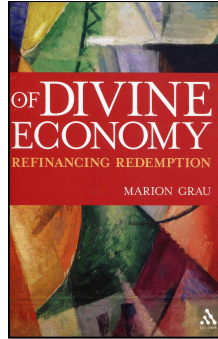


## ○ THE SEARCH FOR THE THEOLOGICAL THIRD WAY

REVIEW OF MARION GRAU, *OF DIVINE ECONOMY: REFINANCING REDEMPTION* (LONDON: T&T CLARK INTERNATIONAL, 2004)

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This is a thoroughly engaging and stimulating book. Often it made me stop and ponder a point, construct a train of thought and an argument, nod in agreement and more often pause in disagreement. The aim of the book is to construct what Grau calls a ‘countereconomic third space’ at the intersections between theology and economics. Grau is keen to avoid what she regards as the conventional oppositions between capitalist and socialist, conservative and progressive, left and right, lack and plenty, heaven and earth; seeking a path that weaves its way between or perhaps outside these tired oppositions. And she wants to do so with the Bible in one hand and the tradition of theological reflection in the other (note the absence of economists – I’ll come back to that).

So where does Gray find the biblical and theological resources for such a task? She locates them in the image of the trickster (from folklore, indigenous religions and feminist biblical criticism), the hysterical woman (an embodied figure who appears at the margins) and the slave (especially in terms of the ‘admirable commerce’ of the redemption of Christ). None of these topics is new in and of itself, but the combination is very creative. In the process we try to find our way to a ‘third space’ that has both feminist and postcolonial resonances. The result is what should be called an alternative economy – both theological and economic – that exists in the interstices of the dominant ones we know. The image that comes to mind is of a local co-operative, an alternative-lifestyle community that has developed its own patterns of spiritual and economic exchange, a commune if you will that models the possibilities of a very different society. I must admit I find this very appealing (it must be the old hippie in me). This proposal hinges on the multi-layered sense of ‘economy,’ which is at once household, Trinitarian formula and the global patterns of commerce.

On the way we are treated to an encyclopaedic feast. Grau sweeps through readings of biblical texts (Matthew 19 for example), early theologians (Origen, Anthony, Athanasius, Irenaeus,

Ambrose and Augustine), the martyrologies of Christian women, theological positions (radical orthodoxy, liberation theology, feminist theology, process theology and postcolonial theology), and a who's who of critical theory (including Derrida, Bhabha, Spivak, Cixous, and Irigaray). Although the book began as a doctoral thesis, it is not too weighed down with the inevitable need to cover every base.

For all its ingenuity the book is not *sui generis*, since it is actually part of a sub-discipline that might be called economic theology. Grau engages with John Cobb's *An Earthist Challenge to Economism* (1999), Sally McFague's *Life Abundant* (2000), Mark Taylor's *On Religion* (1999), Wayne Meeks's *God the Economist* (1989) and Stephen Long's *Divine Economy* (2000). However, this is part of a problem, namely that for all the talk of economies, not one economist is actually cited or discussed. To say the least, I find this strange for a book that seeks to go beyond the economic discourse to which we are subjected on a daily basis. Where is Ernest Mandel or Robert Boyer or Immanuel Wallerstein (the representatives of some of the most vibrant economic positions in Marxist economic theory); or where is Friedrich von Hayek or Milton Friedman (the pin-up boys of neo-liberal capitalism)? Or, for that matter, where are the feminist economists like Susan Feiner? At least Grau might have engaged with Anthony Giddens, the apostle of the (in)famous 'third way' in economic and social thought. Giddens made his name by seeking an economic policy that disregarded the orthodoxies of social democracy and *laissez faire* economics, arguing that we need to take what works and discard what does not. He became a key economic advisor for Tony Blair, who presented himself as a 'third way' leader. Unfortunately, Giddens's third way has turned out to be empty, for what happened was that Blair became a great proponent of neo-liberal economic policies which differed little from what was happening in the USA, Europe, Asia or Australia. An engagement with Giddens would have helped situate a claim to find a third way on matters of economics and theology with someone who is actually a 'third way' economist. The first few pages manifested this lack of actual economists, but I decided to wait and see if any would turn up in the following pages. They didn't arrive and they stayed away even in the bibliography. Grau is content to remain with the theologians and critical theorists who have written about economics, but none of them are specialist economists.

However, I would like to focus on two features of the book that provide examples of the reading process where I sat back and thought. One is a perceptive insight and the other example I found lacking. I begin with the negative. Grau introduces liberation theology only to pass on (pp. 26-7), suggesting it is not adequate to her task. On the way she rolls out some conventional points, such as the combination of Marxism and theology (without contesting what that actually means), the failure of liberation theology to bring about any lasting change in a classic case of delayed parousia, although she does not ask about the Latin American turn to the left, and the preferential option of the poor. She seeks but does not find a sustainable critique of capitalism and goes looking elsewhere. Apart from the dreadful mistake of asserting that liberation theologians work with class as a primary category (p. 34 – the 'poor' does not constitute a class), I find it passing strange that Grau does not mention the critique of idolatry developed by some key liberation theologians like Franz Hinkelammert and Enrique Dussel. Reading Marx's fetishism of commodities in light of the biblical critique of idolatry, they identify the features of capitalism – profit, surplus, growth, the national debt, balance of payments and so on – as so many idols of a destructive and brutal religion that demands countless sacrifices. Surely this theme could have done with some discussion.

By contrast, the criticism of radical orthodoxy is very astute. Taking on Philip Long's *Divine Economy*, which moves by way of Thomas Aquinas to recover Christian socialism (the French variety on the 19<sup>th</sup> century which regarded a very religious communism as the manifestation of the kingdom of God), Grau points out that it suffers from a strong nostalgia for a pre-modern, pre-humanistic universe (p. 32). Absolutely, I want to say. The push to pick theology up from the ground, dust her off, straighten her gown, rearrange her gown and restore her to the position of 'queen of the sciences' smacks a little too much of a restorationist coup. With all its talk of heresy, the evils of secularism and modernism (again 'heresies'), capitalism (another 'heresy'), post-Christian 'paganism' (guess what that is?) and the wish to recover the Thomistic versions of Aristotle's virtues – such as the good, the true and the beautiful – one would be forgiven for thinking that we are back in the time of Pius IX's 'Syllabus of Errors' of 1864. This infamous document listed, among other notable items, religious tolerance and freedom, liberalism, reason, critical biblical studies, Bible societies, and the separation of church and state as modern heresies. I get the sense that at times the radical orthodox crowd, which has a large church following, really want to see the restoration of Christendom. For these gems, *Divine Economy* is worth a read.