

Kessler, Volker, Ebeling, Rainer & Meier, Elke (Hg.) 2010.
Geld und Geist in Gemeinde und Gesellschaft.
Marburg: Francke-Buchhandlung. (GBFE Jahrbuch, 2).
ISBN 978-3-86827-165-2
Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Room for Grace in the Economy: A Jubilee Perspective

*Willem Saayman*¹

Introduction

Is there room for grace² in the global economy today? My paper is an attempt to articulate a response to this question. Before I begin to attempt to answer that question, I have to provide some indication of how I understand important concepts. I attempt this not as an Economist, but as a Theologian, specifically a Missiologist. I do this in the conviction that the economy is too important a dimension in the human existence to be left to Economists only. If one takes notice of the prophetic ministry of Israelites such as Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others (JEM 2010:1), it becomes very clear that

¹ Prof. Willem Saayman is Professor Emeritus in Missiology at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in Pretoria. Email: saaymw@gmail.com

² I borrow the formulation from the title of a book written by B. Rumscheidt: *No room for grace* (Rumscheidt 1998). I taught as Visiting Professor in Canada in 1983, where Ms. Rumscheidt heard me and was inspired by my approach to write the Master's dissertation on which this book is based.

the proclamation of God's word has very definite economic dimensions. In the same way, of course, religion is too important a dimension of human life to be left to Theologians only. So Theologians can comment on the economy, just as Economists can comment on questions of faith. I work with a very simple understanding of the economy here. I prefer the term *political economy*, by which I am referring to the symbiosis in human society between the political and the economic systems governing human life and community. It is the symbiosis of the political and the economical which determines the control of the production of wealth (resources, means of production, etc.), the means of gathering or collection of that wealth (trade, etc.), and the way in which the profits are distributed (salaries, dividends, etc.).

In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Second World War, there were two dominant political economies in the world: communism and capitalism. But the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 changed all that, as it signified the failure of the communist political economy. In today's globalised political economy, therefore, there is basically just one dominant political economy left: neo-liberal capitalism. This system exerts its dominance by way of American political, military and economic hegemony, as well as the influence of institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation. Any economy which wants to flourish, big or small, First World or Third World, must follow the precepts of this political economy and its dominant institutions.³ My question in this paper, as a Christian missiologist, is: is this political economy such a closed hegemonic system, which brooks no deviation, or is there room for grace for the weak, the struggling, the "outsiders"? I am not going to spend very much time and energy in establishing whether

³ This process and phenomenon is known as *enclosure*, and it means that "all non-capitalist systems of production are eliminated or subordinated...so that all escape routes are closed and people cannot survive without capitalism" (Hallows & Munnik 2007:13).

this is a legitimate question. Any common sense recognition of the problems of poverty, hunger, sickness and forced migration in the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century will confirm the necessity of dealing with the problems posed by those who do not “make it” in terms of the dominant global economy (the perennial “have-nots”). I am also not going to spend a lot of time and energy in arguing whether it is their own fault that they have been left behind. I think any recognition of the various attempts by the world’s rich nations, for example in the so-called Millennium Development Goals (which, among other things, aim to halve world poverty by 2015), will make it clear that there is widespread recognition of the reality that it is indeed not simply their own fault. For sure in South Africa, where I come from, most citizens are proud people who would prefer working for their daily bread, rather than having to beg for this bread on the street corners in our cities. I also do not in any way call into question the legitimacy of the quest for profits in our political economy. It is even possible to argue that the principle of profit making is not alien to the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. In his parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30) Jesus compares himself to an owner who expects of his workers that they should produce profits on his investment, and if they did not do so, could be expected to be scolded. So there is nothing wrong in principle with an entrepreneur wishing to make a proper profit on his investment. The real question is whether he leaves room for grace for those who do not make it in his business plan. So then: where do we find room for grace for the poor, the migrants, the misfits, in the world economy today? I think the Bible does give us some indication of where to look.

The Jubilee system

When God gave the Law to Moses at Mount Sinai, he also gave the fundamental principles for the Israelite political economy. This we find, for example, in Leviticus 25, in the teaching

about the sabbatical year and the year of the Jubilee (cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*: Holy year of Jubilee). Briefly, the sabbatical year was every seventh year, when the land was to be rested: no cultivation, no planting or harvesting. This obviously was related to the rhythm of creation given in God's creative work of six days, with the seventh being the day of rest. It also was meant to test the faith of the Israelites, because in that seventh year they had to rely on God's providence, not their own industry (just as they had to collect manna only for six days in the desert—Ex 16). But there was an added commandment: after seven sabbatical years, in other words, in the fiftieth year, there were far stricter and more important economic laws to fulfil. All debts had to be forgiven, all Israelite slaves had to be set free, and all land bought from impoverished owners had to be returned to the original owners. We do not have clear evidence that the Israelites ever actually fulfilled these requirements of the Lord in their political economy. What we do have, though, is clear evidence that reform-minded prophets such as Isaiah (58, 61:1–2) and Jeremiah (34:8–22) called the Hebrew people

back to their radical roots rather than to live seduced by the Dominant Culture... The prophets criticized their country's monarchs for imitating the imperial cultures of Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt... Sabbath-Jubilee was, for the prophets, an alternative economic path – one that *resisted* the Dominant Culture's imperial excesses and exploitation, and one that *integrated* with the sacred web of life which God has gifted to our planet.

(JEM 2010:3)

The best proof that the Lord God was quite serious about the Jubilee requirements, though, is given when Jesus announced himself as the Messiah in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:16–21). Here he clearly stated that the main motive for his mission (the *missio Dei*) was to announce the year of the Jubilee (Brueggeman in Harris 1996:ix–x). The connection is so obvious that Chang (1995:2) can state that “gospel is the

realization of jubilee”. The conclusion is very clear: if we wish to call ourselves followers of Jesus of Nazareth, Christians, the body of Christ on earth, we must live by the laws reflected in the legislation on the year of the Jubilee, not in order to fulfil the Law, but in obedience to the Spirit (Harris 1996:2). This implies one thing very clearly: *we must leave institutionalised room for grace in our economic system* (:16). What are the implications of this statement for our political economy?

The Jubilee demands the practise of justice

Brueggemann (in Harris 1996:76) paraphrases the meaning of the year of the Jubilee succinctly as “to sort out what belongs to whom and to return it to them”. The Bible is very clear about the human predilection for gaining unjust advantage through the exercise of power. Even king David, a man after God’s heart, was prone to this in his murderous scheming to get hold of Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11 & 12). But God’s very being as God of justice refuses “to let false words and false actions slip by without comment and resistance” (Harris 1996:17). God requires *mispat*, justice, which originally referred to “the restoration of a situation or an environment that promoted equity and harmony” (:18). This situation of equity and harmony has been disturbed and made impossible by human greed and abuse of power (such as in the case of David, Uriah and Bathsheba). What rightfully belonged to Uriah has been unjustly alienated from him through the abuse of power. It is these situations which had to be sorted out through the Jubilee system so that the equity and harmony could be restored. This requirement had consequences also for the realm of material possessions, though. The Bible is a very down-to-earth book, dealing with the human condition in a very realistic way. So the Bible takes into account the reality that some people will make a success of business ventures, and some people will not. This latter group will therefore land in financial difficulties which might necessitate the sale of possessions and land,

and even the selling of self into slavery in order to deal with unmanageable debts. This will lead to the creation of a very wealthy group of Israelites over against a very impoverished group. But this is not what God had envisaged for his people. God wished a broadly equitable distribution of the wealth of the land he would give to his people, a situation where nobody was excessively wealthy and nobody was excessively impoverished. So the year of the Jubilee aimed to continuously correct this situation by curbing the tendency as well as the possibility to accumulate wealth without limit. Land, which in ancient Israel was the equivalent to capital in our modern economy, therefore had to revert to the original owner after fifty years—not because God opposed entrepreneurship and wanted to reward laziness, but because everything belongs to God (Ps 24:1) and is given to us as a temporary gift only. Therefore Harris (:81) can conclude that “The Jubilee stands as a critique not only of massive private accumulation of land and wealth, but also of large-scale forms of collectivism or nationalization which destroy any meaningful sense of private or family ownership”. Because the Jubilee demands justice, God clearly left room for grace in the economic system.

Jubilee requires the recognition that the world’s resources are not inexhaustible

The concept of “Sabbath” which underlies the Jubilee system reflects a rhythm of action and inaction given with the very creation of the world. Human beings could not expect to earn a living by doing nothing; the Biblical rule is clear: “he/she who does not want to work, will not eat” (2 Th 3:10). But human beings also were not created *only* to work. They were created to serve and praise God and in order to do so, they had to have specific days of rest. This institution expresses the first element of criticism against our present-day economic system, where there are no longer days of rest and people are worked to exhaustion. But it was not only people who had to

have days of rest: on the Sabbath day also the workers, the working animals, and everything else involved in the mode of production had to rest. And the Sabbatical year meant that *even the land* had to have a period of rest: the earth should not be worked to exhaustion either. When we take all of these prescriptions together, they tell us that neither human nor natural resources are inexhaustible. We therefore should not develop an economic system which is aimed at one thing only, namely the massification of profit. There has to be room for rest and recuperation both for the workers and the earth's resources of energy, water and air. So obviously the Sabbatical system underlying the institution of the Year of the Jubilee requires room for grace in our economic system. Be an entrepreneur; try to be as profitable and successful as you can be; but remember that God requires that you allow yourself, your workers and your natural resources a period of rest, room for grace. God does not desire a system of production which works people and natural resources to exhaustion (Harris 1996:31).

Jubilee institutionalised the forgiveness of debts in the economic system

This is perhaps the Jubilee requirement that is the most difficult to understand in the neo-liberal global capitalist economic system of today. How on earth can I be certain of making a profit and providing dividends for the investors if I make an in-built provision for the forgiveness of debts? If people incurred debts which they cannot repay, then the full might of the law has to deal with them, otherwise our whole economic system collapses! Strangely enough, the Lord of heaven and earth, creator and owner of all, does not agree. He institutes an economic system which proclaims to everybody in advance: if you cannot repay your debt, it will be forgiven after 49 years; if you take out a mortgage on your property, and you cannot keep up monthly payments, your property will be returned to you after 49 years. This is crazy! How can anyone

run a proper and profitable business on these lines? I cannot answer that question, because I am hopeless as a businessman. But I can assure you that this is what our God, the Father of Jesus Christ, requires. And the most terrible thing is that he does not specify that only *some* debts have to be forgiven, those where people had the equity to enter into the debt, but then fell into difficulties and now cannot repay it. No, he simply says: forgive *all* debts, also those where people perhaps wilfully entered into a debt agreement while they knew they would not be able to repay it. As I say, I cannot explain to you how such a system will work, but I can explain to you how absolutely necessary such a system is. When Jesus taught us, his disciples, to pray, he taught us to pray: Please forgive us our debts, as we forgive our *debtors* (using exactly the terms of the Jubilee legislation). In other words, Jesus teaches us that this is how God's system works. He is willing to forgive every debt we have to him; but he forgives it on the basis that we forgive our debtors in exactly the same way (Harris 1996:38). So God requires an inbuilt room for grace in any economic system.

What is the real purpose of Jubilee?

I think some of my readers may feel at this stage that the editors of this volume have invited a crazy man to contribute an article, someone who knows absolutely nothing about the economy and has completely utopian ideas. So I think it is necessary that I try to at least explain that the Jubilee system was not conceived as a system of crazy economics at all, but actually had a much deeper meaning. The word "jubilee" comes from the Hebrew root *ybl* (in its written form the Hebrew word consists only of consonants; in spoken form it will be *yobel*). This word has two dominant meanings. In the first place it literally means: the release of debts. Its second meaning is: the ram's horn which was used to be blown at important religious festivals and occasions. The resonant sound of the ram's horn clearly signified the beginning of a time of

celebration, music and song (:96). Although the two meanings may at first glance seem very far apart, they are actually related, for the release of debts is indeed a cause for celebration for the person whose debts are released. But what about the person to whom the debt is owed? Certainly she/he would not have any reason to celebrate! We may say so at first glance, but we are wrong. The real emotion we should feel if we are the persons to whom the debt was owed, is...**gratitude** (:101)! Why? Because that means, in terms of Jesus' instruction in the Our Father, that *our own debts have also been released*. So we are doing unto others as we wish God and they should do to us. We show gratitude because we confess that no material object (property, money, factories, etc.) ever truly *belongs* to us; we always have it only on lease, in stewardship, to use to promote God's favour and well-being, because "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Ps 24:1). For this reason indeed "all the gifts of life belong to everybody" (Harris 1996:108). And finally, we demonstrate gratitude because *this actually makes the earth and all its systems of production work better*. So it is indeed also a better business plan, although no bank manager will lend you money if you actually presented it to him as such!

Conclusion

The Jubilee Economics Ministries (JEM 2010:2) claim that there are eight reasons why Sabbath-Jubilee economics makes great sense today:

1. Sabbath-Jubilee facilitates cooperation instead of domination.
2. Sabbath-Jubilee vigorously promotes community.
3. Sabbath-Jubilee redistributes resources in order to counter economic inequities.
4. Sabbath-Jubilee implements structural adjustments that foster economic justice.
5. Sabbath-Jubilee is an economics of nonviolence.

6. Sabbath-Jubilee practises lifestyles of enough rather than more and more accumulation.
7. Sabbath-Jubilee has cosmological origins.
8. Sabbath-Jubilee sustains life ecologically.

I have not addressed each of these dimensions explicitly in my paper, but I think I have argued the general principles sufficiently to argue that they are correct. We have, therefore, in the Jubilee economy a very relevant economic system for our times. This is why I agree with Harris (1996:108):

When we decide to confront brutality, racism, or any of the wrongs in our world—as Jubilee impels us to do—we do so because we have a prior conviction. Peace, employment opportunities, health, food, and education are universal gifts. There’s a fault line in the universe, however, that prevents those gifts from reaching all but a privileged minority of the world’s people.

It is for this reason that a return to the economics of the Jubilee system makes such sense in our world today: “to sort out what belongs (or belonged) to whom and return it to them.” Such a course of action does not come naturally to us, human beings in whom God’s image has been sullied by sin. For this reason we have to consciously “make room for grace” in the global economy. Hardnosed businesspeople will say to us that this is not the way the economy works; they have worked very hard for all their possessions, to make their fortunes, and they do not plan to share their hard-won riches with millions “too lazy to work”. It is then time to remind them that “*the earth belongs to the Lord and everything in it*”—the very real foundation of the celebration of the year of the Jubilee. So the introduction of the Jubilee will not be an act of madness, neither a huge sacrifice; on the contrary, it is action in grace, accepting God’s gift in hope and in gratitude.

Bibliography

- Catholic Encyclopedia*: “Holy year of Jubilee”. www.newadvent.org/cathen/08531c.htm [accessed 22/3/2010].
- Chang S 1995. Justice of jubilee in Luke: a Bible study. *Reformed World* 45:1&2, March–June 1995. www.warc.ch/dp/rw9512/12.html [accessed 13/7/2010].
- Driver J 1993. “Messianic evangelization”, in Shenk W ed. *The transfiguration of mission*.
- Hallowes D & Munnik V 2007. *Peak poison: the elite energy crisis and environmental justice*. The groundwork Report 2007. Pietermaritzburg: ground:Work.
- Harris M 1996. *Proclaim Jubilee! A spirituality for the twenty-first century*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.
- Jubilee Economic Ministries (JEM) 2010. *Sabbath-Jubilee economics in brief*. www.jubilee4justice.org/html/sj_in_brief.html [accessed 22/3/2010]
- Rumscheidt B 1998. *Room for grace. Pastoral Theology and dehumanization in the global economy*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Shank D A 1993. “Jesus the Messiah: messianic foundation of mission”, in Shenk W ed. *The transfiguration of mission*.
- Shenk W R ed.1993. *The transfiguration of mission: biblical theological and historical foundations*. Institute of Mennonite Studies (IMS) Missionary Studies, no 12. Scottdale: Herald Press.