

Introduction

In this introduction, the central thesis of the book is laid out. This is that the market world has created the modern society in which our lives are lived, whether as citizens of a European democracy or of an Asian, newly emerging nation. The focus in this book is overwhelmingly on Europe, and it explores the relation of a theology of justice to that of human identity in this market world. It is not, therefore, a work of business ethics, nor one simply of Christian social ethics in its ultimate questioning. It is shaped by the tradition of Anglican social ethics in England, within which I write and continue to work: the tradition of Hooker, Coleridge, Lux Mundi, Temple, Preston and Atherton. The concern of the book, however, is with human nature and the question of justice, or, as it is called by theologians, theological anthropology and ethics. The paradox is simple to state, but difficult to resolve. As our society becomes more industrialized, market driven and pluralist, human identity becomes more problematic. The resolution of human identity is made, for those who have the freedom to choose, through their self-expression in employment, consumption and the human relations which sustain them. Less and less is it made through religious faith, or the implications which flow from that faith, such as the Protestant Work Ethic. However, it is not clear that paid employment, or consumption, can provide the satisfactory definition of that identity which is sought. Ironically, the very restlessness of employment and consumption is the reason why such activity is both so attractive and so illusory at the same time. Equally, the ethical standards which should govern such employment, or consumption, become unclear.

This book is not an attack on the overindulgent world of the conspicuous consumer, nor a description of the inherently alienating world of modern capitalism. Both these descriptions may be true, and indeed the prophetic Christian voice may well contrast the world of religious faith, waiting for the coming of its Lord, with the frenetic activity of shopping at Christmas: it is a familiar, and justified, theme of the Christian preacher across the years. Nevertheless, such a move would set the theologian over-against the question of human identity as it is posed at the end of the twentieth century.

The argument begins with the work of Jürgen Habermas, who has set out with impressive clarity two facets of modernity. One is the increasing dominance of an instrumental way of thinking, which is a type of rationality which excludes social values and the nature of justice. The second facet is the pervasive interplay of capitalism in economic life, and bureaucracy in social life, which together dominate contemporary culture with their pattern of thought (rationality) and values. In a phrase which will be explained later, there is a ‘colonization of the lifeworld’ all the more powerful because it is often taken for granted. In this world, discussion of social value, or the understanding of human flourishing, becomes difficult and even problematic. It is the great merit of Habermas’ thought that he has laid out his argument with such force that it becomes a way into the question of human identity and social justice and the market world. Nevertheless, Habermas is not the answer to the discussion of modernity and late capitalism for the theologian. There are a series of assumptions which he makes about the nature of language, tradition, society and moral value which set him outside the Christian tradition, as much as his enduring refusal to admit the reality of religious language as having any validity. Habermas, therefore, both illustrates the conceptual argument which a Christian theologian must address (‘what does it mean to speak of human identity and justice in a world dominated by this colonization of our culture by the power of capitalism and bureaucracy?’) and yet leaves a set of issues for further argument.

The book is not confined to the question of the theological

interest of the analysis posed by Habermas. Instead, a series of four chapters explores different aspects of the resolution of human identity and the nature of distributive justice. There are two chapters, following the initial one on Habermas, on consumption and work. It is here that the central issues of human identity and justice are considered, as the demise of the Protestant Work Ethic is described. In part, the argument is historical, so that the place of aesthetics and the Romantic Movement can be shown in the transformation of a work ethic into an ethic of consumption. This is the predominant thesis of the book, and it encompasses the views of T. Veblen at the start of the twentieth century on conspicuous consumption. It is still the case, however, that paid employment (colloquially, if inaccurately, called work) provides a great source of meaning and self-identity, even if it no longer stands within the framework of the Protestant Work Ethic. In particular, the studies of Robert Lane, the American social psychologist, in his book *The Market Experience*, show how persuasive the nature of paid employment still is to human identity. Whether this employment is sufficient, what its relationship is to human society and the wider set of social bonds which constitute our identity, and whether such activity at work renders a transcendent relationship irrelevant are all questions which must be explored.

The nature of paid employment, and of consumption, is set within the framework of the global market-place. Again this has an impact on human identity, both from the dimension of the market and from the scope of globalization. Nicholas Boyle's recent study of western European culture and globalization is aptly called *Who are we Now?* In part, the question of the market is a question of social justice, and this has been well discussed by many theologians in the social ethics tradition within which I write. In recent years, David Jenkins, Ronald Preston, John Atherton and (from the Scottish Reformed tradition) Duncan Forrester have all probed the justice of the market. Indeed, as market relationships spread further and further in the last decade of the twentieth century into education, welfare, penal policy and health care, there seemed no end to the remit of the market. This gives us our clue, for the question then becomes

not simply whether the market is just, but how it frames the question of human identity. Can there be a ‘theory of public cooperation’? This is the sub-heading of an important study by Jonathan Boswell entitled *Community and the Economy*. Given that human identity must be related to the nature of community, what form of community is possible in a market system?

Equally, the question of globalization raises acute questions of the rootedness of human identity under the advancing power of global capitalism. Both Boyle and John Gray, in his recent brilliant polemic against globalization *False Dawn*, believe that the western European tradition of social democracy and culture will be swept away by the tide of globalization. In a related, but different, perspective, the English Anglican bishop and theologian Peter Selby argues that only a theology of Christ’s universal sovereignty over all that enslaves us will enable us to resist the ever-growing power of financial debt, both domestically and globally. Here issues of justice press hard.

Consumption, paid employment, the relationships of trading in the market and the global economy are the four elements which define human identity today in the market world. Two relate to what we do (consuming and working), while the latter pair place this activity in the context of the global market. These four chapters take up the conceptual questions posed by Habermas in the opening chapter and examine them in a multifaceted way, partly historical, sociological, economic and, of course, theological. Through all of this the nature of human identity, as consumer, worker and global citizen, is subject to scrutiny. In brief, the question is ‘who are we now?’

This leaves open what the response of the Christian churches might be, in terms of justice and human identity. As much of my recent employment has been within the churches, as they seek to respond to social change and to discern some patterns in the often frequently bewildering pattern of events, it is only natural that the final chapter should examine the adequacy of contemporary church documents on the issues of work, unemployment, consumption and the global market. In a sense, this final chapter mirrors the opening one in which Habermas’ thought was set out so that the conceptual issue could become clear. The

opening and concluding chapters frame the four chapters as they discuss consumption and employment in a global market. (This framework is in part inspired by the unpublished Ph.D. written a decade ago by Philip West on Habermas and a theology of work, although the argument and conclusions are developed in a very different way.) Once again, it is not simply the nature of social justice which is important in the examination of Roman Catholic, Anglican and German Lutheran thought. It is the possibility of a viable set of social relationships, which can both nourish human identity and yet recognize the reality of holding together a market economy and a theory of justice that is at issue. This task has not proved easy for the churches, and the temptation to fall into theological rhetoric or detailed policy options is very apparent. Nevertheless, it is also the case that the last few years have seen the beginning of an understanding of what it means to be a human being, both worker and consumer, at the end of the twentieth century. The implications of this understanding, of course, go into the fields both of social justice and of mission. Nothing shows this more clearly than the writings of the Industrial Mission in England at its beginning in the 1940s when compared with its self-description now. The task of relating the Christian faith to the world of the shopping-mall, and the hi-tech industrial and service sector, within the constraints of a global market-driven culture, is one that can only be begun in this book. It overlaps very clearly with work on gender and sexuality in this same series, and with our attitude to the environment which encompasses all our actions. It is, however, a discrete area, and one in which there have been continual shifts in social awareness since this book was begun at the beginning of this decade. It would require a much more detailed study to trace the ramifications of a study of human identity for business ethics and the regulation of the global market. Equally, the churches will continue their dialogue with government and economic institutions on the public-policy implications of their Christian faith at the end of this century. I am encouraged that this work is being undertaken by many colleagues, as the social and economic forces which shape our lives change ever more fundamentally. This study stands back

from that debate and seeks to discern the outline of human personhood in our contemporary society, which is the often dimly discerned reality shaped by the forces of the market for good or ill. Whether there can be a resolution of the question of human identity, as it is expressed in the global market, in terms of the Christian faith is perhaps the most difficult question of all. It is clear that for many theologians – DÜchrow, Gorringer, and, I suspect, Selby – the choice is either/or. While we have no choice about living in this market world, it is for them a dehumanizing world which takes away the choice of the poor so that they have doubly no choice: no choice but to live in it, and no choice but to be oppressed by it. Even for the rest of us, global capitalism is often seen as an idol to be resisted by the power of the Gospel. I leave the resolution of this dichotomy between human identity in the global market-place and Christian faith to the end of the argument. It is a question to be worked through stage by stage, neither denying the fundamental injustices in the market nor reducing the entire argument into a consideration of this point. Justice certainly demands a reformulation of the global market, but (as Raymond Plant argued a few years ago in his Gore Memorial Lecture) the churches cannot simply walk away from the market because it is unjust. If they proclaim their own theory of human nature, in narrative form, then one must ask how this relates to others who participate in political discourse and the market.

Holding together questions of justice and human identity is never easy. The reason for doing so is that it is, it seems to me, too simple to criticize the market in terms of justice without seeing how human beings are themselves shaped by those forces of work and consumption, and find their identity by participating in those activities. It is not as though there is a neutral standpoint from which to stand in our critique of the market: we are shaped by the forces which we criticize. Duncan Forrester, in his recent book, has explored in a very helpful way the manner in which theories of justice have become fragmented and only provide glimpses of a whole truth. In a similar, but more descriptive and historical, way, I would point to the way

in which we work, shop and consume as part of the enormous fragmentation of human identity in the late twentieth century. Like Forrester, I believe that we must seek to fashion an identity, however fragmented, which is demonstrably Christian out of the experience of contemporary life, so that a theory of justice which holds up the flourishing of human identity under God may be still possible.

This leads, in conclusion, to some reflections on theological method. There can be a tendency to exalt this to too great a preoccupation of theologians: John Atherton's criticism of *Putting Theology to Work* in his review in *Crucible* makes exactly this charge. Nevertheless, while recognizing this point, it is important to be clear about the theological method which has been adopted. The book begins, as said above, with the philosophical analysis offered by Habermas, but this is then subjected to a theological critique from Bonhoeffer and Hardy. Similarly, in the chapters on consumption and work, the method employed is to trace the development of contemporary reflection through both the historical evolution of intellectual ideas and the analysis of social psychology. The chapter on consumption follows more of a historical approach, while that on work is primarily based on social psychology. In each case, the work of contemporary theologians is then correlated with this analysis, but it is not the intention that a theological statement should serve as a theological 'transformation' of the initial presentation. This is the position taken by M. Douglas Meeks, who, in his fascinating book *God the Economist*, in some ways approximates to this study. In both, there is a study of the market, work and consumption, although Meeks has also an extensive and very interesting section on property, while mine concentrates more on global capitalism. (Perhaps this merely reflects the fact that Meeks published his book in 1989, a decade ago, before talk of globalization was commonplace.) In both, there is a concern for social justice and a theological account of work, consumption and the market – in other words, of the economy. However, Meeks develops his theology out of a fully developed Trinitarian and biblical account of the nature of the Christian God and of the early Christian community.

Therefore, it is part of his intention that a Trinitarian theology (largely developed from Jürgen Moltmann) and a sociology of the New Testament should deepen the challenge of the Christian tradition to modern economic thought, the structure of the western economy and the pattern of daily living in ways that are inspired by, but, ultimately, go beyond, Latin American liberation theology. They go further than this liberation theology in three respects. First, there is a highly articulated doctrine of the Trinity which sees the divine 'economy' as not only liberator but creator and sustainer. Secondly, the exposition of scripture is indebted to much work in the 1980s and 1990s on the sociology of the New Testament. This avoids the rather crude literalism of some biblical work in liberation theology, although more recently this has begun to change. Thirdly, and most importantly, Meeks is concerned to discover how the entire western political economy fits together and is legitimated in its dimensions of property, work and consumption. This is far more sophisticated an attempt than a straightforward analysis of economic, social and political oppression. Since Meeks is interested in a critique of the legitimation of the economy, economic thought and daily life, he therefore offers a brief, but very suggestive, sketch of the meaning of property, work and consumption.

In so far as Meeks is concerned, in the meaning of each of these dimensions of the economy there is a helpful correlation of social ethics, concerned with theories of justice, and Christian anthropology, or sociology, concerned with the nature of personal identity and society. This goes in a different direction from the writing of Ronald Preston and John Atherton, which is primarily concerned with the proper ordering of economic life. Preston's careful analysis of Christian social thought in the last two centuries, and indeed of earlier periods as well, has enabled him to present an unparalleled account of the modern economy. As a trained economist, as well as a theologian, Preston has presented a sustained description of the tasks which a Christian critique of the contemporary economy must accomplish. This rich combination of past theological ethics, contemporary economic thought with economic activity and

current Christian reflection on society has made Preston uniquely equipped to analyse and expound Christian social thought. John Atherton has built on the work of Preston (he was taught by Preston) in describing how the development of the contemporary global economy goes beyond some of Preston's careful, and cautious, acceptance of the market system. Neither theologian is primarily concerned with the meaning of work, consumption or the market: they take them as they are, and correlate the best secular analysis of them with the Christian tradition following the method of middle axioms. This allows their work to be inductive, arguing from contemporary experience and social realities, while arriving at a clear set of principles for a Christian social ethic in the economy. J. Philip Wogaman, an American Methodist, has followed a similar path in the United States. It is also the usual pattern of working of the Board for Social Responsibility of the Church of England, as well as other Protestant denominations in England, such as the Methodist and United Reformed Churches, and the (now defunct) British Council of Churches.

My own method combines elements of Meeks with those of Preston/Atherton. The historical analysis of why consumption matters so much in modern western society; the meaning of work; how human identity is fashioned in the global economy – all this serves to create a theological account of the human being as consumer, worker and participant in modern society. To this extent, I am sympathetic to Meeks, and those who have written like him, such as Volf or Biggar – all from the Protestant Reformed stable. Equally, I would want to hold together an account of social justice with a theology of society, finding the justification for a theological ethics in an account of why theologically things may be said to be the way they are. This leads into a social ethics which is more in dialogue with systematic theology than Preston is: I would be far more cautious in giving his criticisms of Trinitarian thought in relation to social ethics. However, the failure of Meeks appears to be that he refuses to accept the genuine dialogue of secular reality with theological thought. At several points, Atherton applies the term 'pre-modern' not

Cambridge University Press
052147048X - The Market Economy and Christian Ethics
Peter H. Sedgwick
Excerpt
[More information](#)

so much to Meeks' own thought, but to the theological ethics which he prefers. I find this criticism compelling. Atherton writes of

the perennial temptation for theologians to return to pre-modern understandings, and the confusion it generates over the relationship between economics and market economies. So when Meeks promotes the superiority of a household economy over contemporary market systems . . . then we are faced with failures to understand contexts and changes.¹

There are two further implications of this critique. One is that the nature of social ethics must always recognize the complexity and interwoven nature (indeed, the *oikonemia*) of contemporary economies. Forming ethical judgements must be a patient task, which cannot simply deduce principles from the Christian tradition. Here, the strength of the Preston/Atherton/Board for Social Responsibility tradition has been proved in many reports. Indeed, theologians like Duncan Forrester in Scotland show that this approach, while rejecting middle axioms, can also be correlated with the Reformed tradition, as several reports from the Church of Scotland argue very well. The end result is an approach which may not adopt detailed policy changes (although the *Unemployment* report of the British Churches did this in 1997), but does seek to produce concrete changes in economic behaviour. So this book will also wish to look for different strategies which could be adopted on work, consumption and the market.

The final difference from Meeks is that the theological style is far more inductive, where the nature of a Christian understanding of the human agent as worker or consumer emerges out of dialogue with secular, and contemporary, thought. Biblical material is certainly important, but there is no attempt to narrate a biblical '*meta-narrative*' over against secular thought. The reason for this is well put by Raymond Plant, who is an English political philosopher, Labour peer and an Anglican. He argued in the Gore lecture in Westminster Abbey (analysed in depth in the chapter on the market) that there were profound problems of social engagement with the evangelical, counter-cultural approach. There are also problems of revelation and