

VALUE AND EQUIVALENCE: THE ROLE OF MONOTHEISM IN EARLY ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

• **Giorgio Buccellati** •

“The relevance of monotheism to the introduction of pricing (and money) is in the affirmation of values, not primarily in the implementation of techniques. The unifying thread is the posture of facing rather than of seizing.”



That a person might be bought in exchange for money or other goods is one of the most tragic achievements of higher civilization. For it was the enormous social and conceptual upheaval of the urban revolution that brought in its wake the curse of slavery, a little over five millennia ago. This coincidence of two extremes, civilization and slavery, should give us pause. For our present concern, I will use it as a window into the central question of the relationship between the monotheistic perception of the divine sphere and the nature of monetary exchanges within human society.

It is for a good reason, I believe, that I propose to look at our central topic from a greater distance than may seem warranted at first. Historically, the early monotheistic institutional setting (as found in ancient Israel and early Christianity) did not in and of itself affect the conception and the use of monetary mechanisms. If we

look at slavery¹ as a test case, we do not see fundamental differences in the conception and the practice of that institution between monotheistic and polytheistic societies. It is rather at the level of fundamental presuppositions that profound differences exist, and it is in turn from these presuppositions that equally profound transformations eventually emerge in the institutional practice. It is in order to better understand these deeper differences that we must start from a greater remove in time. Interestingly, the long argument developed here comes to echo one of the central points of Benedict XVI's latest encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, as I will show below.

1. *The reification of value*

1.1. *The urban revolution*

The attribution of precise equivalences among material goods was an integral part of the urban revolution, the development that saw the coalescing for the first time (in the fourth millennium B.C.) of large human groups into coherent institutional wholes (the first cities, in Syro-Mesopotamia). So momentous was the transformation brought about by the urban revolution that we see it as the hallmark defining the transition from prehistory to history. A trigger to its success was the conceptual ability to reify abstract notions, so that they could be dealt with effectively within an ever widening system of complex interconnections. The introduction of writing was the single most important technical innovation that contributed to making the whole process possible, and it was also one of the most visible and distinctive.

An important aspect of this profound conceptual transformation was the ability to assign quantifiable attributes to objects of the material world. This was the basis for the origin of a proper economic system, where property could for the first time be permanently assigned to single individuals, according to a publicly recognized system of measurable standards and legal guarantees.

¹For a particularly strong condemnation of slavery in recent times see the 1992 speech given by John Paul II to the Catholic community of the island of Gorea in Senegal (the main way-station for the African slave traffic), especially section 3, available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1992/February/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19920222_isola-goree_fr.html.

Thus, while money in the sense of coinage was introduced much later in history, there arose from the beginning the fundamental presupposition that goods are comparable according to established scales. Pricing was one of these events, and it contributed powerfully to the orderly development of that broadly based societal and political entity we know as the state.

1.2. *The functionalization of social relationships*

A parallel development was the functionalization of human relationships.² In the widening sphere of contacts among individuals one came to recognize the other person not only on the basis of personal traits, but also by virtue of a special function with which any given individual was identified. In a pre-urban context, when you needed a certain commodity you would go to someone *you knew* who could give you the desired product. Knowing the person in question came first. In an urban context instead, given the same need, you would look for a production facility as such, regardless of whether or not you knew the person(s) behind it. This increased immeasurably the efficiency of the social apparatus: functions could be presupposed, and their products expected, regardless of how many people you actually knew personally. This was one of the main triggers that set in motion, after the countless millennia of an almost imperceptible social growth in prehistory, the vertiginous rate of progress of which we are the direct heirs. It was the beginning of the five millennia of what we call “civilization.”

This was, however, at the expense of the interpersonal dimension. Human beings came to be seen apart from their personality, as elements performing tasks in given functional slots. Anonymity meant, precisely, that people came to know each other apart from their “names,” i.e., from their individual personality. The basis for reciprocal knowledge and trust was not the direct acquaintance resulting from long-term association, but only the evidence that a

²This argument is developed in detail in my article “The Perception of Function and the Prehistory of the State in Syro-Mesopotamia,” in *Archaeology Without Limits. Papers in Honor of Clement W. Meighan*, ed. Brian D. Dillon and Matthew A. Boxt (Lancaster, Calif.: Labyrinthos, 2005), 481–92, online at www.urkesh.org, under “Electronic Library.”

task was being performed the outcome of which one could safely expect. The product was then the gauge and standard that would guide human interaction: whether you knew a potter or not, let alone whether you liked him or not, you could expect a pot you could use. Function had become the rule.

The introduction of writing served a crucial role in this development. It allowed for the contents of thought to be represented, graphically, outside the mind. In this, the process of reification was at its clearest: humans could now confront, in an external physical embodiment (the graphic sign), formulations that were, heretofore, consigned only to the inner workings of the brain. In the process, the ability for abstraction increased exponentially. One could “see,” in its extrasomatic objectification, not only individual items as present in nature, but also abstract concepts, of which numeration was among the first. As a result, the process of social functionalization was accelerated: the slot which human beings were known to fill in the real world of social interaction could be neatly represented through the interrelation of graphic signs. Rosters of individuals, ledgers of commodities, lists of words, are the types of texts that we first see in the record, well before writing came to be used to render prose or poetry.

1.3. Institutional consolidation

The orderly organization of the new social order entailed that the various functional slots be co-present for the system to serve its purpose. The city provided the framework within which this was possible. It was not only the place where each and every type of craft could be found (the scribe, the potter, the smith, the weaver, etc.). It was also the place where broadly based patterns of interaction had become institutionalized and were universally accepted in all their complexity. Stratification within society came to be accepted quite apart from the specific qualities of single individuals. Here is where slavery comes in. The availability of human persons who could be expected to perform tasks automatically and without recourse, and who could be exchanged as commodities, was seen as indispensable for the proper functioning of the system as a whole, and it was unquestioned.

Such institutional consolidation affected the broader conceptual framework as well. Take writing. Its codification had to

be recognized and accepted by a substantial technical class, that of the scribes, who subscribed to and accepted the myriad correlations between the many graphic signs and their signification. In turn, everyone who turned to a scribe had to assume that writing and reading were uncontroversial, i.e., that what one scribe would write was exactly what another one would read. But it was not just writing. In the process, a whole host of new institutions sprang to life, all of which rested on sets of shared presuppositions. For example, it was at this time that a proper legal system came into existence, whereby sets of standards came to be recognized as binding, the adjudication of which was to be done by individuals familiar with the overarching system. Coercion (with punishments from fines and imprisonment all the way up to death) was the institutional mechanism that guaranteed the universal acceptance of the system, but behind it there was also a sense that justice was indeed served.

At the pinnacle of society, a profoundly institutionalized structure of power developed, with a single figure holding together the filaments of the entire social fabric. This was due, to a large extent, to the effectiveness of individual leadership in providing motivation and cohesiveness: the figure to whom different titles were attributed, but whom we can generically call “king,” was able adroitly to exploit the built-in need for coordination and organization. It all contributed to the stability of the group, an important aspect being the transmission of power, which came to be understood from the beginning in terms of filiation. Thus it appears that the origin of the city and the origin of the state are one and the same thing.

1.4. Predictability and control

These innovations had an immense impact not only on social interaction (as with the city) and on cognition (as with writing), but also on perceptual and attitudinal dispositions. Two in particular are relevant for our current purposes: predictability and control, which are closely interrelated. The emergence of function as a paramount dimension in human relationships, and the consolidation of the institutions that depended on such functionalization, introduced an element of stability that had a major impact in two respects.

First, *efficiency*. The new urban societal complex had to rely on the regular and permanent availability of a network of functional

slots: a city without potters, scribes, judges, centralized political leadership, was inconceivable. The urban system was efficient precisely because it was predictable in its articulation: walking as an outsider into a city, you would expect to find all of the elements in this articulation. It was just as important that these elements should be subjected to mechanisms of control, arranged in a hierarchical way, which would ensure not only that the slots were present, but also that they were actually filled and functioning.

The second type of impact was *psychological*. The human view of reality came to be profoundly shaped by the growing persuasion that predictability could be universal and control could be total. Within the urban framework one came to anticipate every node of its articulation and to expect a hierarchical line of command that effectively would hold it together. Just so, in the realm of the world as a whole, the persuasion developed that patterns were the rule, and that the progressive ability to anticipate these patterns would yield a control on natural phenomena that could eventually encompass each and every one of those patterns—once known. Awareness of death is one of these psychological moments that we can trace in the early archaeological record: its document is the burial, which monumentalizes (in however modest a form in most cases) the proclamation of a death that has taken place and of one that is going to take place—the onlooker's.

2. *Early economic systems*

2.1. *Pricing*

Within this wider perspective, we can best appreciate the role of pricing as it found its way within the compass of human society. It rested on all the presuppositions that I have been outlining, whereby commodities were reified and attributed “values” according to well defined standards, universally acknowledged and accepted. The process entailed a clear definition of the commodities in question, before any pricing equivalent could be assigned. For instance, parcels of land had to be clearly outlined as to their boundaries, their quality (e.g., irrigation potential for agricultural properties, building rights, etc.), their pre-existing property titles, and so on. This mattered both for transactions among owners and for taxation purposes on the part of the central government.

There is a large number of cuneiform sale documents that give us a precise sense of how this worked in practice in the Syro-Mesopotamian area, such as the following one.

A buildable parcel of land, measuring 70.5 m²,
 bounded on its upper broad side by the house of Iddin-Rushpan,
 on its lower broad side by the Square of the Land, on its upper
 narrow side by the street and on its lower narrow side by the
 house of `Abdu-Dagan,
 the buildable parcel of Yasma`-Dagan, son of Yashub-Dagan.

Puzurum, son of Namashum, has bought this buildable parcel
 from Yasma`-Dagan, son of Yashub-Dagan:
 for its full price he has weighed out 165 grams of silver.³

Notice the equivalence⁴ to silver, stated in terms of a precise weight. Analogous documents are missing from ancient Israel,⁵ but there is no reason to assume that the mechanisms of exchange were any different.

2.2. Slavery

The stark reality of slavery is brought home by the equally abundant number of sale documents relating to persons. Instead of a sale document, I will give here the text of a verdict issued in

³O. Rouault, *L'archive de Puzurum*, Terqa Final Reports, no. 1 (Malibu: Undena, 1964), 28 (*TFR* 15:1–13). The text, written in Akkadian, dates to about 1700 B.C. What follows are various legal conditions, a list of witnesses, and the date (given as a given year name of a king of Terqa).—The most recent research on Mesopotamian prices is to be found in three important articles by Lucio Milano, Francesco Pomponio, and Mario F. Fales in Lucio Milano and Nicola Parise, *Il regolamento degli scambi nell'antichità (III–I millennio a. C.)* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2003), 3–58.

⁴On the notion of equivalence, beginning with the very fact that the sign for “price” in cuneiform is a jar with barley inside (barley being the first commodity used for establishing equivalence), see Lucio Milano, “Sistemi finanziari in Mesopotamia e Siria nel III millennio a.C.,” in Milano and Parise, *Il regolamento degli scambi*, 11–14.

⁵An interesting recent article on monetization in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel is by John S. Holladay, “How Much Is That in . . . ? Monetization, Money, Royal States, and Empires,” in J. David Schloen, *Exploring the Longue Durée. Essays in Honor of Lawrence E. Stager* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 207–22.

response to the claim by a slave girl challenging her owner's property title. Besides two witnesses, the slave girl's own mother testifies to the fact that she, the mother, had indeed sold the girl into slavery.

This is a final judgment.

U. the cook, bought E-tamuzu, daughter of L., from her mother A. for 37.5 grams of silver.

E-tamuzu has now said to U.: "I am not your slave."

U. the gardener and I. are witnesses to the fact that U. the cook had indeed bought E-tamuzu and had delivered her price.

Even A., the mother of E-tamuzu, has stated before us (the two judges) that U. the cook had indeed bought E-tamuzu, her daughter, from her.

Therefore, E-tamuzu, has been adjudicated as slave to U. the cook.⁶

The fact of pricing becomes even more real when one sees this document in relationship to the many others of the same period: the price given here for the slave girl is the median "value" in the distribution among 41 such cases from the same period, where the minimum is 4.15 grams of silver, and the maximum 76 grams.⁷

⁶A. Falkenstein, *Die Neusumerischen Gerichtsurkunden. Zweiter Teil. Umschrift, Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1956), N. 35, 58–60. The text is in Sumerian and dates to about 2050 B.C. In the translation, I have slightly simplified the text by giving only the initials of the long Sumerian personal names (except for the slave girl herself—whose high-sounding name can be translated as "In the temple the deity has recognized her"). What follows in the text are the names of the bailiff and of the two judges who adjudicated the case, and finally the date (given as a given year name of a king of Ur).

⁷Lucio Milano, "Sistemi finanziari in Mesopotamia e Siria nel III millennio a.C.," 32. These figures are for slave girls. Male slaves are more "valuable": the total number of cases for the same period is also 41, the minimum price in silver is 5.55 grams, the median is 60, and the maximum is 141.60 (not counting the exceptional figure of 458.15 grams, which is wholly out of range). These prices are those in force at the end of the third millennium, and they change otherwise considerably over the centuries.—By way of comparison, the price for a sheep in the same time period is 4 grams of silver, for a pig 8 grams (14): in other words, the median price

Again, no such documents exist from ancient Israel, but there is little doubt that the mechanics of the system were the same, and that analogous documents would have regulated such transactions.

2.3. Legal validation

Parallel texts do exist, instead, when we come to legislation. Biblical law⁸ echoes closely that of the great systematizations of legal practice that took place in Mesopotamia at about the same time as the two documents cited above, the so-called law code of Hammurapi being the most extensive and the best known of these systematizations. While there are differences in matters of detail, it is the central point that must retain our attention here: in ancient Israel as well as in Syro-Mesopotamia, slavery was not an occasional phenomenon, existing outside the system that regulated the newly emerging “civilized” life, i.e., the life within the new urban centers and the attendant socio-political systems. Rather, slavery was a central dimension of this new way of life, fully conceptualized and closely regulated as a core institution of the new order.

One of the differences is the existence, in ancient Israel, of what is known as “apodictic law,” i.e., a set of regulations that are not issued in function of specific cases (“casuistic” law), but retain, instead, universal and as if absolute value. While casuistic law envisages, for instance, a hypothetical case of murder and then prescribes a given punishment, apodictic law issues the simple and unconditional command: “Thou shall not kill.” The prime example of this is the “Decalogue,”⁹ the set of the ten “commandments”

for a slave girl is four and a half times that of a pig, nine times that of a sheep (but notice that the lowest price attested for a slave girl, 4.15, is about the same as for a sheep or half the price of a pig!).

⁸The most recent treatment of slavery in ancient Israel is by Philip J. King, “Slavery in Antiquity,” in Schloen, *Exploring the Longue Durée*, 243–49. There are indications of some more humane attitudes toward slaves, but the real difference is between the domestic type of slavery in both Mesopotamia and ancient Israel on the one hand and the much harsher, industrial type of Hellenistic and American slavery on the other.

⁹The difference vis-à-vis the Mesopotamian legal tradition is primarily in terms of the form (apodictic vs. casuistic). Conceptually, the substance of the “ten commandments” is also found in the Mesopotamian tradition; see my article

thought to have issued in a particularly solemn way from God himself who delivered them to Moses on Mount Sinai, written on stone tablets. And here, too, we find slavery enshrined:

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, *nor his slave, nor his slave-girl*, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is your neighbor's. (Ex 20:17)

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor shall you desire your neighbor's house, his field, *or his slave, or his slave-girl*, his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's. (Dt 5:21)

This very solemn validation of slavery is particularly troublesome,¹⁰ and we will have to come back to it below (3.3, 4.1).

2.4. *History and prehistory*

When eventually money came into existence, it emerged simply as a more standardized, and effective, mechanism to take advantage of the pricing system that had already developed fully over a time span of almost three millennia. But what about the much longer time span before pricing had come into existence? What about prehistory? We have no evidence of pricing, certainly not of slavery. But we do have evidence of exchanges, even over long distances, hence of some sort of standards by which the goods exchanged could be measured. There is also no evidence of an articulate legal system that would have explicitly stated the limits within which such standards and exchanges could occur. And yet we

"Ethics and Piety in the Ancient Near East," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Sasson (New York: Scribner, 1995), vol. 3, 1685–96.

¹⁰It did have the most negative effect in the case of American slavery, as indicated for instance in this troubling passage from the autobiography of Frederick Douglass (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave. Written by Himself* [Boston, 1845]), chapter nine, where he speaks of the religious "conversion" of one of his former masters, Captain Auld: "If it [the conversion] had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found *religious sanction and support* for his slaveholding cruelty."

must assume that there were unstated conventions that could regulate human intercourse in such matters. In other words, there was, *in nuce*, the capability to assign equivalences even before extrinsic correlative standards (specified quantities of barley first, then of silver) came to be accepted.

This conceptual mechanism had even deeper implications, to which we must now turn our attention.

3. *The immanent dimension*

3.1. *The deeper roots of reification*

A result of the civilizational process was, then, that the human person could be “priced,” hence reified with the stark mechanism of material equivalences. I have pointed at the institutional transformations brought about by the urban revolution as the cultural humus within which such reification could occur. But there is another aspect that should retain our attention, one that goes even farther back in time than the advent of civilization. As far back as prehistory, we have evidence of the human apprehension of the absolute, in the form of installations that can best be explained as cultic in nature. From similar installations in the earliest historical periods, we can project the underlying spiritual dimension back in time and apply it to earlier periods: the effort at representing in concrete physical form different aspects of the absolute was a correlative of the broader endeavor to reify intangible values.

With that, a new measure of control seemed to be placed in the hands of the “reifiers.” The representation was considered sacral in the sense that it partook of a higher sphere of being. But it was for all intents and purposes a representation that originated with its makers, and was in some ways dependent on their volition. Inherent in this was the imposition of limits. Even the highest values, those felt to be absolute because in principle above conditions, came to be seen within the confines of human initiative. Deeply entailed in this process was, ultimately, the very relativization of the absolute. It, too, could eventually be seen to fit within the growing acceptance of the functionalization ethos that lay at the root of urban growth, of civilization. Functionalized and predictable, the absolute itself could be “civilized,” i.e., ultimately reified and controlled.

This was the great spiritual power of polytheism. The multiplicity of divine beings was seen to match the human urge for organization, and, therein, the human understanding of the world came to be infused with a renewed sense of harmony. Even disharmony (evil, disease, war) was enshrined in this mindset: the very notion of multiplicity entailed differentiation and eventually opposition among the multiples (the gods), so that strife came to be seen as an integral dimension of their interrelationship. (Against this background one can more fully appreciate the doctrine of the Trinity as the dynamics of differentiation within the absolute based on love rather than strife.) Urban polytheism brought to its climax the process of reification that had started long before, when values first came to be perceived and humans began their millennial endeavor to bring them within the boundaries of conceptualization.

3.2. *Harpagmós: value and equivalence*

The spiritual dimension of this process lay in the projection of order onto the realm of reality. It is as facile as it is insidious for us to look at polytheism as nothing more than naïve and bigoted superstition. Insidious, because we lose track of achievements and attitudes that have seared deeply our very civilizational being, and more than ever shape our mores today. By framing values within a set of correlations, one gained a high measure of intellectual control. But along this line of development came, irresistibly, the impulse to achieve *substantive* control. The eating of the forbidden fruit is emblematic not only of what one circumvents (disobedience), but also for what one does instead: values are grasped as something that can be owned (eaten). Paul puts it starkly when speaking of the highest dimension, that of trinitarian relationships: Jesus did not consider his being equal to God “a seized possession” (*harpagmós*) (Phil 2:6).

When one puts a price on value, then value is effectively devalued. Through the mechanism of equivalence, value can seemingly be owned. But, then, it can no longer be confronted. Tragically a slave, owned, can no longer be confronted as a person. One cannot look a slave in the face any more than one can a thing—or a pet. One can no longer expect the unexpected.

Here we begin to see the deeper implications of my longer argument with regard to our central topic. The relevance of

monotheism to the introduction of pricing (and money) is in the affirmation of values, not primarily in the implementation of techniques. The latter are by no means irrelevant—as the incessant effort of individuals within that tradition (Amos, Vincent de Paul, Dorothy Day) forcibly tells us. But the unifying thread is, in each case, the posture of facing rather than of seizing. The spirituality of advent, so alien to polytheism, defines and colors that posture: it is a spirituality that attributes agency to values, a spirituality that waits for the unpredictable manifestation of the living God.

3.3. The law

It is, however, a spirituality that seems to be in contrast with the law. For biblical law's full acceptance of slavery (see above, 2.3, and below, 4.1) speaks not only to the social, but also to the spiritual dimension. It is not only that a society, within which monotheism was deeply rooted, did in fact accept the practice. It is also that the practice was dignified within a context that claimed to hail directly from God as the very source of all values. That even the apodictic formulation of the Decalogue should admit such non-value as slavery is particularly troublesome.

All the more so as we claim continuity. Along with Elijah, it is Moses whom the apostles recognize as speaking with Jesus at the Transfiguration (Mt 17:3 | Mk 9:4 | Lk 9:30)—a strong emblematic moment in which “the law and the prophets” are embodied in two representative figures of Israel's past. That “not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, should pass from the law until all is accomplished,” in fact not “until heaven and earth pass away” (Mt 5:18), is a strong statement indeed on Jesus' lips. It echoes the feeling of awe that is found so often in the lyrical style of the Psalms: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes” (19:7–8).

It is only part of a larger problem, for many other non-values are accepted and codified, such as wars of aggression, cruel behavior, debasing treatment of women. Jesus once faced the latter. When asked whether it was “lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” (Mt 19:3), he answered: “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the

beginning it had not happened so” (Mt 19:8). In the “Sermon on the Mountain” Jesus speaks in counterpoint to the law when he juxtaposes his “But I say to you . . .” pronouncements. Next to the statement about divorce (Mt 5:31), the other strong pronouncement is against the *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye”): “But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. Rather, if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other as well” (Mt 5:38f., see below, 4.1).

3.4. *Ownership*

The concept of property and ownership develops into a full system with the advent of “civilization,” when organized large-scale institutions begin closely to define and regulate social intercourse. Pricing is the mechanism that underlies such definition. Owning does not just mean keeping others from using goods of which you claim possession. It also means being able to exchange such goods with the goods somebody else owns. Scales of equivalence regulate such exchanges. Such a seemingly simple mechanism (equivalence = pricing), turns ownership into a definable and controllable reality.

It is this aspect that the law, precisely, defines and regulates. It is a mechanism that establishes predictable patterns and limits, within which each member of the community can expect the relationships with the other members to unfold. Ownership is one such “right” that contributes to the stability of the lives of the individual and of the whole. The political rulership adroitly exploits this. The Mesopotamian law “codes” are, in fact, political manifestos wherein the king projects himself as the judge who sanctions a given set of verdicts that have already been handed down by the judicial tradition. He is not a lawgiver in the sense of defining the rules; rather, he guarantees the standards by which the community lives, and he adjudicates disputes on the basis of those standards—among which figures the setting of price standards as well.

The *torah* emerges to a position that may be considered of a metaphysical nature. While in its details it follows closely the long-established Mesopotamian tradition, its linkage with God is unique. It is God, rather than the king, who is the judicial guarantor of the law (the king only sanctions the divine origin of the law, as with Hezekiah and the Deuteronomistic tradition). But more importantly, God is truly the lawgiver in the sense that he is the very source of the law. Such a close interaction between the “living” God and the

statutory system gives the latter its unique dynamics. It is an immanent system because it anticipates the details that regulate social living. And yet it is, at the same time, a transcendent system because it is only the outward expression of the total unpredictability of God. The Decalogue may be set in stone, but even the stones may be broken.

4. The “transcendent dimension”

4.1. The personal foundation of institutions

It appears, then, that, for the many centuries during which we can follow the history of a society inspired by monotheistic values (ancient Israel), we do not see any appreciable impact on the pricing system and on the related institutions that had arisen with the start of urban civilization. Even the codification of those institutions, which finds its expression in the system of laws, accepts the most negative aspect of that process, namely the reification of the human person seen as an object of mere equivalence, a slave.

“But *I* say to you . . .” Far from being a mere anecdotal correction of details, Jesus’ pronouncement emerges as the fundamental answer. The emphasis is as much on the “*I*” as on the “but.” It is the same posture we see in Jn 13:34: “*I* give you a new commandment.”¹¹ Uniformly, Jesus speaks as the foundational referent of the law. This is the fundamental difference vis-à-vis polytheism: the tensionality inherent in the fact that the law, like the whole of reality (whether natural or man-made), is rooted in the absolute and is a manifestation of his personal involvement in the world and in human history. In Mesopotamia, neither the law nor morality are so rooted. When they deal with this at all, the gods are only judges who concur in the implementation of an abstract system, inscribed within a universal and impersonal fate. By contrast, in a monotheistic worldview, God is the single absolute referent who does not just posit reality as a one-time act, but is rather the living and ongoing source of creation, the creation of a reality that is

¹¹The Greek text (*entolēn kainēn didōmi humin*) does not, in this case, use emphasis to express the pronoun of the first person, as is instead the case, for example, in Mt 5:39: *egō` dē légō humin*.

constantly held in place by his grace. The coherence is not in the frozen fixedness of a system, but in the singleness of its personal foundation, the living God.

The institutions that permeate the reality of our social living do indeed have a central role; their codification itself *is* a value. But not a reified value that becomes an end in itself. Central to monotheism is the ethos of creation and of grace, i.e., the belief that the world of finitude is not a one-time extraposition of a reality that becomes ipso facto an alternative to the infinite; rather, creation is the constant positing through grace of all of reality with which the infinite has an ongoing intimate relationship. Hence it is that the codification of institutions is, too, a value constantly posited, constantly in a living relationship with the one who posits it. Which is why monotheism entails a spirituality of the search, and of the advent. We search even while we have received, we wait even while he has come. The ultimate danger is otherwise the reification of religion itself, with the consequent loss of a sense of the living God; we are then caught in a trap of our own making, the trap of civilization. It is the constant alternative of choosing between the Baptist and Caiaphas.

The alternative is not to jettison the law. But neither is it to accept a relativism that implies the absence of absolute values. For there is, in monotheism, a delicate balance between the personal and the institutional. The potential for the institution is willed at the very moment of creation; development and growth are inscribed in the constantly renewed act of creation. That is because relationality is at the core of humanness: we are in function of each other, and institutions are the form taken by the relational interaction. Even the supreme relationality, between man and God, is institutionalized in the exquisitely dynamic phenomenon we know as the “covenant.” The institutional dimension is essentially and intrinsically bipolar, one that involves at the most personal level *both* partners—a reality expressed nowhere more clearly than where Jesus describes it as “the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20, cf. Mt 26:28, Mk 14:24, 1 Cor 11:25).

Emblematic of this process is the way in which the law-giving episodes at Sinai are narrated in Deuteronomy. The first time, Moses goes up the mountain to “receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant” (Dt 9:9). It is clearly emphasized that God himself had written “the ten commandments on two stone tablets” (Dt 4:13), “written with the finger of God” (9:10; see also 5:22,

9:11–15). The agency with regard to the tablets is wholly in God’s hands. And yet. For all the wondrous aura with which they are invested, the tablets are in the final analysis secondary. First, the tablets appear as the embodiment of a personal relationship: God *spoke* to the people “*face to face*” (5:4), so that the people “heard the voice of the living God” (5:22), they “heard *the voice of words*, but saw no form—only a *voice*” (4:12). Second, Moses smashes them (9:17), and instead of receiving new ones, this time he, Moses, fashions the tablets which he brings up the mountain for God to write on (10:1–4). The tablets, then, are not an end in itself, but a token of the personal encounter when the people met God face to face and heard his voice. They can be dispensed with, because what ultimately matters is the personal encounter as a source of the content.

4.2. *The prophetic ethos*

Thus, if the legal system codifies immanence, there is, profoundly embedded in it, a prophetic ethos that points to transcendence. This is the central theme of the latest encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*. With extreme clarity, Benedict XVI emphasizes that the technical aspects of human progress are to be subordinated to grace as the transcendent reality that is the very foundation of historical growth. When denouncing a “dehumanized form of development” caused by “too much confidence . . . (being) placed in . . . institutions, as if they were able to deliver the desired objective automatically” (section 11), he addresses the very situation that, we have seen, was set in motion at the dawn of *civilized* “institutions.” In opposition to the “conviction that (progress) lies entirely at (our) disposal,” Benedict calls for the recognition of the “transcendent dimension of development” (17). This is stark phrasing indeed. Just as starkly, he argues against the “rejection of metaphysics” (31) and states outright that “the Church does not have technical solutions to offer” (9), being “fully aware of the great danger of entrusting the entire process of development to technology alone” (14).

The “*prophetic task* of the Supreme Pontiffs” (12), as with Paul VI’s *Populorum progressio* and John Paul II’s *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, lies in the summons to face, upstream of the anecdotal and the epiphenomenal, the personal—the supreme personal reality of the living God in whom all values are rooted. Monotheism proclaims

the distance and the closeness of the absolute. It is only on that basis and from that presupposition that “technical” solutions can flow. On the one hand, we must accept the distance. For all the “reificatory” powers at our disposal, we do not create values: “truth-filled love, *caritas in veritate*, from which authentic development proceeds, is not produced by us, but given to us” (79). On the other hand, we must respond to the closeness by taking the initiative and acting in response to that supreme agency: “it is . . . a serious mistake to undervalue human capacity to exercise control over the deviations of development or to overlook the fact that man is constitutionally oriented toward ‘being more’” (14).

Herein lies the prophetic dimension. The historical inculturation of monotheism responds to a call: “integral human development is primarily *a vocation*” (11, and often in the encyclical). The “prophet” is the herald who alerts publicly all the members of the social group to their vocation. Ultimately, it is the call to a never abating confrontation out of which individuals, and through them the social group, discover the abiding energy of the supreme source of all values. Far from undermining the immanent dimension as embodied in the institutions and in the legal order, the prophetic dimension incessantly re-awakens us to the fact that, behind the predictability and the stasis of institutions and regulations, there pulsates the unquenchable energy of a living and dynamic absolute.

4.3. *Transcendence and economics*

How, then, does this prophetic vocation affect the concrete circumstances of the economic systems? Historically, we have seen that it took centuries of a monotheistic tradition to alter the tragic reality of setting a price on human beings, to abolish slavery: there was no axiomatic rejection from the start. Are we to conclude that the impact of transcendence on economic systems, and (in our case) on pricing, is minimal and ineffective?

The question may have to be answered in both the affirmative and the negative. Yes, it is minimal with regard to techniques: there is no immediate directive that is set in stone—even the Decalogue, set in stone, was but a token of a higher, and living, presence, and it could be broken, replaced, lost. And yet no. Transcendence goes to the heart of the matter and it affects the structural depths of the human condition and the human consor-

tium. What it calls for is an organic development in answer to a call (the “vocation”), a call that is never static but always extremely dynamic in nature and thus potentially always in flux. It would appear that part of the human toil is to learn to measure the limitations of the human condition against the absolute values as embodied within the personal reality of the living God. Thus, transcendence gives both a sense of direction toward the ultimate goal and a sense of the roots from which we spring. It tells us that pricing, fully valid as a key to efficiency in human development, must not be perverted into a means to achieve the reification of values. When this happens, then transcendence comes to the rescue of historical events and institutions by redirecting our focus and attention.

The dual answer is echoed in Jesus’ attitude. On the one hand, he accepts not only the status of currency as such but also its use for the purposes of taxation (Mt 22:16–21 | Mk 12:13–17 | Lk 20:20–26). On the other hand, Jesus is vehemently enraged at its abuse (Mt 21:12–13 | Mk 11:15–17 | Jn 2:13–17) and warns strongly against its corrupting power (Mt 6:24 | Lk 16:13). In both of these contexts, the use of money is not contrasted to poverty, but to the way in which it may either supplant true worship or create undue anxiety. This points, once again, to the ultimate need to depend on the irrepressibility of values rooted in God as their living source. Which brings us back to *Caritas in veritate*: to address the “present economic situation,” we need “new efforts of holistic understanding and a new humanistic synthesis” that must “rediscover fundamental values” (21).

4.4. Redemption

We do not know that Jesus spoke out against slavery, but he did, himself, take on “the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:7). He identified most intimately not just with our humanity, but also with the very worst that human progress and civilization had engineered. And in so doing he chose to become personally the price that would buy back civilization itself.

Thinking about what slavery was, and coming closer to absorb the impact of what pricing had come to mean when brought to its extreme, we will also come closer to being able to appreciate, if not understand, its counterpart—redemption, the buying back of

a slave. In the world of early Christianity, a world still full of traded human beings, to restore freedom, to “redeem,” was much more than a religious concept. It had a profound psychological valence. Steeped in that world, early Christians would identify more intimately with the mystery of the one who had taken on “the form of a slave,” the Christ after whom they had come to be named. He was not the compassionate rich person who would, however unwittingly, validate the system by paying a price with an extrinsic means of equivalence, which would cost him only the loss of some goods. Jesus was himself the price.

When seen in this light, the whole history of equivalence and pricing assumes a tragic new dimension. It would be difficult to understand the concept of redemption in a prehistoric world that did not yet attribute proportional correspondences between goods, that did not yet price things—much less, human beings. The latter equivalence was a perversion that came only with the end of prehistory and the beginning of “civilization.” Ultimately, we are reminded that the only equivalent of a human being is a human being. True enough, the notion of redemption from sin was not, in and of itself, the solution to the bane of slavery. But it was, in a sense, the trigger of the solution: a human being could simply not be priced if the only equivalent was another human being. Which is what Jesus offered—himself. □

GIORGIO BUCCELLATI is the director of IIMAS—The International Institute for Mesopotamian Studies, co-director of the Mozan/Urkesh Archaeological Project, director of the Mesopotamian Lab of the Cotsem Institute of Archaeology, and Professor Emeritus of the Ancient Near East and of History at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Fall 2009

COMMUNIO

International Catholic Review

Introduction: Money	391
D. C. Schindler Why Socrates Didn't Charge: Plato and the Metaphysics of Money	394
Giorgio Buccellati Value and Equivalence: The Role of Monotheism in Early Economic Systems	427
Thomas Storck Is Usury Still a Sin?	447
Wendell Berry Inverting the Economic Order	475
Mark Shiffman An Ethic of Attentiveness: The Rediscovery of Oikonomia	487
Nathan Schlueter Healing the Hidden Wound: The Theology of the Body in Wendell Berry's <i>Remembering</i>	510
<i>Retrieving the Tradition</i>	
Charles Péguy On Money	534
<i>Notes & Comments</i>	
Michael Hanby A New Reformation?	565