

Religions, Economy and Social Justice: A Critical Juncture

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The famous book of Max Weber on *the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* perhaps needs additional chapters. The central thesis of Weber was not that religion is the determinant causal factor of economic development, but rather that there exists, between certain religious forms and the capitalist lifestyle a relationship of “elective affinity”.

On that ground Michael Novak, a catholic thinker, wrote about the conditional compatibility between the *Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Of all the questions raised by Novak, the possibility of economic competition in accordance with religious beliefs seems to be the most intriguing. For the Catholic thinker, a noncompetitive world is a world reconciled with the status quo. To compete - goes on Novak - is not a vice; on the contrary, it is “the form of every virtue and an indispensable element in natural and spiritual growth”. Some Christians would object to this thesis, recalling for instance the teaching of universal love and selflessness of St. Francis

Novak underlined, referring to the relation between Catholicism and economy, a solid blend of “democratic polity, an economy based on markets and incentives, and a moral-cultural system which is pluralistic and, in the largest sense, liberal”.

One might conclude that “western modernity is not characterized by a desacralization or disenchantment of the world, but instead by the affirmation of a new religion, i.e., by the transformation of the Christian spirit into the ‘spirit’ of capitalism.”

Religion and the problem of the market: according to the “economic approach” to religious freedom, freedom of religion can be understood as a “free market of religious beliefs”. This circumstance would make pertinent, for the interpretation of religious case, applying the understanding of the working of free markets and the effect of government intervention.

Other studies suggest that “it is in a nation’s long-run economic interest to expand not only economic freedom but also religious freedom”; however, “we must not forget that ultimately those rights should not rest solely upon economic or utilitarian logic.”

However, the problem lies exactly at this juncture between freedom of religion and economic freedom.

Can we conceive of such arrangement without endorsing the basic features of political and economic liberalism? This is a fundamental question, since in non-Western cultures the religious freedom claim is often perceived in close association with the Western and Euro-Atlantic political culture and in particular with systematic individualism. In addition, we must realize that the ideas of an “open society” (Popper) and of a “polyarchy” (Dahl) are historically and philosophically linked to the structure of a liberal-democracy, what John Rawls would include in the “basic structure of a society” understood as a set of arrangements related to laws, political institutions, economic markets, public associations, and the family.

As the case of Pope Francis discourse shows, the triangle between religion, economy and social justice is constantly on the brink of falling apart.

For instance, the idea of the “periphery”—certainly not entirely new, in the substance if not in the terminology in the Catholic social thought—could be, in turn, a new way of outlining an alternative worldview consisting in rethinking the present state of affairs of the world starting from the periphery rather than from the “headquarters” of global politics.

There is a parte of the religious messages that can be read in terms of “resistance” of “critical actors” to the idea of globalization embedded in the current world’s political and economic structure.

By resistance I mean a different concept, more related to the infrastructure of the contemporary international realm. In practical terms, religions tend today to provide the rationale for a resistance to the standard version of globalization. Such an attitude might take the feature of a protest or even open rebellion to the political power and to the hegemonic discourse of liberal institutions.

Contrary to the loyalist tradition of the past, especially in the area of Christianity, religions are interpreting their role in term of critical

agencies towards the “market failures”, the growing global inequality and the loss of ethical perspective in individual and social life. However, this is not a new function for religions and for any comprehensive vision of the world or any holistic conception of mankind. In fact, one may say that any version of the political philosophy of cosmopolitanism is, in its essence, a way to re-assess the “partition” of the world community from an integrative ideal “state of nature”.

However, one should resist the temptation to reductively read Pope Francis approach as some sort of revised version of the “liberation theology” made fully compatible with the Catholic *doxa* and adapted to the global era. The idea of periphery represents an updated revised version of the “preferential option for the poor”; it implied not only “to hear the cry of the poor”, but, at the same time, challenging the “trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting. To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own” (EG paragraph 54).

Religions today tend in several cases to re-conceptualize the role of economic activities in function of their impact on social justice.

It is worth recalling the two fundamental principles of social justice formulated by John Rawls:

First Principle: Each person has the same inalienable claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all;

Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions:

- a They are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of *fair equality of opportunity*;

- b They are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the *difference principle*). (JF, 42-43)

It seems to me that religions, in many circumstances, are willing to revert the order of the two element of the second principle of justice by giving priority to the *difference principle* (any inequality should be justified only if it is for the advantage of the poorest) upon the *opportunity principle* (in term of equal condition of access to offices and positions for all).

My point is that, whereas some form of minimalist liberal arrangement is perhaps necessary for articulating a religious freedom that doesn't equate only to religious multiplicity, religious freedom - not only at national but also at global level - may prove to be sometimes at odds with economic liberalism in its standard version.

Beyond the idea of *political theology*, encompassing the understanding of the political order in an integrative way or, on the contrary, in an exclusivist and manner, there is a need to look deeper into the *economic theology*, dealing with odd couples, such as market *and* virtue, growth *and* salvation, efficiency *and* mercy.

The key factor is not some version of capitalism more or less compassionate, but rather the interplay between individual freedom, economy, and community.

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