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Political-Economic Activity to the Honour of God (Book Review)

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practices" (73). The first without the second assumes that learning of the practices happens automatically, which it does not. The second without the first is hypocrisy.

The second half of *Growing in the Life of Faith* applies Dykstra's account of faith nurture to specific places where such nurture occurs: the congregation, the family, the youth group, the Christian college, and the seminary. These five chapters will obviously have varying degrees of interest for different readers, though the first three have almost universal appeal. I find it striking that Dykstra applies his account in unique and fresh ways in each of these chapters by identifying the central dynamics of each place that he is addressing. For example, he highlights the crucial role which the practice of confession holds in the life of the congregation, for it is comprised of redeemed sinners and without confession its sin creates communal "patterns of mutual self-destruction" (86). Moreover, he adds, "the community of faith is continually susceptible to judgment and renewal from its source and ground, because its source and ground is not itself" (93). Dykstra achieves a unique approach in each of these five chapters by focusing on one particular dimension of the place that he is analyzing. Though this narrow focus is somewhat limiting, the reader who has walked with him to this point has been equipped to apply his understanding of faith nurture to other dimensions of each place as well.

Finally, I also find Dykstra's understanding of the role of Scripture in faith nurture refreshing and illuminating. His thoughts here are both scattered throughout the book and summarized in two brief, concluding chapters. Scripture places us inside the story of God and his world, so that "through the story God is revealed to its hearers as a present reality in the contemporary telling and hearing" (58). As the story is told, "its world becomes more and

more our world...[Scripture acts] on its hearers by rendering a way of living that makes sense in this world and in the light of the God who reigns in it" (59f.). Teachers do not so much teach the Bible as they *co-operate* with what the Bible is doing (154). And just what is the Bible doing?

God is using the Bible, I would say, to give us courage, to set us free of whatever enslaves us, to seduce us into the love God has for us, to call us to account, to turn us around from whatever paths of destruction we may be following, to humble us where we need to be humbled, to lift us up when we are heavily burdened, to forgive us, to redeem us, to make us holy. God is using the Bible not only to inform us, but to form us and re-form us, to shape us into God's own. (155)

As a Bible teacher and preacher of the Word, I am inclined to tape those words over my desk as a daily reminder of a central power and purpose of the Scriptures as they point us to Christ.

I have only one complaint concerning *Growing in the Life of Faith*: it is not accessible to a wide audience. I have tremendous respect for Dykstra's careful scholarship and his determination to reject shallow descriptions of faith and faith nurture, but the result of his depth is that this book cannot capture a popular following. I believe every parent, every office bearer in the church, every Christian teacher, every youth leader, indeed, every believer, will benefit greatly from Dykstra's insights. Perhaps a "small group study edition" of the book is needed so that a leader who has read the book could use the study guide to work through its central concepts with a gathering of believers. In the meantime, I will continue to use the book in my teaching at Dordt College and hope that these students will carry its wisdom into many communities in the years to come.

Political-Economic Activity to the Honour of God, by John Boersema. Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1999. 355 pp. \$10.90 [CDN\$15.75]. Reviewed by Jonathan Warner, Professor of Economics, Dordt College.

In this book, John Boersema, professor of economics at Redeemer University College, seeks to relate Biblical principles to political economy. As a Reformed Christian in the Kuyperian mould, he believes that it is incumbent upon us to glorify God in all that we do. As Kuyper famously proclaimed, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry 'Mine!'" The challenge, then, is to see how God might be honoured in business activity, politics, and policy-formation. Dr. Boersema draws heavily on the Programmes of the Reformed political parties in the Netherlands, notably the *Gereformeerde Politiek Verbond* (GPV), many of whose members he interviewed in the course of his research. One of the values of the book is that it makes the insights of the party

members accessible to an English-speaking audience for the first time.

Dr. Boersema's point of departure is the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1:28. Mankind's role is to care for God's world. We must, as God's stewards, develop the world to enable man to honour God (19, 33). As he points out, though, equating the cultural mandate with development (rather than, for example, a narrower approach based on the "dominion" of mankind) is controversial; he devotes a helpful appendix to examining these issues, concluding that developing the earth is not an end-in-itself but a means by which God can be honoured.

Moving on from this view of the cultural mandate, Dr. Boersema examines some derivative principles to guide thinking on political economy. The cultural mandate gave

mankind a task—Adam was set to work in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:15)—and so the need for employment is a creation ordinance. Similarly, caring for Eden implies that care of the environment should feature prominently on a Christian politico-economic agenda. Human needs must be taken care of, and good stewardship requires efficiency in the use of resources; this last principle is the most amenable to neoclassical economic analysis.

Other Christian principles are, of course, important in deciding on appropriate policy guidelines. If one overemphasises creation ordinances, there is a tendency to neglect the effects of the fall into sin. The whole of God's Word is needed to guide us. Policy-makers need to be aware of sin and its effects (and to be aware, too, of the sinful tendencies of human-run institutions, such as governments). For this reason, Boersema sees love for neighbour as a guiding principle for carrying out the Cultural Mandate. He ties this principle to a notion of justice, in that true neighbourly love is impossible if our neighbours are in gross need (Jas. 2:14-17). Moreover, he seeks to extend concern beyond present humanity to future generations. Boersema is well aware, of course, that "justice" (and, especially, "social justice") is a contested term. Therefore, he examines three types of justice. First, procedural justice refers to fair dealing, as in using honest scales (Prov. 11:1). Second, justice as righteousness functions as the primary concept of justice in the Bible. This concept subsumes fair dealing, but also equity, and a concern for those excluded—the poor and the weak. Third, distributive justice "rejects economic egalitarianism but accepts rewards based on results." On this point Boersema argues that "distribution based solely on performance must be overridden on the basis of need" (59).

Though the GPV has a strong sense of individual responsibility, Dr. Boersema notes that the position tends not to be well supported by Scripture (excepting, perhaps Ezekiel 18:4, "the soul that sins shall die"). Although individual responsibility does not necessarily equate with any pernicious form of individualism, a perspective of this sort does have radical consequences for the types of economic structures that can be considered appropriate. As doctrinaire Socialism denies people the ability to make responsible decisions, Boersema derives a conditional preference for a market economy, where the ability to make choices is generally considered to be important.

The aim of economic policy, then, is to enable man to honour God, and to honour Him in all that he does. Most secular economics texts list macroeconomic goals such as ensuring continuing economic growth; maintaining full employment; achieving price level stability (zero inflation); an equitable distribution of income; and an appropriate Balance of Trade and exchange rate. Dr. Boersema finds support for full employment (as work is something commanded by God before the Fall, and idleness is con-

demned), and recognises the need to care for the weak, but rejects the idea of aiming for continual economic growth, which tends to breed materialism and ignores the environmental and other costs associated with increased economic throughput. Policies to ensure sound money (and low inflation) can serve as desirable secondary goals, as they tend to promote productive activity.

One area of disagreement among Christians concerns the appropriate role of the government. The GPV has moved beyond the minimalist government advocated by Abraham Kuyper, and finds his justification, based on the idea of sphere sovereignty, generally unhelpful and extra-Biblical. Everyone is agreed that government is responsible for maintaining justice, restraining "the licentiousness of men" by protecting people from threats (both internal and external), and ensuring the procedural fairness of institutions. The GPV sees the government also as a shield for the weak. (Solomon asked that God would give him justice and righteousness so that he might judge Israel correctly—Ps. 72:1-2.) Boersema gives examples from the Old Testament law to support this position, but he sees the role of government as largely residual: to help those who cannot help themselves. He thinks that this may be the extent of appropriate government, as it is not self-evident, at least, that the government can have any direct role in carrying out the cultural mandate. Governments, as they comprise sinful people, are prone to sin, so one should be careful in advocating too great a role to them. Excessive government not only stifles initiative, but may provide a temptation to sin: tax evasion increases as tax rates increase. Moreover, big government will tend to impinge on personal responsibility as it reduces the areas of life over which people have the ability to make choices.

A market system, with limited government, will tend to provide a framework within which mankind can carry out the Cultural Mandate. Welfare policy directed at helping people help themselves will, on this basis, be more effective than cash handouts. Although, as Adam Smith realised, the market operates as a result of self-interest, "we do not have to be selfish to take part in the free market system" (163). Markets, as traditionally conceived, are an efficient means of translating people's preferences into production and distribution, without the necessity of enquiring into the source of those preferences. Markets, then, have instrumental value as a way of achieving biblically-mandated goals.

Everyone recognises, however, that the market is not perfect; as an artefact of a sinful world, it could not be. Economists recognise cases of "market failure" where the operation of the Invisible Hand fails to produce a desirable outcome, perhaps because of the existence of externalities (i.e., effects such as pollution on innocent bystanders who are not a party to the market transaction). Boersema examines some of the problems of the market economy: the pre-

conditions for a market to operate, problems posed by its operation, and the possibility that even well-functioning markets will not necessarily produce full employment. Thus he sees a role for government: to ensure justice (through establishing property rights and other pre-requisites for a market to function), and to ensure a level playing field (through, for example, promoting fair competition and controlling the abuse of monopoly power). Boersema argues that, to avoid trampling on personal responsibility, government action should be the minimum necessary to achieve biblical objectives (175-6). Therefore, the government has a right to regulate economic activity, to levy taxes, and even to appropriate private property, but only to the extent that to do so is consistent with this residual role. The disincentive effects of high tax rates and the sclerosis that tends to be a feature of government-run enterprises mean that decisions need to be made on a case-by-case basis, rather than on doctrinaire capitalist or socialist grounds. "Government failure" is just as much a danger as "market failure."

Boersema is not alone here. Many others, including Christians, have argued for a market-based economy, but with appropriate regulation or government intervention in cases of market failure. The superiority of a market economy in allocating resources to their most valuable uses is generally recognised. Views diverge over the cases where government can improve on the market outcome. A growing concern about the finite nature of natural resources, for example, has raised questions about the sustainability of the current scale of economic activity relative to the ecosystem. It is perhaps surprising that a book concentrating on insight from the Dutch tradition does not have more to say on the Dutch approach to environmental problems.

Boersema does, however, seek to apply the results of his investigation to the Dutch economy. Since the time of Abraham Kuyper, at least, neo-Calvinist thought has been influential on Dutch politics and society, and one would expect, then, to see this heritage playing out in the everyday policy decisions of Dutch governments. The Dutch harmony model sees economic life as a partnership between workers, employers and the government, working together to pursue the common good. Boersema critiques this "Dutch Model," first by sketching out how the Christian-derived positions of the GPV and other Reformed parties have influenced policy, and then by posing the question of the transferability of the model. Dutch society is less individualistic and has a more intentional religious focus than North American society. The more public-spirited nature of the Dutch trade unions and business managers (the latter being more likely to hold themselves responsible to all "stakeholders" in an organisation, rather than just the shareholders), plus the much smaller and more culturally-homogeneous nature of the Netherlands, make wholesale adaptation to North America

problematic. Furthermore, the problem of developing appropriate institutions would be hard to surmount. The pervasiveness of human sinfulness should also make us wary of institutional panaceas for all states and cultures. This, though, is a disappointing conclusion: if models of political economy and institutions are generally not transferable across different Western cultures, then the interest in studying particular cases is surely reduced.

The book is very clearly laid out, with many recaps and concluding sections that summarise each stage of the argument. The last chapter in effect summarises the argument of the book. The Table of Contents breaks down chapters into sub-headings, dealing with particular aspects of the position that Boersema is putting forward, making navigation of the text easier. The conclusions are usually tentatively expressed (e.g., "it would appear that..."; "it is doubtful if..."). More definitive claims would make the book more appealing by challenging the reader to work out whether or not he or she agreed with Boersema's position.

The repetition and highlighting of important sentences in bold type produce the impression that this work started life as a potential textbook. And yet, although an Economics class could no doubt use the text in this way (and Boersema does say that draft material was used in his own introductory classes), I am not sure that this is the primary audience of the book. Boersema himself says that it is intended to appeal to a broad audience. Those who want to know more of the "Dutch model" and the policies and programmes of the Reformed parties in the Netherlands will find this book a good introduction, although more discussion on the wider applicability of the ideas presented there would be interesting.

It would also be fruitful, I think, to contrast Dutch (and Continental European) ideas of Christian political economy with those from the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Archbishop William Temple's influential *Christianity and Social Order* (1942) sketched out a model whereby the Church would act as the Nation's conscience, calling attention to cases where the need for redemptive action was evident, but leaving the task of policy-making to the existing, secularised, political parties. Intentionally Christian-based parties are not part of the mainstream of British politics, a situation similar to both Canada and the USA. In addition, the blurb on the book's cover mentions the Dutch "harmony" model as a potential "Third Way." Drawing connections with Tony Blair's ideas, and those of liked-minded politicians, would also be a fruitful area of research.

But these points take us beyond the scope of just one book. Dr. Boersema is to be commended for an interesting and thoughtful contribution to the literature on Christianity and Economics. As the book is subtitled "the Foundation," we can look forward, I hope, to further development of his thesis: that we can indeed seek to do political economy to the honour of God. ernment action should be the minimum