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The Global Economic Crisis and the Role of Religion

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The metaphysical and moral dimensions of the economy

Looking at the history of international economic exchanges, we observe repeated crises of the financial system in different epochs and under different social and political circumstances – as if man, when acting collectively, were unable to learn from his own errors. The global crisis we are confronted with today is not the first such event and will definitely not have been the last, as long as the human race focuses all its attention and concentrates most of its energies on the finite realm of the material and subordinates everything to the goal of wealth accumulation for its own sake. Instead of accepting that process's intrinsic futility – in view of man's rootedness in absolute reality –, he stubbornly engages in an effort that is nurtured by the fiction of endless progress in space and time. The dynamic of what can be described as historical “cycles of greed” (in terms of individual and collective action), culminating in periodic economic collapses (that are often and superficially perceived as “crashes” of a supposedly stable order), will condemn mankind to a perpetual struggle of Sisyphus, having to start anew after every collapse, only to fail again.

The problems that are apparent in those cyclic systemic crashes cannot be solved within the parameters of a given system of economic and financial interaction. The respective order of the economy has to be viewed – and evaluated – from an *outside* perspective. This means that its norms and given assumptions have to be transcended towards a realm that is independent of the human economy's system of finite transactions. It is characteristic of the modern “globalized” economy that its transactions are not only conducted as if there were no temporal limits, but also without due consideration of *moral* constraints. It should not surprise us that most economic experts and political leaders in the industrialized world were unable to predict the present crisis – since they lacked the intellectual distance, or a point of reference outside the system, which is needed to adequately view and evaluate man's economic activity. The apparent ignorance of the things to come of the World Economic Forum in Davos is a case in point.

Furthermore, in the strict sense, there can be *no morality* as long as the contingent reality *alone* is seen as basis of all human action. Without being able to relate our understanding of the world (“life-world”) to an external system of reference, man will always end up with the postulation of mere utilitarian principles as parameters for all his actions and will not be able to conceive of genuine moral values as guidelines for human self-realization. The ongoing global financial crisis – which is also a *systemic crisis* of the materialistic and areligious worldview of a dogmatically understood “globalization” – is clear and dramatic

proof of the lack of moral credibility as well as sustainability of an economic doctrine that closes the eyes to man's finiteness and inevitable mortality within the physical world. This has also direct bearing on the status of the human being, i.e. the inalienable dignity of the human subject, which, in our analysis, can only be ensured in a metaphysically "open" context.

Against this background of the (ontological) *incompleteness* of an exclusively secular worldview and that approach's failure to detect the systemic (internal) contradictions of economic activity based on it, one can distinguish two fundamental aspects (or dimensions) of the *relevance of religion* for the analysis and evaluation of the contemporary economic and financial crisis:

- (a) The metaphysical aspect: The dominant economic system's internal "logic of greed" is based on the fictitious assumption that the accumulation of wealth can and eventually will go on indefinitely, an approach that excludes all limits in space and time (as if life on earth was eternal) and often also rejects any constraints in terms of basic moral principles. It is in fact related to a *linear* understanding of progress, which has all along characterized the industrialized world's ideology of "globalization." Only religion, not any empirical science or social tradition, can "break" this irrational dynamic of greed, since it brings into human life an awareness of the absolute. Under the pressure to conform to an as yet undefined "modernity," and to function as an "efficient" participant in the ever more competitive global economic environment, modern man has all too often excluded religion from everyday-life. The religious interpretation of the world goes indeed *beyond* an "inner-worldly" (and exclusively secular) self-realization of the human being and exposes the intrinsic futility of every effort, whether individual or collective, at amassing wealth for the sake of gaining personal security and fulfillment. Religion evaluates human activity, including all matters economical, *sub specie aeternitatis* [under the aspect of eternity] and provides an interpretation of this activity that makes us aware of its limits vis-à-vis the absolute reality, and of the ultimate vanity of all material endeavors. Regrettably, establishment religions in the industrialized world at times appear having forgotten the essentially metaphysical message of religion, refusing to question the selfish and

arrogant exclusion of the transcendent by the advocates of economic “liberalism,” and resigning themselves to a rather opportunistic approach, which often makes institutionalized religion a mere corollary of a society that has become forgetful of its material limitations and, at the same time, of the ultimate destiny of man.

- (b) The moral aspect: Unlike any worldly ideology, political program or economic doctrine, whether of capitalism or communism or a so-called “third way,” religion makes the members of the human race aware of their *common destiny* in the context of the universe – and *beyond* the lifespan of the individual as well as of any given society or civilization. The awareness of the *absolute* dimension of life implies, or is the foundation of, *solidarity* among individuals and groups (societies) at the global level, comprising all civilizations and socio-cultural traditions. The moral aspect is intrinsically linked to the metaphysical aspect, it in fact results from the latter. The sense of common destiny that is generated by religion enables the members of the human race to commit themselves to a common purpose (i.e. one to which all human action is *subordinated*), which in turn paves the ground for solidarity among people of all creeds and cultures and helps modern man to escape from the trap of selfish isolation in which he got entangled due to the uncritical acceptance of the *supremacy of the economy* – or what may be called the ideology of “globalization” that appears having become the surrogate religion of the modern industrialized world.

Any analysis of the global economic crisis that ignores these two aspects of religion will actually only be able to propose a cure of symptoms, but will not be capable to grasp the root causes of the crisis, and will thus be unable to offer lasting remedies that could prevent the recurrence of systemic instability in the future.

Conclusion:

“Transcending” the economic approach

Thus, a sustainable solution to the crisis can never be found within the parameters of the present economic system, namely with the concepts of the *immanent* worldview that has caused the very crisis. This would create a *circulus vitiosus* in the literal sense: a vicious circle of self-betrayal, within which no genuine normative critique of economic activity will be possible.

The anarchic “network of greed” that the “globalized,” and highly interdependent, economy has become in our era – and mainly due to the uncoordinated interaction of individual and group interests, in total neglect of the *bonum commune* not only at the level of the nation-state, but of mankind – must be viewed and evaluated from outside of that system. This perspective can eventually only be provided by a worldview that goes beyond the parameters of the “life-world” (which is the subject of the empirical sciences), namely by a position that includes the *absolute* as point of reference for the definition of humanity.

This metaphysical dimension is largely wanting in today’s industrialized societies that proclaim the ideals of secularism and of unending economic progress. It is to be understood in an *inter-denominational* sense. Awareness of their metaphysical origin unites people of all creeds and religions in the context of the universe and defines their identity by relating them to the absolute, instilling in them a sense of belonging to the *same human race*.

Only religion, not any worldly science or philosophy, however “enlightened” it may be, can provide this kind of *comprehensive* worldview, a position from which people can draw inspiration and motivation for joint action not only domestically, but at the global level too. Herein lies, in our view, the true meaning of “globality.” This approach alone may eventually enable mankind to overcome the entrenched attitudes of *egotism* and *metaphysical nihilism*, which have been at the origin of modern materialistic doctrines (whether communist or capitalist), and which can now be identified as the root causes of the systemic crisis of the global economy.

As we know by now, this is indeed a crisis of what – particularly since the end of the Cold War’s rivalry between the capitalist and socialist worldviews – has been advertised as “globalization,” with Francis Fukuyama’s vision of the “end of history” as ideological consequence. In the meantime, he, like so many other apologists of dogmatic secular

ideologies, has been proven a false prophet: ignoring the contingent nature of all human activity, he has created expectations that can never be fulfilled.

The belief in all things material and the subordination of human life to the supremacy of the economy has, to a large extent, become the surrogate religion of the globalized and “secularized” society of the 21st century. It is up to the religions of the world to join their efforts so as to remind humanity of their common destiny in relation to the absolute. Under the prevailing circumstances, this will be a timely – and desperately needed – contribution to economic justice and peace among nations.
