

Theology and Economic Ethics: Martin Luther and Arthur Rich in Dialogue

By Sean Doherty

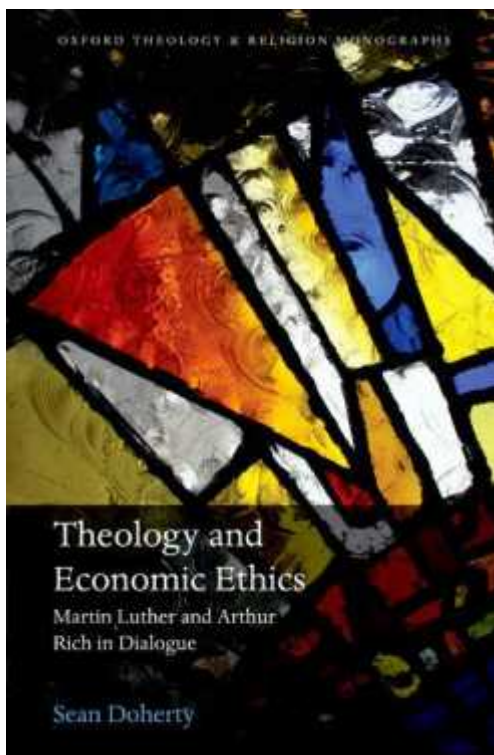
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Sean Doherty shines in the firmament of academic ethicists. Doherty is Lecturer in Ethics at St Mellitus College in London, and is in demand as a speaker and author across the spectrum of ethics. I first met Doherty when he was an undergraduate at Oxford. He made an immediate impression on many older students with rare intelligence, scriptural soundness, and worldly wisdom. So I asked him to be President of the student Theology Society after me, knowing he was destined to be a thought-provoking pioneer. Over the intervening years I then lost touch with him as he married and raised three children alongside the calling of ministry and teaching.

Theology and Economic Ethics is a book based upon Doherty's doctoral thesis, so when I was asked to review the monograph, I had high expectations. This book exceeds expectations: it is indeed a pioneering work which reflects Doherty's complex thinking and crisp simplicity of expression.

Doherty's work is pioneering because he revisits Luther in the light of recent scholarship to take Reformation theology "seriously as a resource for reflection on *economic* matters." He is also one of the first to critically appraise 20th century Swiss ethicist Arthur Rich in the English language. In terms of

method, Doherty draws on "the pre-modern Luther as a resource for interrogating the possible strengths and weaknesses of Rich's own method" (p.2). In so doing, he aims



to avoid what he describes as tunnel vision in being constrained to only one time period.

Doherty's complex thinking is demonstrated from the outset. Methodologically, the book is a skilful exponent of meticulous research. Why juxtapose Martin Luther and Arthur Rich's theological methods? There is an atmosphere of

apple and pear with the two theologians. Luther is the apple – liked by many, memorably colourful, and universally recognised. Arthur Rich is the pear, less widely appreciated, harder to digest, and not known outside academic circles. The differences are considerable. Luther (1483 – 1546) was a child of the Renaissance and father of the Reformation whereas Rich (1910 – 1992) grew up in Switzerland between the world wars, postulating a postmodern, scientific, ethical method of doing economics. Luther's emphasis on scripture was inherited from Erasmus and Renaissance scholarship; Rich's roots came from Weber, Marx and Rawls but also Barth, Pascal and Zwingli. Yet context aside, Luther and Rich share similarities which serve to hone Doherty's dialectical comparisons. Both Luther and Rich were pastors, writers and professors who were concerned with the intersection of faith and contemporary society.

Doherty's simplicity of expression is due to his focus. He takes Luther's 1519 *Sermon on Interest* as his primary text, demonstrating "Luther's first methodological step is to hold up the gospel against contemporary practice for comparison. His second assumption is that the gospel has inherent moral import" (p.13). Third, Luther has a

hermeneutical suspicion of “self-love” (p.67). Luther elaborates the implications of the gospel, intensifying the distinction between worldly economics and Christ’s triple degrees of command in Luke 6: do not resist; give freely; lend without charge. Luther then broadly uses the doctrines of creation and the nobility of work to warn against self-interest, which “pretends to know what cannot be known, attempts to avoid work, and it seeks to avoid risk” (p.64). But Luther also theologically grounds some exceptions: if somebody cannot work, if the creditor shares in the risk, and the interest is related to the actual profit made, they can charge interest. In terms of modern financial theory, Luther advocates more equity-like structures, rather than fixed-interest solutions.

Doherty makes Arthur Rich surprisingly digestible, and even seems to emulate him “[Rich] begins not with his own convictions, but with the most generous imaginable field of enquiry, and... narrows his focus and pinpoints his own project within that field defending his rationale” (p.76). Rich explores typologies of ethics: descriptive, normative and meta-ethics before locating his work as normative ethics, especially social ethics. Rich’s book *Wirtschaftsethik (The Ethics of Economics)* was published in 1984 and 1990, and is thus a mature work. He addresses a pluralist audience. “Rich seeks to avoid... an obscurantist, biblicist approach to faith. The claims of faith must be made in dialogue with

those of science” (p.100). So Rich moves from theologically conditioned “certitudes” to moral “criteria” (e.g. creatureliness) to generally acceptable “maxims”. Rich quotes Luther’s famous antithesis to illustrate his criterion of *relationality*: “a Christian is both free Lord and a servant of all.” A maxim might be “humanity originating in faith, hope, and love.” In a rare worked example, Rich also emulates Luther by investigating the Old Testament ban on interest (e.g. Ex 22:15). The basic social intention behind the command itself is investigated and must be observed (the prohibition on interest was intended to prevent the exploitation of the unfortunate) as well as the effects of obeying the command (driving lending underground in the Middle Ages which led to extortion). Rich “affirms the need for and legitimacy of engagement with biblical material, and provides a method for doing so” (p. 132). But the paucity of Rich’s biblical engagement robs him of the power to critique existing social-economic paradigms. Rich’s vision for “capitalism with fewer tears” is a result of his perspective of having already arrived at the optimal possibility in a fallen world. The “socially unenforceable standard of the Kingdom of God” falls beneath “pragmatically feasible... best possible social consequences” (p.173), so usury is accepted.

Doherty entitles the third section “An Analysis of Arthur Rich’s Method in the Light of that of Martin Luther.” A brief review cannot do

justice to Doherty’s discussions on the problem of ethics; adjudicate Luther’s use of creation vs. Rich’s use of eschatology as the basis for social ethics; or explain the widespread desire for justice against the difficulties in defining justice. Yet I feel that Doherty is slightly unfair in declaring Rich’s method as ‘untheological’ beyond a certain point. “[The purpose of Rich’s theological considerations] was to generate criteria which someone could endorse for entirely non-theological reasons. From this point on, there is no further need for them because the application of the criteria is not a theological matter” (p.191). Rich’s subtle work is an apologetic for the reasonableness of theologically grounded economic ethics. I find it hard to condemn Rich’s willingness to sugar coat theology in a form that is acceptable to the society he addresses, in order to be acceptable. Yet Doherty is right in the verdict “For Luther by contrast, every stage of the process must be a theological one. This is because the goal is not the optimization of outcomes, but to call people to obey God’s commands in Christ’s name.” Luther’s conclusions are not palatable “without subscribing to his premises.” This is what empowers Luther to “envisage genuinely different outcomes” (p.191). Thus Doherty prefers Luther’s distinctiveness to Rich’s accommodating stance.

In conclusion, Doherty’s ambitious exposition is deep and broad, but carefully executed. Doherty forces the reader to think about how one must expand one’s own perspectives, with a “modest emphasis on discipleship” that enables a “theologically radical approach” (p.202). It is therefore interesting to academics in terms of method, to ministers in terms of engagement with the world, and to every business practitioner in terms of reflection and witness. 📖



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