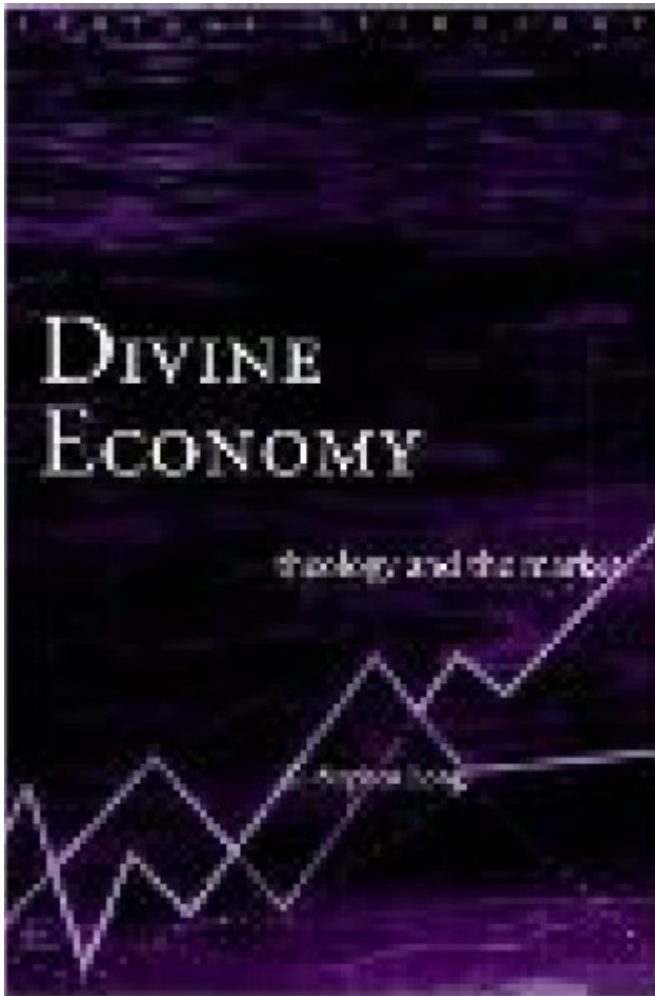


God and goods

By [Daniel Rush Finn](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

In Review



Divine Economy: Theology and the Market

D. Stephen Long
Routledge

Stephen Long has written an engaging and frustrating book on the relation of theology and economics. Baptized by Anabaptists, educated by evangelicals and

ordained in the United Methodist Church, Long teaches at UMC-related Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, where he is co-director of the Center for Ethics and Values. Just as there is diversity in his background, there is irony in his current position. For Long, most talk about values undermines what theology—and social science—should be saying about the moral life.

Much of *Divine Economy* is a critique of the work of other theologians who have engaged economic life. Long's strongest disapproval is reserved for Michael Novak's defense of capitalism, but the list of those he criticizes is long and diverse. Max Stackhouse, Ronald Preston, Philip Wogaman, Dennis McCann, Rosemary Radford Reuther, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino and James Cone are among those found wanting. I shall leave it to these able thinkers to defend their work and will instead focus on Long's appropriation of Catholic social thought to support his views.

Long operates out of the "radical orthodoxy" movement led by Anglican theologian John Milbank. The book also shows the influence of Stanley Hauerwas, with whom Long studied at Duke University, and that of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who has had great influence on Hauerwas.

Following MacIntyre, Long argues that intellectual history is first and foremost a narrative history, and so he details the stories that precede and undergird the points of view he analyzes. Because he believes there is no independent standpoint from which all perspectives can be evaluated objectively, he views his role as telling the stories of his and others' traditions from his own tradition's point of view. Competing descriptions of the intellectual world cannot be objectively demonstrated to be either true or false. Rather, each narrator attempts to "out-narrate" the others and thereby persuade the listener.

Of course, Long does not reject all theological approaches to economics found in the history of Christianity or he too would be left without an adequate narrative tradition. The heroes of his story are Thomas Aquinas, Pope Leo XIII, Jesuit economist Bernard Dempsey, and the Association for Social Economics (formerly the Catholic Economics Association). In Roman Catholic tradition, Long finds the threads of an adequate argument about the interaction of theology and economic life. Long names his own ideal economic system as "pre-1848 Christian socialism," but says remarkably little about it. His primary economic agenda is to reject capitalism and to turn economic institutions, including corporations, into socially responsible not-for-profit (and, ideally, Christian) organizations.

Long's most fundamental critique is lodged against capitalism because its "cultural logic" celebrates a "universality of pluralisms" that undermines the particularity of Christian life and faith. He holds up the food court at the local shopping mall as an illustration. At the food court we are presented with a diversity of cooking from around the world, brought together in one place as only capitalism does it. But this cosmopolitan ethic presents a "false catholicity" because the underlying economic realities do not sustain but rather consume particular identity amid the overpowering requirements of profit-making firms in a market system.

The workers at these various fast-food restaurants display differing facial features, hair and skin tone, but beneath this veneer of diversity lies the bedrock of capitalist homogeneity. Each retail outlet is part of a large chain, with owners far distant. Labor is treated as a commodity. The workers make the same low wage and have almost no hope for moving up to a decent job that would support a family.

Long's excellent critique of capitalism is similar (and presumably indebted) to that provided by many of the theologians he criticizes and by a goodly number of economists who populate the "heterodox" societies within the discipline. Neither Karl Marx nor Thorstein Veblen ever ate at a shopping mall, but both spoke eloquently of the constraints on economic life that arise from the requirements of capitalism.

Long also complains that theology has been marginalized in public discourse in large part because of the way science has treated the moral life. Max Weber is the primary villain in this story, in which science becomes regarded as the rational attempt to describe the world as it is, while morality is presumed to reside in "values" which people "hold." The problem, Long says, is that Weber set up rationality as a context-independent view of the world "as it is" and reduced the pluralism of perspectives represented by the great religious traditions of human history to the role of providing competing values with which to evaluate the "actual" state of affairs as described by disembodied reason. Long argues that there are many other traditions that don't see the world this way. Scientific rationality should be viewed as but one tradition among others and should not have authority over the modes of perception embodied in those other traditions.

Long seems unaware that the fact-value distinction was a part of economic discourse long before Weber. Nevertheless, in his critique of economic science, he competently summarizes many of the methodological complaints of heterodox

economists. However, he takes them farther than most do, and he makes a claim that will put nearly all economists on edge: that theology should be understood as the master discipline, setting the parameters for social-scientific inquiry. As he puts it, "The hypostatic union of the second person of the Trinity, wherein the divine and human natures constitute 'one person,' is the pattern by which creation itself is deemed reasonable from a Christian theological perspective." No adequate description of the human can be made, he says, without including the inbreaking of the divine in human life.

Orthodox economists adopted the fact-value split as the fundamental model for dealing with (or rather for not dealing with) the moral life in their efforts to construct "value-neutral" social science. Numerous heterodox economists have proposed something Long also advocates: that the only adequate economics will be one that begins with presumptions about the moral life and makes them visible in its description of the world. But few of these would agree with Long that social science should begin with presumptions available to Christians only through God's revelation.

This is where Long's use of Catholic social thought runs into problems. He wants to employ the work of Thomas Aquinas and subsequent Catholic social thought because it is a living tradition with a sense of integrating faith and economic life. He legitimately disagrees with parts of this tradition, especially its development over the past 50 years. Unfortunately, he makes claims about this tradition, and especially about Aquinas, that are unsustainable.

Long argues for an unusually strong link between "natural law" and "divine law," or to put it another way, between the capacity of human reason to understand God's order unaided by divine revelation and a necessary reliance on God's word as revealed in the Bible. In this he disagrees even with his favorite economist, Bernard Dempsey. Long restates Aquinas's position, emphasizing the necessary integration of reason and revelation at each juncture. Counting on the "new law as the grace that orders nature," Long argues that granting autonomy to economics will relegate theology to advocating values and "little recourse will be had to the end of human life as supernatural." That human reason needs correction by revelation is the essence of Long's (and Milbank's) claim that theology must set the fundamental ground rules for social science. The problem, of course, is that if we were to rank all Christian theologians in history based on their confidence in human reason unaided by divine revelation, Thomas Aquinas would appear near the top of the list.

Long largely overlooks Aquinas's own description of the difference between natural law and divine law, the two means humans have to learn God's intentions for the world. He gives four reasons why there is a need for divine law, but none of them corresponds to his claim that human reason unaided by revelation is unable to accurately perceive and describe the world. Long is right that for Aquinas the ultimate meaning of life is to be found only within an overarching faith in God as the end of human existence, but he is wrong in his claim that for Aquinas what we today call social-scientific inquiry would have to begin with foundations taken from revelation. The best proof of this—though Long fails to note it—is that Aquinas didn't appeal to revelation even in his own moral analysis of economic matters such as property ownership and usury.

Long complains repeatedly that Christian theology's approach to economics has relied far too much on the doctrine of creation and not enough on christological foundations. And yet this is exactly what Aquinas does—for this is the essence of the natural-law approach to ethics. In Aquinas's treatment of property, for example, the fundamental constraint on an owner's claim is the fact (perceptible to reason without the aid of revelation) that the world has been created by God with the intention of meeting people's needs. In articulating his own position on property ownership, Aquinas does not rely on Jesus' teaching about love of neighbor or other biblical warrants. His argument, consistent with that of the early church, is that because of God's intention in creation, if I have more than I need and you have less than you need, I am obliged to share my surplus with you, even if I rightfully own it. Not to do so would violate God's created order.

To take a second example, consider Long's desire to recover the classic prohibition against usury—the claim that it is immoral to charge interest when lending money. In an attempt to counteract received wisdom today, Long spends considerable time on the relevant discussions by economists Dempsey, Knut Wicksell, John Maynard Keynes and Ludwig von Mises.

Long objects to those who argue that Aquinas's prohibition against usury is based on a faulty conception of money as "sterile." Long defends the notion that money is sterile on the grounds that only living things can reproduce "because God endowed them in nature with the capacity for reproduction."

Aquinas himself, however, makes a single argument against usury, arising out of the Aristotelian tradition. He starts with a distinction between two kinds of goods and

the different moral requirements we face when we lend goods of each kind. Some goods are used up when they are used, like the bottle of wine we lend to a neighbor. When the neighbor brings the bottle back (or brings an equivalent bottle back if the first one was drunk), we put the bottle back in our stock. Because from our perspective the wine was not used (after all, we now have it, just as we would if there had been no loan), we deserve to receive the bottle but no additional payment because of the loan.

The second kind of good is one that is not used up when it is used, like a house. The house can be used temporarily by another person and then returned to us, but we have, in fact, lost something in the meantime: the use of the house. For this reason God's natural law allows us to capture an additional payment (which we call rent) for our loss. In modern terminology, the wine is a consumption good, whereas the house is a capital good, producing a flow of services, or in Aquinas's terminology, producing "usufruct." (Long completely overlooks Aquinas's conviction that goods like the house are not sterile. This alone disproves Long's claim that, in this tradition, only living things can avoid sterility.)

To make the transition from the issue of lending in general to usury in particular, Aquinas asks which type of good money is. In his day the answer was simple: Money was like the bottle of wine. If you wanted to borrow four gold coins from me, I would take them out of my money chest and lend them to you. A week or a month or a year later, you would bring back those four coins (or, more likely, four equivalent gold coins if you had spent the originals) and I would put them back in my supply. Money was described as "sterile" like the wine, because it was not a productive asset the way a house would be.

The reason almost all modern Christians have changed their view of usury is that in the modern world we regard money as like the house, not the wine. Money is a claim on assets, and such a claim is indeed productive, whether I have temporary use of it for a year or, in these days of money-market funds, even for 24 hours.

The original biblical prohibition against usury was intimately tied to concern for the poor, because most borrowing in an agricultural society occurred out of desperation. Aquinas, however, dealt with the concerns of poverty through his doctrine of property, while his usury prohibition was based on a wholly different argument. If Aquinas were alive today, he could maintain his usury theory intact and come to a different conclusion: that interest on a money loan can be perfectly moral. Long

seems to have overlooked this fundamental argument of Aquinas, and as a result claims that Aquinas's analyses of usury and property require the insights of revelation to complete them.

In the most general sense, of course, Aquinas stresses that all of human knowing and living requires a relation to God in faith for its ultimate completion. But Aquinas's treatment of these concrete economic problems without using insights from revelation indicates that Long has badly overstated his case.

The outcome of all of this is that, unlike Long, Dempsey and most other modern Christians understand social science as separate from but complementary to theology. Though the social sciences did not exist in the premodern world, their appearance as independent inquiries is a reasonable development within the tradition of natural-law ethics. Long wants to employ the perspective of Aquinas but demote the natural law, which is like trying to be a Lutheran without relying on the Bible.

Like Hauerwas, Long holds out little hope that the structures of the contemporary world can be transformed into anything approaching an acceptable outcome. This leads to a view of the church that will appear sectarian to most other Christians. However, members of the radical orthodoxy movement resist that label. They see the living out of a faithful life in the church as potentially transformative in the sense that others will—it is hoped—take notice of this attractive alternative and be drawn to it. According to Long, the church should “re-present in history a form of life that is good, true, and beautiful”—something he's sure the world has given up on.

Economic exchanges, Long says, are “to be narrated as liturgical performances within the church rather than commodity transactions solely relegated to the market.” He notes that it will be difficult to convince businesses to alter their self-conception and become nonprofit organizations but argues that, for Christians, exactly this transformation must occur. “Natural laws” alone will not provide a basis for political economy. Rather, “a theological poetics must seek to make possible” the encounter with God in economic life.

Long cites only one example of what all this might look like—and it comes on the penultimate page of the book. He celebrates the way one farmers' market in a church parking lot transforms the typically “anonymous and impersonal exchanges” into interactions characterized “by friendship and personal relations.” Many readers

will yearn for more substantive examples of this vision before being tempted to put much stock in it.

As part of his narrative, Long praises the Association for Social Economics, a heterodox group of economists who share most of his misgivings about both economics and the dominant capitalist culture. This makes it seem that his ultimate goal has significant support among social scientists. He is either badly informed or is trying to re-narrate this professional society's history for his own purposes. He describes ASE members by saying "they no longer seek to reconstruct the social order, but merely to find a space for a Catholic social economy." As a past president of the association and an active member for the past quarter century, I am flabbergasted by this description. While a handful of (very quiet) members may take this more sectarian approach, the vast majority of the economists who make up the association have not given up on democracy's capacity to alter the economic order, and the group is far too ecumenical to endorse a Catholic economy of any sort.

This type of inaccurate and self-serving narrative unfortunately characterizes too much of Long's argument. His method undermines his credibility, for example, when he presents the reader with a choice between two incommensurable options: "Either the church and its spokespersons or the contemporary market and its spokespersons must finally persuade us." For most Christian intellectuals today, life is not this dualistic.

I share most of the criticisms that Long (and Milbank and MacIntyre) make of mainstream economics and capitalist institutions and culture, and it is clear that many of these problems are tied to broader advances that come under the banner of "modernity." Still, it is telling that the advocates of this more sectarian Christianity almost completely ignore the morally important advances that have been made under this banner, without which Christianity either might not yet have moved or would surely have moved more slowly. These issues arguably include the abolishment of slavery, the improved status of women, public education of the poor, social mobility, due process, democracy, and civil and human rights. For all the morally damaging developments in the modern world, there are a great number of morally precious ones, though it is all too easy to ignore them because so many have become firmly a part of the quotidian presumptions of both church and sect.

The genius of Catholic—and indeed Christian—social thought is that, at its best, it is catholic, open to the world, reaching out to gather in the best insights and energies that the world has to offer while steadfastly criticizing the world's failings. In Long's

hoped-for future, Christians will have not only their own theology but their own economic science and, to the extent possible, their own economy, a divine economy. Long's book does a fine job of examining the faults of capitalism and the weaknesses of mainstream economic method, but such a withdrawal from the world as he envisions would require a far more persuasive re-narration of Christian theology and history.