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Promoting What We Oppose: Faith, the Free Market, and First Things

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Promoting What We Oppose: Faith, the Free Market, and First Things

Abstract

Of increasing influence in the Australian Catholic Church is the kind of orthodoxy associated with American conservatism in which the defence of life and family against the depredations of cultural liberalism is tied to the defence of the free market and the promotion of economic liberalism. The clearest example of this thinking being the magazine *First Things*, a magazine with great influence both in American and in Australia. The argument of this paper is that there is an organic and determinative link between economy and culture such that economic liberalism will inevitably give rise to, and promote, cultural liberalism. In short, that if the Church identifies herself with the promotion of economic liberalism she will find herself promoting that which she rightly opposes, namely what John Paul II referred to as the culture of death.

Promoting what we Oppose: Faith, the Free Market, and First Things

Robert Tilley

In 2008 as the Global Financial Crisis (the GFC as it has come popularly to be known) took hold there was what was seen to be a resurgence of interest in the Marxist critique of capitalism¹, albeit by reference to capitalism's more recent manifestations in neo-liberal thought and hyper-consumerism.² As might be expected it was a rather truncated form of Marxist theory that enjoyed a new popularity, and although one could be pedantic as to whether or not Marx was being employed in a way that did justice to his thinking, nevertheless it was generally recognised that his writings had something important to say to the situation in which the world found itself.

If there is one aspect to Marx's thought that resonates with those looking for a critique of our modern global economy it is that to do with commodification, a process in which the value of everything becomes increasingly defined by way of market evaluation. Again, purists might quibble with the appropriation of Marx on this score, for missing from much of the discussion is the understanding that for Marx the process of commodification proper revolves around the abstraction of labour from the labourer in order to create surplus value for the employer. But that to one side it is certainly true that commodification became a central element in Marx's thought for it related to the way in which all value and meaning (including the meaning and value of private property) had become transformed into what we would call market value. It is not too difficult to see why it was that this part of Marx's thinking should have become popular, not least because with the GFC it seemed as if the lives of many had become worthless for, having lost their livelihood, their superannuation, even their houses and businesses, they had become expendable. People's lives became little more than integers on the stock market board, the rise and fall of their personal value and meaning being commensurate with the rise and fall of the market. Succinctly put, everything was tied to the meaning of the markets. But what was lacking in many of the discussions on this matter was what was essential to Marxist thought, namely the relationship between the nature of the

¹ The meaning of the term 'capitalism' can differ according to the school one is listening to, but one element appears generally to be agreed upon, and this is the freeing up of capital such that it can become something that multiplies itself, which is to say that it is not bound to an objective, concrete locus of value. The issue in Marxist and other schools of economic philosophy is how self-fructifying capital relates to the wider society. In this essay I use terms as they are commonly used, especially in Institute for Religion and Public Life journal *First Things* (<http://www.firstthings.com>), so that 'free market' theory becomes something of a synonym for capitalism. Some of us would question this identification and argue that capitalism is corrosive of truly free markets as it is of private property, the family, and things religious, but for the purposes of this article those objections have been put to one side. When I use the term 'economic liberalism' it refers to the way in which neo-liberal theory, capitalism, and the rolling back of government 'interference' in the market are all entwined. We will return to this matter of definition in the second part of this series.

² As Tristram Hunt in his review of Terry Eagleton's book *Why Marx was Right* (see below) in the *Observer* (29/5/11) put it, there has been a "growing appreciation for Marx's predictions of globalisation, rampant capitalism, and the instability of international finance. As the *Times* put it in the middle of the 2008 crash: 'He's back'." Eric Hobsbawm noted the same thing in his essay 'Marx Today' in his book *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism* (London, Little, Brown, 2011). Hobsbawm writes that it was, in fact, the Capitalists and not the Socialists who rediscovered Marx, and he cites by way of personal example the way in which United Airlines commissioned him to write a piece on the Communist Manifesto, and how George Soros no less requested instruction on Marx (5-6).

economy and the consciousness that could be said to define the culture in which that economy operates, a subject to which we will return.

There is much that would need to be qualified in what has been said above, but I think it true to say that Marx or no Marx there has been a growth in many and varied quarters as to the problem of commodification and its effects on society, and this in respect of topics as wide ranging as the art world, the ecology (notably with anthropogenic climate change), the integrity of the local community, the privatisation of public utilities, the treatment of refugees, and most everything else in-between. The general sentiment has been that in certain matters Marx was right, that he had traced out the lineaments of the process of commodification and that in our day this process has reached something of its apogee.

But what is significant about this line of argument is what is *not* mentioned. And what is not mentioned is something that one might have thought would prove the clinching argument in respect of the commodification of all areas of life; and this has to do with the subject of abortion and the concomitant use of embryonic and foetal stem cells for the hoped for development of health cures, as well as for industrial aids in the development of things like better flavour enhancers for soft-drinks.

What's more, abortion is defended on the lines of individual choice – hence the popular descriptor 'pro-choice' – and choice is of the essence of a consumer society especially in contemporary capitalism.³ Furthermore, the use of embryonic and foetal stem cells in health and industrial development to make better consumer products would seem to be the height of commodification, for human life itself is now very much a commodity (and *a means* to better commodities). If anything proved Marx right then it would seem abortion does, and yet abortion (and its accoutrements) is rarely if ever mentioned in treatments on Marxist theory in the last few decades. By way of example take the popular presentations of Marxist theory by Peter Singer and Terry Eagleton in which although they discuss commodification (it would be difficult not to) they do not mention abortion.⁴

There is something of a blind spot here, which is to say an ideological 'blank' upon which, and around which, the popular discourse concerning Marxism revolves, both before the GFC and after. But here's the thing, something *similar* attends more recent thinking in Christian

³ It is possibly for this very reason that in January 2013 Planned Parenthood in America launched a YouTube video advertisement calling for the end of the use of labels such as 'pro-choice'. See the discussion on the *Atlantic* magazine's website in response to the article (January 23, 2013) 'The End of Pro-Choice: Will 'No Labels' Really Help the Abortion Debate?'. See too Jeffrey Tobin 'Daughters of Texas: the fight for abortion rights' *The New Yorker* August 5, 2013). Tobin notes how it has been pointed out that Planned Parenthood is reticent in mentioning its provision of abortions. "In January [2013]" writes Tobin, "Planned Parenthood released a video in response to polling data that showed a distaste for labels – 'pro-choice' or 'pro-life'" (27). It is perhaps pertinent that in the reprint of Marshall McLuhan's first major work, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (London, Duckworth Overlook, 2011, fp. 1951), McLuhan reproduces an advertisement for Sun Oil from 5/1/1948 that has the slogan: "There is only one freedom. Freedom of Choice" (115).

⁴ Peter Singer *Marx: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 1980. Singer doesn't engage all that much with Marx on commodification, which I would have thought central to Marx's argument, only a few short pages on how it relates to exchange value and alienation (67-71). And Terry Eagleton *Why Marx was Right*, New Haven, Yale Uni. Pr., 2011. It might be objected that given the scope of these books it is unfair to expect anything like a thorough treatment of Marx and global capitalism as a consumer-market economy, however both books, and others like them, affect to be popular presentations *in light of contemporary concerns*. That is, they are setting out to show something of the relevance of Marx to the world in which the reader finds him or herself. I would think that how commodification had reached something of its apogee in abortion (and its accoutrements) might therefore be relevant to why Marx 'was right' and why it is his thinking is relevant to our world.

and notably Catholic circles that pride themselves on being orthodox and steadfastly pro-life, and it is this ‘blind spot’ that this paper wishes to explore.

In August 2012, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton, Robert George, was a key note speaker at the John Paul II Australian Leaders Forum in Sydney. His talk, entitled *Five Pillars of a Decent and Dynamic Society*, among other things argued that the family and the free-market go together. So much so that they are united not only in respect of matters moral but in respect of having a common enemy, to wit “hard left socialism,” the kind that is attended by an “entitlement mentality” and a “statist” ideology. George went so far as to say that against enemies like this “the market economy and the institution of marriage” will “in the end, stand or fall together.” The point being that Australian Catholicism, insofar as it considers itself as conservative and even orthodox, ought to follow the lead of her American cousins and see the defence of free-market capitalism as being of a piece with the defence of Catholic morality. Essential to this argument is the proposition that the economic and the cultural spheres of a society cannot be separated for they are in some form of causal or supervenient relationship; to change one is to change the other.

So it was that early in his talk, George cited the American congressman and one time Republican Party nominee for Vice President, Paul Ryan, to the effect that “the notion of separating the social from the economic issues is a false choice” for “they stem from the same root.” As to what this root is (or was) George did not say, but what he did say in quoting Ryan was something that earlier forms of “hard left socialism” would have agreed with. Indeed, something fundamental to the critical analysis of Karl Marx. This is that the economic and the social are inextricably entwined such that there is a causal, even deterministic, relationship between the economy a people live within and the way in which their consciousness, we might say, is shaped. Different forms of economy give rise to, or are attended by, different forms of consciousness.

What Marx (or for that matter Ryan and George) meant by consciousness is unclear, but then again it is a notoriously hard subject to pin down, for contrary to what many assume consciousness means more than simple awareness. But whatever else ‘consciousness’ might mean it has to do with the way in which we experience the world in which we live, how we conceive of ourselves and others, and do so in respect of value and thus meaning. For George, if the family and marriage are properly to be valued and then defended and nurtured, if they are to be protected from those enemies that would destroy them, if they are to be prevented from ‘falling’, then it is necessary to have a free-market economy. Under capitalism the family will thrive; under socialism it will decline - and presumably this is because under the former the family is valued and has meaning, while under the latter it is not valued and, as a consequence, it has little meaning.

Robert George’s talk may be seen by some as of little moment in the history of Sydney Catholicism let alone Australian Catholic history. And it might be thought to have even less significance for the discussion on matters of the faith in respect of culture and politics. But with this I would disagree, for whatever one’s views on the merits, or lack thereof, of George’s talk the fact that he *was* a key note speaker at the Leaders Forum indicates

something very important indeed, not least for the way in which Australian Catholicism might understand its mission in the near future. Succinctly put, the tendency is to identify orthodox Catholicism with the championing of limited government and a concomitant commitment to the free-market. And to do this via certain currents in America associated with the magazine *First Things* (which in turn has a sympathetic and collegial relationship with the Heritage Foundation, one of the preeminent think tanks in America, and one that identifies itself with the cause for limited government and liberal economic theory). Robert George is regular contributor to *First Things*, writing on matters political, economic, juridical, and moral.⁵ George is also a regular contributor and participant in the Heritage Foundation's programs and events indeed he is described on the Foundation's website as being a non staff member.

The tying together, even identifying, of liberal economic theory with conservative/orthodox Christianity is nothing new, for it can be argued that this was a process that came into its own in the mid twentieth century in evangelical Protestantism. Further, that the Catholic tendency to do the same began in earnest in the 1970s with the rise of the Moral Majority and an increasing willingness of Catholics to work alongside evangelical Protestants to counter the influence of cultural liberalism. This is not the place to rehearse the history of this phenomenon but instead to argue against its continuation, which is to say to argue against identifying orthodox Catholicism with the defence of liberal economics and free-market theory, and with the concomitant championing of limited government. And the reason for opposing this can be explained by reference to something hinted at in George's talk, something touched upon above; that there is a strong causal relationship between consciousness and the dominant economics of a society. This relationship can be summed up in the following aphorism: cultural liberalism is the expression proper of economic liberalism. In other words, where you have economic liberalism you will have, if not of necessity then certainly in all likelihood, cultural liberalism. And the obverse holds as well: where you have cultural liberalism you will have economic liberalism. In order to explain why this is the case it will be necessary to rehearse something of the history of that which is essential to the rise and formation of capitalism proper, and thus to capitalism's more modern expression in respect of neo-liberal policy vis a vis free-markets and consumerism, a history that is entwined with the topic of usury. A history, however, that will be discussed in the second part of this series. In this article we will be approaching our subject by way of

⁵ Indeed George's talk was pretty much an adaptation of an earlier article he penned for *First Things* in October 2008 entitled 'Making Business Moral'. There is one significant difference between the pieces, in 'Making Business Moral' he argues for three pillars for a good society, whereas there are two more in his later talk 'Five Pillars of decent and Dynamic Society'. In a more recent essay, 'Ruling to Serve' (*First Things*, April 2013), Robert George argues, via John Finnis, that the best form of government is that which best accords with what enables human nature to flourish ("human flourishing"), and this, as might be expected, is "limited government.". A theory of government based not on supplying the needs of the populace but of facilitating their finding these things themselves. It is a "facilitative conception" of government one that "clearly excludes corporatist and socialist policies.". In order for the 'facilitative' conception of government to be realised then it must maintain a "market economy" (41). Later in his essay, George implicitly ties together the kind of economy a people live within and whether or not they will express or be led to express "virtue." The point being made is that only a virtuous people can ensure that a limited government and market economy will thrive, but one also gets the impression that limited government and a market economy will be conducive to virtue especially as, George argues, such an economic and political arrangement best squares with the Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity (41). The problem being, however, that today virtue does not seem overly evident under the dominance of the market economy, a point that has prompted the discussion on liberalism and conservatism in the pages of *First Things*, of which more below.

reference to the magazine mentioned earlier, namely *First Things*. *First Things* is one of those magazines that is more than just a magazine for it represents a movement if not a force for cultural change, perhaps the only comparable magazine is *Adbusters* which not a few see as being the source of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

First Things was founded and edited by Fr John Neuhaus and within Christian (not just Catholic) conservatism it is the most respected and the most sophisticated, not to mention the best written magazine on the market. It is an excellent read and is rarely boring or stultifying pious in the way some conservative religious periodicals can be (and which all liberal theological periodicals are). Its contributors are a who's who of major writers today in the area of religious and social matters, and among their number is Australia's Cardinal Pell. It might be compared to *Commentary* magazine, another American conservative journal, and the Australian secular magazine *Quadrant* (to which Cardinal Pell is also a sometime contributor), and though these are also well written and engaging, I do not think they have quite the same clout that *First Things* has. Fr Neuhaus died in January 2009 and new hands took over the reins. From at least 2011 *First Things* has been engaged in a period of what might be called a period of reassessment, at least insofar as its relationship to liberalism is involved. And this has occasioned not a few papers in the magazine on what liberalism is and whether or not it is wise to style oneself as a liberal. Of course, what is meant by liberalism has itself been a matter for discussion, and much of the debate has turned upon whether or not there is a liberalism that can properly be called Christian or, at the very least, be something which a Christian can feel comfortable with, of which more later. That *First Things* is at something of a crossroads is evident in the remarks recently made by its editor Russell Ronald Reno in his comments that served to open the symposium on this very matter.⁶

First Things, writes Reno, was “associated with an optimistic phase of American conservatism. The Reagan coalition affirmed American exceptionalism, sought to unleash the creative potential of capitalism, and was influenced by a can-do, problem-solving neoconservatism.” “To a great extent secular liberals and religious believers of the *First Things* sort united to construct a global system under American leadership with capitalism as the engine of economic development and human rights as its moral basis.” The only problem, Reno notes, is that this was too successful. “Today, the success of global capitalism has encouraged a secular materialism all around the world. The definition of human rights is almost entirely controlled by secular elites who are antagonistic to the role and influence of religion in public life...” So what now? Well, now that “global capitalism, or at least market based economic thinking is triumphant” this reduces the need for *First Things* to “defend the market economy” even though that was “a clear priority in the past.”⁷ But if that is not the priority then what is? It was this question that the symposium was meant to address.

It is important for us that we should note that the substance of Reno's argument was that liberalism, capitalism and free-market theory are *not* the problem per se; rather the problem is that certain ‘elites’ have managed to gain enough power to skew these laudable things so as to have them serve bad ends. As we will see, this is something of the default position of *First*

⁶ R. Reno ‘The Challenges we Face: A Symposium on the Future of *First Things*’ *First Things*, Aug./Sept. 2013.

⁷ *Ibid* p.34.

Things: that cultural liberalism has no real organic or causal relationship to economic liberalism, but is in fact something of an aberration. It is this ‘aberration’ that First Things has been attempting to explain, at least in the years since Fr Neuhaus’ death.

What follows is not meant to be an exhaustive overview of the different positions argued for in the pages of First Things but I do think it is a fair presentation of the way in which the argument is going. The best place is to start with Fr John Neuhaus’ own work on the subject, one that was recently reissued by reason that it has been so important on the thinking and direction of First Things. This is his book *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist* published in 1992.⁸ As First Things was founded shortly before this book was published, in 1990, it is not too difficult to see how the magazine was informed by the same ethos that informed its editor’s views adumbrated in his book. After all, Neuhaus would have been researching and writing the book at the same time he was giving birth to First Things. It does not seem unjust, then, to assume that both the book and the magazine arose sharing something of the same vision.

Neuhaus’ book is something of a commentary upon and engagement with the then recently published encyclical of John Paul II *Centesimus Annus*, his argument being that this encyclical is something of a vindication of free-market capitalism insofar as Catholic social teaching is concerned⁹, and that it serves to balance the approach of former Popes not least that to be found in the writings of Paul VI.¹⁰ This is not the place to argue this point and some of us might find Neuhaus’ interpretations a bit skewed if not tendentious. But our interest here is in Neuhaus’ views irrespective of whether or not they coincide with the encyclical in question.

Neuhaus is not blind to problems in the modern capitalist economy, only in his book these problems, especially the moral ones, notably those that have to do with the rise of abortion, appear unrelated to capitalism *as capitalism* and have more to do with relativism and a concomitant form of liberalism (even with Communism).¹¹ Indeed, the problems that can be found within a capitalist and market economy should more properly be tied to dispositions such as greed, hence it is a problem with human nature (fallen as it is) rather than with the economic system. Furthermore, the problems attendant upon sins such as greed only become exacerbated when politics tries to change things by changing human nature, socialism being a prime example of this bloody folly.¹² For its part, capitalism has never presented itself as a remedy for a world wounded by sin.¹³

The point is that for Neuhaus there seems little problem with capitalism per se, except, that is, when the state involves itself in the free market. So it is that he opposes raising the basic wage, for this, he writes, is an ‘artificial’ remedy that will only destroy the employment prospects of those it claims to help.¹⁴ The state should not interfere in the market; *especially*

⁸ J. Neuhaus *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist*, New York, Image, 1992.

⁹ *Ibid* p.78.

¹⁰ 67.

¹¹ 209-210.

¹² 27.

¹³ 40.

¹⁴ 225.

not if it is guided by the idea that it can eradicate exploitation by reining in capitalism, this is because ultimately the problems that might attend global capitalism have little if anything to do with exploitation, but rather with exclusion. If there is a problem with modern capitalism then it is that it is *not* as dominant and widespread as it ought to be. The answer to the problems of poverty and unemployment will be better answered when *all* are included in the global market for then there will be no more “marginalisation.”¹⁵ There will be no more marginalisation by reason that it is exactly this that capitalism destroys. Capitalism is about pluralism and thus inclusiveness *in all spheres of human life*. “Economic pluralism is connected to political pluralism is connected to cultural pluralism.”¹⁶ These are big claims, and one might be forgiven for thinking that, when all is said and done, Neuhaus seems to contradict himself for in his view capitalism not only *does* present itself as something of a remedy for human sin, but it delivers on its claim as well!¹⁷

Perhaps such a claim should not surprise us, if, that is, we take Neuhaus’ opening premise to heart, for in the first pages of his book he asserts a proposition that would warm the heart of a classical Marxist, which is to say one who still held to the deterministic relationship between base and superstructure – that is, between economy and culture. “Our subject,” writes Neuhaus, “is economic freedom, but this book is about much more than economics. That is because economic behaviour is inseparably intertwined with other social spheres, notably the political and the cultural.” And, “at the heart of the sphere we call culture is the moral and the spiritual.”¹⁸ It is this understanding of the interconnectedness of the economic, the political, and the cultural (which includes the spiritual) that not only informs his book but, as might be expected for reasons touched upon above, his magazine *First Things* as well.

As was noted earlier, since the death of Fr Neuhaus there has been much discussion in *First Things* as to the magazine’s relationship to cultural and economic liberalism, though this has in no way seriously brought into question its positive attitude to the free-market and the concomitant limited role of the state. The issue has instead been about the kind of liberalism with which *First Things* should identify itself. In this respect Wilfred McClay’s essay ‘Liberalism after Liberalism’ is instructive.¹⁹ McClay contrasts two forms of liberalism. The first which is primarily defined in economic terms is one that holds to a “free-market economy” and limited government, as well as to “natural rights” which rights are tied to “upholding the independence and supreme value of the individual person as a free agent.” This liberalism is tolerant, it holds to “religious disestablishment” and, echoing Neuhaus’ book, is all for “pluralism.”²⁰

¹⁵ 209. Thus, pace Paul VI, Neuhaus writes, the problems will not be solved by wealth distribution but by wealth creation (67).

¹⁶ 264.

¹⁷ Indeed, we are even told that the capitalist system being identifiable with pluralism is thus the system most conducive to the truth being found for it is the system that allows the majority the freedom to “decide against the truth.” This is important for it means that truth can “contend more effectively another day” (271).

¹⁸ 1-2 (see too 49). Elsewhere, as if by way of aside, Neuhaus appears to contradict this point when he writes of the “seeds of democratic capitalism’s distinctions between economy, culture, and politics” (67). Given that his book, taken as a whole, is a defence of capitalism by reason that its principles of pluralism and freedom (according to his assessment) informs politics and culture (which includes the spiritual realm as well), then this comment seems more than a little inconsistent.

¹⁹ Wilfred McClay ‘Liberalism after Liberalism’ *First Things*, May 2012.

²⁰ *Ibid* p.26.

The second form of liberalism – called by McClay the ‘new liberalism’ – argues that a high degree of equality is necessary for liberalism to be a reality, and more significantly it is prepared to use the state to enforce this equality. Furthermore, this liberalism is concerned about the increase in social “atomizing” and “social selfishness” which it is held attends the modern market and consumer economy. In sum, this form of liberalism is attended by a “philosophy of expansive and activist government.”²¹

It is the first form of liberalism that finds acceptance with the writers and readers of *First Things*, not least because, as McClay argues, this liberalism approaches “albeit in secular political terms, the Judeo-Christian understanding of the high dignity of the individual human person.”²²

The responses to McClay’s essay, in the same edition of *First Things*, took issue with some of his points but, nevertheless, agreed upon the basic premise, namely that in respect of the market the role of government should be limited. So it was that James Rogers wrote that “because of the Fall, it is best to limit the power of the state” for Christians should hold to a “libertarian minimalism.”²³

A few months later, Patrick Deneen took up the discussion in his essay ‘Unsustainable Liberalism’.²⁴ For our purposes Deneen’s essay is the more interesting of those we have discussed. This is because Deneen allows that we need to recognise the relationship between ‘progressivism’, which the magazine dislikes, and ‘economic liberalism’, which the magazine approves of. It is this relationship that is problematic, but Deneen holds that it can successfully be addressed - yet how? The fundamental problem is that economic liberalism places the autonomous individual at its centre and this means that it is corrosive of the family and in general things social. Indeed, it appears that it might also be responsible for “breakdowns in the market” as well.²⁵ What is required is a “fundamental rethinking of how law and economics are understood and employed to undergird the liberal vision of society.”²⁶ Whatever this would entail it does *not* entail a “cessation of free markets” *nor* does it call for increased state power, rather does it call for a “greater local autonomy” and “local forms of government.”²⁷ Why this should answer to the problem of the concept of the self that is at the heart of economic liberalism is not clear (or at least not to me it isn’t), unless Deneen means to suggest that smaller communities will necessarily inculcate a concept of self that will temper that predicated upon autonomy. Whether or not this is what Deneen is arguing for his basic premise is the same as that held by Neuhaus and *First Things*; that whatever the

²¹ 27.

²² 29.

²³ James Rogers ‘Sin’s Political Lessons’ *First Things*, May 2012 (37). Another respondent in the same edition was Yuval Levin ‘After Progressivism’ who argued that what was needed was a “serious revival” of interest in Edmund Burke – a not uncommon theme among neo-liberal conservatives. Levin contrasts Burke with those radicals who represent a “sharp break from nature and history” in respect of the “Western tradition” (35). In point of fact, Burke’s whole argument was one contra the Western tradition in that we mean something older than John Locke and Hobbes. Burke opposed any appeal to what he called metaphysics championing instead what we would see as being nascent modern pragmatism. This was the essence of his argument against the likes of Rousseau and Tom Paine; *they* were beholden to metaphysics and not to worldly wise political pragmatism.

²⁴ Patrick Deneen ‘Unsustainable Liberalism’ *First Things*, Aug./Sept., 2012.

²⁵ *Ibid* p.30.

²⁶ 29.

²⁷ 30-31.

problems may be with economic liberalism, even when it becomes apparent that it has a strong relationship to cultural liberalism (that is, progressivism), the answer is *not* to be sought for in curbing the markets, or in a strong centralised government, or in an increase in state influence; rather, the answer seems to be for more freedom for the local market!²⁸

The general upshot of the discussion in *First Things* is that any problems today attendant upon global capitalism is *not* about economic liberalism per se but with *cultural liberalism* which is variously identified with ‘philosophical liberalism’ or ‘hyper-liberalism’ or simply ‘progressivism’.²⁹ How it is cultural liberalism has become identified with economic liberalism such that they seem to be fellow travellers, as it were, is certainly a problem, one that the magazine has set about attempting to answer. So far in the discussion the answers proffered carry the implicit and explicit assumption that cultural liberalism does not belong, properly so, to economic liberalism but is something of an aberration, something that is

²⁸ In an essay published in *First Things* June/July 2010 entitled ‘The Morality of Self-Interest’, David Goldman applies this thinking to American foreign policy. He styles his approach as ‘realism’ (don’t all political theorists?) by reason that it is an “Augustinian realism.” By which is meant that it is anti-statist and free market, and being so is very much like America. “States that suppress individual rights on behalf of some expression of the collective will fail...Those that support individual rights have some chance of succeeding.” Hence “to the extent that other nations share the American love for the sanctity of the individual, they are likely to succeed” (54). Of course, the issue is whether or not economic liberalism does, in fact, best serve individual rights for it clearly does *not* serve the rights of unborn individuals or those who, having escaped the strictures of the neo-colonialist Planned Parenthood and the reach of Melinda and Bill Gates, have been allowed to be conceived and come to term and been born into poorer climes where free-market trade deals have undermined traditional agricultural products (such as in Haiti and Mexico, among other less fortunate lands). See too Goldman’s article which he co-wrote with Reuven Brenner ‘The Keynes Conundrum’ in *First Things*, October 2010. The article is, as might be expected, opposed to Keynesian economics, the conclusion being that government bureaucracies are to blame for all manner of economic problems, whereas if we listened to entrepreneurs and speculators things would all go much better. David Goldman was at the time of writing these pieces a senior editor at *First Things* as well the head of fixed income research at the Bank of America. This information is on the official website of *First Things* where all of Goldman’s articles are listed, except, that is, for one, at least it was absent when I accessed it on 13/11/13. This was his ‘The Morality of Self-Interest’ which I think was a little bit intemperate and it might have been felt that it was best left forgotten.

²⁹ In his reply and critique of Patrick Deneen’s article (see above) Robert Miller (‘Eudaimonia in America’ *First Things*, April 2013) makes the contrast in liberalisms to be between ‘philosophical liberalism’ (which is the bad kind) and ‘pragmatic liberalism’ (which is the good kind). The latter is not doctrinaire and is, in fact, “generally indifferent to the moral perfection of its citizens” (29). This is the American form of liberalism and it is America’s greatness. Miller opened his essay thus: “America is under attack in the pages of *First Things*” (25), hence it is his intention to defend her against the likes of Deneen. Basic to Miller’s argument is that “Social pathologies do not result primarily from philosophical mistakes” (28). The argument is that Deneen and other like critics are wrong to critique the basic principles that inform American pluralism as these principles really have little to do with the moral problems in America today. A similar line of argument can be found in Paul Griffith’s response to Deneen’s essay (‘Public Life Without Political Theory’ *First Things*, Aug./Sept. 2012). Griffith writes that what is needed is “data” (35-36) and “good statistical information” (36) not theory. “Reason is incapable (and unaware of its incapacity) of assessing the outcome of adjusting complex systems” (36). Daniel Mahoney in his response to Deneen’s essay (‘The Art of Liberty’ *First Things*, Aug./Sept. 2012) draws a distinction between ‘philosophical liberalism’, which is of Hobbes and Locke and the concomitant notion of the autonomous individual, and the kind of liberalism proper to America which has to do with a “liberal republican order” (35), an order that is “federalist” in nature (34). What is needed is that Americans have a pride in this order: “Americans need pride, in themselves and in their tradition, a tradition that is not reducible to philosophical liberalism” (34). David Yeago (‘Modern But Not Liberal’, *First Things* June/July 2012) contrasts “ideological liberalism” (26) to the kind of theological liberalism that has arisen in Catholicism and Lutheranism. Ideological liberalism is defined by “individual autonomy and human rights” (27) as well as “individualistic voluntarism” (28). It is simplifying in a Hegelian like way (29) and does not recognise the “complexity and contingency” of the world in which we live (29). In a similar manner Thomas White (‘Love’s Greater Freedom’, *First Things* June/July 2012) contrasts what he calls “hyper-liberalism” which like all ideologies reduces “the human person...to some one principle” (35) and which thus ignores the complexity of what it is to be human (35), to a more moderate and Christian form of liberalism. Above all else, there does need to be a “normative account of the human good” for this provides a necessary tension to the autonomous choice of the individual (36). In these and other essays though the writers might differ one with the other in particulars, they nevertheless agree to distinguish between one form of liberalism, which is a bad form associated with cultural liberalism, and the good form which is, by and large, associated with economic liberalism and America properly understood.

probably the result of undue state interference in the market.³⁰ Neuhaus and other writers may have posited a inextricably entwined relationship between a good form of liberalism (that identified with pluralism and the privileging of the individual over state and ‘ideological’ collectives) and a liberal economy, but this relationship has little if anything to do with cultural liberalism referred to as ‘progressivism’.³¹

Both in Neuhaus’ book and the later essays in *First Things* the sense is that the free-market represents the economic system that best corresponds to ‘human flourishing’ and it does so by reason that it alone of all such systems best respects and nurtures the freedom of the individual as well as the ‘common good’.

It might be said that the genius of this position is that it can, at one and the same time, style itself as being anti-utopian while insinuating that it alone is conducive to the perfection of human nature. The sense of ‘utopian’ in the discourse of Neuhaus and *First Things* tends to refer to those systems that claim to be able to change, shape, mould, or even perfect human nature. As a rule where a system is referred to as ‘utopian’ this implies government programs and a consequent interference in the market economy; in short, in the state imposing itself, illegitimately so, upon the freedom of the individual. But how is it that economic liberalism can be opposed to utopian claims concerning the perfecting of human nature and yet seem to be making similar claims itself? It does so by reason that in appearing to oppose state informed ideologies it gives the appearance of opposing positive prescription (which is to say laws) and thereby of promoting and preserving freedom. And, as freedom as understood by *First Things* is defined by reference to the individual, and as this freedom describes the proper and even perfect state of an individual, then economic liberalism not being a *prescriptive* doctrine but a *permissive* one is thus the system most conducive to the flourishing of human nature proper. It is not too difficult to see that at the heart of this matter lies the definition of ‘freedom’ and the relationship of freedom so defined to human nature, a topic that we will return to in the second part of this series.

It ought also to be noted that recent discussions in *First Things* have not been as bold and forthright as Neuhaus was in his book discussed earlier. Neuhaus was not afraid in stating that his position was to be identified with capitalism; indeed the title of his book broadcast this point to all and sundry, *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian*

³⁰ A similar conundrum attends cultural liberals only they affect to reject any necessary link to economic liberalism, but they too are confronted by the fact that these two liberalisms have been, at the very least, fellow travellers. This is a topic to which we will return in the following essay.

³¹ The closest that a writer in *First Things* comes to seeing the inextricable link between cultural and economic liberalism is, to my mind, Edward Skidelsky’s essay ‘The Emancipation of Avarice’ (*First Things*, May 2011). Skidelsky argues that usury which is the basis of our commercial economy encourages avarice and greed as well as self-love. Furthermore it strips economic activity of its ethical character (37), all of which plays into the “familiar progressivist narrative” of consequentialism (that is, contra a theological understanding of natural law) (38). Certainly, Skidelsky hints that the bad aspects of a commercial economy can be put down to cultural liberalism (that is ‘progressivism’) but he goes on to say something that did not sit well with the readers. He actually argued for “the power of the state” to “discourage avarice” (38-39) which appeared to be an argument for state interference in the economy. The letters that followed, in *First Things* August/September 2011, were critical of this and other points, as one John Penfold wrote: “Markets fail, often spectacularly, but left alone they self-correct. The government does not,” this is because with government “rot and corruption become the norm” (8). All the replies defended capitalism and there was not one that said that perhaps Skidelsky was on to something or that he even had a point. I stress this was the case even though Skidelsky did *not* argue against liberal economics per se, and even took the standard line that the detrimental effects were down to ‘progressivism’ and not liberal economics per se. It was simply because, as far as I can see, that he did not argue for less state interference in the markets.

Capitalist. But that was in 1992 when capitalism could be triumphalist; whereas since the crashes and scandals of the late 1990s and on, well it is not too much an exaggeration to say that the term ‘capitalism’ has become a *little* odious. ‘Liberalism’ is a bit more acceptable except, of course, for the use made of it by those who are progressivists, hence the need, as we have seen above, for First Things to distinguish between different forms of liberalism.

If we translate First Things more recent language into that of Neuhaus’ plain language then in light of what we have charted above we can say this: that capitalism is the most conducive economic system for the flourishing of human nature, which nature is exemplified in the individual and not in a collectivity; that as an economic system capitalism not only embodies the principle proper of human nature, namely freedom, it also fosters human nature and helps to perfect it; and that capitalism is, in essence, antithetical and antipathetic to state control, which is to say government interference, for state control fosters that which is inimical to human nature being inimical to freedom proper. If we take this seriously, which First Things wants us to, and if we consider it by way of Christian theology (more specifically Catholic and Thomist theology) then we would, I think, be justified in arguing that capitalism is one of the primary natural means by which God works to bring human nature to its proper end. It is no surprise, then, that Neuhaus first of all and then First Things should think it fit that those who count themselves orthodox Catholics (and orthodox Protestants and Jews) should defend and promote economic liberalism, a program that seems to have found its way to Australia, to Sydney in particular. And it is also no surprise that they should print articles (and books) to the effect that divine revelation points to something of a similar conclusion, which brings us to the last essay from First Things to be engaged with here: Yoram Hazony’s ‘The Biblical Case for Limited Government’.³²

Hazony’s analysis is confined to the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) and in particular to the historical books dealing with the kings of Israel (including Judah). His argument is that the Bible charts a middle course between anarchy (exemplified in the period of the Judges) and monarchical despotism. Although the problem of anarchy is mentioned, the accent in Hazony’s article is on the state and thus his conclusion is that the Hebrew Bible is “fundamentally suspicious of the state.”³³ It is not too difficult to agree with Hazony’s conclusion, though in agreeing with it one would also want to point out that the Bible is fundamentally suspicious of *all* human concerns, including everything associated with individuals acting *as individuals*. Why Hazony should single out the state for special mention is not hard to guess given the sentiments of First Things. The fact that the Bible is suspicious of all human concerns this side of the Fall is not something in dispute, even the most thorough going Pelagian amongst us would allow that to be the case. The issue has to do with what form of government and economy is best suited to rein in, check, and ameliorate the effects of sin, while being conducive to the encouragement of virtue. And when the issue is put like this then something very important is seen to be missing from Hazony’s essay, something to which we will return shortly.

³² Yoram Hazony ‘The Biblical Case for Limited Government’ *First Things*, October 2012.

³³ *Ibid* p.42.

Hazony posits the best system of government as being one in which the state has a “dual legitimacy,”³⁴ one part consists of social acclamation (a kind of social contract) and the other has to do with an “independent standard of right,” namely God.³⁵ As most Christians would agree on this it might be thought trite, or more charitably of being the enunciation of a general principle which is to be filled out and given concrete content sometime in the future. Perhaps Hazony is even now following up on this. As the essay stands, however, the only concrete content that Hazony gives to his ‘dual legitimacy’ model is that it ought to be attended by limited government. The Bible, we are led to understand, sees limited government as the best form of government. Thus does Hazony’s essay lend biblical (and one presumes divine) legitimacy to the politics and economics championed by First Things.

There is something of a cheap trick in scholarship that serves a form of one-upmanship, and this is especially evident in respect of reviews. The reviewer points out something the author has failed to mention thereby giving the impression that the reviewer knows just that little bit more about the subject than the author of the work being reviewed does. Given that no author can exhaust a subject there is always something a reviewer can find to put the author in their place. And yet, having said that there are nevertheless times when pointing out an absence *is* called for; when what is not included in the work under review is essential to the serious treatment of the topic in question. Often what is missing is very telling indeed in that what it tells of is blindness, only it is no ordinary blindness but might rather be described as being of the nature of ideological myopia. Whether or not this applies to Hazony’s essay others can decide, but whatever the case may be there is very serious and significant omission in his argument. ‘Significant’ not least because what is absent might be said to undermine his conclusion.

What Hazony does not mention is that the Torah prescribes a centralised theocratic state, one in which the economy is reined in by laws that severely delimit the freedom of both capital and the market.

The significance of this omission might be spelt out in this way: if the laws found in the Torah were applied today then our economy (we could say the *global* economy) would look *very* different to how it looks now. For example, if usury were outlawed, if all debts were wiped every seven years, if all land reverted back to the ownership of the original extended family every forty nine or fifty years, if it was incumbent upon those who are wealthy to help those in their extended family who are poor, and if no work whatsoever was allowed on the Sabbath, and if these and other like matters were to be enforced by the state then I think it reasonable to say that the shape of our society would be *very* different indeed.³⁶ And by that I mean not just economically but politically and culturally different as well. And as Neuhaus allowed that the spiritual is a subset of the cultural, then our society would also look

³⁴ 44.

³⁵ 46.

³⁶ Against usury *Exodus* 22:25, *Deuteronomy* 23:19-20; the wiping of debts *Deuteronomy* 15:1-11; Jubilee year reversion of land *Leviticus* 25:10; helping the extended family *Leviticus* 25:35-37; and Sabbath *Exodus* 20:8; 23:12; 31:15. And this is not to mention enforced tithing to help the Levites but also the poor (for example *Deuteronomy* 26:12-15). I have used the term ‘extended family’ in the place of ‘kin’ and ‘tribe’ so as to employ a more modern idiom. The sense is of it being incumbent upon a person to look out for those even distantly related to them. Not just being incumbent by way of voluntary and virtuous behaviour, but being incumbent by way of state sanctioned and enforced law.

spiritually different to boot! Our consciousness would not be quite the same if only in respect of the way in which we understand value and meaning.

Whether or not it would be a good thing that the aforementioned laws be put in place, or even if Israel *ever* in fact enacted these laws, is neither here nor there, at least in respect of the point we are making. The point being made here is that, pace Hazony and First Things, divine revelation certainly *does* give a mandate for state interference in the market economy. Indeed, it would seem to do so in a rather obvious way, by which I mean that it is not too difficult to see passages in the Torah (and the rest of the Hebrew Bible) that support a strong centralised government imposing itself upon the economy. Why, then, did Hazony and First Things (or at least the editors of First Things and their reviewers) not notice what appears to be a glaring omission? There is no evidence that would suggest insincerity or conscious duplicity on the part of Hazony or anyone else at First Things, and such a charge would not only be uncharitable but evidence as well of critical laziness. The argument here, and it is one to be taken up more so in the next essay in this series, is that what the foregoing testifies to is just how powerfully the economy can shape our consciousness, insofar as this is expressed in what it is that does and does not register in our reading of the sacred text (and for that matter any other text besides).

Now, whatever else the aforementioned laws would have done they would, to a significant degree, have served to redistribute wealth. Taken together the laws cited earlier would have given rise to scenarios like the following: a wealthy person would have had to help out a poorer person (at the very least one in their extended family) and do so by way of a loan with no interest attached. And not only that, for if the loan were not able to be repaid it would in seven years be wiped from the ledger. (It might be argued that such a system would be open to abuse, or it might be that rich people would in such circumstances not lend any money, but if this were the case then such behaviour was not merely a matter of personal virtue but of state sanctioned, and presumably policed, law.) An interest free loan with no threat of it ending in financial servitude certainly seems to be one way in which wealth can be redistributed to those less fortunate. Indeed, it seems to something that might actually serve to encourage 'small-business' entrepreneurship, though of course it would certainly not encourage the kind of financial speculations that fuel today's money markets, which in turn fuel modern capitalism.

We might think this interference ill advised, or we might think that what the Bible mandates is more a matter of a general principles than specific rules to be applied in the same way in every situation - but whatever we think it is nevertheless true that if we look to the Hebrew Bible by way of guidance on matters political and economic it is not difficult to see that the Bible gives credence to a position that is contrary to the one that First Things champions. In short, there is little in the Torah that warrants the statement that divine revelation extols limited government interference in matters political and economic.

As noted above, the issue here is why this aspect of biblical revelation is ignored, simply not seen, or not given due prominence in the thinking on matters political and economic in the pages of First Things. It might be argued that this is due to the Christian and Catholic

approach to the Old Testament, by which is meant that the economic laws in the Torah are irrelevant to the New Testament dispensation. But this is not the case for the simple reason that First Things is not given to dispensational exegesis or any form of exegesis that could be likened to supersessionism. It might be argued that although the laws of the Torah are not dispensed with in Christian polity they *are* transformed, in a similar way to how the purity and priestly laws are fulfilled and transformed in Christ. Certainly, this approach finds expression in *some* forms of Protestantism, notably ‘pietistic’ forms, where it is argued that the injunctions of the Torah are now no longer ones to be enforced by the state, rather have they become principles that the individual is ‘personally’ to ascribe to by way of a conscious and free decision. That is, the New Testament is a matter of the ‘heart’, by which is meant individual and free assent, whereas the Old Testament was a matter of state imposition. Such a simplistic view of biblical theology, however, seems out of place in First Things, and I can see in its pages no explicit argument made for this take on the Bible. And yet, in its championing of economic liberalism and the privileging of the individual over communal and/or state conceptions of the human person, First Things does seem to *intimate* such an understanding of the relationship of the Torah to Christian polity. This may be an unfair appraisal of First Things reading of the Bible, it may even be wrong, only be it wrong, right, or unfair, such explanations are called for in light of more recent discussions in the magazine on matters economic in relation to matters biblical. I want to pursue this matter some more in the next essay, but here we ought to turn to the New Testament in order to see what is made there of the economic laws in the Torah. Before we do this we might note a rather common phenomenon: when commentators treat of the way in which Jesus fulfils the Torah they rarely discuss the way in which he fulfils the economic laws in Torah.

What we might begin by doing is observing something all Christians hold to, namely that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and Prophets but to fulfil them³⁷ and that the essence of the Law is to do to people what you would have them do to you.³⁸ The latter being something that accords with what Jesus says are the two greatest laws: to love God with your whole heart and to love your neighbour as yourself.³⁹ There is a hierarchical order to the laws by reference to which there is an order of derivation and orientation. In the Torah the 600 or so laws all find their proper meaning by reference to the highest laws, the love of God and love of neighbour. Informing this hierarchical system of derivation and orientation is a ‘reciprocal’ logic, one in which our well-being (or to use the term First Things likes, ‘flourishing’) is inextricably tied to the well-being or ‘common good’ of the other, which relationship is not something separate to, or distinct from, the state as covenantal community. Rather is the state/covenantal community both the chief expression of, and guarantor of, this relationship. It can be argued, then, that in the Torah *the laws that rein in the economy are an essential element in protecting the common good of Israel and in allowing it to flourish*. To put it another way, the economic laws are an essential aspect to preserving the reciprocal logic that informs the *raison d’être* of the Torah and, thereby, in preserving and nurturing the

³⁷ For example *Matthew 5:17* and *7:12*; *Luke 16:17*; *24:14*.

³⁸ *Matt. 7:12*.

³⁹ *Matt. 22:37*; *Mark 12:30*; *Luke 10:27*. See *Deuteronomy 6:4-5*.

‘common good’ (and preserving and nurturing the ‘common good’ is a cause that First Things holds to be very much in its brief).

How, then, are the economic laws fulfilled in Jesus? By which we do not mean how it is they are abolished, but *how it is they find their perfect expression*. First of all we might note that one aspect of this expression is that the laws and their logic of reciprocity are not annihilated but extended. Hence, although in the Torah usury between Israelites was forbidden it was not so between Israelite and Gentile.⁴⁰ We would thus expect this law not be abolished but to be extended so as to include Gentiles as well, and that is what we find.

Although we will be discussing the subject of usury and the Fathers in the second part of this series it is apposite here to quote St Augustine from his sermon on Matthew 19:21. This passage in Matthew is the well known one concerning the rich young man who says he keeps all the Law but is told by Jesus to give away all he has to the poor. Augustine paraphrases Jesus as saying both to the rich young man and to us that in selling all and giving the proceeds away to the poor we become a usurer in respect to God. “Give to God, and press God for payment. Yea, rather give to God, and you will be pressed to receive payment.”⁴¹ Augustine notes that there are two forms of usury: worldly usury which is condemned and to be avoided; and usury towards God which is praised and to be encouraged.

What Augustine picked up on is what we have, by and large, missed, though when it is pointed out it becomes as plain as day. In other words, something has blinded us to what is most evident. This is that contrary to common post-Reformation notions of grace the theme of *reward* bulks large in the topic of salvation in the New Testament, and no more so than in the Gospels. And this theme of reward is presented in economic terms, in terms of usury (or rather contrary to worldly usury), which is to say of reward on investment; you give to God and you receive back a hundredfold more. Again and again in the Gospels salvation is presented in, and illustrated by, economic terms, and this is more than mere metaphor for the contrast drawn is between the economics of heaven and the economics of the world, where it is expected that the former will supplant the latter.⁴² On a practical note it might be asked how it is we *can* lend to God? And the answer, as a rule, is by giving to the poor, that’s how.

This is not, of course, a this-worldly prosperity doctrine such as one finds in certain forms of contemporary Pentecostalism, but it certainly is a soteriology of ‘investment’ insofar as in

⁴⁰ *Deut. 23:20*.

⁴¹ St Augustine Sermon 36, using R. MacMullen’s translation in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 6*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979. See too St Augustine’s reflections on Psalm 37, in Volume 8.

⁴² For example see: *Matthew 5:12, 42-48; 6:1-4*, see too *vs. 12* where we ask for the forgiveness of our debts as we forgive others their debts; *6:16-18; 10:40-42; Luke 6:20-23, 28-31, 35, 38; &:36-47; 8:18; 11:9-41; 12:33-34, 47-48; 14:12-14*. See as well 16:1-8 and the parable of the shonky manager, the one who lessens the debts of his master’s clients, which parable ends in the statement that “You cannot serve God and Mammon.” Also *Luke 16:19-31* on the rich man in hell who did not share of his wealth with Lazarus. We are told that he had his reward, the denouement of this tale being that the rich man expressed his (and apparently his brothers) deafness to the Law and the Prophets by his failure to obey the Law and help the poor. The investment the rich man made is contrasted to that which attended the state of Lazarus. As this follows on from our being told that the Pharisees “loved money” (*Luke 16:14-15*) then the story of the rich man in hell illustrates the outcome of that love. It is state of affairs later illustrated in the presence of the money changers in the Temple (19:45-46), and their devouring widow’s houses (20:47). There is one time honoured way in which the proverbial widow’s house is devoured and that, of course, is by way of usury. It is pertinent to note that these and other like passages in the Gospel often revolve around the way in which the Scriptures are read so as to ‘justify’ behaviours that are contrary to the Law. This is a theme to which we will return in the second part of this series.

redistributing one's wealth one gains greater treasures in heaven. This economics of soteriology is of grace, but *not* a grace that works principally to the individual *as* individual, but a grace that perfects the reciprocal logic enunciated in the Torah. It is a grace that works, first and foremost, through mediation, the mediation of the visible, authoritative, hierarchical covenantal communion. We are given grace in order to be a means of grace to others, and the principle way in which grace works is to build up the visible community which first and foremost applies to the Church⁴³, but also to the state, not least, as St Paul put it, in its capacity to be a terror to evil doers and a source of consolation and protection for those who do good.⁴⁴ Hence, God's grace works both in the visible hierarchical order of the Church and likewise in the state, what's more that which we have such that we can serve the other through the Church *and* the state comes from God; is of grace. In its supernatural and natural aspects grace works to establish and fulfil the two greatest laws of the Torah mentioned earlier, as well as the logic of reciprocity clearly enunciated in what is called 'the golden rule'. Succinctly put, we are able to give by reason of the grace of God, and grace works to free our wills such that we can then cooperate with grace, and we cooperate with grace by 'investing' the grace we have been given (which includes our wealth) with God by giving to those who are poor, and in doing this we are given an incredible return on our investment.⁴⁵ This is the heavenly economy, a *heavenly* usury, only when the attempt is made to justify *worldly* usury by reference to this economy then there can only be corruption; a corruption that thinks that it can serve both God and Mammon. It is in this confusion that ideological blindness finds its power.

The passage from Matthew concerning the rich young man that St Augustine was commenting on is very significant in light of the above. If there is one thing that is made clear in the Gospels concerning Judah and its environs at the time of Christ it is that there was a large disparity between rich and poor, and concomitant with this there was a great amount of poverty and physical incapacity to be encountered on a daily basis. All of this was undoubtedly exacerbated by the great wealth on show in Jerusalem for such urban centres become a magnet to the impoverished and lame, the hope being that some of the wealth on show will, in today's parlance, trickle down to them. Against this background it is interesting to reread the account of the rich young man. When the rich young man says he has kept all the commandments there is good reason to argue that this, in fact, is *not* the case, for he is still very rich while there are many poor and crippled people around him. We might ask of this young man, what of those laws in Torah that have economic ramifications? Not least those which command the helping the poor? That he couldn't answer to Jesus' demand expresses something of why he couldn't answer to the Law's command; he loved his wealth more than he loved salvation. But of course he would not have thought of it this way, he would have justified it, perhaps by doing the time honoured trick of seeing his wealth as being a sign of God's blessing for his being pious. For our purposes we might put the issue in

⁴³ *1 Corinthians 12:1-31*.

⁴⁴ *Romans 13:1-7*.

⁴⁵ The Mass is the best example of this economy of grace. We give to God the gifts of the earth and of our hands (the bread and wine), gifts that come from God, and then these gifts are given to be the body and blood of our Lord who gives his life for us. We then eat these gifts that are made truly and really so into the body and blood of our Lord. Thus, from the gifts that God gives us, we give bread and wine to God, and then we get it back a 'hundredfold' greater than it was for now it is the gift to us of the body and blood of our Lord!

the form of a question: why was the young man unable to see those laws in the Torah that we touched upon earlier? Perhaps more startling still is that this blindness was one that Jesus' disciples seemed to share for they are astonished by the outcome of this engagement.⁴⁶ When Jesus says to the young man to give all that he has to the poor, Jesus may well be demanding more than the Law commanded but he is not annulling the law in question, rather is he extending it! He expands its scope.

“Love your enemies and do good to them; lend expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”⁴⁷ We might note that in this passage and others like it the reciprocal logic that informs the Law is made explicit, furthermore when Jesus says to lend and expect nothing in return, well that *is* what the Law commanded. The Law is fulfilled by being expanded such that it applies not only to a person's extended family, or even to Israel, but to all people, hence the prohibition against usury applies not only to fellow Israelites but to the enemies of Israel as well, namely to the Gentiles, which is to say to the *global* economy. What Jesus does is show how the economy of salvation is one in which the worldly economy of usury is turned on its head (or to paraphrase Marx on Hegel, on its feet). The *common good* of humanity, which is to say the *flourishing* of humanity, requires the transformation of the worldly economy into one that is in accord with the economy of heaven and the state certainly has a role in this.

Only it is just here that many balk, and all of a sudden the extent and reach of the Gospel is said to have reached its limit; we might say that here is where its extension is stayed. And where exactly is the limit to the reach of the Gospel? It would seem at the very borders of an economy based upon worldly usury; which is to say *exactly* where capital is freed from moral constraints, at the place that today we call ‘the free-market’. The problem is, and it is *the* problem that First Things seems unable at the moment to seriously address, is that today society in all its aspects is increasingly defined by reference to the free market not least through the logic of commodification and privatisation (or more accurately ‘corporatisation’) and this has ramifications for all aspects of society and culture. The most obvious and yet routinely ignored example of this being the example which served to open our discussion proper, namely the commodification of human life and its subjugation to the logic of the consumer economy in abortion and its accoutrements.

To translate this into the language First Things employs: the limit of the Gospel coincides with the limit to which the government can ‘interfere’ in the market. Both the Gospel and the government seem to reach an impasse as far as the market is concerned, for when we come to the market economic matters are now to be the concern of the individual's free choice and not to be a subject proper of government interference be it by way of law or other form of agency. The problem is that when the market becomes off-limits it does *not* stay in its place, it expands its reach and, soon enough, all comes under its domain, insofar as all value and

⁴⁶ Note how in *Matt. 19:25* the disciples are astonished to hear that rich people getting into heaven is an impossible thing to achieve. They reply “Who then can be saved?” The implication of their response is that any reasonable and pious Jew of the time would have thought that a very rich person who appeared to keep the Law in most particulars would be saved. To hear that this is not the case is *astonishing*.

⁴⁷ *Luke 6:35-36*. This was one of, if not *the*, principle Scriptural passages used by the Fathers in their denunciation of usury.

meaning are determined by its logic. Like Marx, Neuhaus was right, and so too for that matter are Robert George and Paul Ryan, the economic, the political, and the cultural (which includes the spiritual) are all entwined, and so it should really occasion no surprise that it is abortion above all else that reveals the real causal relationship between economic liberalism and cultural liberalism. We will return to this subject in more depth in the next instalment.

By way of wrapping this piece up we might note that there has been much debate in the Church since at least the Fathers on as to what constitutes usury proper: is it a blanket ban on making profit from investing money, or does it refer only to having money multiply by reference to no concrete external good? Is it a blanket ban on lending at interest, or does usury refer only to lending at interest to the poor? There are many other like questions raised in the course of the history of the Church and I want to return to the primary issue in the next essay – this being if the condemnation of usury was only a matter of justice in respect of contingent circumstances, or if it refers to matters of natural justice and thus has to do with metaphysics, which is to say with the very character and constitution of creation itself. Suffice it to say here that in the Church the discussion turned on the nature of usury proper, not if it should be proscribed by the state – the condemnation of usury was a given. It needs to be stressed that whatever usury was it was to be proscribed, and if that were not possible then hemmed in.

The point here is that in both the Bible and the history of the Church (and this includes both Catholic and Protestant, at least in Protestantism's early years) the issue of usury and the role of the state in delimiting or even proscribing it was certainly *not* seen as being evidence of the Church or state overreaching itself. Indeed, it was seen as the duty of the Church and/or state to oppose usury or severely delimit its application and that with heavy penalties enforceable by law. In other words, it was seen to be the duty of the Church and/or the state *to interfere in the economy*.

It may well be that we now know better, that now we know that freeing up capital in the way we have done is a God mandated way of encouraging 'human flourishing' and thereby of aiding the 'common good'. And it may also be the case that by reason that America has been the home both of the intellectual defence of the freeing up of capital and its application then America is to be defended by every Catholic and Christian who deserves to be called Christian and Catholic. What's more, it may well be the case that through exporting this economic model, such that it becomes applied throughout the global economy, that the world will become more liberal (in the non-pejorative sense of that term), more inclusive and more pluralistic, as well as more protective of individual human rights across the globe. All of this may well be the case (though I do not think so), but if it is so then we might have expected far better biblical exegesis from the pages of *First Things*, not to mention a far deeper engagement with the history of the Church on the issue of usury. In other words, we might have expected a few less blind spots.