

The Future of Economics and Human Dignity: Economic and Theological Perspectives on the Meaning of ‘Wealth’ and ‘Poverty’

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ABSTRACT: Human dignity is a concept which can hardly be confined to a unique field of inquiry, or be analyzed from a restricted scientific approach. In this paper I would like to approach the idea of human dignity through the lenses of economics and religion. The word “dignity” has wide and multiple applications, ranging in meaning from the concepts of freedom, reaching economic level by applying the idea of a welfare concept or feeling decent. Although, the term of dignity is not likely to be reduced to the economic arena, this paper draws attention—although not exclusively—to the terms of poverty and wealth. Poverty is generally regarded as important to human dignity, but what can be said about wealth? Considering the meaning of “poverty” and “wealth” in relation to human dignity, this research uses a general theological approach from the perspective of the Bible.

KEY WORDS: human dignity, economics, ethics, future, morality, human rights.

Introduction

Does the economic dimension have a profile that can be identified as dignity? Or, could human dignity be applied to the economics field? In this paper, I would like to bring in research three fields of study: the economy, human dignity, and theology which could be seen

through the point of view of two major sections: the first being the United Nations legislation and the second section, the theological approach. At the end of this paper, I would like to explore the idea of the future of human dignity and economic ethics.

Human Dignity and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights we find several times the word “dignity” in different contexts such as: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”¹ In the context of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, freedom and dignity have been given to the person by birth, and it is not offered through political, economic, religious decisions or anything else. The term “equal in dignity” must not be confined to the economic aspect because “dignity”, in broader terms, is approached as “the state or quality of being worthy of honor or respect.”² In the conception of the UN Declaration, the economic needs for survival along with their implication upon human dignity are made obvious in the context of the compensation rights. “Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.”³

In the human dignity field the politic and the economic roles played by each political nation are extremely important because human dignity must be placed in a broader context including the education of the person in the process of understanding human dignity taking into account that “the quality of a person that makes him or her deserving of respect, sometimes shown in behavior or appearance.”⁴

Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes the fact that “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances

beyond his control.”⁵ Most of these legislative directions could be met in the economic areas, generally speaking, and in the context of poverty and wealth, if we talk more specifically.

Human Dignity in the Biblical Context of the Concepts of Wealth and Poverty

I would like to start by approaching these sections in bringing the theological element into the relationship with human dignity. Although the term “human dignity” couldn’t be found in the Bible, we have found the idea of human dignity with the terms of freedom, rescue, salvation, etc. The biblical writings have tried to bring attention to the primary intention of the Creator to create a happy world in a perfect creation.⁶

A broad look at the biblical writings reveals two issues that could be seen at first glance as being in conflict with each other: the Old Testament idea of wealth and the idea of poverty that transpires in the New Testament writings. The two ideas are two major current concepts. The first concept which is developed more in Western Europe and the United States is the concept of the abundance promoted more by Protestantism. In this concept the religion means abundance, God is the God of wealth and His followers should not be impoverished. In this concept, it is actually materialized the idea of capitalism.

The second concept, has been promoted more in Eastern Europe, especially by the historical churches, Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and it is the idea that wealth and spirituality are not compatible, and in many contexts could be mutually exclusive. It is a concrete aspect of tension between West and East, found in religious discourse. Why is this tension between the two religious concepts, if both categories come with biblical arguments, meaning they cite the same source? For a better understanding we must deepen the source of origin, the Bible.

The Old Testament, which is the first section of the Bible, treats wealth as a blessing from God. If a person is faithful to God, wealth comes as a reward. It is an idea that goes from the vision that God’s

faithful people live in one nation, have the same laws, and the same faith. The unity is more than the unity of doctrine, is the social and economic unity. It creates an interdependence between the individual and the people, between man and God, between listening and receiving wealth as a blessing. Being rich brings, in the Old Testament, the responsibility towards others who live around you, that are facing deprivation and disease. So, in the biblical context, wealth is limited, and it is to be developed in line with fulfilling social responsibility.⁷

The prominent characters of the Old Testament are strong people who possess material wealth and have a good image in society. We can call them “successful people”. Abraham, Jacob, Job could be mentioned. All these three men are described in the Bible as owners of large properties. Later the promises of God to the Hebrew people are aspiring to certain properties, to a country where it is “flowing with milk and honey.”⁸ This concept is emphasized by God through what He offers or withdraw by that emphasize as important or less important.

The promoter of this idea, especially in the nineteenth century, is Max Weber, who remains famous for his study of the origins of capitalism. In his famous book “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism”, Max Weber launches and supports the idea that wealth is a grace from God⁹, dispelling arguments that traditional Christian religions still claimed otherwise. Another Christian group which promoted the same ideas has been Calvinism. Calvinist concept is the favorable view of wealth they haven’t considered it as a sin, though they have emphasized asceticism in their teachings. According to Calvinists, God loves not only the ascetics but also He loves the rich who remain among the people and produce riches who have remained in the communities to serve others.¹⁰

Interestingly this religious group could manage the pressure of asceticism and wealth and in this way wealth becomes a functional role, namely to serve the community. This way of working can operate successfully in a compact company with the same interests and ideologies. As long as the community is given the tone of one voice, the system is operational. Noteworthy also is the satisfaction of altruism that is described in the behavior of Calvinism. As with

any idealistic group, here as well there is a desire for perfection and intercommunity love. This spirit is present in the first century of the Christian community when all of them “were together and had everything in common.”¹¹

It is noteworthy how the early Christians, because accepting a new faith, a new ideology, manage to live in this system of “community.”¹²

Unfortunately, much later the “system of community” is subordinated to the luxury and wealth system. In his book “About Luxury”, Virgil I. Ionescu speaks about the conception of capitalism on the luxury. He quotes Werner Sombart, a German economist, and sociologist who argues “the birth of capitalism from luxury.”¹³ This argument is based on the idea that luxury has contributed in many cases to the conversion of the social wealth. Even if wealth has been associated with capitalism and not with Protestantism, it remains rather an obvious idea that capitalism was born and visibly stressed by Protestantism which has wealth and legitimized wealth.

Another author who has a contribution in promoting wealth is Gaetano Filangieri (1753–1788), an Italian jurist and psychologist, who had studied the idea of luxury seen through the point of view of economic policy. He talks about luxury, about “luxury good” and “pernicious luxury”, giving it a moral tinge. Filangieri wants to discover the role of morals so he can shape the meaning of luxury. So, if the manners are good this means that luxury is good, if manners are bad than luxury is bad.¹⁴

I think Filangieri approach is very interesting. He deepens the idea that human character can influence the perception of luxury, wealth. However, I can remark a passive approach of the luxury influence on the character and manners. Contrary to this view, I think luxury, wealth are not inactive, harmless. Not just the manners influences the luxury but the other way around as well. They have something active, something that transforms the attitude and the behavior. In just few cases the poor man that become rich in a short period of time remains the same. Most of the times, getting rich, especially in a sudden way, transforms the person. Not a few cases were when the individuals reach certain levels of wealth or fame and they give up on family or they don’t recognize their friends etc.

These cases remark, from ethical point of view, the role that wealth has in moral and social degradation of the individual.

In such situations you can ask the question about the influence of wealth and its impact on human dignity.

Human Dignity and *Wealth*

Although human dignity should not be linked to the material dimension but rather the self-esteem of the individual, we must recognize that the context in which they live and the intellectual and financial level of the individual are indispensable elements of living life in a holistic way. Yes, but perhaps the most important issue in terms of the correct approach of wealth is to reach a balanced and fair point of view about the influence of wealth, this approach would required to have an unbiased approach of both sides of the issue. Does the Bible has a positive approach to wealth? Certainly. Because the term wealth is a relative form of the expression “having” and that great wealth in a certain time or in a particular community might be insignificant, further I will define the term riches as “having more than necessary”.

If we look at Jewish history, we see a very prominent thought on perceived wealth. They believed that riches were a sign of blessing and their acceptance by God.¹⁵

I believe that material possessions can provide a framework in which there may be safety by reducing stress factors, at least the mentally one. From here begins the accurate perception of human dignity.

Human Dignity and *Poverty*

The second conception of poverty and wealth is found especially in Eastern Europe. But it is quite widespread in the West, especially the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. Being an idea promoted by traditional churches, in particular, it is contrary to that preached by Protestantism. The term wealth, interpreted from the Bible is

often spiritualized. Wealth and surplus are necessary only in the spiritual.¹⁶ Even the idea of private property is based on other realities. The quote below is quite revealing in this regard: “In the Orthodox conception, private property is a manifestation that appeared from greed. Those who are possessed of this passion in reality are not the master over their property, but its servants and guards of it. Even if they give from something they have to those in need, they can not be worthy of praise, but they are still indebted with repentance for their whole life because all of the things they held in their hands could not be used by their brothers as well.”¹⁷

This conception even if it looks a little bit exaggerated in a world centralized on selfishness, shows a lot of spiritual and ethic realities. If the world would be the one described here, the human position would be improved. Personally I believe that this conception, pretty hard to be applicable in the current world, remains still an ethic norm sustained by the Bible which we should take into account. Even if the church was many times balanced in terms of philosophy about poverty and wealth, this position did not involve a favorable approach if wealth or accepting collecting material goods, that was usually closely with injustice and greed. Such a point of view is also expressed by the authors Oliver F. Williams, C.S.C. and John W. Houck in the book *The Judeo-Christian Vision and the Modern Corporation*. They say Church has taught people, over time, that they must have sufficient means for their material condition in the world, but the accumulation of wealth, beyond this level of sufficiency, becomes a sin by avarice.¹⁸

The catholic interpretation of poverty is obvious in the positive approach. St. Francis of Assisi believes that the poor are the privileged category eligible for the divine reward, conception claimed by Bishop Gore as well.¹⁹

Michael Novak is a figure of the Catholic world and author of several reference books on religious approach of business. Although some of his writings he associates capitalism with greed, yet in his last writings he urges readers to embrace a printed system of democratic capitalism, including a market economy, a democratic form of government and a cultural-moral system that nourish virtues of which free societies depend on.²⁰

May this trend be a subtle shift from the idea of Catholicism from the idea of blessed poverty to the blessing of abundance?

Where does the idea of denial of wealth comes from *though*? The approach of wealth repudiation is rooted in Jesus Christ's words and his attitude towards wealth. Is it possible that Jesus Christ hated that much material wealth? In the following paragraphs I will try to analyze the statements of Jesus Christ about poverty. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, your heart be also."²¹ Jesus Christ speaks here about many realities. Man's preoccupation with investing profitably on the long term is visible. However, it is important to invest financial values in a safe place. Safety is also the biggest concern of our days. It is very obvious as well, the temporality of investment that we can benefit here. What does Jesus Christ wants to convey here? Should Christians be so indifferent to financial values? I think here Jesus Christ is addressing especially to Christians, telling them that they should use possessions, gifts, their talents, so that their accounting is done in heaven.²² This manner of interpretation alleviate, even slightly, the seeming tension created here. I do not believe that Jesus Christ teaches Christians to be uninvolved, uninterested to material things, but I rather believe that Jesus Christ warns Christians to distinguish between the two worlds, the material and the spiritual, and to discern them choosing the spiritual one.

Another statement of Jesus is made in the same context with the words, "do not worry saying, 'What shall we eat?' Or 'What shall we drink?' Or 'What shall we wear?'. For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them."³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."²³ Does Jesus Christ launches here a philosophy of indifference to life? Should readers of the Bible be careless to the essentials of life? Certainly not. Jesus is not talking about "do not care", but about "do not worry". It is something else. A Christian with a strong sense of ethics will care not only for themselves but also for others. At the same time he will

not be desperate about his future, because these depends on God.²⁴ At the same time Jesus Christ reminds the listener of the reality of both worlds, culminating with the certain benefit of the one who chooses the spiritual world, but who will receive the realities of the physical world as well. From this expression it can be seen that Jesus did not exclude the benefits of material goods, but places them in the proper order.

Another statement of Jesus Christ, which can be used to emphasize a social category, in this case of the poor, is the statement in which He says He was empowered to proclaim the gospel to the poor.²⁵ Does Jesus Christ excludes the category of rich people? Is the gospel only brought to the poor? Certainly not. Then what did Jesus Christ wanted to say? It should be noted since the beginning that Jesus Christ was both interested in the poor as in the rich. Among His apostles were also rich people. Then there was the case of Zacchaeus who was a rich man and Joseph of Arimathea who was rich, too.

It is clear that the message of Jesus Christ is not exclusive, but inclusivist. He came to proclaim the Gospel even to the poor.

It is a form to demonstrate His interest in the right to dignity of every person whether the person is rich or poor. But if we spiritualize the term “poor”, we will better define those referring to modesty, openness to God, decency etc.

The Future of Human Dignity

What could be the future of human dignity be seen through the angle of poverty and wealth? If the question seems quite simple the more complicated is the answer. I do not think it can be given an objective response to this question without making a comprehensive study on the mentality of groups from different regions of the world or without taking into account the importance of the elements of poverty and wealth, elements which might substantially influence the idea of human dignity.

The study of theological perspective on human dignity comes not to change the importance of business ethics or morality, but rather to appreciate the ethical approach and support it. The concern

for human dignity of the two areas, poverty and wealth, is one of the arguments that specialists could support regarding the union effort to promote morality. If we start from a different premise, that of familiarity with Christianity thinking, it is easy to come back with another argument to this goal. The theological confirmation of human dignity probably does not give a valuable addition, for it is focusing its value in its approach, but I think that it may increase the field of application in a receptive nation in terms of faith. Early references, since the time of the Jews exodus, come to show something of humanity great concern to the principles and ethical values and to the human dignity. Jesus Christ's influence becomes evident in the field to human dignity and morality, and the subsequent concerns of Christianity follows the same direction. In conclusion, human dignity, even if it is found as terminology in the Bible, it is confirmed by theology and by the large context of the Bible, remains an engaging study of eternal values, values that are current and that condition the economical demarche in the civilized countries offering a perspective of success. Human dignity in the biblical context is confirmed not only by God's concern for the welfare of the faithful, but it becomes proof of human concern of holistic development to be fully moral, spiritual as well as economic.

NOTES

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1

² Cf: http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/dignity (Last accessed on April 30, 2016)

³ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23.3

⁴ <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/dignity>

⁵ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25.1

⁶ This is easily observed if we analyze the expression of the Bible when "God saw good bu That" several times in the context of the creation of the world as we read in Genesis 1:24

⁷ 1 Timothy 6: 17-19 Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; 18 That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; 19 Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

⁸ Genesis 3: 8, *Bible or The Holy Scripture*, published with the blessing of His Beatitude Patriarch Teoctist. (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1997).

⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007).

¹⁰ Eduard Recordon, Philippe Tapernoux, *The Church or Assembly*, (Dillenburg: Gute Botschaft Verlag, 1993), 147.

¹¹ Cf. Genesis 2:44 "All the believers were together and had everything in common."

¹² Ioan Rămureanu, *Istoria bisericească universală*, (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1992), 24.

¹³ Virgil Ionescu, *About Luxury*, (Bucharest: Omega Press '93, 1995), 88.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁵ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, (Oradea: The Golden lampstand, 2004), 98.

¹⁶ Cf. www.creștinortodox.ro (Last accessed on April 30, 2016)

¹⁷ Cf. www.creștinortodox.ro (Last accessed on April 30, 2016)

¹⁸ Oliver F. Williams, C.S.C., John W. Houck, *The Judeo-Christian Vision and the Modern Corporation*, (Indiana, USA: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).

¹⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Oradea: Christian Book, 2003), 47.

²⁰ Michael Novak, *Toward a Theology of the Corporation*, (Washington, D.C: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), 26.

²¹ Matthew 6:19–20, *Bible*, Dumitru Cornilescu translation, (Chișinău: Interdenominational Bible Society of the Republic of Moldova, 2005).

²² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Oradea: Christian Book, 2003), 441.

²³ Matthew 6:31–33, *Bible*, Dumitru Cornilescu translation, (Chișinău: Interdenominational Bible Society of the Republic of Moldova, 2005).

²⁴ Gerhard Maier, *Matthaus-Evangelium*, (Korntal, Germany: Hanssler, 1995), 222.

²⁵ Lucas 4:18, *The Holy Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984).

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