for all the status rivalry, for all the jockeying for position within the religious field that surrounds who has grace and how to get it, one thing that people are often looking for in Christianity is a way out of the competitive circulation of goods. This is especially true for people without money, education, high social rank, or other status markers. They hope to find in Christianity not a status to rival the great, but a circulation of goods without status rivalry. What attracts them is a vision of grace offered to all,

without regard for distinctions of status: the lowly in the eyes of the world can have it just as much as the privileged can. This grace is offered freely to all; to be favored by God with it, one does not have to be educated or wealthy or socially well connected.

*grace is offered freely to all; to be favored by God with it,
one does not have to be educated or wealthy or socially well
connected*

In this distribution of grace, distinctions of status make no difference. In the first place, this is true because the distribution of grace does not follow the lines of already established differences of status of nonreligious sorts. You can be graced whether you are high or low, rich or poor. But, in the second place, differences of status become irrelevant because the distribution of grace does not itself foster a new competitive market in status or standing along religious lines. The distribution of grace does not, in other words, establish simply an alternative competition for status, with new standards to replace the old, discriminating between high and low—now, not on the basis of how much money one has or one’s social standing, but with reference to one’s holiness or the genuineness of one’s conversion experience. Nor need grace be merely an alternative means to elevation in the eyes of the world, a way of aspiring to a higher social class through the proposal of a new form of capital. Although it happens frequently enough, there is no necessity to the fact that, as H. Richard Niebuhr elegantly expresses it, “the history of denominationalism reveals itself as the history of the religiously neglected poor, who fashion a new type of Christianity which corresponds to their distinctive needs, who rise in the economic scale under the influence of religious discipline, and who, in the midst of a freshly acquired cultural respectability, neglect the new poor succeeding them on the lower plane.”¹ Running contrary to this dynamic, grace is often thought to be always directed especially to the lowly, in order to raise everyone to a common height.

In general, I think what is notable about Christianity, as a field of an economic sort, is the attempt to institute a circulation of goods to be possessed by all in the same fullness of degree without any lessening or loss, a distribution that in its unrestrained generosity calls forth neither the pride of superior position nor envious rivalry among recipients. Breaking this economic vision down into some of its various elements, one could say the following more particularly: the good is distributed by God, and is to be distributed by us in imitation of God, in an indiscriminate, rather profligate fashion that fails to reflect the differences in worthiness and status that rule the arrangements of a sinful world. The purpose of the provision is to elevate us, without limit, so as to bring all recipients to the level of the

¹H. Richard Niebuhr, *Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian, 1959) 28.

provider, ultimately God. The whole of God's grace is given to each, or at the very least is continually being offered to each, awaiting the expansion, which God and the followers of God are also trying to bring about, of the recipients' capacity to receive the whole. The good is distributed without the provider, God, suffering any loss thereby. The recipients of such goods do not amass them in a static way, simply for themselves, against others, but become providers to others, in turn, on the same terms. The recipients do not hold these goods simply for themselves as a form of exclusive possession, but distribute them to others in much the way God has distributed those goods to them in the first place.

This idea of providing, out of one's own fullness and without loss, to those in need for the very purpose of making them "rivals" in one's own gifts can be found everywhere in Christianity, if one is looking for it. It is evident in all the topics of Christian theology, at least as a submerged theme—in the account of trinitarian relations, God's creation of the world, God's presence to the world, God's distribution of all the goods of grace from creation to salvation, and in the account of our responsibilities to others. The whole Christian story, from top to bottom, can, I think, be viewed as an account of the production of value and the distribution of goods, following this peculiar noncompetitive shape.

ECONOMY AND THE LIFE OF GOD

Thus, within the triune life of God and in God's relations with us, God's provision of goods is noncompetitive in that benefits for oneself are not gained at another's expense but, also, in that having for oneself is not diminished by provision to others. Providing to others and having oneself are simply not in competition with one another in a theological economy. The persons of the Trinity give to one another without suffering loss; each person continues to have what that person offers to the others. What is offered remains the possession of the one offering it; nothing is given away. What the Triune God provides to us does not lessen the inalienable fullness of God's own life either. God retains the fullness of God's own goodness even as we become the best that we can be by way of God's productive powers, even as we become better approximations in created form of the supreme goodness that is God's own life. And all that Jesus does for us—at the extreme by dying on a cross—comes not at his own expense, but is part and parcel of the process of perfecting his own humanity to glory, I would argue. On the cross, mortality and the effects of sin are in the process of being overcome in Jesus' own life as they meet the indefatigable powers of divine life that are his as the Word incarnate. We receive perfected humanity from Jesus as someone who enjoys it before us; our humanity is perfected only to the extent his is already, upon his resurrection.

Following the same theological principle, our giving to others should also not mean the impoverishment of ourselves. In human relations, as elsewhere in a theological economy, giving should not be at odds with one's continuing to have. What one gives is not to come at one's own expense; one isn't giving by a giving away that

leaves one bereft; what one gives remains in one's possession. A community conforming to this idea would be a community of mutual fulfillment in which each effort to enrich, perfect, or fulfill oneself enriches others' efforts to do the same thing. One perfects or fulfills oneself by making one's own the efforts of others to perfect or fulfill themselves; their efforts, too, being furthered in the same way by one's own. Something like that is happening all the time in community living, but it is rarely made a major principle of community reform and self-purification.

Rather than being in competition with benefiting others, having becomes in this way the very condition of provision to others. Having received gifts ourselves from God and from all others similarly gifted by God, we provide to others, rather than withhold from them, rather than hold what we have simply as our own, as our exclusive possession. The first person of the Trinity does not begrudge the second and third anything; the Triune God does not begrudge the world anything; the Word does not begrudge the man Jesus anything; Jesus does not begrudge us anything. Making what one has the root and impulse of giving to others is simply the summary story of God and the world. The Triune God is a God that communicates the goodness of God within the course of God's own dynamic life and outward in love for what is not God. The whole point of God's dealings with us as creator, covenant partner, and redeemer in Christ is to bring the good of God's own life into our own. Our lives participate in that divine mission and, thereby, realize the shape of God's own economy by giving that follows the same principle: self-sharing for the good of others.

BEYOND A MATERIAL/SPIRITUAL DUALISM

Is this theological economy totally unrealistic, a pipe dream to be deferred until the utopian space of heaven? One might think so if one believed such a non-competitive economy could be instituted only for spiritual goods. Theological economy would therefore be suitable only for a realm of grace divorced from the material world, from the everyday fields of economics and politics. Only joy or knowledge is subject to noncompetitive distribution—nothing that is physically embodied. For example, some piece of knowledge can be shared equally by any number of knowers in a noncompetitive fashion; my knowledge increases your knowledge, and yours, in turn, mine. But can the same thing be true for a car or a house? This sort of dualism between material and spiritual is often, of course, incorporated into Christianity along with the ideals of a noncompetitive economy. Hear again the words of H. Richard Niebuhr as late as 1959: "The values to which [the modern world] gives the greatest veneration and which it pursues with greatest abandon are values which inherently lead to strife and conflict. They are political and economic goods which cannot be shared without diminution and which arouse cupidity and strife rather than lead to cooperation and peace."² But the

²*Ibid.*, 276.

Christian tradition as I am developing it affirms at a minimum that God creates the whole world, in all its aspects—material and spiritual—according to such a non-competitive economy, so that it should be such a noncompetitive economy to every degree possible, holding us as creatures of body and soul up to its measure. The social worlds of economics and politics as we find them certainly do not run

the present shape of capitalism can be changed and redirected by human decision; it is not an immovable object, an implacable juggernaut, simply our fate

according to principles of a noncompetitive economy, but, as modern people, we are aware of their malleability by our own efforts, the way such structures are maintained only by way of our own complicity in them. The present shape of capitalism, for example, can be changed and redirected by human decision; it is not an immovable object, an implacable juggernaut, simply our fate. Part of my intent in conceiving Christian beliefs in economic terms is just to suggest that a Christian understanding of economy extends to the material dimensions of life as much as the present economic system does. The way God's grace operates in the world amounts to a world-encompassing economy, in which we are called to participate as both spiritual and material creatures. Because it takes the form of an economy, these ways of God can be set alongside the present economic system to provide an ideal against which it should be measured and the goal to which we should aspire in efforts to change it. ⊕

KATHRYN TANNER is the Dorothy Grant Maclear Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School. She is the author, among other books, of Economy of Grace (Fortress, 2005). Her latest is Christ the Key (Cambridge University Press, 2010).