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The Market Economy and Christian Ethics

Peter H. Sedgwick

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One might argue that it is a heartless, even a cruel editor who assigns an economist to review a book written by a first-rate theologian. There is, however, considerable professional tradition going back as far as Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), father of utility theory and predecessor of Adam Smith in the Glasgow Chair of Moral Philosophy. Too, there is certainly no better place for such an effort than *Markets and Morality*. So, brush the dust off the dictionary and begin an epistemological journey into the world of hermeneutics and isomorphisms, recognizing that our focus is immanentistic and that we are eschatologically secure.

Author Peter Sedgwick is concerned about the impact of four relationships—paid employment, consumption, the market, and globalization—on personal identity and distributive and commutative justice. In economies that have shifted dramatically from manufacturing to services, from local to global, from socialist to market-driven, has personal identity become more problematic? Sedgwick begins his book with a review of the work of Jürgen Habermas and his theological critics. Consumption, paid employment, and trading in the global market are the foci, respectively, of the next three chapters. A fifth chapter reviews the response of the Churches to these economic forces and a short chapter of reflections concludes the book.

From a Christian perspective, there is little to recommend Habermas. He sees capitalism and accompanying rationalization as stripping away the power of religious ideas and welcomes the shift away from a culture integrated by religious beliefs. In an

almost Nietzschean fashion, Habermas sees the ideal society as populated by persons with strong identities, strongly motivated, finding commonality at best in something like the Kantian categorical imperative. Socialization is increasingly a function of money and power. Justice is defined as universally valid procedural criteria separate from the values found in Christian revelation. He sees no possibility of a personal encounter that is transformative. Not surprisingly, Habermas finds a society where indifference and cynicism are expanding and previously accepted moral standards are disintegrating. The worthiness of a political or economic order is unimportant as long as the mass of people are financially rewarded and see no other alternative. Sedgwick contrasts this to Bonhöffer, in whose view the Incarnation has made living in communion for others the mandate that brings unity to the social and economic spheres. The individual is ontologically prior to society and the civil State exists as a social contract.

Next, Sedgwick turns to consumption. Is consumption hedonistic or utilitarian? What role does consumption play in establishing individual identity? Sedgwick reviews the hypotheses of Veblen and Galbraith and finds them wanting. Jean Baudrillard's views are considered, including his key claim that identity in the post-modern world is not given by ethnicity, class, gender, or social status, but by consumption. Sedgwick continues with a long review of M. Douglas Meeks's *God the Economist*. Meeks's desultory opinion of the market economy leads to a neo-Marxist position on economic policy. Sedgwick contrasts this with the non-Marxist school of left-wing Keynesians and notes Meeks's Veblenian position that consumption is solely an endless search for meaning in a meaningless world. Sedgwick finds affinity with the argument of Oppenheimer that in a world where consumerism determines personal identity, there is no way in which one can be fully satisfied. This is a significant departure from the function of the Atonement as the answer to meaninglessness and worthlessness. Sedgwick calls for Christians to practice ethical consumerism on a personal (adopting a simpler lifestyle), national (supporting higher prices on goods that damage the environment), and global scale (boycotts of companies involved with oppressive governments). He also calls upon the Christian Church to provide an alternative community in which personal identity can be founded upon love rather than upon consumption.

An examination of the work ethic begins appropriately with a description of Weber's Protestant work ethic (PWE) and statements of its critics. Robert Reich's new classification of occupations is used to argue that the relevance of the PWE varies by type of work. For those who problem-identify, problem-solve, and broker, work is actually enjoyable and remuneration is rising in real terms, while work is less fulfilling and compensation is falling for other occupational groups. A decline in religious faith has facilitated a decline in the PWE, especially for those for whom work is hard to find, alienating, poorly rewarded, and insecure. Sedgwick's theological evaluation of the PWE begins with Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther and ends with a variety of current scholars (for example, Atherton, Brunner, Halsey). The theological focus today,

contends Sedgwick, should be shifted to injustice at work and the struggle to reconcile stewardship and efficiency.

The chapter on globalization asserts that for the first time in history "the vast majority of the world's population is bound together in a global capitalist system." Since geography can influence policy and policy can influence geography, we live in interesting times. The variations in geographical conditions among nations and regions stand in stark contrast to the broadly similar economic and social policies foisted on developing countries as a result of international debt. Barriers to trade and immigration between developing and industrialized nations run contrary to distributive justice. Sedgwick's solution is not more competition, as Adam Smith would recommend, but global regulation of and cooperation with transnational corporations.

The chapter on the response of the churches concerns itself primarily with Pope John Paul II's encyclical of 1991, *Centesimus Annus*, and the American Roman Catholic bishops' 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*. The reactions of various scholars (for example, Hauerwas, Simon and Novak) are noted and major points discussed. My favorite extract is John Paul II's statement that "Economics is not just a matter of which economic systems can produce the most units … but what kind of people we become through these economic systems."

Sedgwick concludes his book with the claim that the structural shift to service industries and the rise of global competition comprise a revolution that rivals the collapse of the command economies of Eastern Europe. We must accept as a reality that consumerism and paid employment are a source of identity for many people and supplement this with a Christian identity that provides security in a fragmented global economy. Christians "need to remain part of the debate on reforming and humanizing that world, and not abandoning it for a rhetoric of Christian identity over against that world."

In closing, I will mention four minor criticisms of the book. First, there are obvious crimes of omission such as overlooking the work of such scholars as Donald Hay (*Economics Today: A Christian Critique*, 1991) and Leland Ryken (*Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work and Leisure*, 1995), and not including the Oxford Declaration in the response of the churches. Second, relative to the other chapters, the chapter on globalization is weak and lacks clear structure. Third, for a book on Christian ethics there is limited scriptural exegesis. Finally, if given the choice, I would want to hear less about the perspectives of other scholars and more about Sedgwick's thoughts on the important issues covered. Overall, the book is a detailed compendium, strong on theology and light on economics, with an upbeat ending for friends of competitive markets.

—John E. Stapleford
Campolo School for Social Change,
Eastern University, Philadelphia