

Justice in the Global Economy: A Theological Reflection

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Introduction

Justice in the Global Economy is a concise account of the crisis which humanity is currently facing: 'We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental' (*Laudato Si'*, § 139). Of particular interest is the recommendation that Jesuits and colleagues have direct engagement with poorer communities and, in particular, that we turn 'our institutions into instruments for economic justice'.¹ The latter is spelled out in terms of harnessing research resources and advancing knowledge in favour of poorer people, networking to focus on policy issues, lobbying in this direction, and realising the potential of our professional schools in faculty, students and alumni to bring about changes to the *status quo*.²

It will be interesting to see what traction this particular call to action achieves: in the past, while undoubtedly there has been much progress in all Jesuit institutions (including schools and centres of spirituality) in taking on board the social justice agenda, still there has been a resistance to what has been seen as an 'instrumentalisation' of any apostolate, which might take it away from its own particular goal. And so, for example, Jesuit educationalists have often understood their tradition in the light of a Christian humanism which cannot be reduced to a social justice agenda alone.

Theologically, this was the kind of war of ideas carried out by and within Liberation Theology and, in particular, by Ignacio Ellacuria in El Salvador with his notion of the Jesuit university in service of the option for people who are poor. We have had our own version of this war in terms of the debate among Jesuits and colleagues about fee-paying schools and other related issues in Ireland. *Justice in the Global Economy* may be an opportunity to revisit these debates in a more constructive way.

In this reflection, however, I have chosen a different focus. The Report is a 'call to action', and part of the action envisaged is an identification of particular challenges arising in 'different regions and local situations'. It seems to me that one of

the key challenges in our Irish situation is that as believers – or people struggling with questions of faith – we often know the scientific/secular analysis quite well, but we have difficulties in linking it with our operative grasp of faith and spirituality. Jesus remains a powerful ethical model, but somehow we do not easily connect him with God or with traditional theological categories, such as *sin and salvation* that are the common language of Church. This means that our faith is not the dynamic motivation it might be in the struggle for a better world, and we remain mostly unconverted and somewhat sluggish in our response.

One important aspect of this phenomenon is captured by Gladys Ganiel in her recent study, where she uses the term 'post-Catholic' to describe our situation in Ireland, defining it in terms of *a shift in consciousness* in which the Catholic Church, as an institution, is no longer held in high esteem by most of the population and can no longer expect to exert a monopoly influence in social and political life in Ireland.³ However, the problem has to do not just with the Church as institution, but with theology as a means of articulating an understanding that can resonate with contemporary experience.

Without this theology, as Christians in Ireland – and elsewhere in Europe – we run the risk of remaining somewhat one-speed and contradictory in response to the crises facing humankind, our scientific understanding hampered by our lack of a corresponding intellectual grasp of how this matters to faith. By theology I am referring here not just to academic theology, but to the operative and spontaneous theology or world view of people of faith. The posthumously published words of Seamus Heaney come to mind: 'Christian myth is so contentious and exhausted'.⁴

I will suggest some lines here along which theology at all levels might explore new idioms and a new way of translating traditional theological categories into terms which might ignite our imaginations and move us more urgently along the path of that 'ecological conversion' seen as so crucial by Pope Francis (*Laudato Si'*, § 216–221).

The Irish Context

The dialogue between faith and culture has been there from the birth of Christianity and is part of the logic of the Incarnation – God taking flesh, becoming one with humankind. Biblical scholars note the crucial importance of the Jewish background of Jesus for his life and teaching, as well as his closeness to nature and rural life. They suggest too that he may well have learned the more universal dimensions of his mission from encounters with the likes of the Syro-Phoenician woman.⁵ Paul famously dialogued with the wisdom of the Greeks on the Areopagus. This dialogue with the Greco–Roman world became a standard feature of theological and popular thought in the first few centuries of the Church, culminating in the necessity and appropriateness (for those times) of defining the identity of Jesus Christ as being ‘consubstantial with the Father’ in the Council of Nicea. What is there in our contemporary culture that faith and theology would do well to take on board if it wishes to be truly ‘incarnated’? What in that culture needs to be considered if faith wishes to speak the message of ‘justice in the global economy’ more tellingly to people of our times?

Dermot Lane, drawing principally on the analysis of the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, presents a succinct diagnosis.⁶ The process of secularisation (a characteristic of modernity now well advanced in Ireland) has resulted in the emergence of a purely ‘immanent frame’ of reference, an ‘exclusive humanism’, a ‘disenchanted universe’ without reference to the Transcendent.

Within this new ‘social imaginary’, there has arisen the anthropological notion of the ‘buffered self’, disembodied, closed off from the world (the natural world in particular) and any transcendent horizon. Post-modernity has engaged in a critique of this ‘disenchanted’ world. However, with its own relativism and fragile subjectivity, post-modernity has failed to find much objective traction in its search for a ‘re-enchantment’ of our world. A common characteristic of both modernity and post-modernity is a high esteem for freedom – often, however, limited to a reductively liberal notion of ‘freedom from’ without much agreement on what a ‘freedom for’ might look like.

What all this means is that faith now is experienced within a cultural context which is challenging in its complexity. One cannot anymore, for example, presume a pre-Enlightenment world in which

salvation could easily be understood as freedom from the fear of hell. As science and technology have led to a deeper understanding and mastery of so many of the previously feared forces of nature, as human autonomy and democracy have liberated us from many of the chains of despotic rule and – more problematically – imbued in us a suspicion of all authority, a God of Fear no longer resonates with our culture.

And yet, with all its good points, we can see how the ‘buffered self’ of modernity, with its excessive individualisation and anthropocentric focus, has little sense of either the common good or of intrinsic links with nature. It follows that we have fertile grounds for the excesses of a neo-liberal economic model and a failure of ecological engagement. Post-modernity is aware of this and has critiqued many of the presumed certainties of modernity by its inclusion of minority voices and opinions, allowing for the legitimacy of feeling and sensibility as sources of knowledge, and also by its intuition that ultimately a more transcendent frame of reference is required.

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Post-modernity understands that we have become over-impressed with scientific and technological progress to the extent that we have an operative epistemology which gives weight only to the empirically verifiable, a kind of rationalism which disqualifies the spiritual, the poetic, and the artistic from being legitimate sources of human knowledge. Its critique of the ‘magic’ which modernity sees in economic markets, in naked power and violence, is cogent. But its own antipathy to ‘meta-narratives’ and its de-construction of the self have led it into a kind of banal trivialisation and drift, including a cult of celebrity, which are unlikely to lead to a re-constructed world view. In a stimulating piece likening Disneyland Paris to the ancient practice of religious pilgrimage, Mark Faulkner observes what G.K. Chesterton once said: ‘When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything’.⁷

How then do we go about constructing a faith narrative which can integrate what is good in the ambient culture and critique what is deficient? This narrative might seek to re-present Jesus Christ not just as one other ethical model, but also as Son of God who answers the post-modern call for ‘re-enchantment’ by revealing a sphere of mystery, not magic, a sphere which is both transcendent and respectful of the imminent.

Writing in the 1950s about the German Catholic Church, Karl Rahner notes the sullen, dejected feel of a Church out of touch with the world, peopled by half-hearted Christians, an institution to which the ‘world’ is kinder simply because it no longer provides any challenge or threat, already a symptom of ‘tired old Europe’.⁸ Could the same be said of the Church in Ireland today, and, if so, is it any wonder that our faith fails to inspire the intelligence and energy required to grapple with the issues raised by a document like *Justice in the Global Economy*?

And how different the tone of this woe-begone situation is to the urgency of the liberation promised by Jesus Christ when he said: ‘I have come to cast fire on the earth and how I wish it were blazing already!’⁹

How then might we go about weaving a narrative of faith, hope and purpose into this secularised fabric of, at best, practical love and, at worst, drifting harmful immediacy, a fabric indifferent to questions about ultimate meaning or purpose.

Steps Towards a Renewed Theology

It might be good to begin with the kind of shared starting point that people of faith, no faith, and all in-between could share – for example, the common human instinct that human beings matter, and that, for example, some response is called for when we witness the terrible insecurity and suffering of so many migrants today.¹⁰ Of course, some people will feel this instinct more strongly than others, and there will be disagreement about how to respond. But the point is that the instinct is there, we share it, and it has become enshrined in international treaties safeguarding human rights.

But what is this instinct based on? Is it due to biological determinism, chance, or does it have a more purposeful foundation? Or, is there simply no explanation, is it just a ‘given’? When you push a little further, inevitably the question arises: is our universe just ‘there’, based on chance and

determinism, without any deeper intelligibility? Is there any reason for any ‘before’ ‘the Big Bang’? Or – the most basic philosophical question of all – why is there *something* rather than *nothing*?

These are the kinds of questions which our culture today is not so interested in, preferring instead to remain at the level of what is scientifically provable. This world view has not been the usual mode of human civilisation – the ancients appreciated the need for good ‘physics’, but knew that ‘meta-physics’ was also important if our primary intuitions about human life were to be sustainable in the long term. Over the centuries, mythology, philosophy, poetry, art, and religion all dialogued with ‘physics’ in an attempt to answer more ultimate questions and to ground our basic values and attitudes.



Stepping towards a renewed theology

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In the Christian understanding, this human search for meaning has been aided by a divine revelation in the Judaeo-Christian tradition (seeds of which are present in other religious traditions) which, *inter alia*, posits God as the source and energy of our universe. This God is not simply a bigger A.N. Other than the rest of us, another being, but rather is Being Itself, Mystery, more unlike than like us, and, therefore, about whom we can say relatively little, a heuristic notion in this sense. But, thanks to revelation, what we can say is that this Mystery is benign and benevolent, is purposeful Creator and Providential shaper of our world which itself is shot through with fixed laws, but also with randomness – a randomness in that way of ‘emergent probability’ which philosopher Bernard Lonergan outlines,¹¹ and which is altogether compatible with a scientific, evolutionary perspective.

God, then, is not like an obtrusive Big Brother, much less a harsh Judge or capricious and cruel dispenser of fate, and above all, does not crowd out human individuality and freedom – but rather, in the words of Augustine, God is more intimate to

me than I am to myself, and higher than the highest I can reach (*intimior intimo meo, superior summo meo*). In other words, it is my relationship with God which frees me to be most myself and to reach the heights to which I have been called. This claim to a more authentic and adult freedom, issuing in responsible action, is what counters the assertions of wishful thinking, regression, nihilism, and resignation to fate characteristic of the influential critique of the Modern ‘masters of suspicion’ such as Feuerbach, Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx.

Christianity revealed this God in terms of a differentiated unity – the Father (associated particularly with creation), the Son (with salvation) and the Holy Spirit (through an ongoing presence in the world and in the Church). This mysterious Trinity, when you explore a little further, is non-sexist and non-patriarchal and, more positively, is a model of unity-in-difference/relationship/equality which is paradigmatic for the inter-connectedness of all created reality, natural and human. And so, along these lines and contrary to the operative spirit of the age, Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* can speak of the natural world as having an intrinsic dignity and value not simply in relation to humankind but in itself – because in itself, it mirrors and reveals something of the immensity of God which human beings (who are ‘in the image and likeness of God’¹²) cannot do on their own. And of course, with regard to humankind, the Christian world view is pointing to the dignity and meaning of the individual human person as being intrinsically relational. Hence, this world view opens up notions such as the *common good* and *solidarity* that are so central to Catholic social teaching, and also deeply rooted in human instinct and experience, as we noted above.

The philosophically heuristic notion of God as Being Itself yields to a more relational world view or ontology with the revelation of Jesus Christ, image of God. Consequently, the Mystery of God as solitary power and transcendence is transformed into the relational God of self-emptying love, tender and close, loving us to death. The kenotic image of Jesus on the Cross is God’s glory revealed, less as fearsome power, and more as vulnerable, almost incomprehensible, love. How could God love me/us so much? This is Mystery not as mystification, but as more profound depths of a love which we catch glimpses of in our own deepest human relationships.

And this is a mystery which enters deeply into

what theology speaks of as sin and what all language knows of as *suffering*. We tread on sacred ground here: no glib responses are possible to the grave and often terrible consequences of even petty human acts of malice and spite, not to mention more serious breaches that often occur as the result of omission as much as commission. Nor to the seemingly intractable web of unjust social structures which blight the lives of so many. Nor to the havoc wreaked by natural disasters, such as earthquakes and tsunamis. Nor, indeed, to the grievous failures of Christian Churches, including the Catholic Church through the ages – and more recently in, for example, the ongoing unconscionable treatment of women and the terrible consequences of clerical sexual abuse and its mishandling by authorities.

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The ravages of evil are as old and well-known as Job, and we know that we share in their roots in our own hearts, as we struggle through life to free ourselves from egoism and self-delusion. What we can say with reverence and humility is that Jesus Christ shows that God wants not sin, but salvation – in other words, not suffering and evil, but happiness, liberation and flourishing for humankind and for all of creation. That evil is a surd, parasitic on the good, that good which is the norm. That as is seen in the life of Jesus, God is particularly close to those who suffer, and that, in fact, God takes that suffering into God’s own self, shares it, and carries it (this is the Christian branch of theology called soteriology). And that God, mindful of natural evolution and human freedom, is all the time luring us, and creation, to better places (‘all creation groans in coming to birth’¹³), and through the mysteries of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, has indicated that truth, beauty and love will win out. With our help, we can experience anticipations of this victory already in this life (otherwise known as eschatology).

And so, as human beings, we have the immense dignity not just of being born in the image and likeness of God, but also of being called to participate in the building up of the Kingdom of

God preached by Jesus – a kingdom of peace and justice for all, with care for our created environment as an integral part of this call in today’s world. We are called then to be free, to a growing ability to be less self-absorbed and – mysteriously and entirely unexpectedly – to experience the full flowering of our humanity in becoming sons and daughters of God, god-like, holy, ‘divinised/deified’, as Eastern theology preferentially puts it (that is, grace).

If God is source of all this and Jesus effective exemplar, it is the Holy Spirit who now acts in our world according to the Christian understanding, drawing all individuals into this journey towards justice and love. It is the Holy Spirit who, for Christians, acts through God’s word in Scripture and God’s presence in Church, sacraments, liturgy and prayer to lead us along the way to a less ‘buffered self’, and to a greater opening to the infinite possibilities of a share in divine life offered to humankind.

We are called to be radically practical about this: prosaically, we need to immerse ourselves in the day-to-day realities of human work and struggle. We need to learn how our world works and how we may bring about change – helped by the likes of Catholic social teaching – together with unbelievers. We need to work for a Church which is more just and, in line with Pope Francis’ own thinking, more collegial, synodical and dialogical in nature, a better expression of God’s Trinitarian nature and a more apt instrument for evangelization in today’s less authoritarian world.

But we will be helped to carry out this prosaic work by being imbued with the poetry of God’s Good News of divine presence and effective engagement with our world, engendering in us trust that fills our imaginations, hope that gives energy, and a joyous wonder which sustains and nourishes us on that onerous long march through the institutions, and towards our own liberation, as part of everyone’s story.

Conclusion

I began with mention of a ‘post-Catholic Ireland’. It should be noted also that the eminent German political philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, has spoken increasingly of ‘post-secular Europe’. *Irish Times* journalist Joe Humphreys has often written of the need, in Ireland, for progressive secular thinkers to avoid adopting a reflex antipathy to all things religious but instead to seek allies among religious people seeking the same ends. Writing in July

2016, he noted the observations of the late legal scholar and secular humanist, Ronald Dworkin, in his book *Religion without God* (2013), that people of all faiths and none can find common ground by adopting a ‘religious attitude’ which accepts the truth of two central judgements: ‘The first holds that human life has objective meaning or importance ... The second holds that what we call “nature” – the universe as a whole and all its parts – is not just a matter of fact but is itself sublime: something of intrinsic value and wonder’.¹⁴

I have tried to indicate some of the steps towards an articulation of a theology, both academic and popular, which might speak to our culture’s lack of curiosity about transcendence (and the basis of objective meaning), as well as its truncated notion of the individual and of human freedom, with the well-known consequences for our sense of the common good and for care for our common home. Each of these steps would, of course, require much more detailed treatment:¹⁵ this has been more in the way of map-making, in the hope that it may stimulate others to make better maps and fill in the terrain appropriately.

There are different levels in the approach taken. A first level tries, somewhat in the mode of traditional apologetics, to create a certain plausibility structure within the Christian narrative to make it more accessible, without compromising it to our contemporary culture. What emerges here is the somewhat surprising (to many contemporaries) conclusion that the Gospels are in fact a pre-eminently Enlightenment, liberationist document, making freedom and individualism more sustainable by placing them in a relational and transcendent context where the common good also embraces the good of nature.

The second tries to appeal to believers themselves to understand that their faith in Jesus Christ, and the discipleship and ecclesial belonging it entails, shows a God deeply involved in our world, dreaming and working to bring about a better world in the face of enormous challenges and opposition, calling on us to be the divine hands and feet to bring about the realisation of these dreams. This is the God illustrated powerfully in the New Testament figure of Mary, disciple *par excellence*, not least in the profoundly liberationist sentiments she proclaimed during her pregnancy in her Magnificat.¹⁶ This is the God too of the Ignatian spiritual exercises, labouring in our world, working as Trinity for our salvation, aware of sin and evil,

but always drawing us toward the Kingdom. This is already achieved in principle through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so that in the end we can begin to see God in all things, and see our world primarily in the light of God's love.

Above all, this essay has been an attempt to respond to the Report, *Justice in the Global Economy*, by identifying, as the document asks us to do, a particular challenge that arises in our own region. Clearly a renewed theology on its own will not suffice: we need ongoing conversation with the best scientific analysis, we need the spur of effective leadership, engaged spirituality, and prophetic action in order to reawaken our need for salvation and the Good News of the Gospels within a culture which experiences and sees no such need. But it has been my contention that a renewed theology, if not a sufficient condition on its own, is a necessary condition for the effective reception and implementation of the 'call to action' in this Report. If we continue to understand our world in traditional theological and ecclesial categories, at variance with our contemporary culture, we are like spangelled, three-legged runners, racing to keep up with an increasingly frenetic world sprinting to God-knows-where, and increasingly tempted to drop out into our own nostalgic cul-de-sac.

obfuscation to conceal lack of rational engagement and ignorance), but mystery (the more we know, the more we marvel – for example, the universe, or the depths of love).

11. Lonergan, B. F. J. (1957) *Insight*. London: Longman, Green and Co. Ltd.
12. Genesis 1: 26.
13. Romans 8: 22.
14. Humphreys, J. (2016) 'How the left can rise again – in three easy steps', *The Irish Times*, 18 July 2016. (Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/joe-humphreys-how-the-left-can-rise-again-in-three-easy-steps-1.2725440?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fopinion%2Fjoe-humphreys-how-the-left-can-rise-again-in-three-easy-steps-1.2725440>)
15. For a slightly more extended, but still far from exhaustive, treatment see: O'Hanlon, G. (2010) 'The Recession and God: Reading the Signs of the Times' in *Theology in the Irish Public Square*, Dublin: Columba Press, pp. 12–64, especially pp. 39–61.
16. Luke 1: 46–55.

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Notes

1. Promotio Iustitiae (2016) *Justice in the Global Economy – Building Sustainable and Inclusive Communities*. No. 121, 2016/1. Rome: Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat. (Available at: <http://www.sjweb.info/sjs/PJ/index.cfm?PubTextId=15696>)
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 33–35.
3. Ganiel, G. (2016) *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Marlowe, L. (2013) 'Seamus Heaney's last interview covered Homer, Virgil and Dante', *The Irish Times*, 3 September 2013. (Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/seamus-heaney-s-last-interview-covered-homer-virgil-and-dante-1.1513804>)
5. Matthew 15: 21–28.
6. Lane, D. (2015) *Catholic Education In the Light of Vatican II and Laudato Si'*. Dublin: Veritas Publications.
7. Faulkner, M. (2016) 'When you wish upon a star', *The Tablet*, 18 August 2016. (Available at: <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/8860/0/when-you-wish-upon-a-star>)
8. Rahner, K. (1959) *Free Speech in the Church*, New York: Sheed and Ward (original German 1953), p. 62.
9. Luke 12: 49.
10. Of course, there are many other possible starting points – consider the depth of dimension of common human experiences like falling in love, victory and celebration, failure and disappointment, decisions of conscience, guilt and forgiveness, illness, bereavement and death. This approach is along the lines of Karl Rahner's idea of 'mystagogy', where we learn to see the deeper dimensions of human experience not by appeal to magic (based on illusion and trickery) or mystification (based on deliberate