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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

## **Discipleship, wealth, worship**

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***Hargaden, Kevin. Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age: Confronting the Christian Problem with Wealth. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018. Paperback, xxxiii + 234pp. 2 ISBN 9781532655005.***

While there is a long tradition of theological debate and ethical reflection centred on Jesus' teaching on wealth, recently the focus has tended to move away from the issue of how individual Christians should handle wealth, to arguments about economic policy. What policies should Christians advocate in their response to Jesus' teaching about wealth? The shift from personal ethics to economic policy has resulted in conversations that have frequently generated more heat than light and have been characterised by an abstract approach to the interpretation of scripture. By contrast, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age: confronting the Christian Problem with Wealth* offers us a theological argument about how disciples of Jesus should respond to the economic reality grounded in a specific time and place—in this case Ireland after 2008.

While this book began life as a thesis at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, it has been substantially reshaped and rewritten, and no longer bears the formality, structure, and occasional obscurity of a PhD. The author Kevin Hargaden, a self-confessed 'evangelical Presbyterian', is currently the social theologian at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Dublin. Given this appointment, it is not surprising that the theological resources that he draws on display an ecumenical approach. Karl Barth underpins his overall theological approach, and William Cavanaugh, a Catholic political theologian, is his other major interlocutor.

Hargaden begins by noting that "Jesus appears (at best) ambivalent to the holding of riches. This puts Western Christians who typically enjoy a material standard of life the like of which is unequalled in human history in a precarious position" (p. 15). Our position is he suggests is not only precarious, but also difficult for us to extract ourselves from. Wealth weaves its way around us in our daily lives while exercising a deep hold on our imagination. Hargaden's exploration of this issue arose as a result of his ministry, as members of his church during the boom prior to 2008 in Ireland shared with him their struggles in reconciling their wealth with their faith. The problem returned in a different mode with the economic crash in Ireland: economic hardship pressed in on many, while others continued to experience relative and objective wealth as a lived reality.

In chapter 1, Hargaden explores the ways in which economic values are embedded in our cultural practices. The economy is located within a neoliberal understanding of life and has a level of

influence where nothing is outside its reach. People living in Western nations “increasingly exist as neoliberal subjects. The rationale of economic quantification and monetary valuation predominates not just our political deliberation but our self- understandings” (p. 19). Given this how can we find the resources to live faithfully inside a potentially totalising system?

With economic context sketched, Hargaden turns in chapter 2 to the parables of Jesus. With the help of Karl Barth’s exegesis he discusses the way that these apocalyptic narratives announce and envisage the Kingdom of God. In the face of the apparently hegemonic character of neoliberal economics we learn from the parables that no human system can compete with the Lordship of Christ. The specific parables that provide this apocalyptic framework (“The Rich Young Ruler”, “The Ten Virgins,” and “The Talents”) direct us to a world that is both on the way and already here in the kingdom of Jesus. Parables open up ethical issues in a way that teases us, challenges our imagination, and offers allusions towards a conclusion without stating it in bald and abstract terms.

Hargaden’s theological argument does not proceed in a straight line. In chapter 3 he brings us up close to the real existing capitalism of Ireland, which he invites us to view, in the spirit of Karl Barth through three homemade secular parables. These parables visualize the impact of the crash on specific economic institutions and communities without using the abstractions of economic vocabulary. The author sketches the ways in which economic reality impinged on the lives of ordinary people, whose experience was often obfuscated in public discussion by economic language and statistical snapshots.

We return to theological issues in chapter 4. Here Hargaden calls into question the two standard Christian responses to an assessment of neoliberal capitalism, reform of the system, or withdrawal into communities of difference based around some alternative, perhaps “Christian” economic logic. He offers the proposal that worship is the appropriate response to the problem of wealth because in worship we encounter the parables as God’s Word to us. Worship, he argues, offers the possibility of counter-formation that opposes the impacts of economic liberalism while acknowledging that we cannot evade its reality. This reshaping will be likely to lead to action in the public sphere, but the form that takes will differ from time to time, and place to place, so that no standard formula can be offered. The book’s afterword highlights the centrality of lament as an appropriate mode of worship in the face of the inescapable reality of wealth.

In the face of the profound and inescapable challenge that wealth presents to Christian discipleship, at least as much in Australia as it is in Ireland, Hargaden has provoked me to think afresh about the issue from a profoundly theological vantage point. As the latest in the ‘Theopolitical Visions’ series, the volume fully delivers on the promise to open up new vistas on public life through theological engagement with political theory.