

An Inter-faith Perspective on Globalisation

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The Tree of Life: Reclaiming a Rich History

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Abstract

The globalised money system is not a naturally occurring phenomenon to be studied scientifically but beyond human control, rather like the weather. On the contrary, the globalised economy is a man-made system. As such, its history, institutions and operating systems can be studied with a view to the adaptation of the structures governing society. This paper introduces social credit, a Christian-centred approach to the study of the economy, setting it within the context of the wider literature from which it evolved.

*In recent decades narrow subject specialisms, and specialisms within subjects, have precluded an holistic approach to the study of the relationship between the money economy and the human and natural worlds which support it. Economic history and the history of economic thought have become all but excluded from the formal academic curriculum. This paper takes the form of a brief review of 20th century literature on the economy, land and society, exploring their inter-connectivity. Central to the paper is H.J. Massingham's *The Tree of Life*, which surveys contemporary and historical literature on the subject. Published in 1943, *The Tree of Life* links the loss of love of the land with the loss of love of the Christian religion. Additionally, this paper establishes common links between the work of JRR Tolkien, Thorstein Veblen, Clifford Hugh Douglas and others. A comparison is drawn between the 20th century works and Alastair McIntosh's *Soil and Soul*.*

Introduction

"It's the economy, stupid!" The sign, allegedly displayed in the Clinton campaign headquarters during the 1992 election, reminded campaign workers of the central issue in contemporary politics. During the twentieth century a new politics of unbridled economic 'mal-development' (Shiva 1988) has swept aside value systems based upon faith and respect for the land and its peoples, leaving unprecedented climate change, pollution and mass warfare in its wake. In this paper I examine the core theme of economic theory which provides the rationale for the political economy of globalisation. I then introduce the work of major alternative thinkers. The paper originates from my research into the heterodox economics of Clifford Hugh Douglas (Hutchinson 1998. Hutchinson and Burkitt 1997. 1999. See also Hutchinson and Hutchinson 1997. Hutchinson, Mellor and Olsen 2002). Through these researches I conclude that orthodox economics has no value save to justify a system based upon exploitation and destruction of the land and its peoples. Although neoclassical

economic theory is central to the many strands of theorising, it does not provide a basis for analysis of the real-life economy and the institutions by which it is governed.

The Good Ship TINA: There Is No Alternative

In orthodox economic theory, the economy is visualised as a circular flow. The central section of Fig.1 shows the traditional circular flow diagram embedded in the natural and social economies. Economic theory is concerned purely with the central money economy: demand means effective demand, i.e. demand backed by money. Need does not enter into the equations of economic theorising. Within economic theory, economic agents own factors of production which they sell to businesses. Firms use the factors to create wealth, paying out money incomes to households. The households use the money to 'consume' the products placed on the market by the productive firms. The money then returns to the firms and the whole process starts again. The maintenance of equilibrium within the circular flow of the money economy has remained the focus of mainstream economic theorising throughout the twentieth century. However, although the formal money economy (the central section of Fig. 1) *measures* wealth in money terms, it does not *create* wealth: that is done with resources provided by God's creation through human society and its natural environment. While the formal economy can put a money value on 'wealth', creating such measures as GNP, it fails to measure degradation and depreciation of social and natural capital, except in so far as a money value is placed upon it. Furthermore, an oil spill at sea appears as a plus in terms of the formal economy, as resources are spent on the clean up operation. My colleagues and I have likened the formal economy to an old-fashioned galley ship, built long ago to meet past circumstances. Now, in the 21st century, attempts to maintain the old ship are placing unsustainable strains upon its life support systems. It is heading with un-nerving speed towards a series of icebergs in the form of natural disasters waiting to happen. Suggestions that the ship be slowed down at least until a safe route forward is discovered, are met with blank incomprehension by the crew (policy-makers, leading politicians, academics and financiers) and passengers (top business management), while wage-slaves and non-ship (unpaid social reproduction and self-provisioning) labour lack the knowledge to gain control of the ship.

Until very recently, most people spent most of their lives off the 'ship', supplying almost all their needs and pleasures from their own land, within local communities. As traditional resources, knowledge and skills have been plundered by ship culture, the natural resources of the earth have been despoiled. The main problem is that passengers and crew have no conception of the true extent of their dependence upon, and desecration of, 'non-ship' labour and the fertility of the land. It is difficult to visualise the conditions of virtual slave labour which produced the chips for our computers, and the distant chemical factory which manufactured the ink you are now reading. As the ship grew in proportion to the social and material resources available to communities on the land, questions were raised from different quarters about the advisability and desirability of its growth. However, since most unease was expressed on land, i.e. by non-ship labour, it had no effect whatsoever on the crew of the ship. They had their own agenda: what they needed to enable the ship to grow and continue moving forwards, they simply took. There was no other agenda on the agenda. Of course the ship must grow, and it needed resources to do so.

Note that this analogy is, like all analogies, only useful up to a point. All agents on the 'ship', i.e. in the formal economy, relate to each other through the money system. They are paid to do things, or pay for things, in money. One problem is that many tasks are undertaken from mixed motives: a nurse is paid to care, but does not only care because s/he is paid. Furthermore, people cannot be classed as *either passengers or crew or slaves or non-ship labour*. Individuals play more than one role at a time. Passengers, wealthy business people, often work very hard within the system in managerial roles (they are certainly not the 'idle rich'). The crew, leading politicians, academics, and bankers work with the 'passengers' to devise ways to keep the ship moving forward. The slaves, waged workers below senior management level, follow orders for money rewards. Most of the essential work necessary to keep the ship afloat is done by non-ship labour. All on board the ship are at some time in their lives, often for much of their lives, part of the pool of non-ship labour (working in their homes and in voluntary work in the community). The amount of non-ship labour necessary to keep the ship going is vast. Without it the ship would sink without a trace.

However, if the ship does crash into an iceberg, the survivors (crew, passengers or slaves) will not survive for long because there is nowhere else for them to go. The ship has grown so large that it has drained the land and its peoples of the ability to survive outside the ship. Although the Good Ship TINA, the money economy of western capitalism, is an artificial construction, made entirely from non-ship materials and non-ship labour, it has been around so long that it seems to be a natural phenomenon. Nobody, whether crew, passengers, slaves or non-ship labour, absolutely nobody can imagine life without the ship. Hence the possibility of TINA running into an iceberg is unthinkable. Note that debt-fuelled economic growth is the problem. As the ship sails, its cancerous growth devours the resources upon which it depends (Hutchinson, Mellor and Olsen 2002).

There is a whole series of alternatives

Throughout the twentieth century critiques of the ship-economy from a Christian perspective have continued to circulate and were, until the final decades of that century, widely read among lay people and non-specialists (Hutchinson and Burkitt 1997. Hutchinson 1998). However, suggestions for bringing the ship/economy under the control of the whole community (not just the formal policy makers, the 'crew' and 'passengers') so that all can take common responsibility, have survived only in the heretical 'underworld' of economic thought. From an academic point of view, ethical, environmental and spiritual concerns can be grafted onto the margins of economic thought, so long as they do not impede in any way the growth of the formal 'ship' economy: they cannot, however, replace or even challenge the ethics of the formal economy based upon the twin cycles of production and consumption. My special study has focused on the work of a so-called 'heretical' economist, Clifford Hugh Douglas (1879-1952). Like Henry George, but with a great deal more justification, Douglas was popularly read throughout the westernised world and addressed mass audiences. This short paper does not offer space to detail the economics of social credit, with its radical proposals to divert redundant 'ship' economics into ecologically sane, theoretically sound and socially just economics by ending a production system based on waged and salaried labour. For a full account, see my works as detailed in

the references. Note also the increasingly effective critiques of 'mainstream' economic orthodoxy (Feiner 1999. Guerrien 2002. Roterling 2002).

Douglas' work formed a part of the mass movement against economism, mass warfare and globalisation in the first half of the twentieth century. I can only introduce a few writers whose work deserves in depth study in the quest to reverse the trend, recently critiqued by Chomsky, to exclude serious study of political economy from the educational and academic curriculum (Mitchell and Schoeffel 2002). The works of H.J. Massingham and Thorstein Veblen are of particular interest.

The Tree of Life

Writing during World War II, Massingham opens The Tree of Life with the following quote from a letter from a friend:

I feel that the loss of the love of the land for its own sake and the loss of the Christian religion are the greatest tragedies this country has ever suffered (Massingham 1943: 11).

Noting the extraordinarily rapid development of a purely secular society in the 20th century, Massingham observes that few Christians see any necessary connection between "Christianity and Nature", nor that rural values "should be 'spiritual' no less than practical and cultural" (Massingham 1943: 11). Throughout this scholarly work Massingham cites G.K. Chesterton, R.H. Tawney, T.S. Eliot, William Morris, William Cobbett, the saints and many other writers still widely respected. He makes a powerful plea to the Church to take a positive role in re-creating co-operative social structures capable of respecting the land, the locality and the people. In Massingham's opinion:

Everything that offends against the Doctrine of Creation is Church business; everything that affirms it, the love of nature, the craftsman's job, the artist's vision, the yeoman's husbandry, responsible or creative work of any and every kind, all true zeal in interpreting that Doctrine whether by witness in art, by service in honourable labour or by devotion by resistance to anarchy or automatism, those modern enemies of godliness, should receive the holy blessing. In *The Mind of the Maker*, Dorothy Sayers has demonstrated that the triune process of all artistic creation, if authentic, is fulfilment in miniature of the Doctrine of the Trinity, as expounded by the Nicene Creed. That is only another way of saying that it is the business of the urban clergy to bless every symptom in the social, economic or political body which furthers a modern version of the Guild System in which the accent is on the work rather than what you make out of it. It is the business of the country clergy to bless any movement which aims at or aids the re-establishment of a genuine rural community based on distributed and responsible property, not flung helter-skelter over the countryside, but in nuclei; co-operatively clustered on an estate or round a central farm. The *latifundia*, a propertyless proletariat, predatory vested interests, the wage-system, blaspheme the Doctrine of Creation, and the clergy are the appointed guardians of that Doctrine (Massingham 1943: 194-5).

The mass-production of "superfluities", degradation of agriculture and wasteful industrialism have been supported by a largely silent clergy. For Massingham,

frugality is a Christian virtue, "while the choice for man has definitely become his mastery of money and the machine, or their mastery of him" (Massingham 1943: 195). Referring to Tawney's Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, Massingham notes the "Tudor clash between Christian morality and economic interests":

Theology surrendered to ethics, ethics to economics, and man followed suit from a spiritual being to an economic animal. The terms of surrender are indeed explicitly set out by the Tonnage Act of 1694, by which the king handed over his prerogative in the issue of money to a private interest in the newly created Bank of England. Thus the Bank of England took precedence of the Church of England by relieving economics of Christian supervision and giving it into the charge of itself (Massingham 1943: 103).

Enclosures and the highland clearances brought 'privatisation' of the land and a body of landless labour dependent upon employment for survival. As western society has become increasingly secular, the inhumane struggle for domination over the earth has replaced knowledge of God in creation with nihilism, a denial of all established authority and institutions, permitting a godforsaken desecration of nature (Moltmann 1985). It has, however, often been individuals outside the Church who have been most forthright in critiquing the structures of secular power, notably Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen.

The Theory of the Leisure Class

Economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen, whose importance and influence has been underplayed (Spindler 2002), has been described as the "terror of received truth in economics as Luther had once been the terror of received truth in religion" (Lerner 1948: 19). For Veblen, neoclassical economics was a system of apologetics for the system of economic power. The growth of consumer society was based from the outset on emulative consumption, the conspicuous waste of time and resources, on food, clothes, house, luxuries and leisure pursuits designed not to meet basic needs but to keep up with the latest fashion and appear to be a member of the "leisure class". The Theory of the Leisure Class, along with The Theory of Business Enterprise, Essays in Our Changing Order, The Place of Science in Modern Civilization, and the more sombre Absentee Ownership deserve a much wider readership (Veblen 1998a, 1904, 1998b. 1990. 1997). The latter work, originally published in 1923, provides a thorough analysis of the credit and financial system, having much in common with Douglas' work.

Faith and Land

The evil flowing from the separation of God's people from their land runs as a common thread through the writings of many global dissidents. According to Karl Marx:

In the sphere of agriculture, modern industry has a more revolutionary effect than elsewhere, for this reason, that it annihilates the peasant, that bulwark of old society, and replaces him by the wage-labourer (Marx 1974: 474).

For the early Marx, capitalist production lays waste the "original sources of all wealth – the soil and the labourer" (Marx 1974: 475). By concentrating production in urban centres capitalism "disturbs the circulation of matter between man and the soil, *i.e.*, prevents the return to the soil of its elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; it therefore violates the conditions necessary to lasting fertility of the soil" (Marx 1974: 474). The subject of Marx's works and the many interpretations they have undergone lie beyond the scope of this paper. Marx raged at the dispossession of "free peasant proprietors", who worked as agricultural labourers on the large estates but had independent rights to subsistence and were "co-possessors" of the common land (Marx 1974: 671-716). Marxism has presented a poor shadow of Marx to subsequent generations. The original has much in common with the thunderings of Massingham who, like Marx but from a Christian perspective, attacks the established church for colluding in the destruction of peasant farming.

For Massingham, peasants are the true guardians of the land, handing on knowledge and skills from generation to generation. Sophisticated mass production can survive for a time, as in the Roman *latifundia*, but such methods are not sustainable. In England, it was peasant culture which returned the fertility to the soil. Massingham rails at the Church for colluding in the secularisation of society. Although the Founder of Christianity was executed by the earthly powers as the enemy of law and order, the Christian Churches have abdicated their responsibility, affecting not only "the response to Christianity of the external world but the quality and inspiration of the Faith itself" (Massingham 1943: 13). Quoting R.H. Tawney, he notes that the Churches of the 19th century "acquiesced in the popular assumption that the acquisition of riches was the main end of man, and confined themselves to preaching such personal virtues as did not conflict with its achievement". Hence they merely softened "the materialism of principalities and powers with mild doses of piety administered in an apologetic whisper" (Tawney quoted in Massingham 1943: 12-13). Writing during World War II, Massingham notes the twin evils of Nazism and Communism, looking to England's past heritage as providing guidance for a sane and sustainable future society. In The Tree of Life, chapter headings include: Heaven and Earth, The Rural Christ (The Rural Redeemer, The Peasant Poetry of the Gospels, The Peasant Prince of Peace, The Christ of the Trades, The Christian-Pagan Christmas), Enquiry into Nature, The Separation of Nature from Religion, The Doctrine of Creation and The Church Across the Fields (Massingham 1943).

A couple of years later, as WWII ended, Massingham published The Wisdom of the Fields. I quote from the Preface at some length:

The first chapter of this book is a study of Cobbett and of his meaning for us today. Chapters II and VI give personal descriptions of certain craftsmen in village, town and region, who in our century have maintained the Cobbett doctrine as expressed in his *Cottage Economy*. Chapters VII to XI contain pictures of various living farmers who, both as unconscious survivors and conscious pioneers, have carried on the Cobbett tradition as it appears in his *Rural Rides*. The Epilogue covers a wider field, stretching behind Cobbett and his successors and into the future.

These portraits depict the kind of England and Englishmen that Cobbett loved, but are more necessary to the welfare and even survival of England than they were in

his own time. They are stragglers from a lost community that have wandered into the strange land of our own era, while the evidences of a lost culture they represent are like discarded bygones found in a derelict barn. The men I am going to describe are, on the analogy of the "Sons of Ben," the "Sons of Cobbett" and grandsons of his "Commons of England"; the things are the torn and faded scraps of a priceless manuscript.

But the spirit behind these people and things is, like Cobbett himself, more modern than the moderns because it is the promise of the future no less than salvage from the past. What replaced Cobbett's world is rapidly dissolving; its new strength triumphed over his passion, but now the light from his flame penetrates our dark age and gives firm guidance through it. A new war lies before us, the greatest of all wars, the war of values, and it may be that our soldiers who have so valiantly borne themselves through the hell of modern war will have a part to play in this other war (Massingham 1945: 7).

Massingham was to be disappointed. "What replaced Cobbett's world" did not dissolve. As the 20th century continued to rage on its destructive course, the Church ignored his writings and Massingham's books merely went out of print. Search the institutions of higher learning for his works (and they were considerable) and you search in vain. Cobbett and his world, if mentioned at all, are referred to in terms of derision in 'respectable' academic, business and political circles.

However, it is my belief that *the people*, the soldiers and civilians of the on-going global war, retain the ancient faith despite the capitulation of established religious institutions to triumphant materialism. Massingham makes a distinction between Christian and pagan faith on the one hand and secularism, which rejects religion and its place in civil affairs on the other. A global society which reduces the notion of evil to a figure of speech is capable of great evil, as the events of the 20th century have amply demonstrated. However, as J.R.R. Tolkien demonstrated in The Lord of the Rings, small individuals have the capacity to stand against great evil. According to Patrick Curry (1998), Tolkien did not simply lecture, on the lines of Ruskin and Chesterton. Rather, he wove his anti-materialism into a rich and intricate narrative that presents an alternative world. Furthermore, although he omitted specific references to religious practices, Tolkien perceived The Lord of the Rings as a religious and Catholic work. It rejects the inevitability of 'progress' in favour of a belief in individuals as free agents capable of determining events for good or ill.

Despite being studiously ignored by the literary establishment, this book, published nearly fifty years ago has been voted the most important book of the 20th century, selling 50 million copies at the last count in 1997. Annual lending totals have exceeded 300,000, well ahead of Austen, Dickens and Shakespeare. Its popularity lies in its relevance to the contemporary struggle of community, nature and spirit against the pathological union of state-power, finance capital and globalised technology, where a rootless science exists beyond history and locality, inseparable from power and profit. Curry's book is arranged around the three interrelated worlds of community (the hobbits and the Shire), the natural world (Middle-earth itself), and spiritual values (symbolised by the Sea). All three worlds are under threat from the pathological union that is Mordor, where the love of people and places is destroyed, to be replaced by a self-interested utilitarianism.

Conclusion

When I reviewed Curry (1998) for Resurgence magazine, and more recently Alastair McIntosh (2001)'s Soil and Soul: People versus Corporate Power, I was heartened to see evidence of the continuation of the great universal tradition of local story-telling. Across the world, in very different cultures, religions and lands, the story, the history, the folk myth and its re-interpretation live on, inviting ordinary people to escape from the prison of forced modernity, currently barred by its intellectual and cultural warders, the realists and rationalists, who would have us believe that 'progress' is not only good for us but is here to stay, regardless of the trail of devastation left in its wake. Alongside other authors quoted in this paper, and the many others in the same vein which they represent, these works contain hope for the re-sacralization (or re-enchantment) of experienced and living nature, in the local cultural idiom. For hope to become reality it will be necessary for the institutions of organised religions to take a lead in bringing the ancient stories back to the people in their everyday lives as producers and consumers of western capitalism.

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