



## God and the Marketplace: Why and Where He belongs

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*"History is a record of the encounter between character and circumstance."*

I've always liked that saying because it reminds us that people make history; not the other way around. We often can't control circumstances. But we can control our own actions, and our actions have real consequences for ourselves and others — now and into the future.

I've also always had a special interest in history because history is to a people what memory is to individual persons: It roots us. It gives us a context for the present. It provides us with the lessons we need to build a better future.

Sometimes history can be a riddle, but it always has meaning.

Here's an example: four seemingly unrelated facts.

1. Devout Muslims reject the use of interest as a financial tool.
2. The Church likewise originally regarded interest charged on money as a sin.
3. In general, Protestant countries have outperformed Catholic ones economically.
4. Despite the huge flaws in his ideas, Marx inspired millions.

These items are separated by time and culture. And yet they're related by a single thread: the power of money.

The Church initially resisted interest because it allowed the rich to take even greater advantage of the needy and reduced the bonds of family, fealty and friendship to impersonal transactions (see Exodus 22:25-27; Leviticus 25:36-37; and Deuteronomy 23:19-20). Devout Muslims still hold to this view.

Protestant individualism led to economic initiative, while Catholic distrust of the new economy tended toward excessive economic control and conservatism. Just compare the traditional economic assumptions of countries like the United States with those of some nations in Latin America.

Marx rightly identified the fact that capital without a moral compass erodes all traditions and all traditional relationships, beginning with the family.

As a result, people often misread Scripture to mean that money is the root of all evil. But that's not what Scripture says. The Bible says that "*the love of money is the root of all evils*" (1 Tim 6:10). And that's relevant for our reflection. We love people. We cannot love things. People are the subjects of history. Things are the objects and tools of history. When we treat things with the reverence due to people, people suffer.

We know now that the free market can be a very powerful force for good in the world and in our own country. More people live better and longer than at any time in history.

But more people are also poor and suffering than at any time in history. One of the lessons of history, and both the Christian and Jewish Scriptures, is that the rich forget the poor. Power, including economic power, can become a kind of addiction. The language of appetite begins to subvert the language of ideals. If we associate the idea of freedom with cars or cell phones or computers, as we relentlessly do in our advertising, pretty soon we lose the real vocabulary of freedom.

Adam Smith alluded in some of his early writings to the importance of religious faith and moral principles in guiding this very powerful machine we call the market. This is why the effort to push God out of our public life and reduce Him to a private idiosyncrasy is so dangerous.

During the Cold War, we liked to contrast our piety with the atheism of our enemies; but left to its own devices, the market is completely agnostic and just as economically reductionist — in its own way — as Marx and Engels.

At its root, the market is just a *A service-for-compensation@* or *A product-for-compensation@* transaction. And the more efficient we become at it, the more we risk losing sight of the larger moral environment of our culture. Specialization of skills and interests *narrows our horizon* — not just at work, but in the way we connect with the world and perceive others.

In all the great religions, the world and its resources exist for the benefit of all people. So too, the market exists for the benefit of everyone. People have a right to enjoy the benefits of their success. There's a wonderful dignity in financial success rightly earned. But we *never* lose responsibility for those around us.

And when we *do* lose sight of that responsibility — when we reduce others to statistics or stereotypes or impersonal social problems — the bonds that hold a nation together begin to unravel. Just look at our newspapers. So the burden of maintaining the soul of the market — the human concern which is its spiritual strength — falls to the people who practice the market well. People like the economic leaders of our community.

There's an old saying that each new child is a new universe of hope. C.S. Lewis once said that each human person is more important than every great empire which ever existed — because the human person is a child of God destined for eternity, and nations and cultures pass away into dust all the time.

The sanctity of the human person is the heart of Catholic social teaching. But Catholic or not, every sensible businessperson will understand the logic of the Golden Rule. We reap what we sow. If we behave ethically, we create an ethical world — even if its borders only extend as far as our family, associates and friends. That's still a "universe."

More importantly, we can't be free until we live, in some sense, for others. Freedom is not self-indulgence. It's self-mastery and self-sacrifice to achieve goals that matter, and accomplishments that last.

The saddest thing to watch today is an evening of television commercials. Here's the message: "*You're* in control. *You* deserve this or that product. *You're* important." And yet all the while, people's desires and tastes are being molded in ways they don't even understand. We are reduced to consumers. We often have the *illusion* of individual freedom but the *reality* of choices without real content.

Real freedom is rooted in self-mastery, self-discipline, and talents that are turned outward for others. We need to *give to receive*. And that makes sense, because God is the author of creation, of our lives and of all our talents — and the "ecology" of our lives, to be in balance, requires that we help others if we hope to help ourselves. In the long run, there's no way to be a "successful" person — in business, in politics, in the Church or anywhere — by taking more than we give. The habit of giving creates abundance.

Where does God belong in the marketplace? He belongs in the hearts and the actions of the people who make the market succeed. "History is a record of the encounter between character and circumstance." Each of us becomes "powerful" by becoming free, and we become free by mastering ourselves and living for others.

The biggest lie of our age is that we can't make a difference. Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King all made a difference by being faithful to the sanctity of the human person in little ways that accumulated into an avalanche, one day at a time. Being faithful in little things is a big thing; choosing to be honorable and generous to a colleague, or a competitor, scrubs the air of our world. It makes the oxygen we all breathe a little bit cleaner.

So we should never believe the lie that our problems are too big or too complicated. Scripture is the story, again and again, of the *anawim* — God's little ones, the unimportant ones, who end up making all the difference in the world because of their fidelity to what's true about God and true about the purpose of our common humanity.

Business, like art, literature, music, and architecture, is a window on the soul of a culture. What we do, what we create, reveals who we are. And that's as true in the marketplace as it is in the painter's studio.

The job of our business leaders is to light the marketplace with habits of generosity and integrity. All of us preach by the way we live — and the way we work. If we do that honestly and consistently enough, we'll find that the light we reflect — God's light — is reflected back to us from the lives of others we've changed.