Editors’ Notes

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Anglicans have consistently celebrated the via media (middle way). Historically, this referred to its origins, which carved out conciliation between Reformed Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Theologically, this led to the pathway of mediatory truth. Such mediation of truth must be distinguished from relativistic exercises of “irresponsibly eclectic, freelance theological pundits.”¹ Instead, the Anglican theological tradition comprises a sorting through of many perspectives in order to adopt a middle way that is infused with the love of God,

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empowered by the Spirit, and dedicated to life in all its fullness offered by Jesus Christ. Anglican theology can thus be portrayed as “passionate balance” in which “the truth of God is not the monopoly of any of the ‘tribes’ within Anglicanism” or, we might add, any of the disciplinary “tribes” in the academy. Truth for living “abundantly” (John 10:10) is worked out in dialogue among God’s people spread out across the world.

Such passionate balance, however, needs to be enriched by a method of thinking and acting that is also preferentially compassionate. This was the way of Jesus Christ. He came to bring good news to the poor, release for the captive, recovery of sight for the blind, and freedom for those oppressed by religious, political, and economic systems (Luke 4:18–19). For those on the Jesus way, losing of self in Christ presses toward seeking and giving life to those who struggle for existence in our world. This preferentially compassionate stance is what unites theologians, economists, social commentators, and church leaders in this issue of the Anglican Theological Review. In every essay “passionate balance” bends toward preferential compassion for those who struggle in valleys of death in our contemporary world. “Passionate balance” is interwoven with preferential compassion in a conversation between theology and economics as the idea of common good is re-appropriated and re-imagined for our life together today.

“Common good” is a theological and economic end. When viewed within the creation–transgression–redemption Christian narrative, it expresses the objectives of the reign of God. As a gift from God, this religious goal incorporates all human beings, even as it encompasses the whole of creation. Theology reflects on human beings “co-creating common good” (Ian Douglas) with God in humility, hope, and joy with a special eye out for the poor and marginalized. When looked at within the economic cycle involving the production–distribution–consumption of goods and services, it signifies the goal of freedom or “capability expansion” for the entire global community. Within an organized

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domain of human activity, this goal of economics takes into account the welfare of the whole human family as well as the well-being of the cosmos. Economics investigates how humans collectively create common good within the kingdoms of this world. Increasingly economists have kept a watchful eye on “the fragile classes,” “the working poor,” and “the bottom billion” as the globalized financial system creates and distributes resources.4

Emanating from deliberate and dialogical reflections around the 2015 Trinity Institute’s theme of “Creating Common Good,” the essays, poems, and books reviews in this issue of the ATR bring theology and economics together with Christian mission. Through engaged conversation, theologians, social commentators, economists, and church leaders honestly take stock of and imaginatively offer solutions for dealing with our contemporary economic context. The voices in this issue are not merely interpreters of the age in ways that might produce pessimism. They also strive to be constructive in presenting concrete, even if experimental, ideas and examples that defy the maladies of inequality and the injustice of the business-as-usual economic system. As Juliet Schor puts it, not only is another world possible, “it is already being built.”

The authors in this issue of the ATR are united in their conviction that the inhumane effects of inequality and the privations of structural injustice, so obvious in the United States, are spreading like a virus across our twenty-first-century world. Like the prophets of biblical times, Barbara Ehrenreich is severe in her criticism. Yet hers is an indictment of our post-Enlightenment age. “The thing that strikes me most all these years,” she laments, “is that while we talk about what can be done for the poor, the sad truth is, instead of helping the down and out, we have a society that seems to persecute the poor.” Scott Bader-Saye describes how such a system of wealth inequality is much more than what Ehrenreich identifies as “a system of mindless sadism.” His fear is that our present economy in the United States will end in stagnation, jeopardizing democracy and weakening social solidarity. If we do not do something constructive, economics will taint

our overall political and social well-being by letting the elite one per-
cent capture the material and social dreams of the bottom 99 percent. 
What is daunting is that this is expanding across the world. Bishop 
Julio Murray, writing from Panama, notes that “the neoliberal eco-
nomic system has produced in the so-called third world countries 
a growing number of impoverished, marginalized, and persecuted 
people.” More specific to his own continent he lists the “suffering” in Latin America: “the middle class is disappearing, external debt is 
draining their economies, insecurity saps their energy, the capacity to 
feed the people is in danger, and the growth of poverty is also rising.”

Beverly Mitchell lifts up the defacement that results from such 
a system, which robs the majority of human beings of the God-given 
gift of human dignity. “We do not have to be trained economists” she 
says, “to know that an economic system that permits some to have 
most and many to have very little is a system that cannot support gen-
uine community.” Such an economic system of unchecked consumer-
ism, Mitchell adds, which “encourages, urges, persuades us to acquire 
more and more, far beyond our need, is a system that creates a sense 
of alienation in ourselves and alienation from others.” Archbishop 
Justin Welby draws on this theological motif of alienation to question 
the present system “because it stands against the equality of access 
to God in worship and fellowship.” Yet this condition affects more 
than human beings before God. He draws our attention to how the 
system leads to “the corruption of the human person, our sinfulness, 
to create power-grabs, patrimonialism by the powerful: that which is 
self-serving, not foot-washing.”

Willis Jenkins names this phenomenon “plutocracy” and also 
denounces it as “sinful.” However, he is only willing to characterize 
the system of inequality as sin if the church moves away from un-
productive, pious theological rhetoric and undertakes the more ben-
eficial task of evolving spiritual practices that work against the spirit 
of plutocracy, which he argues bolsters exclusion and feeds on theft. 
Just so that we do not overlook the historical and conspicuous mark-
ers of plutocrats in the United States, Amaryah Jones-Armstrong 
sketches the overwhelming nature of black dispossession in relation 
to the domination of white wealth. To leave race out from social and 
economic analysis is to miss the face of those who have been dispo-
sessed historically and kept marginalized currently.

But merely unveiling the mean spirit and wealthy bodies behind 
the economic system, while attending to the theologies that sustain its
political and social maladies, is not sufficient. That is why the authors in this issue fire up the embers of social and theological imagination: hope is kindled and exchanged, and pathways toward resistance and justice are carved out. Archbishop Justin Welby sets such a foundation by affirming hope in God, anticipating human repentance, and enunciating change. His words reflect the promise of the gospel. “I end with hope,” Welby affirms, “because inequality is an issue that lies in the hands of God. In his hands, with our repentance, it is an issue that can change; it will change.” Bishop Ian Douglas connects this dynamism for change in the movement of God who is already creating a new oikos. Christians merely enjoin such a movement “to co-create with the triune God an economy (oikos) that is life-giving and abundant for all.”

Theologians in this volume flesh out creative and convincing alternate visions of hope for a new community “on earth as it is in heaven.” Luke Bretherton is comprehensive and bold. His is a master counter-narrative, which weaves together “cure of the soul, cure of the soil, and cure of the polis” by reconceptualizing the idea of debt contained within God’s exchange of salvation, especially in Jesus Christ, and gleaning from patristic, rabbinic, and Islamic notions of property and usury. Willis Jenkins is no less convincing in his theoretical analysis. Yet his theological imagination settles on how “Christian practices can cultivate a spirit other than the spirit of plutocracy.” Getting under the surface of the economic system, Jenkins contends that a kind “spiritual warfare” is needed. Alternative economic practices that flow from the spirit of Christian community must be cultivated to overcome “the spirit of plutocratic capitalism.”

Beverly Mitchell and Amaryah Jones-Armstrong will not let history be disremembered even in imaginative constructions toward a blessed future for the common good. Mitchell challenges theologians to see the embodied presence of “the people who suffer the most under economic arrangements that foster and perpetuate the cycle of poverty.” We must ask ourselves, she says, “Who do we see?” and “Are we mindful of their faces, of their bodies?” Jones-Armstrong asserts this more pointedly: “Until we are able to confront the roots of contemporary U.S. and global wealth inequality in racial capitalism, we will be unable to truly announce the common good as either common or good.” Interconnecting a turn toward contemplation, an openness to “Spirited interruption,” and experimentation with tangible practices, Jones-Armstrong urges that we dispossess ourselves
“of our white and colonial theological inheritance for the sake of the common good.”

What impact does all this conversation between theology and economics have on the church? Theologians and economists both need to pay attention to the practical side of righting inequality and injustice. To ground “creating common good,” Scott Bader-Saye reminds us of something Anglicans take for granted: Anglican traditions “preserve a more robust account of human goodness grounded in the doctrine of creation” that allows for a “sufficiently hopeful” theological anthropology. He then goes on to suggest how “church bodies and church members could reimagine stewardship” and “could make use of our global diocesan relationships to nurture direct trade from local to local.” Both Bishops Julio Murray and Ian Douglas show us in their respective dioceses how such practices of overcoming economic inequality and cultivating human flourishing enliven their participation in the mission of God. The examples they provide involve all orders of the church. Episcopal Christians, laity and clergy alike, are not just dreaming about but working to see a more inclusive and just economic order, wherever God has called us to live.

God, of course, is creating common good beyond the reach of the church. Juliet Schor captures the determination and creativity of such movements. It is not only that such alternate economic activities become experiments from which movements and then cooperative systems emerge. Equally important is her stress on how these activities trigger social imagination. Imagination unites theology and economics as they move toward the common good. Imagination fuels both the spirit of subversion, which doggedly undercuts and dismantles the old order of domination, exclusion, and exploitation, and the spirit of new creation, which dances in the hope of the new order of justice, inclusion, and sustainability.

Our hope is that this issue of the *ATR* will stoke imagination to produce alternate practices that will reverse economic inequality and usher in human flourishing for all.