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The relationship between economics and theology¹

Introduction

Some theologians pay serious attention to economics. But they also have a serious problem how to speak about God, to speak in God's direction, as a former college of mine, Prof. P. Schoonenberg, used to say. And more and more theologians understand the burden which economics places on people’s life and happiness. But in recent decennia most of them have also learned that there is a dividing line between the way one speaks about God, esp. on the part of christians, and areas of social reality. The more the particular character of religious language is understood, the more also is understood that religious language cannot be directly applied to aspects of every day life. In terms of the theology of liberation: theology is a secondary act, a reflection on the one hand over societal and psychological, cultural and economic structures and events, and on the other hand about personal responsibilities, attitudes, behaviour and individual ways through which human existence is mystically deepened and broadened. Only in a contextually hermeneutical reflection is it possible to reach out to the Word of God as a word about life and destiny.

It is not only the way we understand the religious character of the manner in which we speak about God, esp. in our christian traditions, which urges us to reflect anew on the relationship between economics² and theology³. We

¹ Translated from Dutch into English by Henry C. Hoeben.
² 'Economics' is the scientific study of analysing and explaining the working and the constellation of the economic order. 'Economy' is the training in economic activities, in the proper approaches towards production and distribution, investment, savings etc. However, there exist also various definitions regarding the first meaning of the word (economics). In this article I use the definition as used by the economist H.W. Lambers from Rotterdam: 'The terrain of the economy is the organisation in society concerning the production and the distribution of goods and services'. Such a definition is connected with the type of reflection which is known under the term 'societal economy'. It means that in studying production and distribution of goods and services to the benefit of human necessities their relation with societal structures and relationships is included.
all live in societies which have defined the ends and goals of human life and the struggle for human dignity in more or less secular terms. We all do subscribe to human rights, although there is a great difference in the way we define these rights. We all do subscribe to certain democratic aspects which are structurally part of economic relations, although we are well aware of the fact that nobody truly can formulate adequately the very content of democracy. In our societies we have solved such problems by means of political affirmations regarding democratic behaviour.

In my opinion lies herein the very content of secularisation within our societal context. And thus secularisation forces theology to reformulate the manner in which it speaks about God into religious traditions which are relevant for our lives and which are accepted in so far as their specific religious identity is concerned. As this kind of secularisation has a specific economic basis, theologians find it then very difficult and, yet all the same, very necessary to redefine the relationship between economics and theology.

The central question in this contribution is a theological one, viz. whether within the context of the present economic order and all economic activities it is possible to find a "common ground", a proper way to speak about God. In classical terms it is a reference to the question whether the economic order and all economic activities can really be a locus theologicus. In that sense it poses truly a major theological problem. And our purpose is therefore not to speak about economics from a theological perspective, or vice versa.

The question whether economic activities can be a locus theologicus is not only a difficult one, but at the same time an expedient one in view of the Scriptures. Both the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a number of texts which refer to economic activities but in doing so really deal with God himself. A well-known example is the parable of the wheat-farmer (Lk. 12,13-21). Texts like these have been frequently interpreted as parables which concern themselves with morally questionable activities and far less as parables which refer to the Kingdom of God, the impelling reality of God.

3 Theology can also be described as a way of 'thinking towards God' (Schoonenberg). Thereby can be distinguished between a mystagogical and a scientific dimension. The mystagogical dimension tries to trace the reality of God as mystery. In the scientific dimension the purpose is to analyse about and reflect on talking about God, as taking place in specific contexts, with special interest for the interferences of 'talking about God' and the context, specifically with regard to economical aspects.
It are such texts which from the start possibly open up new ways of reflecting theologically on the relationship between economics and theology. And in efforts of this sort it is advisable to look for resemblances in the current debate about economics and ethics, in which theologians also participate. However, from such possible resemblances I will then try to bridge the gap between economics and theology from a different angle than the one of ethics, which is generally pursued by most theologians.

1. Economics as a concern of moral philosophy

In his well-known book *Religion and the rise of Capitalism* R.H. Tawney took on the question which traits were characteristic of the new problems that had emerged in the 16th century concerning both theology and economics. Tawney took usury as an example.

In the transition of a rural society to an open market economy new "actors" had emerged and consequently new demands for moral schemes appeared. At the very beginning "wage-earners" were still the minority. The farmer who was relatively independent, along with the tradesman and the small craftsman constituted the typical groups within society. All three groups were heavily involved in social conflicts which had to do with land-reform, as it was an economic reorganisation through a vast redistribution of land which brought with it that huge speculations about land were rife. Throughout the Middle Ages it had been the normal way of thinking to pay heed to the principle that profits were equally shared. This principle was taken to be natural and based on a hierarchy of values, in which – thus Tawney – religion functioned as the "apex". Though theoretically these conceptions continued to be maintained for the greater period of the Reformation, in reality they were slowly being hollowed out as a new type of businessman emerged. They saw the way the market worked not as something that belonged to the "moral sphere" but rather as a sequence of causalities, which understandably operates "mechanically" as a clockwork does. In the medieval "theory" the natural law had been called upon to justify the curtailment of all economic self-interest. Now a new political theory emerged, ultimately systematised by Locke, which held that the State had no business interfering in questions concerning proprietary rights and business practices. Thus the notion "nature" took on another connotation: the concept did not so

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much refer to the "divine order" as to the whole of "human wants" and "individual rights".
Hand in hand with this basic shift in judging economic practices, so Tawney opines, went an increase in the number of lay-lawyers, who contested the Church's right to make laws for and apply them to (new) economic realities. 'The prevalent religious thought might not unfairly be described as morality tempered by prudence and softened on occasion by a rather sentimental compassion for inferiors. It was the natural counterpart of a social philosophy which repudiated teleology, and which substituted the analogy of a self-regulating mechanism, moved by the weights and pulleys of economic motives, for the theory which had regarded society as an organism composed of different classes united by their common subordination to a spiritual purpose'.
The developments, which Tawney thus described, anticipate according to him Adam Smith's subsequent conceptions of and theory about the 'invisible hand' which reconciles personal interest with communal interest. It is often forgotten that this metaphor is not so much part of an economic theory but rather of a moral philosophy. According to Smith the advancement of personal interest was imbedded in norms, values and traditions. There emerged, thus Tawney in the text cited above, a moral philosophy which repudiated teleology.
The question however must be posed whether this contention is correct, at least in an ethical reflection on the economic order. The ethical theologian Gerrit Maneschijn comes to the conclusion in a recent article on this problem that ethics are again accepted in economics, though it is a conclusion he seems somehow to arrive at with sorrow. For, so he concludes, it is a kind of liberal ethics which is largely tailored to the needs of a liberal economy. And he distinguishes between an individualistic kind of liberal ethics and a social kind. The individualistic one takes the line that the market is morally neutral for it is a system based on "natural liberty" (Adam Smith). Within this kind then justice, which is circumscribed as a norm of activities directed towards cooperation and distribution, is taken as the concept of "mutual profit". On the other hand the social kind underscores that the prin-

5 Tawney, p. 194
Principle of natural freedom wrongfully ignores the unequal points of departure between those who have rights, for the position of inequality depends to a large extent on birth and social status. Therefore within social ethics then the norm as standard for cooperation and distribution has to be determined by the principle of equality, which is to be understood as a reality-in-the-making in that the position of those who are worse off has to be improved. To advance such an amelioration demands the intervention by politics, not an intervention by the (market) economy, i.e. the amelioration is brought about by people who further the social kind of liberal ethics.

Do ethics return into economics? Maneschijn is sceptical. He is of the opinion that the individualistic type of the liberal market economy hardly deserves the connotation "ethical". On the contrary, that type is really a doubling of the very activities of the market economy. And in so far as one can speak about a social kind of liberal ethics, its place can only be secured according to Maneschijn by political intervention. Yet in that instance he is not fully ready to accept that there is truly scope for ethics within economics. And that is the reason why Maneschijn is aggrieved by his own conclusion. He does not recognize therein an ethical attitude which can/wants to work from an intrinsic finality. Strictly speaking Maneschijn searches for rationality within the economical system itself, whereby the rationality of ethical activities is being determined from within. This shows clearly another issue pointed out in his article.

From the very beginning Maneschijn clearly points out that as an ethical theologian he is mainly interested in focusing on the "ideological content" of the market economy: "the complexity of ideas, representations, values and norms at the level of thought". But at the same time he limits himself to elements thereof: the problems which arise in coordinating participative collaboration with distributive justice. Concrete examples of these issues are the current problems which are involved in determining the volume of labour-participation, or the problems concerning salaries when companies close down totally, but also questions which arise when capital is being transferred from poor countries to rich ones. The conclusion Maneschijn reaches, esp. that ethics is being allowed a very marginal place within the economy, is based on his analysis of some economic theories and the bearing they have on the way trends of (economic) thought develop regarding

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7 Ibid.
these problems of coordination. "The approaches pursued by Sen and Apel show that it is hardly possible to internally solve the problems of coordination within the market economy. On my part I add: neither externally by authorities in using corrective powers. An intervention by the authorities is surely necessary, but not sufficient. A modern economic system is of necessity a politico-economic system.... Both politics and economics have to accept that ultimately the mistakes which are inherent in the system cannot be corrected by improving the system (though the improvement itself may be advantageous), but can only occur when the rationality of the system is integrated within the rationality of ethical activities."\(^8\). As this has not yet happened so far, ethics has not gained a place within economics. Maneschijn agrees with Schokkaert and van Zuthem that it is disappointing to have to make deals (to have to make compromises) between justice and expediency so as to give ethics all the same some weight within economics. He does admit that rationality nowadays (e.g. within economics) is no longer intrinsically linked to what is relevant and what is right. He subscribes to the view that modern economics has next to an instrumental feature (expediency) also its own feature of relevance (increasing chances of happiness through economic expansion and technical progress). But Maneschijn obviously draws a line in accepting this type of instrumental rationality. As a theologian he defines this boundary with the term "a person's acceptance of God".

Why does Maneschijn draw the boundary with "a person's acceptance of God"? Indirectly he illustrates this by giving an interpretation of the classical two-kingdoms doctrine of Calvin, a "model" he favours. Calvin was obviously not abreast with the modern historical findings regarding human (i.e. economic) activities and had a very different type of economy in mind than the modern market economy, though the latter had started to develop around his time. Maneschijn's conception then postulates a historical mediation for Calvin's doctrine. Yet in his opinion within these hermeneutical structures the two-kingdoms doctrine offers a solution for his problem: to possibly forge an intrinsic link between economics and theology. For within this model economics can be relegated in its own "kingdom" by theology. Theology can acknowledge that economics has its own rules and regulations, and thereafter theology has to concern itself solely with its own specificity,

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 149
theology. Maneschijn argues that such a commitment originates in and is intrinsically willed by "a person's acceptance of God". "The very centre of the theology of the Reformation – the doctrine of reconciliation – sustains the conviction that God frees the perpetrator from his actions (consequently also from his functioning within society) and grants him back his total freedom. For that reason the distinction between the law and the gospel has to be upheld. And that distinction underlies in turn the doctrine of the two kingdoms".

Must it then be conceded that Tawney is all the same right? Has the conceptual reflection about the destiny of humankind vanished from our moral philosophies? If the views of a person like Maneschijn prevail, the conclusion does not seem valid. What has disappeared (at least in the philosophical conceptions which dominate in the West), is the hierarchical-participative model. Probably the last great representative, thus Tawney, was the "scholastic" Karl Marx who still based his analysis and perception of "surplus value" on the erroneous character of the "appetitus divitiarum infinitus". However a person like Maneschijn, who has his roots in the calvinistic tradition, surely lets himself be guided by a view on a person's destiny. And that view takes on a central role in his analyses about the relationship between economics and theology.

2. 'Economics' and theology: a shared interest in teleology.

Maneschijn's analyses point to a teleology. And therein comes the problem to the front which in my estimation plays an important role in the relationship between economics and theology: the question about the teleological model. Lateron I will touch on this problem in greater detail, but with a special purpose in mind. But the question which I like to go deeper into in the next two sections is, whether it is conceivable to separate the teleological model from the (question concerning the) relationship between economics and theology? The reason is that the teleological model seems to impede any new and useful exchange of ideas about such a relationship. In our secularised society a number of different views, specifically in economics and theology, about human destiny have come in vogue, which no longer can be held to be particular aspects of an overall view, which is based on metaphysical and religious concepts. Hence I will try to pose anew the very question

9 Tawney, p. 48
about the relationship between economics and theology. Hopefully it proves to be more advantageous than to try to give a new response to the problems-at-hand from the perspective of existing and tested economical and theological paradigms.

2.1 The institutional character of economic rationality

Earlier we made already reference to a teleology which is virtually intrinsic to all economic activities, viz. the pursuance of happiness through economic growth and technical progress. Some are of the opinion that this need for growth derives from a situation of shortages and consequently is a natural factor. From such a perspective it is then possible to define economics as the science of shortages. And this represents the view of the so-called neo-liberal approach. Here economics is understood as 'the science which studies the human conduct as a relationship between targets and scarce, alternatively available means'\(^{10}\). The rationality of economics is defined in this neo-classical view from the perspective that decisions based on choice can be taken rationally even in situations of great shortages. The neo-classical opinion also holds that it is not economics' charge to make choices. Economics merely studies the relationship between targets and means. Within this perspective then the homo oeconomicus is somebody who 'acts egotistically' (selfishly); who acts materialistically (in pursuance of material benefits), who acts 'maximizingly' (looking for accelerated gain), who acts 'archimedi­cally' (all 'goods' and 'services' are exchangeable in principle), who acts 'objectively' (on the basis of accurate information regarding the relation between price and product c.q. consumption) and who acts 'parametrically' (surmising an unvarying situation)\(^{11}\).

Critics of this neo-liberal view are however of the opinion that this homo oeconomicus and his rationality do not exist. For people do not always base their decisions on these conditions, nor do these conditions exist the same all over. They hold that often people do base their actions on the rule of thumb and tradition, and even more do so on (well founded or not founded) expectations of what others may do.

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\(^{11}\) Ibid., pp. 230-231
In the light of such criticism the search for a truly different approach has been started so as to be able to explain economic activities. And within this research the emphasis has been laid on the 'appropriation of signs of wealth'\(^{12}\). Such a search is based on the assumption that there is an 'institutional character of the economic rationality'. Factually, any economic activity is intertwined with a number of institutions and structures which add a specific 'value' to the desire to covet such goods and services. And this covetessnous in turn determines to a great extent choices and decisions. Thus the markets are regulated in various diverse ways, and only a small part of that regulation has to do with intended interventions (e.g., the market of oil-products is very strong though the price of petrol is merely a fraction of the price to be paid at the service-station). It is always inherent in playing the market to accept a 'calculated risk, a dangerous leap', for each and every producer depends on the situation of finding a buyer who sufficiently "covets" his product.

This approach of the economic rationality also starts from the assumption that all human activity has a 'mimetic' character, so also economic activities. We covet goods and services for they are in the possession of others with whom we are in one way or another connected. And in coveting these goods we not only transpose to these persons a quality whereby the goods themselves become desirable, but we also view these persons as (possible) obstacles to our desire to possess these goods and services. In order now to forestall a constant war of all against all and provide guidance into (proper?) channels, markets and institutions have been created, which institutionally give a qualification to this mimetic desire and regulate all possible violence. This approach also presumes that there is constant interaction between these institutions and the importance we attribute to specific services and goods, and that interaction then makes them for us (rightly so or not) desirable. But also that interaction is obviously subjected to continuous changes.

2.2 Economic rationality and basic choices: justice and tragedy

The neo-classical approach of the economy takes it that it is not the task of the economist to determine the targets of economic activities. These targets are set by politics and only in this manner are ethics and economics brought into contact with each other. The economic rationality remains thus untouched by ethics (and – as the case may be – by religion). On the other

\(^{12}\) Ibid., pp. 227-246
hand, relevant factors are transformed into 'normative' factors, although economics which is deemed to be truly value-free should play no such part.  

*From the perspective* of an institutional approach there is the possibility to research into – what I would call – the factual 'constitution of justice'. Not all choices nor all effects which we desire are ethically acceptable. It should moreover be clear that within a concrete social situation it is not immediately possible to deduce from ethical principles the "just" kind of action. I use the expression 'constitution of justice', for neither cognitively nor ethically is there a direct and unilateral connection between 'justice' and the institutional framework in which economic activities are to be understood. To fill in this expression concretely I fall back on the notion 'entitlement' as used by the economist Sen and on the notion 'basic structure' of the moral philosopher Rawls\(^{13}\).

Sen has pointed out that the economic problem of foodshortages (famines) is not primarily an issue of the quantity of food, which is being produced per capita of the population, but rather of the legitimate rights (entitlements) a person can claim as his part of society's wealth. In many cases famine is less a problem of production but more so a problem of procurement. Rawls points out that each society possesses a basic structure which is the cumulative effect of social and economic legislation. The notions 'entitlements' and 'basic structure' do not only depict conditions, but are moreover regulative structures on which the right to covet certain goods and services can be justly based and which make it possible to critically evaluate the basis of this just right. E.g. a reflection about human rights thus takes place *within* economics.

It probably has become clear that within the institutional approach there is really room regarding basic choices in economic activities. The two types of research, that into these basic choices and that into the functioning of the economy, do not go *hand in hand* but neither are they *totally* unrelated. It is not only scarcity which causes desire; the reverse is (perhaps) more often the case, and the more so, it is said, because the desires are not (longer) religiously rooted. 'Goods and services are said to be economically scarce, not so much because there is a lack of supply, but rather because they are the stakes in a contest (competetive desires)*\(^{14}\).*

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., pp. 242-243

\(^{14}\) P. Tijmes, "De maatschappij in de slip", in: P. Tijmes (red.), *Arbeid adelt niet*, Kampen 1989, p. 75
So as to avoid a stalemate between on the one hand a deontological opinion about the relationship of ethics and economics and on the other a neoclassical opinion, the notion has been frequently advanced that political decisions and responsibilities should underlie economics. Maneschijn has explained why in his opinion this solution is falacious. I concur with him that such a politico-ethical solution is unsatisfactory. The politico-ethical solution does not gain greater weight if efforts are undertaken to bolster the ethical concern by means of a prophetic-eschatological belief in God. In the latter instance ethics are then often reduced to a form of theologising and that adds one more hindrance to an open discussion between theology and economics. It is my steadfast opinion that each way of constituting justice is inevitably tied to a dimension of tragedy. Tragedy is an intrinsec part of all economic activities and bound up with the question of justice. For within the context of the institutional approach each way of constituting justice implies a 'leap', a 'risk'. Whether specific products and services are being coveted depends to a great extent on the comportment of others with whom we are connected and the latter's perception by third parties. Neither the quality of that information, nor the trust we place in this quality are realities which can be accurately quantified. This can easily be verified when we observe the changing relation between a product's price and its expected quality. If we were to go by the price as to be a decisive indicator of quality, this procedure itself would lead to purely speculative forms of logic, which in turn would induce even greater price-fluctuations. The institutional approach to economics holds that there is need for a group of institutions, which has the confidence of the economic actors and which is guarantor of both the quality of the objects to be traded and of the traders. The 'entitlements' and the 'basic structures' cannot exist without such institutions which make sure that economic instability is kept within limits. However, that does not mean that tragedy only occurs when the constitution of justice has failed. Tragedy is intrinsically tied up with such a constitution, as the alternative possibility thereof, which cannot be rationally excluded totally\textsuperscript{15}. The discussion between an economist and a theologian is therefore not merely a discussion between a rationalist and a tragic poet, but rather a discussion about tragedy and rationality whereby the economist scrutinizes the rules regarding all the things

\textsuperscript{15} In using the terminology the 'arrangement of tragedy' I base myself on: A. J. Baart, \textit{Het arrangement van de tragiek}, Utrecht/ 's Hertogenbosch 1993
we deem covetous and whereby the theologian examines this reality as a possible paradigm to speak about God.

3. The 'homo oeconomicus' in theology

In this section I will propose some ideas which affect economics as a field in which it is possible to speak about God. As I wrote above, I'll search for possibilities wherein the teleological model is not posed as an a priori assumption. In the foregoing section this line of action was already pointed out as the connection, which exists between justice and tragedy, had been featured. In this section I propose to continue that line by posing the question whether and how economics can be understood as a field in which one can speak about God. First I will demonstrate by means of an example how this takes place in Sacred Scripture. Thereafter I will present two theological positions of theologians who have intensely studied the field of economics in so far as it touches on questions concerning God. Finally I will propose my own solution.

3.1 Economic risk as a parable

‘16... There was a rich man whose land yielded heavy crops. 17 He debated with himself: "What am I to do? I have not the space to store my produce. 18. This is what I will do," said he: "I will pull down my storehouses and build them bigger. I will collect in them all my corn and other goods, 19 and then say to myself, 'Man, you have plenty of things laid by, enough for many years: take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.'" 20 But God said to him, "You fool, this very night you must surrender your life; you have made your money -- who will get it now?" (Lc. 12:16b-20)

Parables never display only one 'bright idea', never hold only one message. They serve the purpose to transpose and to shed light on certain connotations, but they certainly do not present total transparency. Even a caption as 'the rich fool' suggests that this parable touches on character traits, which could well be personified. However upon closer scrutiny doubt arises about such a suggestion. The text forms part of a more general setting which directs a question to Jesus which concerns an issue of inheritance. Jesus' answer contains a clear warning against all forms of avarice. Such a person

will not fare well, Jesus remarks. And in a similar vein he concludes his remarks: collect no rich treasures for yourself instead of for God. Avarice – though easily recognized as a character trait – takes here the place of a 'negative' commonplace instead: of God. It is a reference which demonstrates that reality is not only to be understood as 'to be of God', but also as something contrary: reality as 'not to be of God'. The parable seems foremost to relate to the question: how is it possible to discern whether a reality is 'of God' or whether on the contrary: 'not of God'. The parable does not touch on character traits which could possibly be personified, but rather on the question how it is possible to discern 'God'. There is further no intimation about the question to what extent ethical comportment refers to God. The primary concern touches on the question whether the field at hand can be exchanged as reality with a reality 'of God'. That concern is not so much a moral question or a question of attitudes, but rather a question of fundamental theology. And it should be emphasized that very pointedly this question of fundamental theology is examined in a problem of economics: viz. the question how people comport themselves in situations of great risks. The wheat-farmer wants to make sure that his (future) economic risks are as minimal as possible. God is portrayed as someone who wants to keep his economic risks as minimally as possible.

The question how economic risks can be reduced to a minimum is taken up in a story which deals however with another question: how is an inheritance to be divided? The question about sharing an inheritance is more often a hidden question about the true participants in the History of the Covenant and the correct interpretation of the Thora. This question greatly influenced the conflict between the Jewish community and the early Christian community, which had emanated from the former. It is consequently the question what meaning must be given to the word 'God' in the light of the Jewish Thora and its practical and narrative History of Reception.

Thus a situation with complications has emerged: the question concerning the true participants in the History of the Covenant (the question concerning the true inheritors of the History of the Covenant) has basically become a question about the true, practical and narrative understanding of 'God'. The controversy, which meaning must be given to the word 'God', is brought into the open by means of the question what is the difference between 'sharing' and 'non-sharing' (of an inheritance). It is not possible to circumscribe 'God' with 'non-sharing'. Is it possible to do so by 'sharing'? The parable and the
storyteller leave the question wide open! But the parable depicts sublimely both the economic instability and the efforts of the wheat-farmer to minimize the consequences as much as possible in a model of action. In a pictorial sequence the wheat-farmer's success is colourfully portrayed: building storehouses, collecting corn, eating, drinking, enjoying himself. And the story does not fail to stress the sense of well-being underlying the sequence. Was Abraham's wealth not a sign of God's blessing? But abruptly this agreeable sequence is 'ripped to pieces'. God calls the wheat-farmer a fool. Death which may overtake a person suddenly contrast glaringly with the successful effort to ensure the future. The sequence of certitude is pitted against death, which is inevitable. Someone who acts economically does therefore not escape uncertainty.

It is not possible to circumscribe 'God' with 'non-sharing'. Why is this so? The storyteller, who questions whether he should interfere as a referee in a dispute about an inheritance, suggests that 'non-sharing' does not necessarily guarantee the continuation of one's existence. A claim will be inevitably made on a person's life. And what is he to offer in exchange? Of what can he be sure? It is my personal opinion that this parable should not be read as an exposé of qualifying or disqualifying qualities. It is not a parable which points to the precariousness of human existence nor one which offers the 'moral' message that solely trust in God can help in the precariousness of human existence. Rather, it is a story about God and people, about God and reality. And a parable about the 'instability' of economics is presented in order to address the question which words can express something about God. Or better yet, the 'instability' itself is presented as a parable. It is a parable which focuses on constituting tragedy in economic activities, to speak in terms of the preceding section.

3.2 Two theological positions: M.-D. Chenu and A.Th. van Leeuwen

Who is the homo oeconomicus whose risky existence is explained paradoxically by means of a parable about God and his relation to reality? I consider this question surely as interesting as the questions which touch on the differences and similarities of contents regarding the views of these two theologians. I am far more interested in the questioning strategy which underlies both positions. In that connection the word paradox is of utmost importance. In the view of both theologians economics and theology are not directly, i.e. without mediation, linked with each other, but rather paradoxically.
To Chenu\textsuperscript{17} this is apparent when the question is asked whether a Christian can be credibly present in the field of economic activities. He responds positively, however with two conditions. Firstly, a liberative praxis over against the poor and the struggle against poverty will be a gauge of this credibility. Secondly, the major criterion will be the messianic character the Christian tradition uses to speak \textit{about God}. And these two postulates of credibility are linked with each other, in the light of Chenu’s view on the question regarding the sense of history. For ‘the sense of history’ is not merely a reality which is present and which 'only' has to be uncovered. No, the sense of history is ultimately a free reality which, promised as it is within messianic symbolism, will make its appearance in a reality in which the struggle against poverty and the liberation of the poor will direct all economic activities and will determine their goals.

According to van Leeuwen\textsuperscript{18} the question is completely different. He lays great stress on the question whether a good ‘citizen’ can truly be a good Christian? Hence the question posed by van Leeuwen is really a one hundred and eighty degrees turnabout with regard to the one posed by Chenu. It is a question which originates in a historically and economically induced setting and which searches for ‘the Christian’s liberty’ in a secularised context. Is it possible for a citizen, a person, who in our context paradoxically appears to be at the same time the architect as well as the product of an economic system of free enterprise, to be someone who understands himself to be \textit{simul iustus et peccator}? Also van Leeuwen thinks that his question can indeed be answered positively. However, a positive answer demands a critical analysis of the religious basis of this economic system and a critical disentanglement of the historically developed ideological connections which have links between this economic system, religious practices and the claim on truth on the part of Christianity.

Our analysis clearly shows that there are considerable differences in the strategies underlying the manner in which both Chenu and van Leeuwen


\textsuperscript{18} Cf. for the following: H.-D. van Hoogstraten, \textit{Zoeklichten in de nacht van het kapitaal. Een discussie over de economische theologie van A. Th. van Leeuwen}, Voorburg 1987, pp. 9-17
pose their questions. Even so both concur on one point. Both theologians attach great importance to the idea that history serves a purpose and that it is crucial for a (faithful) interpretation of history, i.e. of economic activities to accept that purpose as something which gives meaning to our economic activities and to our history as a whole. In other words both theologians make use of a teleological view on history. Only thus are they able to forge a connection between economics and theology.

Precisely at this point I want to pursue another trail, a road where much more attention can be given to the tragic dimension of economic activities as well as to the tragic dimension of history.

3.3 Economics as a story of life and death

Why is it necessary to fight poverty? People like Sen and Rawls try to reason from the significance of ‘justice’. Their responses go like this: because it is more just to fight poverty than not to fight it, because the demands of the poor have also a bearing which can be defined economically: it are as many efforts to overcome the dilemma between ‘cynical bookkeepers’ and ‘fanatic prophets’ and to encourage a discussion between representatives of either side. Even so, the question is pertinent: why indeed is it necessary to fight poverty? Could it be that the answer should not be given from a position which on the one hand does not lie beyond the opposition of scientific rationalism, which borders on cynicism, and on the other of an assessment of values, which often leads to fanaticism, but rather from a position which takes into account the intrinsic limits of either ‘approach’? What does antecedes the disinterest of science which – sometimes in a balanced manner but more often in one which shows that a balance has been forced – promises freedom of the invisible hand but in reality sustains, and even more so promotes, poverty and dependency? Yes, why indeed is it necessary to fight poverty?

It is my firm conviction that this question cannot be answered fully argumentatively, neither from the perspective of economics nor from that of ethics19. It is possible to analyse economics critically, as is done by van Leeuwen. And furthermore it is possible to present ethics plausible within the outline of a discourse on economics. But also such a discourse is necessarily preceded by another one, which sometimes is openly broached, sometimes

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19 Here I have been following: A. Burms en H. De Dijn, De rationaliteit en haar grenzen. Kritiek en deconstructie, Leuven/Maastricht 1986
not, and the character of which is neither economical nor ethical. Ethics and economics do imply an *argumentative* effort to define liberty. Such efforts involve historically changing position between a disinterest which is supposed to serve humanity and an inquisitive knowledge which pursues the same aim. But the diversified definitions of humanity and liberty point to a kind of particularity, for which there is no solution. Even an approach à la Kant does recognize the idea of maturity which is considered as regulative. And such particularity constitutes the intrinsic limit of each effort to *argumentatively* define liberty (as the purpose of all economic activities).

The lesson which can be drawn from the afore-mentioned story about the fate of the wheat-farmer is in my opinion that the particularity, which is part of the definition of liberty, does not derive so much from the purpose of liberty – as the classical trends of morality used to stress – but from the inevitability of death. Each definition of liberty is per se particularized by death. That is its overwhelming tragedy. Each definition of liberty is a line of action, which is economically more or less plausible, to the extent as it regulates the desires, to postpone death. It is also possible to turn this statement around. Each regulation and institutionalisation of our desires is already a confirmation of death. That is why it is possible from an institutional perspective of economic activities to interpret economics as a story about life and death.

Our institutional approach may come as a surprise, but perhaps an even greater surprise is the fact that I have used the term *story*. Is it possible to use that term in relation to economic activities? Walter Benjamin has made it clear that history, i.e. economic activities, can be addressed in a twofold manner. The first he calls ‘historism’. For him it expresses the continuity in time which depicts to the eyes of the (economical) victors the very mark of their victory. But this ‘historism’ (or: historical materialism) is surely very different from ‘history’\(^\text{20}\). In Benjamin’s view then history is, different therefore from historism, not a projection towards progress in the future but rather a retrospective view which finds its origin in ‘the paradise’ in which we presently are. Within that retrospective view the notion time is not a homogenous and empty one, but rather denotes a series of catastrophes in the

midst of which a flash of 'paradise' becomes visible, a moment which can be referred to as 'now'. The perception of this 'now' is caught in messianic imagery. And, so Benjamin, such images pertain to the languages of the oppressed.

Why is it necessary to fight poverty? If Benjamin's trend of thought is pursued, such a praxis does not serve a purpose which points forward. It is fitting to fight poverty, a concretisation of 'the exceptional situation which is the rule', because in this way this empty homogenous time, this forward projection, is being broken open in expectancy of a messianic moment. By combatting poverty death is being pushed back. And the certainty of death, which is so significantly stressed in the narrative, looks forward to a universality and a universal fellowship, which is not to be detected with a timely concept forward, but which is a persuasive trait of both the Jewish and Christian belief in God. In my opinion that is the reason why Holy Scripture contains so many stories about God which are factually stories about economic activities. They are not so much stories with a philosophical view on economic matters, but rather stories which from a messianic perspective scrutinize our efforts to regulate all our desires so as to postpone death.

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Zusammenfassung

messianisches Moment inne, da er als Mittel zur Gerechtigkeit gegen den Tod antritt.

**Resumen**

El autor aborda la cuestión de la relación entre economía y teología. ¿Puede ser el orden económico un *locus theologicus*? Después de examinar algunas concepciones históricas del impacto de la economía en la teología, el autor presenta las ideas de algunos de sus colegas actuales sobre este punto. Se deduce que la actividad económica puede figurar como *locus theologicus*. Sin embargo las imágenes de Dios en ciertas parábolas de connotación económica revelan más bien el carácter mesiánico de las mismas. Puesto que se trata de una cuestión de justicia, los cristianos están obligados a luchar contra la pobreza. Esta lucha conoce también un momento mesiánico, pues, siendo asunto de justicia, es siempre una lucha contra la muerte.

**Résumé**

L'auteur aborde la question de la relation entre économie et théologie. L'orde économique, peut-il être un *locus theologicus*? Après avoir examiné quelques conceptions historiques de l'impact de l'économie sur la théologie, l'auteur présente les idées de certains de ces collègues contemporains sur la question. Il en déduit que l'activité économique peut bel et bien figurer comme *locus theologicus*. Cependant les images de Dieu dans certains paraboles de connotation économique révèlent plutôt du caractère messianique de ces paraboles. Puisqu'il s'agit d'une question de justice, les chrétiens sont obligés à lutter contre la pauvreté. Cette lutte connaît aussi un moment messianique, car dédiée à la justice, elle est toujours une lutte contre la mort.