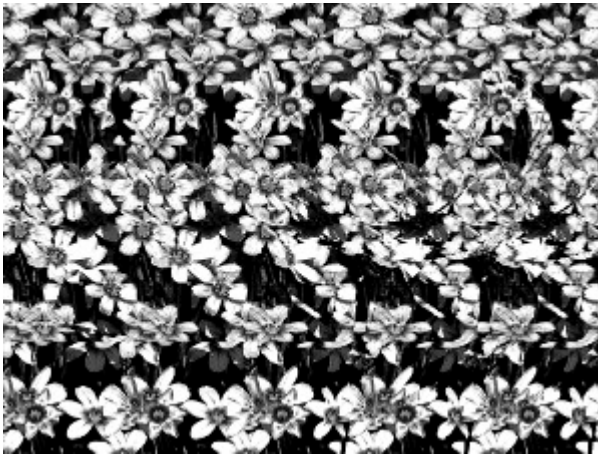


Introduction: Well Water Deep Down



It's easier to see what we are already expecting.

*They have an undying
tremor and draw,
like well water far down.¹*

In the poem “Out of This World,” the Irish poet Seamus Heaney describes a man who has lost his faith as a Christian but whose heart still resonates when he recalls the words *host* and *thanksgiving* and *communion bread*. Even after years of absence from any church, he finds that these “have an undying tremor and draw, like well water far down.”

Few citizens of the industrialized world think much about well water, as most get their water from a large water-distribution system. Even if the system originally drew that water from a well, the liquid has typically been filtered,

treated with chlorine to kill bacteria and fluoride to improve health, and has flowed through miles of pipes to get to the end user. The tap at the kitchen sink has a sort of technological predictability about it, and that drink of water on a hot day occurs at a great psychic distance from any well.

But those of us who depend on the well in the yard for that gulp of refreshment on a steamy July afternoon think about wells more frequently—and differently. The well is not only a necessity of life, but depending on the geology of the area it often bears a significant fragility, as it can fail to produce that life-giving liquid when it's overused or if the drought lasts long enough. There's an increased connection to that water lying far below ground, partly because it is so far down there—inaccessible to eye and ear but compelling, more powerful in life for its importance and the frailty of our access to it.

This seems to be the sense Heaney appeals to when he says the man recalls former religious beliefs that still have a hold on him—the way well water deep down has a hold on those who are conscious of their dependence on it every day.

This book aims to answer an important question: What does the history of Christian views of economic life mean for our economic life in the twenty-first century? Over its pages we will review a large number of texts in that history, from the Bible to the writings of the early church, the Middle Ages, the Protestant Reformation, and much that has been said about all this in the last century.

Very few Christians today know about most of these texts, which are like well water deep down. They lie in wait to provide refreshment, guidance, and even relief to believers today caught up in an economic system—and often in a job—that they think of as a kind of inevitable necessity, an arid fact of life, the unquestioned way the world works. Yet by investing the proper time and attention, we can experience these ancient texts in their persuasive insight, their call to meaning, their “tremor and draw”—and they can help us reflect critically on much that we may have unconsciously assumed about our economic life in the twenty-first century.

DISPARATE VOICES IN CHRISTIAN ECONOMIC ETHICS

Our engagement with ancient Christian texts on economic life must be part of the conversation about the economy today. Yet as soon as we turn to this contemporary task, we find that debates about economic life within the Christian churches in our era exhibit a range of opinions almost as wide as within secular society itself. This is something of a surprise, since it would seem that the moral doctrines of Christianity ought to operate as limits on the range

of views that can actually be warranted by the Christian tradition. However, it is a fact of life that both Christian socialists and Christian libertarians believe their views are supported by Christian faith. Thus it will be helpful to start with a close view of how one representative of each approaches the issues. As we will see, each includes a view of the person and community, but the character and relationship of these two differ significantly.

A CHRISTIAN SOCIALIST CRITIQUE

Consider the views of Franz Hinkelammert, a Central American economist who criticizes capitalist business culture for holding to a kind of “metaphysics” or set of unproved assumptions. The quotations in this section are taken from his essay, “The Economic Roots of Idolatry: Entrepreneurial Metaphysics.”²

Entrepreneurial metaphysics

At first glance, it must surely be surprising that mention is made of entrepreneurial metaphysics. Although there is such a metaphysics, and it has spread to all parts of our bourgeois world, it is very seldom perceived for what it is. It often appears as nothing more than a candid description of reality, or it takes on the appearances of a set of widely accepted slogans. . . . Capitalist entrepreneurs are devotees of this metaphysics, treating it as the framework of their religion. . . . Thus, all the values, guidelines, and conditions of entrepreneurial behavior are converted into “laws of nature” that cannot be broken. Entrepreneurial metaphysics turns the “behavioral logic” of the market into a law of nature. . . . Except from the view of entrepreneurial metaphysics itself, it is quite clear that such metaphysics is idolatry, in the very sense in which this term is used in the biblical tradition.

Hinkelammert urges his readers to step back and think about the belief system underlying capitalism as a sort of metaphysics that has not been proven but is such a basic part of public consciousness, particularly business consciousness, that it goes without challenge in the normal course of life. His point, of course, is that this set of beliefs is deeply wrong and, employing biblical language, makes an idol—a false god—out of the market.

The religion of economics

Entrepreneurs do not view themselves as the prime movers. From their standpoint, the business firm is the prime mover; they are nothing but the leading employee of the business firm. . . . The business firm is converted

into an entity with a personality of its own, which operates independently from the concrete lives of concrete persons. . . . Entrepreneurs (great captains; nay, generals) sense the dynamism of commodities, and know how to accept their challenge. As great captains, they steer their ships that are driven by a far greater force than they—namely, the market, the great object of devotion. Entrepreneurs obey this great force, and it is this obedience that makes them *great* entrepreneurs. Hence, the conviction of entrepreneurs that they are ideally humble and truly exemplary persons. The maximizing of profits appears to them as an act in the public service they render, and it gives them compensation commensurate with their devotion. Even if they are not churchgoers, entrepreneurs are deeply religious persons, who preach to the entire world the good news of subjugation to the anonymous machinery of the markets, wherein a Supreme Being issues them challenges.

Hinkelammert understands business people, entrepreneurs, as not only sharing in the metaphysical illusions mentioned above, but seeing themselves as great leaders because they can harness the force of the market. They are looked up to by many as the most influential figures in a commercial society and yet they don't see themselves as powerful, since most decisions they make are clearly indicated, with market forces not leaving them much room for discretion.

Freedom and death

In entrepreneurial metaphysics, this freedom of commodities is basic and, in the final analysis, the only freedom. Human rights, for example, are purely incidental. With commodities free, business firms are free; therefore, entrepreneurs are free, and the entire society is free. . . . When food is scarce, according to the law, prices should increase. This means that some will be left without food, and consequently will die. According to entrepreneurial metaphysics, they die as a result of a dictate of nature. If, on the contrary, prices and distribution of food are controlled, everyone would survive. But, according to entrepreneurial metaphysics, that would be an act against nature: the law of nature calls for increased prices. Price control is an unnatural, depraved act, breaking the social contract, and, in the end, an act against humankind. Freedom is lost, and what is life worth without freedom?

In this entrepreneurial metaphysics, the only true freedom is that of the market, with other human values and human rights being less important, or actually

defined in terms of market freedom. Thus the law of supply and demand in the market is understood as “natural,” and any attempt to alter its outcomes is seen as misguided human interference in natural processes. Thus when the prices of necessities rise, the poor go without. There is no one really to blame, since this is a “natural” result.

Wealth and justice

In this nature, it is a law that business firms accrue profits, although human beings have no right to live. To live or not is a matter of “values,” not natural laws. The entrepreneurial metaphysician views the business firm as a Creator of employment, and overlooks the fact that employment is the requisite for the creation of wealth on the part of the business firm. It is claimed, on the contrary, that investment creates wealth and employment. Therefore, it is presented as a path to social justice, the only kind of social justice that the entrepreneurial metaphysician understands: the kind that does not break the law of profitability.

Hinkelammert thus understands the outcomes of the capitalist market as ideologically supported by this erroneous metaphysics broadly held in commercial society. That misunderstanding goes so far as to think that the wealthy create wealth by their investment and completely overlooks the role of ordinary workers in that process. Thus in a long history of socialist critique of capitalism, Hinkelammert appeals to his readers to understand the misplaced confidence in markets and in the profit-seeking of firms, and instead recommends, out of an appeal to the fundamental Christian concern for the neighbor, that believers should work to transform the economy to a more just (and socialist) economic system.

A CHRISTIAN LIBERTARIAN VIEW

Consider now the views of George Gilder, an American philosopher who came to prominence in the public sphere with his broad endorsement of capitalism as the only reasonable economic system for the modern world. The text below comes from an interview he gave in which he addresses his convictions about the relation of capitalism and Christianity.³

The primacy of faith

Like every other human activity, capitalism can succeed to the extent that it accords with the deeper principles that inspire religion. God comes first,

obviously. Capitalism comes second. But when churches abandon God through various secular fads and enthusiasms, they are betraying God. When they maintain there's something inherently antagonistic between Christianity and capitalism, they're being obtuse. In other words, the church is perfectly capable of betraying God, and when it does, it betrays its deepest purpose in the world. . . . Capitalism is dependent on the church for the moral values that redeem it, so clearly the church has to stand in judgment. But it should not imagine that there is some other social system that partakes of Christianity in a better way than capitalism itself.

Some secular scholars have endorsed capitalism in complete separation from any religious belief, but not George Gilder. He urges his readers to understand the close relationship that Christianity and capitalism have and argues that only the misguided Christian will see socialism as a better fit for Christian belief than capitalism.

Helping the poor

The World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches routinely accept a lot of socialist propositions and try to infuse them with a kind of holy light they don't deserve—helping the poor, for example. This is a practical problem, not something that can be done through good intentions alone. But the liberal policies some churches have endorsed have hurt the poor in America. . . . The fundamental and paramount role of the church is to transmit moral, inspirational teachings to the poor. There is nothing more important that can be done for the poor. When the church goes to the poor, it tells them that the source of their difficulties lies in some conspiracy by others and in the conditions of the society rather than in their own relationship to God.

Just as Hinkelammert criticizes those who put their faith in capitalism, so Gilder criticizes those Christians who endorse policies associated with socialism. His fundamental claim is not simply religious but also empirical: that the policies endorsed by the churches have actually hurt the poor by offering them a security that leads to their dependence on the welfare system. Only when all able-bodied workers are responsible for providing for themselves and their families will the poor pull out of such dependency and into a life of freedom and independence.

Moral capital

Yet in every material way, the American poor today are better off than most in the history of the human race. Their fundamental problem is spiritual. For the church to continue its preoccupation with material problems while denying the centrality of the spiritual estrangement is to betray the poor. The middle class and wealthy, although they are often not more virtuous, depend on the accumulated moral capital of their culture and society to live productive lives. This moral capital has been destroyed in many poor communities.

Quite basic in Gilder's argument is what has come to be called the "culture of poverty" argument broadly held among conservative Americans: that the fundamental problem of the poor is not the lack of money but the lack of the right attitudes, habits, skills, and cultural support that lead them to an independent life.⁴

Gilder does not describe the middle class and wealthy as more virtuous people than the poor; rather, that they have accumulated "moral capital" to rely on. What he has in mind here are the everyday habits of life that successful people exhibit. These include the ability to get up when the alarm clock sounds every morning, to follow through on workplace commitments, to resolve interpersonal conflicts without violence, and a host of others. Gilder's claim is that these attitudes and skills are missing among the poor and that no government program will ever put them there again. Only parents and communities can provide such training for children, and only the necessity of coping with life without reliance on government will press the adult poor to develop the moral capital they and their children need.

Welfare programs

I reject the idea that it's good for the poor to destroy their motivation, to destroy their families, and to destroy their moral integrity. These social programs that are allegedly charitable are in fact profoundly destructive. . . . A welfare system is indispensable to capitalism, because capitalism is based on freedom, on voluntary response to the needs of others. A society that's based on forcing people to work under the pain of starvation is just as coercive as one that forces them to work at the point of a gun. Welfare is indispensable to capitalism, and capitalist societies generate welfare systems. However, when the benefits of the welfare state far exceed the needs of subsistence or the possible earnings of an employee at an entry-level job, then it becomes destructive. . . . Where a social insurance system,

or welfare, offers benefits far more valuable than work, the welfare state causes poverty. That's what we're doing now: we're causing poverty by paying for it.

Gilder's fundamental critique of the welfare system is that it offers the poor benefits that are more attractive than those of an entry-level job, thus turning their incentives upside down. The welfare system, he argues, leads a rational poor person to stay on welfare rather than look for a job. Thus while he insists there must be a welfare system to prevent the basic violation of freedom, he wants that support to be extremely low so that it will not be a tempting refuge for the poor. The welfare reform of the mid-1990s imposed a five-year lifetime limit on federally funded cash assistance, and average monthly benefits that are less than 25 percent of what a minimum-wage job pays, but conservatives such as Gilder remain concerned about the problem of dependency. Employing the metaphor from acrobatics, we might say that Gilder wants no more than a loose social safety net—it should be tight enough to prevent a person from dying when they fall off the high wire but loose enough that when they fall, they will hit the floor when the net stretches. Walking away bruised is the goal—to create an incentive not to fall off again.

Dependence on God

It's interesting that almost anybody who does achieve something really stunning and amazing, whether he is a boxer or a scientist, always claims that in some sense he wasn't the one who did it. In some way there was external help. If he is explicitly religious, he refers to God. If he's not, he refers to some mystical transcendence that made possible his achievement. . . . Intellectual creativity—any breakthrough of human achievement—is a willingness to give up yourself to others and to God. It's that essential principle that infuses Christian teaching and that also pervades all human life. Most psychological and sociological analyses say you should be much more self-conscious and rational and introspective and that through these means you can achieve a kind of autonomous mental health. But mental health comes from giving yourself up to others and to God, having faith in others and in the divine truth.

Fundamental to the conservative understanding of economic growth is the role of intellectual creativity. In his perspective as a Christian, Gilder cites the awareness that so many successful individuals have reported that they received help from outside themselves; religious people understand this to come from

God. Thus like Hinkelammert, Gilder differs from those individualists who claim that economic success is their own doing. But unlike Hinkelammert, who points to the ordinary workers who make the entrepreneur wealthy, Gilder points to a spiritual relationship with God as the underlying outside assistance that successful inventors and entrepreneurs rely on.

WHAT SHOULD WE HOPE FOR?

The views of Franz Hinkelammert and George Gilder are so divergent that it might seem impossible for them to agree on any way forward, and perhaps even impossible for them to agree on what success for the poor would look like.

The problems facing the poor of the world are overwhelming. Approximately one and one-half billion people on the planet live in dire poverty, defined as living on less than \$1.25 a day. This is an immense problem with no quick solutions. Nonetheless, in recent decades certain regions of the world have experienced success in this fight against poverty. Thirty years ago, China had more than one-third of the world's poor people, but by the year 2005 that share had dropped to 15 percent. There are other areas, however, where poverty has gotten much worse, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where during that same time period, the number of people in dire poverty rose from about 300 million to nearly 400 million.⁵

Much more could be said in detail about the extent and characteristics of poverty and any potential reduction in poverty around the world, yet it is helpful to consider not just the statistics but the lives of individual people who make the transition from abject poverty and hopelessness to an important degree of self-sufficiency.

A very helpful collection of reports of hopeful economic change in the lives of the poor is provided by Jeffrey Korgen in *Solidarity Will Transform the World: Stories of Hope from Catholic Relief Services*.⁶ In one of those case studies, Korgen describes the situation of Sharmila Marandi, who lives with her husband, Premprakash, and their daughter, Anita, in a small rural village outside of Kolkata (Calcutta), India.

Sharmila and her husband used to try to support their family by producing homemade alcohol to supplement a dollar-a-day income. The alcohol did provide some extra cash for food and supplies, but had two significant problems. The first was that it often was used by individuals who were addicted to it and thus contributed to social problems in the region. The second was that Sharmila and her husband both drank too much of their own product and often argued, with Premprakash frequently beating her.

Help for this family, and for many others, came in the form of a social development program sponsored by the Roman Catholic diocese of Dumka, with expert assistance from the U.S. organization, Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

Sharmila first came in contact with a CRS self-help group in her village. She noticed that the women in the group were able to save a little bit each week from their businesses, establish credit with a micro-lending agency, and borrow small amounts of money (typically loans ranging from \$5 to \$30) to purchase livestock and seeds.⁷ Sharmila was impressed with this and when the opportunity came to join a second self-help group in the region, she and nineteen other women attended the workshops on social development to learn about group process, recordkeeping, and basic literacy.

Sharmila reported that it was hard to save money at first, but the women from the original group helped, suggesting that she take a measure of rice from each day's allotted food and set it apart in a special bag to be sold for cash at the market when the bag was full. Joining with other members of her group, she cultivated various vegetables in the village garden and was able to profit from the group's savings.

The most important development came when the women decided there was a need in the village for good-quality bricks. They sought technical assistance as well as a loan from a local bank to purchase and construct a brick kiln. Because the bank saw the record of savings of this group of women—they had saved about 5000 rupees, about \$100—it was willing to make the loan of 25,000 rupees. The group members purchased a kiln and made thousands of bricks, selling them on the market at a profit, which allowed them to pay back the loan quickly and divide up a portion of the profits to each of the member families.

The effects of this development project in this Indian village extend far beyond an improvement in the family's economic well-being. Sharmila and Premprakash no longer argue in drunkenness, and her own economic success has greatly increased his respect for her. And the life prospects for their daughter, Anita, are now considerably improved.

MAKING SENSE OF THE DIFFERENCES

Let us now return to our two commentators, Hinkelammert and Gilder, and ask what each would think of this success story. Here we find reason for some optimism in resolving at least some of the differences between the left and right on the political spectrum. Because Sharmila's group is operating in the market economy, selling their bricks and vegetables, George Gilder will be happy

that they have come to self-sufficiency. He might be surprised that a church organization was responsible for getting poor people involved productively in the market, but he would praise the creation of “moral capital” within Sharmila’s group and the increase in virtuous activity in her family.

At the same time, because the group has achieved this success through a kind of economic cooperative employing interdependence and common goal setting, Franz Hinkelammert will be appreciative of what is possible without dependence on large corporations and a greedy business class. He would likely be worried about the long-term prospects of Sharmila’s brick-making enterprise in a capitalist business system, but he would celebrate what poor people can accomplish when they work together.

Sharmila’s group is one of 50,000 women’s self-help groups supported by CRS in India.⁸ In a nation of more than one billion people, this is still a small number, but it represents a remarkable step in the right direction. Commentators on both the left and the right do indeed share a vision for what is best for the poor of the world: that ordinary people have the skills and opportunity to support themselves and their families through their daily work.

There is a realistic hope for assisting people to move out of dire poverty into a self-respecting capacity to support themselves. But micro-financing is no panacea.⁹ While it can reduce dire poverty, it will not produce a basic prosperity for many. And it does not address the systemic barriers that keep so many in poverty, whether government bureaucracy and corruption, or corporate power and greed. Most of the economic decisions to be made in the world, whether in private business or in government, stand a long distance from these tiny self-help groups, in spite of their importance. Thus while hope is real, we need nonetheless to sort through the differences in the analysis of economic life that so often prevent communities and nations from a common concerted effort to help meet the needs of all.

As we step back and consider such divergent interpretations of what Christianity requires of our economic lives today, we have to be struck with the powerful effect that perspective has on people’s perceptions. Coming from quite different perspectives, Franz Hinkelammert and George Gilder highlight very different elements in the Christian tradition and recommend quite different policies because of them. Here we come up against a significant intellectual problem that requires not just an inquiry into economic life but an understanding of how the human intellect works.

Put quite simply, we are most likely to see what we are already expecting.

The so-called “magic eye picture” at the beginning of this chapter may appear to be simply an interesting pattern of shapes, but if we know to look for

something within it, we might, after considerable effort, see the image there. (For those unfamiliar with such computer-generated images, it helps to hold the center of the printed image right up to your nose. It should be blurry. Focus as though you are looking beyond the image into the distance. Very slowly move the image away from your face, keeping your eyes focused behind the page, not on it. An image “inside” the picture should appear.)

A similar thing happens when we ask, “Does our economy treat everyone justly?” Or even a more technical question, such as “Is the economy heading into a recession or out of one?” We are most likely to see what we’re already expecting. It is difficult to perceive “what is actually happening” simply because there is so much complexity in the world that it takes some sort of conceptual framework to make sense of it. Ideally, this is the role that science plays, and we are indeed reliant upon economics as a social science to describe the economy as it is. However, as we will see in more detail in Chapter 13, we find even among economists significant differences in how they describe our world. Thus it will be helpful to step back from the immediate debates about capitalism and socialism in economic life in this chapter and consider several insights arising from the sociology of knowledge.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote a now classic book entitled the *Social Construction of Reality*.¹⁰ In it, the authors describe how what we presume to be “just the way things are” has often been actually constructed by humans long before us and passed down to us as an obvious fact.

Berger and Luckmann use the example of two people from different cultures who meet and must come to understand each other.¹¹ We might make that more concrete and think of two people on two different ships in the South Seas, both of whom are shipwrecked in a severe storm and washed up on the same deserted island. Neither can speak a word of the other’s language and yet they meet on the beach the next morning and have to begin working out a life together.

They need food. So person A walks over to a bush, digs around it and tears out one of its roots. After brushing the dirt off, A begins to chew on the root. Only then does person B realize that this is food for A; in B’s culture no one eats roots like this. Person B instead notices the trees nearby and climbs up to pick several coconuts. Opening one of them with a rock, B begins to drink the milk and eat the flesh. Again, only after B begins chewing does A realize that this is food, since there are no coconuts in A’s world. Over the long run, however,

they quickly depend far more on coconuts than on roots, as they are tastier and more nutritious.

Similarly, when it comes time to start a fire, Person B makes a small pile of dead leaves and rubs two sticks together, to the puzzlement of Person A. After ten minutes, B gets a small fire going. Only at that point does his companion realize what B has been trying to do all along: start a fire. We can imagine person B's surprise when A gathers a small pile of dried leaves and, picking up two stones found on the edge of the beach, strikes them together to create a spark. In a few seconds A starts a fire. B is amazed since there is no flint in his culture and B soon abandons his traditional method for starting fires in favor of the far better method he learned from A.

With no ship to rescue them, we can imagine the two living for years together and over time they rarely eat roots and never use sticks for lighting fires. Perhaps over enough years they may forget about rubbing sticks together. On that first morning the two had a vivid awareness of a decision about what constitutes fire starting. Eventually that decision becomes less transparent, a bit murky in the memory—their shared world “thickens” and “hardens”—after a decade or two of using flint without having to *decide* to use it.

If A and B are of different sexes and they have children together, we can easily imagine that the children are taught only the more efficient way to start fires, though perhaps for the first generation or two the parents teach the old method as a sort of cultural remembrance. However, we might expect that after several generations the very memory of sticks to start fires may be lost. What began as a perfectly transparent decision (“this is how we’ve decided to start fires”) became translucent, in the sense that “this is how we start fires.” After a longer time the translucence moved to opacity. Subsequent generations hear only “this is how fires are started.” The sense that the use of flint was a decision becomes lost in history. The world as our ancestors created it becomes “just the way things are.”

Berger and Luckmann employ this example to remind the reader that much of what we do in daily life appears to us as simply the natural way to do things but in fact arose from prior human decisions and actions and was socially constructed.

For many of us, our first vivid awareness of this fact of life comes with travel to another country. Our experience of life there often brings about an intense awareness that the way we do things at home is not the only way they can be done. The undeniable proof is that people in that other country do them quite differently.

For example, it is surprising to most North Americans to discover the lively meanings of things considered insignificant or harmless at home.¹² Gift giving is popular in Asia, and the gift should be wrapped attractively, but the wrapping paper must not be white, as that is the color of mourning at death. And in most of Asia, to write the name of the recipient of the gift in red ink will end the relationship, not enhance it; it's like putting a curse on the person you intend to honor by the gift. Manners are very important in Japan, but to slurp your noodles at dinner is quite acceptable, as it is believed to make them taste better.

Asians do much less touching (handshakes, hugs, etc.) than North Americans, but Latin Americans do much more. In the U.S., people stand two to three feet away from each other when talking, but in much of Latin America the distance is twelve to eighteen inches. And, oh yes, what North Americans associate with Friday the 13th, Latinos link to Tuesday the 13th. Even compliments can be tricky in many places. If you speak too appreciatively of a beautiful item in the home of your Japanese friend, he may feel obliged to give it to you, an idea that would never cross the mind of your friends at home.

Examples abound where cultural misunderstandings have caused disasters. Speakers of English who are not used to the difference between intimate and formal modes of address to another person (as exist in French, German, and Spanish, for example) often make the mistake of addressing a much older individual (who merits the formal mode of speech) with an intimate second-person form. While it may seem to the Anglophone as simply a grammatical mistake, those in the actual situation see it as an unthinkable cultural violation, something like calling the elderly lady living next door “babe” or “hey you.”

Corporations also make cultural mistakes. One Japanese traveler tells the story of being given a white carnation by a smiling U.S. stewardess upon boarding an international flight home. He wondered whether the whole plane was going to a funeral, since in Japan white carnations are closely associated with grieving someone's death. The airline had no idea. Revlon made a similar mistake by introducing a new carnation-scented perfume in Brazil without knowing that, as in Japan, carnations are associated with funerals there. Not so good for sales. Some corporations even misunderstand U.S. culture. The Swedish vacuum cleaner manufacturer, Electrolux, misfired in the U.S. when its marketers tried the slogan: “Nothing sucks like an Electrolux.”¹³

Thus one of the primary lessons to learn from this insight into the social construction of reality is that we can come to understand our own views better through personal experience in a different cultural setting, where “they” don't think like “we” do. Without that experience of contrast, we will probably just assume that our ways of acting and thinking are “natural.”

THE TRADITION OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

This volume will look back at the views of economic life in the Christian tradition, views that date back three thousand years into the Hebrew Scriptures. With a history as old as the Judeo-Christian tradition, simply traveling back in time to read how our spiritual ancestors thought about economic life is very much like traveling to a foreign country. Presumptions about culture and faith, family and individual, society and nation—as well as economic life—in those eras were significantly different from ours and thus operate as a helpful critique of any blinders that we may be wearing today.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Part I of the book includes the current chapter and Chapter 2, which will look at how a living tradition develops and generates contextually relevant implications for each new era.

Part II contains the bulk of the book, which will take a close look at texts about economic life written in various periods from the Scriptures (Chapters 3 and 4) to the early church (Chapters 5, 6, and 7) to the Middle Ages (Chapters 8 and 9) and the Reformation (Chapter 10).

Part III begins with Chapter 11, which will look at issues of the development of teaching on economic issues (for example, slavery, usury, and human rights) within the Christian tradition—since such developments help us understand how this tradition does and doesn't change as the world situation changes over time. Chapter 12 provides four ways to sort out modern disputes about economic life. Chapter 13 provides a brief treatment of what we should and should not learn from the discipline of economics today.

Part IV, comprising Chapters 14, 15, 16, and 17, will examine the teaching on economic life represented by the encyclicals of the modern popes on economic life and by denominational statements of Protestant churches.

Part V, Chapters 18, 19, and 20, will then propose from the perspective of Catholic social thought what this history should mean for making decisions about economic life today. This will include both general principles and implications, as well as applications to several critical social processes in the twenty-first century. Although many of the elements contained in these chapters are also affirmed within contemporary Protestant thought on economic life, they do rely on a Catholic conceptual framework and worldview that Protestants would understand differently. Thus while the hope is that these concluding chapters will be helpful to Protestant readers, there is no claim here to speak for Protestant Christianity.

If all goes well, by the end the reader will be well prepared to develop his or her own answer to the basic question of this volume: What does the history of Christian views of economic life mean for our economic life in the twenty-first century?

Notes

1. Seamus Heaney, "Out of This World," *District and Circle* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006). Used with permission.
2. Franz Hinkelammert, "The Economic Roots of Idolatry: Entrepreneurial Metaphysics," in *The Idols of Death and the God of Life*, ed. Pablo Richard (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983). Used with permission.
3. George Gilder, "Where Capitalism and Christianity Meet," chapter 50 in *Border Regions of Faith: An Anthology of Religion and Social Change*, ed. Kenneth Aman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987). Used with permission.
4. See, for example, Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *Society* 35, no. 2 (Jan./Feb. 1998): 7–9.
5. See <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/variableSelection/selectvariables.aspx?source=world-development-indicators>. Accessed January 29, 2012.
6. Jeffrey Odell Korgen, *Solidarity Will Transform the World: Stories of Hope from Catholic Relief Services* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010).
7. For further discussion of the role of micro-finance in economic development, see Muhammad Yunus and Alan Jolis, *Banker to the Poor: Micro-lending and the Battle against World Poverty*, (New York: Public Affairs, 1999) and Dörte Weidig, "Three Myths about SME Finance," World Bank Publications, <http://www.cgap.org/blog/three-myths-about-sme-finance>. Accessed January 31, 2013.
8. Korgen, *Solidarity*, 58.
9. For two analyses of the Grameen Bank, the best known of the micro-credit efforts, see M. A. Baqui Khalily, Mahmood Osman Imam, and Salahuddin Ahmed Khan, "Efficiency and Sustainability of Formal and Quasi-formal Microfinance Programmes—An Analysis of Grameen Bank and ASA," in *The Bangladesh Development Studies* 26, nos. 2 & 3, (June–Sept. 2000): 103–46, and Imran Matin, "Rapid Credit Deepening and a Few Concerns: A Study of a Branch of Grameen Bank," in *The Bangladesh Development Studies* 26, nos. 2 & 3 (June–Sept. 2000): 147–72.
10. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966). If taken too far, Berger and Luckmann's basic insight could be employed to argue that there is *nothing* to life beyond humans' created meaning—rejecting God's action in the world. This, however, is not a necessary result of the insight.
11. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 58–60.
12. Several of the examples in this section are taken from Mary Murray Bosrock's series of books, *Put Your Best Foot Forward* (St. Paul, MN: International Educational Systems). See also Mary Murray Bosrock, *Asian Business: Customs & Manners* (New York: Meadowbrook, 2007).
13. Charles R. Taylor, Thomas A. Claus, and Susan L. Claus, *On-Premise Signs as Storefront Marketing Devices and Systems* (Washington, DC: U.S. Small Business Administration, 2005), 9.12–9.13.