

Irish churches addressing alternatives to the economic crisis

Living for Tomorrow's World – Green? Global? Greedy?

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Friends, here at the Annual General Meeting of the Irish Council of Churches, I do not want to transgress too many boundaries or offend too many people by talking about beer at the start of our time together, but...

Think about beer. Great on a hot day after a spell of hard gardening, it is one of those things that ultimately do not satisfy (Isa. 55:2)—at least, not permanently or to excess.

Now think about the stock market. If you had bought \$1,000 worth of Nortel stock in August 2001, by the following August it would have been worth \$49. However, if you had bought \$1,000 worth of beer, drank all the beer, then traded the bottles in at a redemption centre for the nickel deposit, you would have had \$107. This story begins to challenge our assumptions, for we expect an investment in a reputable company to be financially more rewarding than drinking beer. It is only when the system fails to operate as expected that we see just how much faith we have actually placed in it. We begin to understand the hold its logic has exercised over us.

I used that story in a paper for an extended seminar in 2002 on the theme of “Mission in a World of Hungers”. This was just after the Enron scandal, and I wanted to make the point that the corrupt practices of such companies as Enron and Worldcom were paradigmatic of the governing economic model. The other seminar participants persuaded me that the evidence did not support the extrapolation. Looking back in light of recent economic events, I wonder. Then, as now, the question is whether the crisis is structural or contingent. Now, however, not only is there great urgency to find an answer to the present problem, but also great energy to make it fit the “contingent” side of the equation, as testified by the parallel meeting to this of the G20 in London.

What is clear is that the neo-liberal economic order, which the G20 leaders are trying to save, first ran amok then ran aground, as it moved from plunder to blunder. Note that one of the key tenets of neo-liberalism is that state power should protect financial institutions at all costs. That is what happened in 1982 when Mexico threatened to default on its debts: banks were protected; people destroyed. Today, the neo-liberal model of globalization, which, since its beginnings in the 1970s, has grown to dominate economic relations within and among nations is staggering. But the proposed solution is remarkably consistent: save the banks; people are secondary.

It is therefore no great surprise that the architects of the current bail out—such as Hank Paulson and Timothy Geithner—are themselves bankers. They contributed to the situation we are in by engineering changes in the 1990s to banking law that further facilitated what Susan Strange calls “casino capitalism”. I bet John Kerry, supporting those changes, wishes he had never said, “The concerns that we will have a meltdown like 1929 are dramatically overblown.” There is truth for a new generation in Einstein’s insight that, “The problems we face today cannot be solved by the minds that created them.”

There is a religious and spiritual dimension to this. As Hans Küng observes, in view of so many “crises and scandals, one cannot avoid the impression that the god to whom tribute is paid... is the great god of modernity *par excellence*, the god progress, the god success.” This means that efficiency is prized over transcendence, and “profit, career, prestige, and success at any price instead of openness to another dimension.” Ultimately, “the obvious presupposition,” shared across the industrialized world, is “that success sanctifies, justifies all means.” Consequently, “For success one may lie, steal, bribe, break promises, whatever.” We are all to varying degrees caught up in the pressures of this sort of environment. Perhaps one of the most pervasive and corrosive ideas woven into virtually all spheres of life over the past generation is that everything must be judged primarily according to economic criteria. But as Küng insists, *homo sapiens* is not identical with *homo oeconomicus*.

Occasions such as our present historical moment, when assumptions and presuppositions are challenged provide opportunity for questions, reflection and growth. For those of us invested in the present system for income, pensions and, ultimately a sense of security and worth, the Gospel questions us about where our hope really lies—in the God who made heaven and earth, to whom we pray for our daily bread, or the systems of this world, especially the ones which tend to benefit us and are governed by Western cultural values.

At such times, a perspective from outside of our own culture can be instructive. Malawian theologian Harvey Sindama offers a view that is not only relevant to immediate circumstances, but also places them within the tradition of Western thought. His analysis also has important ecological implications.

Sindama discerns one source of what he considers the Western propensity to exploitation, with its attendant symptoms of environmental degradation and spiritual malaise. Grounding his analysis in the work of important Western scholars Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, Bacon and Newton, who were instrumental in the construction of rationally based modernity, he argues that even if it is accepted that progress as conceived in the West had the worthy ambition of “ordering the natural world to create a better environment for people,” this has ultimately been undermined by a reliance on an “expansionist philosophy” of “unlimited growth” which necessitates the “exploitation of resources and people.”

For him, “the alliance of progress, science and technology leads to social and spiritual bankruptcy,” because “Having objectified nature and people, God too becomes impersonal” and redundant. As he puts it, “In a world without divinity, morality is dictated by self-interest.” One of the results of this worldview was the rise of the idea that “nature simply existed,” and that thus “its value was only in relation to human use,” characterized by “manipulation and subjugation.”

Without denying the undoubted benefits modernity has brought to many around the world, it also has more troubling aspects. It has been so influential in shaping so much of our basic understanding of the world that our “hermeneutic ability” to incorporate other ways of living together in order to build a better future, free from exploitation, have been “deeply affected.” This was brought home to me in an encounter with an African peasant, Stalin Harrison Jamu Kumwenda.

Early one morning—even by Malawian standards—there was a knock at the door. I ignored it, but the knock came again, more insistently. When it became clear that whoever was knocking was not going to go away, I got up and headed for the door, rehearsing how I would get rid of this unwanted guest. On opening the door I was met by Mr. Kumwenda and figured that the insistence of the knocking and the earliness of the hour indicated that a request for help was coming. Instead Mr. Kumwenda presented me with a half-sack of freshly picked beans. Increasingly contrite, I mumbled that he had greater need of them than I, and suggested that he should keep them.

A quizzical, perplexed look came over his face, as if I were clearly mad. He explained that it was the time of the first fruits of the harvest and therefore customary in his culture to share all one could. Then he said, “This is how we live.” For him this was simply a description of reality, but one that implicitly understood the need for generously sharing to create a viable community.

Mr. Kumwenda’s gesture and words were shaped by the richest insight of African philosophy: that we belong to one another and have a profound responsibility for caring for one another, especially those whom the Bible terms “the least of these.” John Mbiti has summed up this core cultural value in the phrase “I am because we are.” A Malawian proverb encapsulates the same idea when it says, “a person is a person because of and on behalf of other people.” The concept of *ubuntu* as expounded by Nelson Mandela is guided by the same concept of personhood.

In each case, a penetrating challenge is offered to our western notion of individualism, which is so deeply embedded in and poisoned by competition, grasping, greed, and self-interest: characteristics graphically displayed of late, and not only by Sir Fred Goodwin. If others are considered at all—an increasingly quaint idea—it is only after our wealth and security have been assured.

I had gone to Malawi as a missionary, but in this incident, my world had been turned upside down and I had been profoundly evangelised by one of the poorest people on earth. A dimension of the Gospel so easily lost in a Western culture dominated by individualism had been illuminated, and in a poignantly incarnated way it was brought home to me that it is the broken, shared bread—or bean, or cassava, or whatever—that truly sustains and creates an alternative economy—that of the Kingdom of God. The implication is that the extension of this kingdom in mission—that is, orienting ourselves towards living for tomorrow’s world—is not most fully engaged in from a position of wealth, strength and security, solving the problems of others in a patronising, paternalistic way, but in solidarity and openness to the best insights different cultures bring to addressing the pressing issues facing the world.

While Sindama may not include the totality of Western thought concerning understandings of God or perspectives on ecology, he does highlight disturbing prominent features of modernity and their consequences. Positively, he reminds us that human activity should be directed toward the enhancement of life, in the context of respecting the integrity of creation. Justice is inclusive, and applies to all of God’s creation.

Within the household of faith, we have resources, in the Eucharist and the subversive memory of a God of liberation, that help fund a different world.

After General Pinochet seized power in Chile in the other 9/11—the military coup of 11th September, 1973—he invited Milton Friedman and the Chicago Boys—a cohort of economists taught by Friedman at the University of Chicago—to restructure the Chilean

economy. Effectively Chile became a laboratory for them to experiment in nascent neo-liberal economic theory. These economists talked about the need to apply “shock treatment” to the body economic, with consequent social suffering. This found a counterpart in the “shock treatment” of the torture being administered to real bodies in the regime’s secret prisons. Against this brutality across Chilean society, William T. Cavanaugh proposes the eucharist as an antidote in a powerful study entitled *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*. Developing the idea more generally, he titles a later article, “The World in a Wafer: A Geography of the Eucharist as Resistance to Globalization.”

In the world of the bible, Egypt is the first in a series of empires, including Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome that embody power structures that benefit the elite, enslave the poor, and dominate the weak. The word Egypt (*mitsrayim*) literally means “double straits”, “narrow places”, “narrow confinement”: references to the shape of the territory of Egypt as defined by the river Nile. Egypt was really the thin strip of land on either bank of the Nile. Beyond the literal meaning of the term *mitsrayim*, figurative allusions to the nature of Egyptian society are striking as they contrast with how Israelite society is conceived in the bible.

So, as Daniel Groody reminds us, Israel was not only delivered from a geographical place but also from a narrow way of thinking. Specifically, Yahweh shifted Israel from a place of slavery and the mentality of empire to a space of freedom and a mentality of generosity. Thus freedom from empire—from the tyranny that there is no alternative—means something more comprehensive than simply taking off the shackles of Egypt. It means taking on a new mind-set, adopting a new way of living in the world, out of a different narrative as a community. In contrast to the narrowness of Egypt in every sense of the word, it is no coincidence that the land of promise is regularly described as a “broad land”, with all the connotations consequently invested in that phrase.

As our friends in the secular world remind us, and as we ought to know in the household of faith, another world is possible.

The word economy does not appear in the Gospels, but the root from which it is derived does. This is the word *oikemene*. Depending on context it can mean either “household” or “world”. We get three important words from it: economy, ecology and ecumenism. At our point in history, which increasingly feels like a *kairos* moment as crises in economy and ecology converge, we in the household of humanity need a different economy, which puts people before profits in the context of respecting and working with the ecology we need to keep life viable. This is a task of such global importance to us all that it must be undertaken ecumenically, for as Sean McDonagh reminds us, there are no Catholic lakes, no Muslim mountains, no Methodist forests, no Protestant roads... except, perhaps, in the minds of some about these parts as July approaches!