

One New Book for the Preacher

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WHERE FAITH AND ECONOMICS MEET: A CHRISTIAN CRITIQUE, by David M. Beckmann. Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1981. 154 pp. \$5.95 paperback.

One need not be a particularly astute observer of contemporary culture to recognize that economic problems are foremost among the concerns facing persons at every level of our society. Because the church is full, or sometimes half-full, of such persons, it seems fair to say that economic issues and questions deserve the attention of the church's ministry. Aside from the obvious pastoral role of supporting people through difficult times, surely one of the important tasks of ministry in any economic climate is to help persons in the church to sense the integral relationship between personal faith and economic choices. David Beckmann has contributed a helpful and useful volume to this interpretive task.

Beckmann is an economist with the World Bank in Washington, D.C. He brings to this book a background in economic inquiry shaped by education at Yale University and the London School of Economics and theological training from Christ Seminary in St. Louis. This brief volume is the product of his own struggle with the challenges, tensions, and ambiguities posed by his dual background and his ongoing efforts within the World Bank's urban projects department to shape sound fiscal policies that respond to the needs of the world's poor.

Where Faith and Economics Meet succeeds at answering the query proposed in its title for several reasons. First, unlike some prior volumes on the subject, this book takes both economic realities and issues of faith seriously, giving fair treatment to ethical questions and, at the same time, avoiding simplistic analyses of economic postures. Beckmann addresses many of the complexities of world economic development, of fluctuating national and world markets, but within a well-defined and substantial theological and biblical framework. Second, he is able from the outset to demonstrate the intricate, though sometimes subtle, relationships between personal economic choices and the global economic effects of such choices. Personal decisions about work, about spending, about voting, Beckmann argues, *do* affect people beyond our communities; and he offers case examples to substantiate his claim. Perhaps more importantly, Beckmann is able to demonstrate the inherent fallacy of compartmentalizing life, of managing one's economic affairs as if religious values were something entirely separate and unrelated. Third, at a practical level the book succeeds because Beckmann is appropriately appreciative and critical of all economic systems: appreciative of the contributions each has made to economic order and stability, yet critical of their distortions of basic biblical ideals. Finally, the volume succeeds because it offers clear and concise informa-

tion and because it offers sensible proposals and responsible strategies for addressing economic ills.

Beckmann devotes the core of his book to the development of his thesis that Christian faith can and should be the motivation for what he calls an economics of “holy materialism.” The choice of terminology is perhaps somewhat misleading, in that it invites expectations of a Christian *apologia* for unfettered consumption; in fact, what Beckmann offers is a biblical perspective of what is right about biblical materialism in order to understand what is wrong with many of the idolatrous materialistic tendencies in today’s economic culture. In particular, he identifies and examines six Enlightenment ideals which, he suggests, are representatives of modern economic culture—this-worldliness, progress, reason, liberty, equality and fraternity—and the ways these values have served to foster economic growth. He acknowledges and traces the biblical roots of each of these values, but he also describes and critiques the historical distortion of the ideals which has led to the often valueless, acquisitive consumerism at the heart of modern Western economic culture. What is wrong with that culture, argues Beckmann, is that it has lost the *moral* pattern of the biblical economy and with it the prophetic conviction that history “swings on a moral hinge.”

Over against such conditions Beckmann urges his readers toward a “holy materialism,” toward taking the same Enlightenment ideals and redefining them for the present time within their biblical context. He issues a call to an economics of trust and sharing rooted in the core of Christian experience, which is to say, in divine grace. It is the human relationship with God, established on the basis of grace, he argues, which gives these economic values, in their tempered and moderate Christian forms, legitimacy and power. He warns that the task of reshaping these values will be a difficult task, at least partially because of the tension one always encounters between economic reality and the grace of God. Beckmann reminds his readers that the economy is not “soft and gracious,” but he demonstrates clearly and convincingly the need for grace in economic decisions. He offers several economic policy recommendations based on such grace-considerations, and he defines model characteristics of individuals and congregations committed to bringing grace to economic choices.

There is much in this book which makes it valuable to the preacher. There are quotable passages and helpful illustrations scattered throughout its pages. The Christian critique of the six Enlightenment ideals on which modern economic culture is founded suggests a helpful sermon series. Beckmann identifies obvious areas of conflict that deserve attention from the pulpit: the tension between God’s grace and economic reality, perhaps, or the split between “holy” this-worldliness and idolatrous materialism. But more important than any specific ideas it may generate is the stimulus this book provides for integrating one’s thought about faith and economics, and the useful correction it offers to simplistic analyses of economic issues and/or issues of faith.