

**Roelf Haan**

*Theology and Economics: The Hermeneutical Case of Calvin Today* (Wellington: Bible Media, 2012), 181 pp., R130.00, ISBN 9780864877024.

This fascinating book by Roelf Haan gives a very insightful introduction in the social economic thought of Calvin; it is both concise and very accessible. Haan stresses that the way Calvin interprets the Bible and applies it to the economic life of his days is still very instructive. Reading Haan's book is worth the effort for anyone interested in the connection between economics and Christian faith. Because of the scope of this review, I restrict myself to some critical remarks. The first point is that Haan uses very much material from the excellent standard work of André Biéler on Calvin's social-economic thought. Although Haan makes this clear from the very start (11) and includes many references to the book of Biéler (see the list of references), one wonders whether it is sufficient for a book to build so intensively on the work of others (and especially in Chapter 5). Nowhere does Haan discuss Biéler critically. The explanation is perhaps that this would require much more study of the works of Calvin. Sometimes it is also confusing that Haan takes up a quote of which the reader thinks it refers to Calvin, but actually turns out to be a quote to a commentary by Biéler. That illustrates once again how closely Haan follows Biéler in his interpretation of Calvin. For a book, one would like also a more critical analysis of Biéler.

I agree with Haan that Calvin is surprisingly topical in the way he connects Biblical texts with the everyday economic practice (28). This has to do with the method that Calvin employs in his ethics (34). Calvin was not only able to accurately analyze the daily practice, but he also took care not to apply the Bible too literally. Rather he looked at the underlying biblical principles, such as the rules of love and reciprocity. His method offers a lot of flexibility in the application to economic practices. With Haan one can call this method an example of contextual theology. But it is important to realize that Calvin based his interpretations of the Bible on a comparison of Scripture with Scripture, carefully taking into account the context of the various texts. The authority of the Bible remains paramount. You cannot equate this way of reading and explaining the Bible unequivocally with contextual theology in the sense of interpreting the Bible from the perspective of the daily experience (praxis) of the oppression of the poor, as Haan seems to defend.

According to Haan, the praxis of human liberation not only determines the success of the interpretation and application of the Bible, but is also the criterion to judge the relevance of economics. In the chapter on Theology and Economics Haan criticizes economic theory for not directly focusing on the problem of poverty. It illustrates just how much economics falls short in its

role as a social science: instead of human beings it is the economic system that seems the core subject of study. Haan makes a comparison with physicians (137), who heal the sick; why do economists not heal the poor? I think this comparison is incorrect. I agree with Haan that poverty deserves much attention in economic theory and research, because it is the most malignant form of scarcity. But scarcity is not limited to the lack of fulfillment of needs of the poor, it is about the allocation of all means the price of which expresses that it is scarce. Moreover, combating poverty often cannot succeed without promoting the overall prosperity of a country. Although the latter certainly not automatically leads to less poverty, it is an indispensable condition. In addition, economic theory and research do include poverty and income distribution. Examples are development economics and the study of unemployment (which is a major cause of poverty and low welfare) in labor market economics or of income distribution in political economy.

Haan is right that according to Calvin the economy should serve the community. Interestingly—according to Haan also for Adam Smith—reciprocity is a central value in economic trade (35). Haan refers to the famous quote about the butcher, the brewer and the baker in the *Wealth of Nations*, where Smith argues that a trader does not talk about his own needs when dealing but about the benefits of the transaction for the customer. Haan interprets this as evidence that Smith was also thinking in terms of mutual interest. However, I wonder whether this interpretation is not too optimistic. In my view, Smith refers to a form of advocacy that is instrumental to one's self-interest. In the course of trade a seller can only be successful if he convinces the customer that the transaction is in his or her interest. But the intent is to serve self-interest. That is nicely illustrated by the sentence that immediately follows after the citation of the butcher, where Smith states that nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow citizens. In future research, it would therefore be interesting to analyze more thoroughly the similarities and the differences in Calvin's and Smith's writings on social economics, particularly in relation to Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments.

I find the somewhat abrupt transition to a chapter on "The technical society and the second modernity", that builds on the writings of Jacques Ellul, a weak point in the book. Haan has written much about this theme in the past. While the economy and economic system are intimately interwoven with the technical society, they are still distinct topics, making it less suitable for a book on economics and theology. That this chapter is somewhat out of scope is also evident from the fact that Calvin is not very often referred to here.

Finally, a point that Haan barely touches is how to deal with the brokenness of creation and the inability of humans to do well. This is curiously enough

also the case for Calvin, at least if one studies his social-economic thought. In his book *Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street*, Tomáš Sedláček states that the Bible is aware of the fact that suppressing what is evil can be counterproductive. He refers to Jesus' parable in Matt. 13:24–30, where a landlord commands his servants not to pull up the weeds because of the good crop. It seems to me that this notion is particularly relevant for social-economic thought and that anyone writing in the field of theology and economics should integrate this notion in his views.

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