

Kevin Hargaden, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age: Confronting the Christian Problem with Wealth*

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In this book Kevin Hargaden articulates a ‘theopolitical vision’ that avoids two temptations: the first is ecclesiastical quietism and the second is ill-conceived activism, entailing efforts to force the arrival of God’s kingdom. Implicit is an endorsement of a ‘two kingdoms’ doctrine: the vocations of church and state differ, and it is this difference that allows people to hold allegiances to both *and* which results in irreducible tensions. What are we to do, however, when church and state are *both* subsumed within the totalizing cultural logic of neo-liberalism? This is the question that Hargaden poses in his punchy opening chapter ‘We’re All Neo-liberal Now’ (pp. 1–33), and it forms the impetus for the book’s argument.

Foucault, Jameson and, most forcefully, Polanyi are all invoked in the search for a language subtle enough to capture the phenomenon by which the personal and political become dominated by a marketised rationale driven by the imperatives of competition, efficiency and growth (p. 15). It is, we are told, a system ‘that is driven, in its deepest logic, by the calculative measurement most commonly associated with market economies’ (p. 21). One may find theologians, particularly on the right, who see the hand of providence in the neo-liberal commitment to the market’s ‘invisible hand’, just as left-leaning Christians may perceive providence in the state as it reins in the destructive externalities of corporate short-term profit making. Both may fail to see that neo-liberalism involves an account of desire and human ends that are antithetical to the long-term flourishing of humans and their planetary home as imagined by scripture and tradition. At some point the totalising vision of neo-liberalism will clash with the totalising vision of Christ.

Hargaden is wary of the temptation to keep the argument at the level of the general and universal, and so in chapter 3 he invites readers to an immersion in the concrete and particular, by means of vivid accounts of the 2008 economic crisis in Ireland. He is insistent on resisting a methodology that submits to neo-liberalism’s terms, by which moral or theological insights must shrink to allow economic metrics to dominate. Thick descriptions of historical events are sought, with all their irony, ambiguity and moral complexity on full display. Hargaden even offers some experiments in composing original parables as a way of narrating quintessential dynamics of Irish market capitalism. While the point is well made, and the results admirable, it might be the case that Hargaden commits himself too quickly to something like a methodological ‘zero-sum game’ or a ‘methodology of dissent’: perhaps greater inclusion of economic metrics and analysis might have enhanced the qualitative and anecdotal focus, thus rendering the argument more compelling to a wider audience. In any case, the author provides a readable and fast-paced account of the Irish ‘economic miracle’ and the way in which it was, in fact, riddled with nepotism, collusion and false consciousness. It was, we read, an unstable manifestation of finance capitalism that had lost touch with the tangible value of goods and services, evident in the unsustainable trade in

derivatives, and a hyped-up property market facilitated by generous tax breaks and state bailouts (pp. 88–125). In the end, a familiar story: harms were socialised while many of the benefits were privatised.

For Hargaden, the boom-and-bust cycle of the ‘Irish tiger’ demonstrates the need for Christians to hold their nerve, rediscovering their own accounts of value and virtue that resist the cultural logic of neo-liberalism. He suggests that immersive attention to Jesus’ parables and participation in worship – the latter chastened with large doses of Barthian scepticism toward ‘religion’ – both inspire resistance. Neither translates easily into an ideological project: they approach the status quo from an apocalyptic angle, like Jesus before Pilate, refusing the worldview driving the interrogation. Apprehended aright, parables and worship may sustain acts of local resistance and prophetic witness. The influence of Hauerwas and Cavanaugh are keenly felt, with the former inspiring a Barthian reading of gospel parables, while Cavanaugh inspires the focus on worship as a locus for a counter-formation. One feels that the argument could have been further strengthened with critical reflection on the concrete situation of the churches of Ireland in the years of economic boom and bust. There is also the question of whether ‘micro-aggressions’ against the neo-liberal order are sufficient (p. 160). Perhaps Christian socialism should not only be invoked (p. 132–4) but also revived and adapted?

It is pleasing to see acknowledgement of Donald MacKinnon’s perceptive apprehension of parables in the Christian quest for moral seriousness, although further attention to his work, especially in as far as it explicitly linked parable and sacrament, could have enriched Hargaden’s case for the inseparability of ‘word and worship’. I also wonder whether MacKinnon’s idiosyncratic focus on the tragic might further illuminate the analysis of neo-liberalism: its very capacity to energise, expand markets, enable choice and generate vast wealth also contains the capacity for downfall, idolatry and destruction.

This compelling and creative book makes a valuable contribution to contemporary political theology, not least by its bold methodology. It can be read profitably alongside Kathryn Tanner’s *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, published a year later.

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