Opinion
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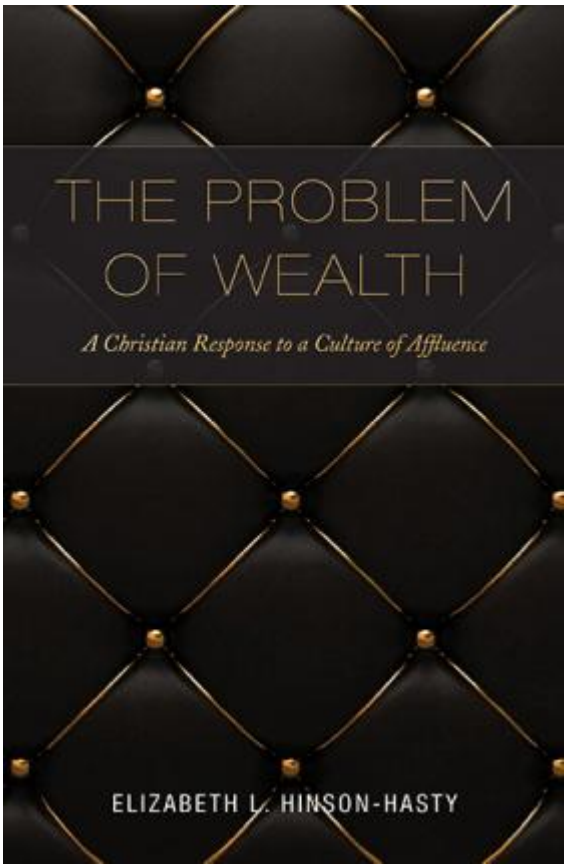
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Inside Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty's new book *The Problem of Wealth: A Christian Response to a Culture of Affluence* there is a great book trying to get out. The premise, that instead of focusing on the problem of poverty we should reverse the equation and see the processes of wealth creation as the problem, is a smart and innovative premise, and certainly designed to excite my leftie Catholic heart. The book has moments of strength and insight. But, where was the editor, insisting that Hinson-Hasty drop the academic nonsense and just tell the tale?

The price of the volume is satisfied by Chapter 3, entitled, "When, Why, and How? The Boundary between Economics and Theology." As an epigram, Hinson-Hasty has a quote from Francis Walker's address to the third annual meeting of the American Economic Association in 1888: "Economics have become as completely freed from the trammels of 'natural theology,' as has geology from the restraints of revealed religion." Regular readers will recall my citing that quote in a previous column. I love it when authors provide me with pithy quotes I had not seen before.

Hinson-Hasty catalogues the influence of Robert Malthus' "Essay on the Principle of Population," published in 1798, and the central role that the concept of scarcity

would play in economics, and subsequently politics, ever since. Most Catholics know Malthus because his repulsive ideas led to eugenics, but the linkage between the cast of mind that has come to dominate — and dominate is the correct verb — libertarian economics is, morally, the same cast of mind that acquiesced in eugenic practices, before Josef Mengele gave them a bad name.



This history is of more than merely intellectual interest. "Prioritizing business, market-based logic, and economics over against other fields in the academy and in public debate is draining our society's theological and moral imagination," Hinson-Hasty writes in what is one of the best sentences of the book. Think about the number of times you hear pundits, on TV or in the pub, announce that "people vote their pocketbook" or the degree to which indicators of human happiness are tilted towards material wealth.

Hinson-Hasty also does a masterful job summarizing economic approaches and policies in her next chapter "The Current Dominant Forms of Wealth Creation and the Ethic of Scarcity." Like many of us, she turns to social critic Michael Sandel for insight, writing, "Sandel argues that, at least on the surface, it appears in our society as if we have allowed and become comfortable with the idea of 'the market'

determining the value of things like quality of life, death, birth and human freedom without 'any deliberate choice. It is almost as if it came upon us.' " She gives one of the best, most concise explanations of neoliberalism I have encountered. The treatment of the Tennessee Valley Authority is a bit rough: At least Roosevelt and the New Dealers were trying to improve people's lives, even if the approach was paternalistic, a paternalism that would characterize postwar foreign aid as well. And, she shines a light on some of the goofier examples of people trying to baptize capitalism. I was familiar with Bruce Barton's 1925 *The Man That Nobody Knows,* which painted Jesus as the founder of modern business, but I did not know about the more recent *Jesus CEO* by Laurie Beth Jones.

Hinson-Hasty then discusses the "Social Trinity" and how "as a feminist theological ethicist" the concept can serve "to enable U.S. Christians to transform our society's individualistic anthropological assumptions, to challenge false theologies that center on individual salvation in an otherworldly context, and to create the consciousness and call to resist the market idolatry of our culture." I would think the principle reason to focus on the Trinity as a counterweight to individualistic anthropology is because it is true, and this jump to the utilitarian is a little creepy. Her treatment of the subject lacks the depth and sophistication found in Meghan Clark's similar focus on the Trinity as the ground of Catholic social teaching in her book *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought: The Virtue of Solidarity and the Praxis of Human Rights*.

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The central focus of the book can be simply stated, that Christian anthropology and therefore ethics is incompatible with modern methods of wealth creation, that the problem is not just the large number of people cast off into poverty by our neoliberal economy but the un-Christian and inhumane presuppositions and built-in attitudes of modern capitalism, which create material wealth at the same time as they create spiritual poverty and societal injustice. And, in large measure, she succeeds in demonstrating these theses. Just so, kudos are in order.

Unfortunately, what drags the book down is the resort to academic jargon ("food apartheid") and perspectives that are, to this non-academic reader, ridiculous the way only academics can be ridiculous. For example, relying on Rohan Park's essay on the prodigal son and "decolonization," Hinson-Hasty renders a reading of that parable in which "the household economy is organized with the needs of a much larger community in mind so that everyone counts and everyone is counted, rather

than the socially accepted boundaries for the distribution of resources as defined by the dominant culture." Silly me. All these years I thought the parable was about mercy! I am beginning to think we should all duck when theologians start employing a hyphenated version of the word "colonial."

Later she writes, "Augustine is one of the most influential theologians from the early Church. Justo Gonzalez points out that Augustine has been so influential that churches have lost sight of his teachings on wealth and greed." Does that make sense? If he is so influential, would not all of his teachings receive special attention? Is there not some other reason why these teachings have been "lost sight" of compared to others?

Hinson-Hasty concludes her book with "parables of the commons" which she says are "intended to raise questions and wonder in your mind and to help you consider new ways to ally yourself with solidarity protest movements and other grassroots efforts to create systemic social, economic, and political change." As you might well imagine, the result is not pretty: Such a self-assuredly manifesto-like objective yields stilted characters in parables that are overwrought and devoid of human complexity.

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Other times, Hinson-Hasty touches on an important point and doesn't seem to recognize how important. For example, she brings in civil rights icon Fannie Lou Hamer and discusses Hamer's views of freedom. Hinson-Hasty concludes with these two sentences: "Hamer did not think of her own freedom in the way many US Americans are prone to do, as a freedom from the encumbrance of others. Rather, she exercised her freedom for others." The difference between a negative and a positive conception of liberty warrants more than two throwaway lines, does it not? One of the greatest minds of the 20th century, Sir Isaiah Berlin, dedicated much of his career to the issue, but alas, he does not even warrant a footnote. Nor does anyone else get a footnote.

So, I commend this book insofar as it deals with one of the most important themes for social ethics today, and it compiles some keen insights. But, be prepared for some frustration. A heavy handed editor was needed and could have scrubbed this book into a masterpiece. As it is, it is an important book suffering from too many distractions.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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