

Overcoming the Spirituality of Money by Inter-religious Solidarity for the Common Good. Dr. Ulrich Duchrow, Professor of systematic theology at the University of Heidelberg, Germany and Co-founder and moderator of Kairos Europa

We are facing a global crisis created by the climax of our capitalist money civilization — a crisis that calls for a global answer. The world's many religions are well suited to serve as resources in the face of this crisis because they emerged during the Axial Age: the same time period when money and private property began to penetrate everyday life including the spirituality of people in pre-capitalist societies across the globe.

Starting in the eighth century BCE, money and private property began to remake everyday life in the context of very violent times, particularly in the ancient Near East and Greece, but also throughout Asia. New professionalized armies play an important role in penetrating society with money through wages and looting precious metal. Politically, this new economy merged with imperial structures and behaviors. Culturally, calculating rationality took over. Linked to this was a loss of solidarity in the affected societies as well as a shift in human self-understanding, spirituality and praxis toward greed and egocentrism.

All these developments are reinforced in modernity because individualist competition and greed are made positive motors of the economy and culture. The money-property economy also has psychological effects. How do we explain that, although the present system works against the interests of the vast majority of the world's population, only a minority resists and works actively for alternatives? So it is important to work not only for more just structures in society but also for transformed persons. The psychological and spiritual dimensions of our struggle must be given the same weight as the structural ones.

If it is true that our modern economy, culture, and political systems are rooted in the Axial Age, then the religions and philosophies that emerged during that period may well give us clues to cope with today's crises. These religions and philosophies are precisely a response to the development of the new money-property economy, causing change not just in economic, social, and political structures but also in the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of persons, thus creating a new comprehensive civilization. A proof of this thesis is that the new perspectives in religion or philosophy can be observed not only in one country or region, but everywhere the new economy spreads — in Israel, Greece, India, China, Persia, and later in the Arabian Peninsula.

Historically, the first protest against the new economy and its social consequences came from the ancient Israeli prophets' call for justice. The next stage saw the development of the Torah as a legal instrument as well as a new relational understanding of the human being as being made in the image of God. The Jesus movement and the early Christian church also built on this foundation.

The Buddha in India also concentrated on prevailing over greed, aggression, and illusionary consciousness in order to overcome the suffering of the people. It is not by accident that Buddhist economists are now among the most lucid critics of capitalism

and are designers of a new personal and collective alternative. In China, Laozi and Confucius are the key figures to oppose wealth accumulation and the violence going along with it.

In Islam we see a second wave of renewal of the spirituality of the Axial Age. The context is Muhammad's struggle with rich merchants in Mecca. Islamic banks have developed on this basis and constitute an interesting approach when it comes to devising financial alternatives today.

If we look at the classical Greek philosophy of that period, we find a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, it brought fundamental insights into the nature and consequences of the money economy, from Socrates to Aristotle. On the other hand, this philosophy, especially in its Platonic version, also laid the foundation for reducing reality to what fits into mathematical models and also for authoritarian political structures (with a male bias) — prefiguring western modernity.

A critical analysis of modernity as a civilization driven by money structurally, culturally, and psychologically has to start with the analysis of its legitimization narratives by John Locke, David Hume, and Adam Smith. The basic characteristics of modernity show that the whole of life is subjected to functional mechanisms geared toward the accumulation of capital, which can be defined as greedy money. The foundational invention for this "efficient" thinking is double bookkeeping, calculating everything according to the profit obtained after balancing input and output. This leads to the reductionist rationality of means-end calculation, which in turn becomes irrational and totalitarian. It leaves out the reproductive rationality that puts life and the sustenance of life at the center of critical thinking. This explains why modernity with its science, technology, economy, and politics has ended up in crisis, putting at risk the survival of humanity on earth. This is the core of the thesis that Western civilization, not just the economy, is death-bound and why this is so.

In the face of globalization as the climax of the "irrationality of the rationalized," how can the repressed human subject stand up and how can the common good again become the yardstick for economy? The common good is not to be understood in the Thomistic way against the background of a natural law. Instead, the requirements of the common good are discovered through the experience of the system's self-destructive tendencies, in the midst of the struggles of the people affected. These struggles are decisive for the common good, for becoming human and moving toward liberation.

What does all this mean for a realistic vision and practice of the necessary new culture for the common good, as well as for the question of how religions can contribute to both? There is a good chance for the vision of a new life-enhancing culture convincing majorities. Even Western sciences, starting with physics a century ago, have started to abandon the Cartesian dualistic paradigm and adopt relational approaches. This is particularly true of brain research, biology, and psychology. A relational political economy has also started to emerge: there are networks of solidarity economy, common good enterprises, and cooperatives. Life in dignity is the guiding metaphor.

A crucial part of this struggle for the common good is the rediscovery of the commons, and to rediscover the commons we need a vision of a new money and property order guided by public interest. In other words, the democratization of economy can serve as the basis for real political democracy. The latter has to complement its traditional representative character with direct and participatory democratic elements to become an integral democracy. (cf. Enrique Dussel, 20 Theses on Politics).

The hope for a new vision is grounded on social movements as the historical subject of the necessary changes. Engaging in social movements can enable individuals from all classes to join in solidarity and shake off the fetters of the fetishism of money and capital. It is here where the faiths of the Axial Age as well as non-Western cultures can experience a genuine revival in contributing to the vision of a new culture of life in just relationships. This indeed is already happening around the world.

What about the transformation strategy and practice for the implementation of the new vision? A multiple approach can be followed. It combines the withdrawal of energy from the dominant system with ways to nurture social and ecological life. Withdrawing from the dominant system requires defiance, resistance, and the demystification of the system. Nurturing social and ecological life, on the other hand, deals with post-capitalist alternatives at the local-regional level, as well as struggles to reappropriate stolen resources at all levels, aiming at the transformation of economic macro-systems. State institutions have to be subjected to the criteria of social, economic, ecological, and cultural human rights from the start and not only as a sideline.

This leads back to the necessity of simultaneous personal and collective transformation. What is the role of religion in the process of implementing the new vision? First of all, a critique of religion is necessary if we want to make a credible contribution to bringing about a life-enhancing culture. Why? Religion in history has been deeply ambivalent itself. It has such tremendous power over people's hearts and minds that the powers that be have always successfully co-opted religion in order to use it for their own legitimacy and support. Unless religion sees through and overcomes this mechanism, religion has no power and operates as opium.

There is an antidote against the abuse of religion in the original religious traditions themselves. It is the criterion that God elected the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded. With that yardstick, all religions, particularly those of the Axial Age, can be tested to see whether they embody their authentic faith or represent a perversion in the service of the powerful. In all faith communities, there are growing minorities who are recovering the original liberating character of their religions. They practice it in cooperation with the old and new social movements. This is a sign of hope in times of growing dangers for humanity and the earth. A renewal of Axial Age religions is necessary, and it might become possible — the common good becoming again the leading yardstick for society.