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## Business, Faith, and the Economy of Communion

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### 5. The Economy of Communion as an Exercise of Prophetic Imagination

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#### Abstract

This paper seeks to consider the purpose and meaning of the Economy of Communion (EoC) movement in the context of totalism. It makes the claim that the EoC is an exercise of prophetic imagination as that idea has been articulated by Walter Brueggemann. The paper proceeds by first explicating the significant dimensions of prophetic imagination at work, then assesses the EoC in light of that explication. We then consider the engagement of EoC entrepreneurs in prophetic ministry and conclude by returning to the question of the EoC as an alternative proposal for economic life and culture.

Keywords: Economy of Communion, prophetic imagination, Walter Brueggemann, economic life, ministry

## **Introduction**

On March 15, 2019, hundreds of thousands of students across the globe staged a protest by staying out of school for the day. With this Global Climate Strike, young people were protesting the inaction and apathy of the world's leaders towards climate change. The day long strike was an outgrowth of an effort begun by a 16-year old student, Greta Thunberg of Sweden, who, in August of 2018, first stayed out of school in a call for our public servants and corporate leaders to act to mitigate global warming. The Climate Strike protesters minced few words in their signs and their speeches, clearly conveying their conviction that world leaders are squandering this next generation's future. In their eyes, world leaders are suggesting that today's young people do not matter, and these young people want an end to such injustice.

While the immediate focus of the strike was the issue of climate change and its threat to the well-being (perhaps the very existence) of future generations, many of the same signs and speeches carried a criticism of the economic and political system of which climate change is a symptom. These young people understand climate change to be attributable to human economic activity. As such the Global Climate Strike is not just a protest against inaction. It is an indictment of an economic and political system that requires significant extractive, industrial, and consumption activity and the environmental degradation that accompanies such, and lays the burden on the young and others without power or voice who will have to confront the full consequences (Gold 2019: 64-65). Protests against global warming and climate change are arguably manifestations of deeper social, cultural, and economic concerns.

There is broad recognition that the current economic system creates, as a by-product, serious social ills that might generally be characterized as inequalities in wealth, power, and in uneven access to significant material and development needs like education, food, security, water, employment, and health care. In the United States alone, we might consider the student debt crisis, the dominance of corporate agribusiness, municipal water crises, wage inequalities between men and women, and the number of families unable to afford health care as evidence for these social ills. The human suffering and despair that accompanies these social ills is significant and arguably systemic. Pope Francis describes these systemic social ills as the creation of marginalized, excluded, and otherwise "discarded persons." Indeed, it is not hard to imagine that the young climate strikers feel quite like discarded persons; not simply ignored, but essentially written off by those of us with economic wealth and political power.

Walter Brueggemann describes this state of affairs as "totalism" (127); a socio-ideological arrangement dominated by a hegemonic ideology that is, in this case, variously and loosely labeled as consumerism, globalization, free market capitalism, or democratic capitalism. As Brueggemann elaborates, it is an unapologetic ideology the outcome of which is "the monetizing of all social relationships, the commoditization of all social possibilities, and the endless production of dispensable persons who have no legitimate membership in the totalism" (131); to wit, Francis' discarded persons. Francis, accordingly, views this creation of discarded persons as the "principal ethical dilemma of . . . capitalism."

This paper seeks to consider the purpose and meaning of the Economy of Communion (EoC) movement in this context of totalism. In this consideration, the paper makes the claim that the EoC is an exercise of prophetic imagination as that idea has been articulated by Walter Brueggemann. The paper proceeds by first explicating the significant dimensions of prophetic

imagination at work, then assesses the EoC in light of that explication. We then consider the engagement of EoC entrepreneurs in prophetic ministry and conclude by returning to the question of the EoC as an alternative proposal for economic life and culture.

### **What is the Economy of Communion?**

The very existence of the EoC is evidence that the challenge of totalism is more than an abstract intellectual concern. Additional evidence takes the form of other movements and projects designed to address the hegemony of our dominant culture of consumerism. Among these are cooperatives, microcredit and microfinancing institutions, “B” corporations, social enterprises, forms of collaborative consumption, and various “occupy” movements. These have been variously, and collectively, described as the “New” economy (Alperovitz), the “generative” economy (Kelly), and/or the “circular” economy (Thunberg). All of these refer to ideas and practices aimed at more humane economic practices and political policies. Clearly, the economic and political policies our young people are going out on strike for have very real consequences. This indeed may be the salient economic and political crisis of our time. In many ways, in the midst of this crisis, stands the Economy of Communion (EoC).

The Economy of Communion (EoC) itself was created in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1991, by Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare movement, in response to the prevailing social injustice and economic inequality in Brazil. Economic inequality was such that for many people, particularly participants in the Focolare community, serious material poverty was a continuing way of life with little hope of mitigation. The original vision of the EoC, as described by Chiara, was that talented, Focolare

people could set up businesses that could tap their expertise and resources to produce together wealth for the benefit of those in need. They would have to be managed by competent persons capable of making them function efficiently and deriving profits from them. These profits would then be put in common (275).

The pooling of profits was understood as a three part distribution of profits: one part to reinvest in the growth and sustainability of the business, one part to provide for the direct needs of the poor, and a third part to support the development of a culture of giving, or of community such that the initiative could be sustained (Lubich: 275). The EoC was a proposal aimed at addressing material poverty, economic inequality, and diminished hope. The EoC looked to skilled, experienced, businesspeople to start (or continue with) businesses, manage them profitably, and then invest those profits, or wealth, in specific ways.

In founding the EoC, the Focolare were looking to the private sector to operate within a market economy, generating products and services, selling those products and services and earning profits; businesses creating wealth through their interactions in the marketplace (Haughey: 92). Part of that wealth would be pooled and shared as a direct effort to reduce poverty by meeting the material needs of a particular people. Entrepreneurs would manage legitimate private sector businesses that rely on a market economy, buying from suppliers in a market economy, hiring employees in a market economy, and producing goods and services in a market economy, selling those to customers, and generating material wealth, all while operating in a market economy.

It is a very deep and rich idea, yet in some ways, it is so concrete that it is immediately accessible to people. The practice of business and the common understanding of profit-making is so familiar that the core idea of pooling profits to help others is quite intuitive. At this level, it is quite easy to become an EoC practitioner and/or participant. But the EoC is a richer idea than just profit sharing. That richness affords an opportunity for sustained reflection on the meaning and implications of the EoC. Much has been written about the multiple, specific, profound ways in which the EoC understands economic activity and the possibilities of economic activity. As Chiara Lubich herself noted,

In proposing it, I was certainly not thinking about a theory. I see, however, that it has caught the attention of economist, sociologists, philosophers and scholars of other disciplines who find in this new experience . . . grounds for further study that go beyond the Movement in which it has historically been developed (278).

### **The Idea of Prophetic Imagination**

It is important at the outset to mention that Brueggemann is concerned in this text with the need for change in the contemporary church, particularly a need for the church to confront the dominant culture in the United States of “the American ethos of consumerism” (1). Certainly the need for change was suspected in 1978 and, as the foreword to the anniversary edition claims that need has not diminished. The problematic features that Brueggemann diagnoses in the social situation have not faded into the past . . .” (Brueggemann: xvi), and the global climate strike and attendant issues are evidence for that.

Brueggemann characterizes prophetic imagination as making possible a “consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us” (3). For Brueggemann, prophetic imagination is manifest most clearly in the scriptural record of prophecy in the life of Israel from the time of Moses through the ministry, eventual death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The prophetic imagination instantiates an alternative to the dominant culture. The alternative arises from within its own “experience and confession of faith,” and not from external imposition or sources.

The prophetic imagination is a call to live out the truth that we know in a dominant culture that would rather not acknowledge such truth because that truth is a proclamation that the dominant culture does not have all the answers. It has only temporal (and temporary) power to prescribe reality. The dominant culture seeks to perpetuate itself through its rules, its exercise of power, its insistence on what matters or what is important because it imagines that things will always be the way they are at present. This is an apt description of contemporary consumerist culture where increasing consumption of goods and services is not only understood as an important driver of economic growth and therefore economic policy, but consumption is arguably the primary means of general well-being and happiness (Araujo: 25). Brueggemann makes the point that the reality we experience living in the dominant culture is itself imaginative and therefore prophetic imagination pronounces an alternative (3) that serves to both criticize the dominant culture and energize the prophetic community to live in the alternative imagination (4). This alternative imagination is nothing less than the “imagination of God” (6).

Brueggemann begins his exposition of prophetic ministry (what I am calling the exercise of prophetic imagination) with Moses and Israel's escape from Pharaoh and flight from Egypt. He then traces the prophetic ministry from Moses, through Jeremiah, to Jesus. Early on the dominant culture is Egyptian culture under the rule (and imagination) of the Pharaoh. This leads Brueggemann, in the original edition, to characterize the dominant culture as "royal consciousness." That is to say that the dominant culture serves the royal state, the Pharaoh, or the king (the extension to Solomon). In the anniversary edition, Brueggemann insists that a more contemporary description for what he means by the dominant culture would be "totalism," as we have mentioned, which is a term meant to describe "a socio-ideological arrangement in which hegemonic ideology takes up all the social spaces and allows to no alternative possibility. Its claim is total" (127). Consider again our consumerist culture and in particular the synergistic interaction in contemporary times between technology and consumption. The nexus of smartphones, digital assistants, smart appliances, social media, makes virtually all things available, accessible, and shareable – in essence, consumable, at all hours of the day, every day, across time and space. Consumption can become the primary way of relating to not only the things in our world, but also to each other.

It is important to recognize that one of the aims of the dominant culture is self-perpetuation. In the imaginative self-understanding of the dominant culture, it will always be dominant. It sees itself as providing meaning and explanation to the community and will always be thus. The dominant culture, therefore, and by definition, is a "politics of oppression and exploitation" (Brueggemann: 7). The prophetic imagination counters this with a "politics of justice and compassion" (Brueggemann: 6). The dominant culture always marginalizes some members of the community through oppressive social policy such that the dimension of the prophetic imagination that provides the critique of totalism originates in grief (Brueggemann: 27). The oppression and marginalization that is partly constitutive of the dominant reality engenders grief, mourning, and anguish at the numbness and insensitivity to the plight of many in the community (Brueggemann: 46). The prophetic imagination goes beyond the mere recognition that something is not right, to a proclamation, a presentation of an "alternative consciousness" that energizes the community to new vitality (Brueggemann: 59). It provides hope in place of despair. "As the prophetic cry loosens the grip of dominant ideologies, it also energizes and empowers a community out of indifference into action" (Hankins: xiii). It demonstrates the imagination of God and provokes amazement at the sheer generosity and inclusion – the reality in the imagination of God. "YHWH has a specific will and purpose . . . that lies outside the totalism of the day and that will not be mocked or countermanded by the practice of that totalism" (Brueggemann: 128).

An exercise of the prophetic imagination bears these marks. It must "nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us" (Brueggemann: 3). The key question is not whether the "alternative is realistic, or practical or viable," but "whether it is imaginable" (Brueggemann: 39). The alternative consciousness serves to criticize the dominant culture, arising from and expressed as grief, but simultaneously, energizing through a promise of a better time and situation in the future. The alternative must arise from within its own experience and confession of faith. It is not new, per se, but it may seem new. But it arises from within – in

this sense it is a recovery of a perception that has been, or is coopted or better, overwhelmed by the dominant culture.

### **The Economy of Communion as the Exercise of Prophetic Imagination**

There are arguably four distinctives that support the claim that the EoC proposes a consciousness that is an alternative to the dominant hegemonic ideology. First, it is a practice of abundance. Not only does it operate with a “logic of abundance” (Haughey: 87) but it is a realization of abundance. The logic of abundance is pervasive in Christian theology. This finds expression in multiple ways, but the central idea is that not only does God provide, but that God intends creation to be sufficient to meet our needs. All our needs; not just economic needs (Pontifical Council: §182). The dominant hegemonic ideology of capitalism operates according to a logic of scarcity (Clark: 29). This is the same dominant ideology that Brueggemann refers to as “the American ethos of consumerism” (1), and what the EoC refers to as the “culture of having” (Lubich: 280) and what both Brueggemann and Francis decry as a culture that creates dispensable or discarded persons. Indeed, as John Haughey asserts, “Forgetful of God’s logic, humans enthrone self-providence over an economic world in which the logic of scarcity is worked out as ‘dog eat dog’ and ‘every man for himself’” (Haughey 88-89).

The EoC is a practice of abundance because it is about creating and distributing a set of economic and social goods toward the end or goal of well-being for all persons involved. It would be a mistake to understand abundance in a strictly economic sense. Certainly the creation and distribution of wealth is a core concern, but when the goods and services produced are *good* goods (Dicastery: 42), when employment is created and sustained, when each business becomes a communion (a set of valued and valuable relationships), when subsidiarity is practiced inside the business, when the market exchange is also an authentic encounter with the other, this is abundance – well-being that goes beyond mere economic wealth creation and distribution. When created wealth is invested in the culture of nurturing and in the development of a culture of giving, this is abundance. So, the EoC is a practice of abundance of well-being, where wealth creation and distribution are but one dimension.

Second, as an alternative consciousness, the EoC proposes the market as a place of authentic encounter with other persons and not merely a place of exchange of goods and services. Exchange in fact is the means of encounter: every good and/or service produced or consumed is the outcome of human creativity, time, and labor and thus is a tangible marker of a particular relationship between two or more persons. This is in keeping with the EoC’s insistence on the primacy of relationships. The market in fact is not only a means to connect persons, even when there is no personal connection, but it also permits connections between people across time and space. Goods and services produced in the past and in a particular location can be consumed by other persons at different times and in different places.

Further, the EoC understands markets as mechanisms for the exchange of more than just goods and services. It is also a mechanism for the exchange of needs. So, markets play a critical role in the EoC practice of abundance. When markets are viewed as places of encounter, they can clearly be beneficial and constitutive, at least in part, of the common good. Additionally, markets are broadly understood to be indispensable in terms of wealth creation and distribution – one facet of abundance. To say that the EoC views the market as a place of

encounter as well as exchange is to recognize the primacy of persons and the presence of community.

And same for markets; to say the EoC views the market as a place of encounter is to recognize that markets create relationships. At the very least, however distant might be the physical relationship between, say, an employee of a company and the eventual user of that company's product made (in whole or in part) by that employee. They may never know or meet one another personally but they are nevertheless in relationship. It might be fleeting, it might be persistent, but they are in relationship even across time, distance, and space.<sup>1</sup>

Third, as an alternative consciousness, the EoC clearly understands the profit of business as a means to a defined, multidimensional purpose. Profit is not an end unto itself. Profit is not the exclusive private property of the business owner, but rather is covered by what John Paul II called a social mortgage. The owners claim on the profit of the business is not absolute. Accordingly, the EoC proposes three legitimate uses for business profits: one is for reinvestment in the business to ensure vitality, growth, and sustainability; a second use is to directly alleviate the material needs of persons; and the third use is to invest in the cultivation, nurturing, and dissemination of this alternative consciousness.

Fourth, and finally, as an alternative consciousness, the EoC understands the purpose of business activity to be the creation of communion, and not any narrower understanding of business purpose such as maximization of profit or shareholder value. Indeed, Pope Francis recognized this in his address to the EoC:

You see the entrepreneur as an agent of communion. By introducing into the economy the good seed of communion, you have begun a profound change in the way of seeing and living business. Business is not only incapable of destroying communion among people but can edify it and promote it. With your life you demonstrate that economy and communion become more beautiful when they are beside each other. Certainly, the economy becomes more beautiful, but communion is also more beautiful, because the spiritual communion of hearts is even fuller when it becomes the communion of goods, of talents, of profits.

This vision of business activity as communion creation is seen in multiple ways. First of all, the EoC recognizes that a business is a *de facto* communion. What this means is that, by definition, an EoC entrepreneur creates a set of relationships that would otherwise not exist. Customers, employees, suppliers, competitors, and others are united by the very activities of the business: by consuming products and services and by participating in the production of those products and services even in the smallest of ways. Secondly, it recognizes that beyond this, a business is always a communion in formation. That is to say, that each of these relationships may require ongoing nurturing and development. Certainly, each of these relationships brings with it a responsibility for the quality and the sustainability of the

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<sup>1</sup> This sentiment, or a similar sentiment was given voice on one occasion by Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, when he said, "you make something with love and with care, even though you probably will never meet . . . the people that you're making it for, and you'll never shake their hand, by making something with care, you are expressing your gratitude to humanity, to the species" (Bradshaw).

relationship, and each relationship could be vastly different in that regard. So, the EoC recognizes the presence of communion, but the business is also called to build communion. Communion is the primary purpose, obligation, and effect of business (Gallagher 2014).

These are the dimensions of the alternative consciousness of the EoC. But what of the other marks of an exercise of prophetic imagination? Is the EoC borne of grief and mourning, and does it function as a criticism of the prevailing order? And does it arise from “inside of its own experience and confession of faith and not through external appropriation from somewhere else” (Brueggemann: 5)? As mentioned, the EoC was a response to social injustice and economic inequality which is certainly a form of grief. Moreover, the EoC founding story often describes the EoC as a response to the poverty found in the favelas, or slums, of Sao Paulo, Brazil. Chiara Lubich described her view of Sao Paulo while aboard her flight as seeing the favelas as a “crown of thorns” surrounding the city (Callebaut: 74).

The grief caused by the experience of deprivation also came with a critique of the injustice that lay at the root of this deprivation. Even though the EoC is so formed and shaped by the spirituality of unity that it looks for ways to bridge differences and distinctions, it often describes the prevailing culture as a culture of having distinct from a culture of giving (Araujo: 25). We might note the following from Lorna Gold. The EoC

. . . raises probing questions about the interrelationship between the cultural, the spiritual, and the economic dimensions of life, arguably calling into question the idea that “rational economic man” based on “self-interest” is the only viable principle for a global economy (Gold 2010: 36).

It is in this way that the EoC is critical.

In the case of the EoC, the alternative consciousness – the practice of abundance, the market as a place of encounter, the legitimate uses for profits, and the purpose of business as communion – certainly arises from the Focolare spirituality of unity. Although we can abstract from its concrete reality to ideas, concepts and understanding, the EoC principles were not generative. What was generative was the Focolare spirituality and culture. As Masters and Uelmen point out; “A spirituality of unity takes love of neighbor as the measure of everything in life. . . . Building relationships of love and unity constitutes the heart, soul, and driving energy of every Focolare community, project, or activity” (40). It is impossible to separate the EoC from the Focolare culture, and from the spirituality of unity. In many respects, the EoC is a lived manifestation of the spirituality of unity, the living out of Jesus’ desire and prayer expressed in John 17. If one were to ask how to live the spirituality of unity in business the answer would be the EoC. Chiara Lubich noted:

This authentic expression of the spirituality of unity in economic life can be understood in its entirety and its complexity only if viewed within the vision this spirituality has of the human person and social relationships (274).

As discussed above, the EoC grows out of the Focolare culture and spirituality of unity. The Focolare have simply been asking – since their founding – how best to live the prayer of Jesus that we might all be made one and answering that question with the art of love.



### **The Economy of Communion as Prophetic Ministry**

Exercises in prophetic imagination are more than abstract ideas. In every case, there must be prophets: those persons who are called to engage with the prevailing culture and ideology in prophetic ways. As an exercise of prophetic imagination, the EoC therefore has profound implications for individual business entrepreneurs. These are among those people that Francis has described as “agents of communion.” I have elsewhere referred to the EoC business as a “crucible of formation” (Gallagher: 2011).

These refer to two slightly different things, but they are related. As an agent of communion, the entrepreneur realizes that the fundamental mission of his or her business is indeed to create communion. The creation of communion in the context and confines of a market-driven business, subject to the same competitive pressures as all businesses, places significant, weighty, and to many observers, irreconcilable demands on the entrepreneur, and in many cases, to employees involved in the business. EoC entrepreneurs are a prophetic voice.

Business (entrepreneurship) is risky, complex, and demanding. The entrepreneur, even faced with the profit distribution decision must decide how much to reinvest in the business, how much to contribute to the developing of culture, and how much to send off. These are not easy decisions and one never knows when one has made the correct decision. To that extent, it is shaped by experience in the same way that each of us have our lives shaped by experience. To be sure, it is experience tempered by attention, observation, reflection, deliberation, and renewed action. It is a learning process. It is organic.

When one undertakes to create a company, a business, one takes on a set of relationships that by definition would not otherwise exist and those relationships can be numerous and qualitatively different. At the same time, one takes responsibility for certain sets of decisions that are presented by the demands of the marketplace and therefore primarily driven by competition. But these decisions are also guided by law, tradition, and custom.

As mentioned, a business can be conceived as a specific set of relationships that would otherwise not exist. The EoC is prophetic here; calling us to responsibility for a set of relationships we might otherwise overlook or dismiss. When a company is small with none or a very small number of employees or even contract, part-time, or temporary employees, the relationships still exist of course, but certainly relationships are going to exist with customers, with suppliers, with competitors. They can be fleeting, they can be long lasting, they can be life-changing, they can be challenging, and difficult. They are subject to tension. Can they be effectively managed by policy? Some of those relationships are with other entities and organizations. With another set of relationships – civil authorities, licensing, the law, customers can be large organizations that might be bureaucratic. And that relationship, no less than any other, demands that we practice unity.

And finally, a relationship exists with the business itself, the company, as an independent entity (Bower and Paine: 57). The entrepreneur has a responsibility to navigate competing demands and needs in regard to the sustaining of the business. When does one put the business ahead of an individual person? This dilemma is perhaps most evident in decisions around the distribution of profits. It is imperative that some part of the profits be devoted to sustaining the business; this suggests investment in tangible as well as intangible assets, and in the repair

and maintenance of existing assets such equipment, processes, technology, marketing, branding and perhaps patents and technology protection.

None of these responsibilities or decisions are necessarily easy. But they are important and necessary in the light of prophetic ministry. And they function as both spiritual discipline and as vehicles of spiritual formation; shaping EoC entrepreneurs in their role as prophetic ministers – indeed, as agents of communion.

### **The Economy of Communion and the Current Crisis**

Chiara Lubich has made the point that the EoC “takes its place alongside the numerous initiatives by individuals and groups that have sought and seek to ‘give a human face to the economic system’” (275). The EoC then is in solidarity with many of the ideas, movements, and initiatives described in the opening paragraphs of this paper, and, indeed, in solidarity with the climate strikers and their critique of the prevailing economic system and social culture that, in Brueggemann’s words, views persons as dispensable, or in Pope Francis’ words, discards them. But given the deep roots of the EoC in the Focolare spirituality of unity and therefore in the gospel, the EoC calls all of us to prophetic ministry – to a particular spiritual journey (Lubich: 281).

The EoC certainly proposes an alternative consciousness to the dominant culture of consumerism, to the common understanding of markets as exchange mechanisms only, and to the prevailing logic that business exist to maximize profits. As a prophetic ministry, the EoC calls us to imagine an economic and political system that places the person at the center of economic purpose, practice and policy (Lubich: 285); that prioritizes authentic and meaningful relationships over all other ends; that seeks constantly to live out the prayer of Jesus as recorded in John, “that all may be one” (17:21, KJV). It calls us to a richer imagination than that which has delivered to us, as our climate strikers attest, a dehumanizing economy and a possible existential crisis.

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