

THE SPIRITUALITY OF ECONOMICS

Kathy Galloway

The Christian Socialist Movement John Wheatley Lecture

Glasgow, 13th February 2003

I have taken as my title this evening 'The Spirituality of Economics.' I am not an economist, I am a practical theologian. But I am a theologian whose practice has involved a lifelong engagement with people living in poverty, and therefore, of course, with economics. And increasingly I have become interested, some might say obsessed, with the spirituality of economics. Now these are two words which are not often found together. A friend said to me, 'I see you are giving a lecture on the economics of spirituality' and it may very well be that that is what I am doing. But I think they are actually inseparable if we are to truly understand either of them. Spirituality is a word which is understood in a multiplicity of ways, so in the interest of precision, I will give you **my** definition of it, which will form the basis of what I say. You may not agree with this definition, but hopefully you'll know what I'm talking about. It's indebted to the Latin-American theologian, Jon Sobrino.

Once, Jesus was talking to the Pharisees about spirituality, or was it economics, and he used the analogy of a cup, saying '*Did not God, who made the outside, also make the inside*' (Luke 11,40):

Our spirituality is our profoundest motivation, those instincts, intuitions, longings and desires that move us, animate us, inspire us (lit. breathe through us)...it is the force that moves us from behind or below or before . But it is also our ultimate concern or orientation or goal, that person, object, ideal or value that attracts us, that draws us, towards which we incline... to where we go. If you like, it's the inner life of the cup.

But our spirituality is not just interiority. It is also our choices and actions; it is where spirit is given flesh, where intention becomes action, where we practice what we preach. Our spirituality shows up just as much in how we spend our money, our time, our abilities, as in how we say our prayers. If you like, it's how we use the cup.

And our spirituality is also our relationships: with our environment, with other people, with our own most hidden and unknown selves. If you like, it's who we share the cup with.

Everyone has a spirituality, just as everyone has a physicality.

Some spiritualities show up dressed in strange clothes. A fervent football fan might be most profoundly motivated by loyalty to his team; his ultimate concern might be that they should win the European Cup; all his choices and actions would be directed to enabling him to follow and support the team and his relationships would all be lived in the light of, and affected, for good or bad, by his passion. But there would be many familiar features in his

spirituality. Loyalty and trust and devotion would all be there, for better or for worse (and some of the worst is extremely unpleasant)...celebration and sorrow would be there...belonging and identity and community would be there... the wiping-clean of the slate and the hope of a new start would be there, in the next game or the next season....

Some spiritualities the spirituality of Nazism, for example, are profoundly perverse and distorted....

We pay much attention to our physicality but often less to the care and nurture of our spirituality. We want to be whole people, or, we might say, we want to live at peace with ourselves, to become our true selves, to be fully alive, to realise our potential. But the gap between our longings and aspirations and the way we actually live can be hugely painful and damaging, especially if our spirituality is unnamed, unrecognised and unloved. So we need the help, insight and support of others to integrate our intentions and our actions.

Spiritualities are not just individual, they are collective. Communities of many kinds also have a spirituality. But can systems?

About ten years ago, I was funded to create and pilot a series of workshop modules on cultural and spiritual values in development. This work had its origins in the concerns of a small development education agency, set up to raise awareness in Scotland about global issues of poverty and development, which was struggling with two particular difficulties. One was the tendency for many in the West to see poverty in the countries of the South as being the result of Southern fecklessness, ignorance, overpopulation, war...in effect, as 'their fault', and to feel that 'charity begins at home', without taking on board the complex causes of poverty, and the role of the West through colonialism and exploitation in helping to impoverish the so-called 'third world'. In an attempt to move from a charitable approach to aid to a justice-based approach, we wanted to make the links between poverty in Britain and poverty in the world's poorest countries more visible.

The second difficulty lay in addressing the recognised and well-documented failures of the predominant development models since the Second World War. Because so many development initiatives and projects were too exclusively based on Western ideas of progress, economics, social life and values, technology and so on, many of them actually damaged the communities they sought to support, uprooted and weakened them, and alienated them from their own cultural and spiritual roots and resources.

Added to this was many people's sense of powerlessness at being the object of external (and often alien) notions of progress, rather than being able to be the subjects of their own self-development. Being told...'this is what will make you happy', and having your own knowledge of what will make you happy ignored is a most disempowering experience. People's experience was unheard, their knowledge and wisdom derided, and their spiritual and cultural values denied. They were being excluded, not just from setting the goals of their development, but from shaping its means. This sense of powerlessness

is also found in the West, especially among those whom society often designates as 'losers' or 'the underclass'.

In the ten years since then, none of this has got any better. In the midst of a hugely accelerated pace of change, we are confronting in equal measure unparalleled opportunities and unparalleled threats. Significant parts of the human population, particularly in the West, are healthier, wealthier and enjoy greater opportunities for self-realisation than ever before. At the same time, the gap between rich and poor is growing, huge parts of humanity live on the margins of destitution, uprooted peoples number tens of millions and wars and pandemics devastate dozens of countries. The fabric and future of life itself, in water, air, the human genome, is facing increasing commodification and one on hand the wealth of consumer nations and on the other the poverty of energy and resource – poor countries have caused an ecological holocaust which threatens the continuation of the planet. In the last 25 years alone, we have destroyed one-third of the world's renewable resources.

The globalisation of markets has proved an unstoppable colossus, kicking its way through well-intentioned but ineffectual legislation designed to protect the environment, workforces, local communities, and American citizens have been as unable to resist the rolling back of such legislation as Indian, Brazilian or Malaysian citizens, as we have very recently seen.

Such powerlessness is not confined to people living in poverty; it affects our own legislators equally. The Social Justice Strategy of the Scottish Executive is in many regards an admirable document; it has attempted to address poverty in Scotland under a number of headings, setting targets and outlining milestones by which to measure progress along the way. There is no reason to doubt the good faith of those attempting to implement this strategy, nor would I wish to deny its many achievements. But like the British government, it is having to engage with the fact that, despite their best efforts, the gap between rich and poor in this country continues to grow, and that there is a level of entrenched or intransigent poverty in Britain that all their efforts are unable to shift. A recent analysis of Glasgow's performance in relation to the Social Justice Strategy makes gloomy reading.

In the economic landscape of Britain, there are a number of ways of being a stakeholder, which, of course, offer a different size of stake, and of power. You can be someone with **capital**, that is, individual accumulated wealth owned by you at a given moment, as distinct from income, such as a salary, wage or benefit received during a certain period. Your capital might be land, property, money, stocks and shares, gold, works of art; if you have a house, it will be the equity, that is, any profit you might make in reselling it, after you've paid off your original loan plus the interest. The economic value of any of these assets is not fixed, and you do not determine their value. Their value is determined by market forces.

Markets determine value by a number of criteria – we all know now from watching reality TV that the criteria for the value of a house, for example, include such things as its spaciousness. its condition. its convenience. its

utility, its stylishness, its originality, its location, its scarcity (if yours is one of a kind, a designer house, you're probably on to a winner). Broadly speaking, property values are based on beauty, craftsmanship, and the ability to maximise the space between human beings while minimising their distance from services and utilities – much the same values as pertain with cars, air travel, and indeed as health and education when these are privately purchased. You may love your Maryhill room and kitchen, it may have huge cultural and spiritual value for you, but that'll not show up in its selling price.

There are some particularly talented people whose brains or bodies are considered so desirable in market terms that in themselves they **are** their own capital; their value is far more than they earn; a David Beckham, for example, or a Jo Rowling. But that value only applies as long as they are in possession of the qualities that make them attractive to the market – their talent, its rarity, its worth to Manchester United or the world's reading children. It's unlikely Beckham will have the same value in 30 years, or Jo Rowling if her imagination dries up. **In the market, value is always extrinsic.** Nothing has value in and for itself, only for what it can be sold for.

Or you can be a stakeholder in the economic landscape through your labour, the work of your brain or hands, by your skill, experience or muscle. Again, your labour is only worth what the market determines. If you're a brain surgeon or a member of Westlife, you're worth quite a lot, because your skills are rare and in demand, or because a great many people, for some inexplicable reason, want to buy your records. If you're a firefighter or a nurse, you're worth a bit less, because you're not so rare – but you still have a reasonable stake. If you're a cleaner or an outworker in the clothing industry, your value is very low, because anyone can do what you're doing, so it's very easy to replace you. You're worth the minimum wage, or less. But what if you no one wants you in the labour market, perhaps because you're too old, or unskilled or inarticulate or unattractive. What if you are one of the people like the woman who said to me once after dozens of unsuccessful job applications, 'it feels like there are too many people in the world, and I'm one of them.' Then your value is set at the income support level. And that's a bit of a problem, because then you are excluded from your only other economic stake, which is as a consumer.

Now we all know that the diet in Scotland is considered to be among the worst in the Western world in terms of nutrition and health. Yet this cannot be attributed (as it can in other parts of the world) to shortages, lack of natural resources or a poor society. Increasingly we recognise that this is to a considerable extent a market-driven problem. In the peripheral schemes of Scotland, people living on income support, and trying to raise a family are doubly handicapped -firstly in simply not having enough money to buy good food, and secondly because they live in places where access to good quality foodstuffs is severely restricted, and what there is is more expensive. At this point of economic activity, people cease to have even the economic stake of being a consumer. They are simply not worth selling to. With no market value, they therefore have no choice, and no consumer clout.

In the economic landscape of Britain, there are whole communities that are almost entirely redundant to the economy. They have little market value. Their environment does not value them to the point where their children may be suffering from malnutrition. Furthermore, these communities are most likely to be the ones that are symbolically undesirable and politically irrelevant. That is, they are a blot on the landscape, and most of them don't vote, or their votes are taken for granted.

I said **almost** entirely redundant to the economy. But not quite. There is one group of traders to whom such communities are the most profitable of all. They are the people who sell money. Or, to give them their old name, moneylenders. **Indebtedness** is both a major consequence and a major cause of poverty. Scotland is now the most heavily indebted country in Europe, and in Britain we are indebted to 125% of household income. Of course, borrowing money is part and parcel of economic life across the globe; it's not new, and it's not confined to the poor. The world's biggest debtor by a long way is the United States government. Consumer credit is what's driving western economies. No, what's really interesting in looking at the economic landscape is not that people borrow money. It's that the people who have the least pay the most to do so.

Poor people have to borrow money to counteract the consequences of being redundant to the economy. There is increasing evidence that people get into unsustainable debt because they simply do not have enough money to pay for basic necessities, never mind the things that most of us take for granted as a measure of social inclusion (warm clothing, a holiday, school activities for children). Furthermore, because people living in poverty are denied access to the normal and more affordable sources of credit, such as bank accounts, many are pushed towards legal and illegal moneylenders. The legal interest rates, charged on small loans of say, £200 by a moneylender such as Provident Financial, is around 160% APR, thus deepening the cycle of indebtedness. To be economically redundant is, paradoxically, to be subject to market forces at their most primitive. In such a context, dealing drugs makes perfect economic sense.

powerless

isolated

degraded

angry – it's totally fixable

it's a desired condition, not an accident; it's in someone's interest that people are poor

there's profit in other people's poverty

lack of control of your life

you're a scapegoat when there's no war or external enemy

scrutinised and judged

being looked down on

it dehumanises people

making people anti-social

hopelessness and helplessness

not just about money

survival
not able to live as human beings
people take over your life (council, etc)
in poverty, people are not needed
existence
strain on family life (1)

These are words used by people living in poverty to describe their experience. The most remarkable thing to me is that they are actually words about spirituality, about the effect of poverty on the human spirit.

'People don't choose to be poor or to live in poverty. In most cases it is through a series of circumstances; illness, death, unemployment or disability. So people should not feel stigmatised – yet they very often are.' (2) These words are a profound statement about value. People's sense of their own worth is today inextricably linked with the economic. We have, all of us to some degree, internalised our extrinsic market valuation.

Many of the ways in which people have previously understood their lives to be meaningful and of worth, ways which have shaped their spirituality, in their relationship to the land, in their work, in community, clan or family, in religion or ideology – have been subjected to a breaking process, a shaking of the foundations, which has shaken people loose from them as a source of meaning, and hence of belonging, identity and well being. Many of the familiar markers and signposts have disappeared or been discredited. But even when disconnected from them, the yearning for these things remains. In that loss, that void, much has been thrown on to other things to fill the gap, to restore meaning and belonging and identity.

The nuclear family has had a burden of expectation thrown on to it, of meeting all the needs and aspirations of its members that has simply proved too great to carry. It is cracking under the strain.

The nation state, a political construct that has had varying degrees of success, is always at risk of being understood as a destructive cultural or ethnic nationalism.

The superstate, as the former Soviet Union or the European Community may be described, is too impersonal and remote to meet the hunger to have our worth affirmed.

And above all, the marketplace constantly entices us, and we duly try to find meaning, belonging, identity, in the gratification of our desires through the economic. Whether our hungers are really met in the array which we are invited to consume is debatable. What is sure that the cost of economic growth is huge, and is unequally borne by the poorest and most vulnerable. The damage to the earth's ecology is already well known, and in the long term renders everyone deeply insecure.

So in this commodified world, I want to go back to my definition of spirituality, and apply it to our dominant economic system. I want to ask these questions.

What is its profoundest motivation? What is its ultimate concern? What kind of choices and actions does it make and take? What is the nature of its relationships?

You will have your own thoughts about the answers to these questions. But I believe they are legitimate questions to ask. No longer is it possible to act as if what we do with our money has got nothing to do with our spirituality – it has everything to do with it, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

In trying to understand any spirituality, it is I think, important to look at what it believes to be its **highest** value. We might be of the opinion that greed, and the unbridled pursuit of profit most characterise our economic system, but we will fail in our search for enlightenment if we do not also try to catch a glimpse of what for many is its best vision, its treasure. This I understand to be the maximisation of individual **freedom**, expressed through the increased extension of **choice**. Such freedom – to own or possess, to develop and explore and utilise, to reap the rewards of one's labour and enjoy its fruits – have, it might be argued, driven the onward progress of science, technology, the arts, civic and political life, health and education –all that seem to make life worth living.

To be free, unbounded, without constraint or limitation has a huge emotional and spiritual attraction. Part of the nature of freedom is the readiness to take on board the risks that go along with it. Exploration of new territory involves the danger of getting lost, encountering unknown obstacles – the mythological cultures of the Promised Land, the Wild West, Space, the Final Frontier, recognise and accept this. Just last week, speaking at the Columbia memorial, George W Bush said, *'Each of these astronauts had the daring and discipline required of their calling. Each of them knew that great endeavours are inseparable from great risk, and accepted those risks willingly in the cause of discovery.'* More prosaically, it is recognised in the markets, in the small writing that reminds us that interest rates can go down as well as up. But in the real world of economics, the nature of freedom is also, increasingly, being perverted.

In theory, we trade the security of communal provision for individual freedom and choice. In theory, we thereby exchange the constraints placed on our actions for the risks engendered by our individual freedoms. But that trade-off is actually becoming less and less real. Increasingly, the risks are paid for by the same people who still suffer the constraints. Only now, not only do they not enjoy the freedom, they don't have the security either. Because, of course, our free market really has got nothing to do with freedom.

At present, trading (the most reliable way to overcome poverty), is seriously distorted by such inequitable practices as the offloading of European and American surpluses on to African and South American markets, putting local producers out of business. Heavily subsidised western goods lower prices to such an extent that local traders simply cannot compete. Stringent regulations

placed by western-controlled bodies such as the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on trade and markets in developing countries, such as no subsidies, are not observed by the very countries which impose them. It's a question of 'do what we say, not what we do'.

There's one area in which Britain really is a world leader – our (heavily subsidised) arms trade. Every year, half a million people across the world are killed by guns that can be bought in some places for the price of a chicken. It's estimated that there are some 100 million guns circulating in Africa alone.

The worst impact is borne by innocent civilians – children, women, the sick and elderly. Bullets claim more lives in Africa than such major killers as tuberculosis, malaria or road accidents. Firearms have transformed once stable and relatively prosperous communities into medieval fiefdoms. Vast areas of countryside are abandoned as millions flee their homes in terror; schools close, hospitals shut; ordinary life grinds to a standstill. Economic and social development has been stripped away. There are huge profits in selling guns – there's no such thing as a poor arms dealer - but the most vulnerable pay a high price.

Our government recently sold Tanzania, one of the world's poorest countries, a £28 million military radar system, though a civilian one would cost a tenth of the price. Despite its adverse impact on sustainable development, and against massive opposition, Tony Blair gave the sale the green light. It was hoped that a new Arms Export Control Bill would end such irresponsible deals. The House of Lords strengthened the law. But the Government has diluted it again.

Meanwhile, boardroom payoffs with golden pension deals to failed managers and directors, go on unchecked, while the pensions of ordinary people disappear like snow off a dyke. The markets are not free. Labour is most certainly not free to move – to be an economic migrant is to be the lowest of the low, although such people are merely following the logic of the market. Only the unchecked flow of capital is free.

The areas for the exercise of our freedom are being reduced and reduced, as everything is commodified - our time, our health, our sexuality, the air that we breathe and the water that we drink, our planet itself. A freedom that is unable to take its risks upon itself is ultimately one that destroys itself. Freedom, we discover, is only meaningful within limits. A system that only recognises extrinsic value gradually strips us of all the things that we believe have intrinsic worth.

We live in a society that entices with limitlessness, and offers the promise of escape from the demands of finiteness. Both personally and politically, on the left and on the right, our society entices us to disengage from the confines and demands and limitations of history, of geography, of bodies, of relationship. We repress, distort, deny our history, the hurts done both to us and by us. We attempt to leap over geography in our cars and planes. cause

carnage on the roads and poison the atmosphere. We systematically demean, degrade, armour and hurt bodies. We pay lip service to community, live out of individualism, and pay to find ways of recreating spurious community.

Jonathan Porrit, searching for the reasons why people do not take ecological issues seriously, said,

'Simply, not enough people are dying yet in our western countries of skin cancer, of UV rays, or from pollution toxification illnesses. Nor are enough coastal communities drowning yet from rising sea-levels due to global warming. The visible, tangible, avoidable consequences of ecodisaster are not yet powerful enough to persuade sufficient people to change today's priorities.' But they're dying in other places. They're dying in Nigeria and Brazil, they're dying in the Solomon Islands and Bangladesh. What kind of human beings are we?

Is this what we are headed for in the West? Is our denial of reality so great, our denial of our finitude, and the planet's finitude so strong that, having rolled back our boundaries so firmly over other people and species, having externalised our costs to such a degree, we have lost the ability to self-limit, and must wait for the limitations laid upon us by catastrophe and tragedy. 'Free thinker, do you think you are the only thinker on this earth, in which life blazes inside all things? Your liberty does what it wishes with the powers it controls, but when you gather to plan, the universe is not there.'

Our society has undergone a huge shift, accelerated in recent years, from defining our work in particular, but other aspects of life too, in terms of cultural value to those of economic value. 'Everything has its price.' It's often quoted, and we have had to learn to put a price on our skills, our experience, our time; to market ourselves. Values are about deciding what is most important to us, about the worth of things, and about setting priorities.

Money and time are the two currencies that people use most in our society. These are what we spend, time and money, and we are more and more accustomed to having to translate our spending of time into the currency of money. 'Time is money' we say, and we calculate our earnings by time. If we look at how we spend our money and how we spend our time we can get a real insight into what our core values really are, into what really moves us, rather than what we think, say or hope they are. Above all, our spirituality shows up in what we **do**. It is where we put our theories into practice, practice what we preach; put our money where our mouths are.

If, as a Christian, I believe in a relationship that unconditionally values every person regardless of status, wealth, success or virtue, that conveys intrinsic worth on the worst as well as the best, with no value addition necessary, how am I to regard an economic system, and its underlying spirituality, which determines worth purely by external market forces, which actually relieves people who are poor, disabled, unemployed, single parents, elderly, of their intrinsic worth? We take care of what we value. Ultimately, people know

whether and how they are valued by their society, and by its systems and institutions. Who do we give value to?

Speaking recently in South Africa, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane said that *'it is wrong and unacceptable for some people to have much, much more than they need, and others to suffer the cries of hungry children....that economics should be in the service of compassion and civilised values.... that there is no intrinsic value in the accumulation of money and possessions; and that these are positively harmful to humanity's spirit if they coexist with poverty.'* (3)

A spiritual task of discernment

*...for the question is always how
out of all the chances and changes
to select the features of real significance
so as to make of the welter
a world that will last
and how to order the signs and symbols
so they will continue to form new patterns
developing into new harmonic wholes
so to keep life alive
in complexity
and complicity with all of being-
there is only poetry.*

(Kenneth White) (4)

How to order the signs and symbols is a political task, but we are in grave danger of allowing it to become an economic one. Selecting the features of real significance, on the other hand, so as to make of the welter a world that will last - that is a spiritual task.

When social inclusion nowadays depends on the economic – we are what we spend, and if you can't spend, you're excluded- it is vital that people are not also excluded politically and culturally. Perhaps the starkest statements of exclusion come in the consistent experience of people living in poverty that being poor results in being regarded and treated with disrespect. Stigma, patronage, even criminalization are commonplace for people living in poverty. Along with that goes isolation. Poverty is an isolating experience wherever a person is, and being poor in a poor community doesn't necessarily guarantee solidarity.

People take care of what they value. If you want to know what someone really values, look at what they take care of. And people also assess their own value and worth by the care they see being taken with and about them. This applies across a whole range of social policy. A Scotland, and a world, where everyone matters is really about who we value, and how that shows up.

Economics is linked to the kind of people a society produces. A compassionate economics produces compassionate people. A highly competitive economics produces insecure, frightened people hoarding their possessions. or aggressive people who win at the expense of other people.

For those who cannot actively participate economically, the results are poverty, crime, destruction and ultimately death. (5)

We alone
We alone can devalue gold
by not caring
if it falls or rises
in the marketplace.

Wherever there is gold
there is a chain, you know,
and if your chain
is gold
so much the worse
for you.

*Feathers, shells
and sea-shaped stones
are all as rare.*

*This could be our revolution:
To love what is plentiful
as much as
what's scarce.*

(Alice Walker) (6)

Kathy Galloway
The Christian Socialist Movement John Wheatley Lecture
Glasgow, 13th February 2003

Quoted in 'A Scotland Where Everyone Matters: A Report on Church Action on Poverty's Scottish Poverty Indicators Project, by Kathy Galloway
Ibid

Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, speaking at the 2002 AGM of the South African New Economics Network (SANE)

Kenneth White, from 'A Walk Along the Shore', in 'The Bird Path', pub. Penguin 1989

Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, op.cit.

Alice Walker, in 'Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful', c.1984

Alice Walker, pub. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1984