
This is a very detailed and technically demanding analysis of the arguments surrounding the concept of ‘economic compulsion’. Professor Albino Barrera is unusual in teaching both theology and economics at Providence College, Rhode Island. Providence College has long been one of the foremost Catholic institutions of higher education in the United States, being founded early in the twentieth century as a vehicle for the new renaissance in Thomism under Pope Leo XIII. It continues to have a teaching staff that is well versed in the Catholic tradition and is highly regarded among its peers. Barrera is the author of several other well-regarded books, including *God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Analysis* and *Modern Catholic Social Documents and Political Economy*.

It is worth spending a moment on his earlier book dealing with divine action before turning attention to the one under review, because the two have an interlocking argument. Barrera is a Thomist theologian, writing as a Dominican who has also specialized in economics. *God and the Evil of Scarcity* asks why a God who is praised throughout the scriptures for his prevenient compassion would nevertheless choose to create a world in which material scarcity is a reality. Material scarcity is more than the technical economic definition of scarcity in which any one object may be put to different uses, thus creating a scarcity of resources by definition for the opportunities available. Material scarcity, however, means that there are times when harvests fail, or population increases beyond the resources available. Barrera replies that God has created humanity with the intelligence and will to act in response to material scarcity, if only the virtues can be formed individually and collectively to respond aright. Scarcity therefore serves as a means of God educating us into the discipline of communal assistance, or *koinonia*, out of which comes the nurture of character formation, and the *habitus* of the virtues. Subsistence and famine represent a collective moral failure.

Barrera summarizes this viewpoint as follows:

Thus, while God’s providence for creatures, indeed every creature, is immediate and direct, its implementation in divine governance employs secondary causes in sustaining and bettering creatures … First, economic activity is seen as an unmerited gift from God that calls for an attitude of humble stewardship rather than of absolute proprietorship. Second, the view that secondary causality is a gift from God provides a strong philosophical foundation for the principle of subsidiarity which states that higher bodies should not arrogate for themselves functions that lower bodies (or individuals)
are fully capable of discharging for themselves. Third, the claim that economic activity is a participation in divine governance furnishes philosophical warrants for the principle of socialization which states that higher bodies have the obligation to step in and assist lower bodies (or individuals) that are no longer able to perform their obligations for the common good (paper at Baylor University, 2002).

It is because of this understanding of cosmology that Barrera is of interest to readers of Ecclesiology. His work is of far more significance than a view that it represents the application of ecclesiology to social reality, as though ‘church’ and ‘economy’ were two large icebergs that bump into each other. Barrera conceptualizes economic thought and practice as the outworking of divinely created sociality in the material world. It is also significant that Barrera’s Thomism is far more informed by scripture than the neo-Thomism present in Providence College at its founding in 1917.

Given this metaphysical structure Barrera has argued both for a particular reading of modern Roman Catholic social ethics, and for an analysis of where contemporary economic practice is deficient. Like this reviewer, Barrera reads social ethics in the light of anthropological presuppositions, such as utilitarianism and transcendence, and market-driven determination of exchange value, labour inputs and outputs, and egalitarianism. Economic Theory and Christian Belief, which I wrote with Andrew Britton, ends by analysing modern game theory, while Barrera in Modern Catholic Social Documents and Political Economy ends with proportionalism and the theory of the common good. In short, Barrera is attempting to place modern economic theory and the response of Catholic social ethics within a particular Thomistic theology. He is one of the most successful of such writers, although his defence of labour outsourcing as not wrong in principle (basically defending the transfer of firms to different countries to enable the production of manufactured goods in low-wage economies) has earned him strong criticism. His book on scarcity, and the one on social ethics, have established his position in terms of cosmology and moral theology.

He is now concerned to fill in the details of this approach, and that is how his new book is to be seen. In Economic Compulsion and Christian Ethics Barrera turns his attention to three aspects of economic thought and practice. He looks first at the ‘nature and dynamics of economic compulsion’ in the operation of markets. Secondly, and in the view of this reviewer of great significance, he turns to scripture for the moral baseline, spending much time on restoration and the Jubilee Principle. Tim Gorringe has made the same move in Capital and the Kingdom, but Barrera is no neo-Marxist theologian. Finally, he turns to the idea of economic rights and ends by considering whether economic protectionism has any value. It is, as noted above, a tightly argued piece of work that depends on knowledge of moral philosophy, economics, scripture and contemporary discussion of human