

ETHICS AND ECONOMICS

Money as God? The Monetization of the Market and Its Impact on Religion, Politics, Law, and Ethics
Jürgen von Hagen and Michael Welker (Editors)
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014 (455 pages)

This impressive anthology is a wide-ranging study with a fair amount of depth in individual chapters. Regrettably, its contributors include only two economists. The remaining authors comprise two professors of law, three historians (two of whom are sinologists), a sociologist, and eleven theologians or professors of religion, scripture, or ethics. The periods covered include the ancient, biblical, and patristic worlds as well as the Middle Ages and the Reformation, and there is some discussion of modern times.

A strength of the book is its inclusion of a Chinese perspective. Granted, it retains an overall Western bias, with only three of the eighteen chapters dealing with China and only one actually written by Chinese co-authors (embarrassingly, in the list of contributors, alphabetized by their given names rather than by their surnames). Still, the chapters on China present interesting parallels to Western culture. They deal with the symbolic importance of money—even the centrality of such symbolism—in Chinese history and present-day culture with its continuing use of “spirit money” and its covenants and contracts that extend to the supernatural. This meshes surprisingly well with the treatment of the Western symbology of the Middle Ages and the Reformation in other chapters as well as with some of the biblical exegesis centered on Wisdom literature. We are left with the fascinating impression that people tend to use whatever is culturally available to them to construct metaphors for God. Economic development and the changing understandings of money that come with it have colored the understanding of God for Westerners just as they have for China.

The economists lay down a brief foundation in the introduction and the two opening chapters. A greater contribution by them, or by other economists, would have been welcome, as the remainder of the anthology deals mostly with the symbolic value of money, and this skews the book toward conclusions not supported by economics. For example, a recurring theme is the idea of a gift economy, realized to some extent in Ancient Greece and China, whereby money is often something other than a medium of exchange, and material transactions are reserved for impersonal dealings. This is contrasted with the situation in societies centered on bartering, credit, or trade using currency. What is wanting is an explanation, preferably by a scholar with a background in economics, of how this relates to the concept of money as a store of value. The sociologist or theologian might then expand on this by exploring how societies may change their emphasis from gifts to credit or exchange and thereby promote new understandings of God.

Perhaps somewhat misleadingly, this collaborative endeavor is not consistently focused on answering the question posed by its title. It strays from the narrower subject that this title suggests, that of substituting God with money or using money as a symbol for the Divine. In one case, the chapter that deals with liberation theology and competing concepts of justice (e.g., Rawls versus Nozick) has almost nothing directly to do with the role of money in religion and winds up simply endorsing a view on the preferential option for the poor that has already been fully articulated by others and probably does not belong in an anthology of this kind.

Perhaps the most insightful treatment of the historical relationship between God and money is in chapter 11 by Berndt Hamm. As much of Hamm's work has not been translated into English, it will be valuable for English-language readers to find a sketch here of his argument about how the Church deftly moved from its "pact with the feudal social order" to embrace, in a symbiotic way, "the early capitalistic economic way of the merchants and bankers." He describes how "mercantile ideas" such as the maximization of profit led to a distrust of profiteering that exacerbated anti-Semitism. On the positive side, the sanctification of money led to more scruples regarding its use and also to great social benefits, including the establishment of hospitals and universities. On the negative side, the Church was arguably responsible for much economic waste.

Another theme that recurs in several chapters is the limits of monetization and the questions concerning what can and should be bought and sold and how faith informs the answers to such questions. For example, chapter 18 considers what sorts of things should be tradable and negotiable in a cursory discussion of noncommodity markets such as "the marketplace of ideas." This complements to some degree the chapter written from a sociological perspective on the experience of Catholic entrepreneurs in China, whose value (due to its small sample size) is largely anecdotal. Here we start to get specific about what sort of nonmonetizable values make sense in business. Still, these questions deserve fuller exploration, and those who ask them will find no explicit answers here.

It is odd, in a work informed by economists, that the topics of inflation and the role of central banks are barely touched on. This is a serious shortcoming, given the moral implications of monetary policy in our own times. Students of religion and scripture,

sociologists, ethicists, and even historians rarely have an appreciation of what inflation is and why it should be seen as a moral issue and therefore a faith issue. There are the predictable disparaging references to commodification and consumerism in chapter 18, but the important question of state control of the monetary system—and how people of faith might critically or constructively view this convention—is avoided or neglected.

Perhaps the most disappointing failing of this scholarly collaboration is its timing. Because it is based on its contributors' international dialogue about standardized monetization that began many years ago and apparently took some years to produce and come to publication, and because it deals mostly with history, little with the present, and hardly at all with the future, it makes no mention of the advent of privately issued forms of money such as bitcoin, a development that might warrant a whole volume to explore its ethical and theological implications.

The opportunity is also missed to address the statements of religious leaders, especially Pope Francis, in recent years regarding how the economy and particularly our view of money can be understood as an aid to prosperity and a help for the poor rather than as a force presiding over them and exacerbating social inequality. The closest the book comes is to describe, much too briefly, the advantages of monetary transactions over barter and paper money over commodity money, and to declare that money is a partial solution to the instability of human relationships because it enables trust to be transferred from the creditor to the issuer of the money, which is presumably more trustworthy. Though it acknowledges that the demonization of money is no solution to materialistic trends, it never seriously tackles the question of how to define true wealth and legitimate wealth creation.

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Money and Justice: A Critique of Modern Money and Banking Systems from the Perspective of Aristotelian and Scholastic Thoughts

Leszek Niewdana

London, UK: Routledge, 2015 (219 pages)

Money and Justice is an excellent exposition of the key flaws in the modern money and banking system and is an important contribution to the literature on how that system might be optimized to serve the common good. Niewdana's analysis reveals an impressively broad scope of research, providing citations to Austrian economists (Rothbard, Mises, Menger, Skousen), Catholic thinkers (Aquinas, Dempsey, Noonan, McCall, and various official Church teachings), historical figures (Aristotle, Locke, Calvin), liberal Nobel Prize winners (Krugman, Stiglitz), behavioral economists (Kahneman and Tversky), anthropologists (Graeber), and extensive citations to avant-garde out-of-the-academy thinkers such as Thomas Greco (*The End of Money*) and Stephen Zarlenga (*The Lost Science of Money*) among many others.