

Sacred Economics -- Is it Silly? Hard-headed Economics -- Is it Breaking our Heads?

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If you listen to the hard-headed people who presumably keep us prosperous, Biblical and Quranic economics are, of course, quaint and unrealistic. They're based on romantic ideas about benefiting the poor, the landless, the outcast. Good for motivating open-hearted charity; bad for making hard-headed decisions necessary to run a successful economy.

Right. Which is why the hard-headed folks have created a crazy economic yo-yo skidding on the edge of massive disaster, in which the worst-hit will of course not be the Wall Street / Washington power-houses but the rest of us.

But the basic religious economic premise was not just about being nice to poor folks. It was about the flow of God's abundance that must move through the whole society, not get stuck in the pockets of the rich. When the flow gets stuck, the clumps of super-wealth become an embolus. They stop the flow of healing blood, the arteries choke up, the heart stutters and stops -- and society collapses.

Massive depressions are not good for societies or for the human race. I had just been born when a major industrial nation that had lost a war, had lost its sense of place and identity and its allies in the world, had gone through a massive economic disaster, then responded to its own fear and anger by choosing an addled war hero to hold power. Faced with rising chaos, he chose as his successor an ultra-rightist, who everybody said was sure to calm down once he actually held power.

The war hero was Von Hindenburg. His successor? Look it up.

So it is certainly urgent to shape our financial system so that such a collapse does not descend upon us. But are we simply propping up the old system - the same one that has set up our risk of disaster? Are we turning over the process to many of the same people who set up the disaster in the first place???

Or can we address the basic issues, the ones our religious traditions teach, the ones that the hard-headed masters of disaster dismiss contemptuously??

So far, the most "radical" poultices have been that a governmental economic czar will save the financial institutions that are in trouble, by buying and selling their assets -- and taxpayers will bear the burden and the risk.

There has begun to be discussion of a slightly deeper remedy - the re-regulation of these institutions so that greed and ambition cannot so easily pocket the abundance that must move through society.

But so far the whole notion of rhythmically redistributing wealth - a vision at the heart of Biblical economics - is not on the agenda. That vision is encoded partly in the redemption and redistribution of family land each fifty years -- the Jubilee - and the annulment of debt each seventh year - all in the context that for the seventh day, the seventh month, the seventh year, and the year of seven cycles - seven times seven plus one - the whole society rests and reflects, along with the earth itself. Not only physical work pauses, but hierarchy pauses as well. Boss and servant vanish, for a day, a month, a year.

And the redistribution is also encoded in the right of the landless to feed themselves by working, gleaning, in the fields of the landowners. No one can deny them this relationship with the means of production. No "unemployment."

And no compulsory overtime. Shabbat is for everyone.

Let us start to imagine how to transcribe this wisdom for a society that needs to let the earth rest from our pouring CO2 into its atmosphere, from our sucking out the water from its veins, from our injecting poisons in its body.

We can restore our economy for both work and rest by building energy-efficient railroads, windmills, solar collectors. We can use the new governmental oversight of banks to insist on micro-lending to the poor for urban gardens, for workplaces within walking distance of our homes, for insulating our houses to save the heat and money that are pouring out of our porous doors and windows.

We can insist on a living wage, with livable hours. Time to sing, to dance, to pray and mediate, to rear the children, to care for the elders, to make love. If the flow of abundance starts at the grass roots, it will reach everyone. Our banking crisis and the fear that elevates a Hindenburg will vanish.

The decentralized, shared economy of the future starts with the decentralized polity, the shared citizenry of today. If politics begins at the grass roots, so will economics. In this very moment, it's up to us.