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PODCAST

THEOLOGICAL ETHICS IN A NEOLIBERAL AGE **DISCUSSION GUIDE**

Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018) is a book-length exploration of the Christian problem with wealth. Written by the theologian, Kevin Hargaden, it introduces the reader to the particular context of Ireland, where an economic crash in 2008 devastated the society, as a means to interrogate how our hearts are held captive by money and how the Christian message of God's generous, free grace can liberate us.

This discussion guide is intended to help readers – especially those not familiar with academic theology – engage with the book. It can be used on its own as a stimulus to thought, or in small-groups as a pattern to guide conversation.

The discussion guide can be paired with a new podcast @ethicsage, which will be launched in summer 2019.

INTRODUCTION : RÉAMHRÁ

- “Jesus appears (at best) ambivalent to the holding of riches” (xv). How does this claim fit with your impression of the Bible’s teaching on wealth?
- On page xvi, the famous quotation from 1 Timothy 6:10 is discussed. There, Paul writes, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” Many people teach this passage to mean that money is not a problem, but the love of money is the real issue. Why does Hargaden conclude that there is no real relief in imagining that we can be wealthy as long as we don’t love the wealth?
- How is a book so focused on a tiny island like Ireland of relevance to other places?
- Instead of a standard, traditional argument, the book has this “two step” structure. What is revealed about the goal of this book when we think about its internal architecture?
- Hargaden suggests that the book aspires “to be a liberation theology for the rich” (xxii). Why might that proposal be controversial?

CHAPTER 1 : WE’RE ALL NEOLIBERAL NOW

- The book opens with a story about a fisherman with a huge haul of fish. What layers are peeled back about the Irish economic crash of 2008 by considering the events in Kilmore Quay?
- Karl Polanyi’s work demonstrated that while “markets” might appear in many times and places, the “market economy” in which we now live is a product of historical factors. The way we live is not some naturally occurring fact, but a product of accumulated choices and reactions. What difference does this make to how we might think about wealth?
- On page 11–12 we read:

“Under neoliberalism, the primal myth of capitalism—that all societies begin in barter and then evolve through truck and trade to become, in maturity, fully developed globalized economies—becomes the story that determines all societies’ stories.”

Where can you see this definition at play in your context?

- On page 24 we read: “If neoliberalism generates wealth, why complain?” What answer, if any, can you offer to this question?
- Hargaden clarifies that “to say that neoliberalism is a totalizing system is not to say that it is all that there is, but that it aspires to a level of influence where nothing is entirely outside its domain” (26). Can you think of domains of human life that are still entirely free of the logic of the market?
- We often rest on wealth as the source of all security and all good things and neoliberalism is the system we adopt to generate the wealth. Hargaden argues this makes neoliberalism an idol. Does this description fit with your understanding of what idolatry is?
- At the end of the first chapter, Hargaden closes down the options of reform, retreat, and revolution. What do you make of his suggestion that our response must come from a much slant angle?

CHAPTER 2 :

KARL BARTH AND THE PARABLES OF JESUS

- Hargaden makes the claim, which might be shocking to some, that “There is no ‘biblical’ economic program waiting to be discovered” (35). What do you make of this assertion?
- Karl Barth reads the parables as being stories that help us to tell the time. Hargaden maintains that debt is a claim on the future. How might the gospel story help us to remember a different future than the one imagined by neoliberal capitalism?
- The parables feature a “peculiar indirection” that makes them suitable for inspiring faithfulness in the face of totalized neoliberalism (42). What parables can you think of which have such an economic angle?
- Hargaden uses the word “apocalyptic” in a sense different from its common usage. The parables are apocalyptic because “they reveal something that is concealed” (44). What is the difference between this technical usage and the one more common in pop-culture?
- This chapter relies heavily on the work of the influential 20th century Swiss theologian, Karl Barth. What do you think of the approach Hargaden deploys here for reading Scripture – by carefully following the steps of a theological master? How is this a distinctively Christian approach to reading the bible?
- The story about the Rich Young Ruler, as Barth reads it, exposes how we rely on wealth to provide all the most important things in our life. With whom do you identify in that story?
- Hargaden’s first parable is the story about the ten virgins. It’s about waiting. It’s about knowing the time. It’s about whether we are active or passive in our engagement with Jesus. But it is also about whether we have invested in the things that will have practical value when the bridegroom returns. How might contemporary neoliberalism tempt us to avoid the alertness this parable teaches?
- The second parable is known as the story about the talents. Hargaden suggests that there is a textual wrinkle in the story; the criticisms of the master that appear on the surface of the text are in fact not substantiated in the story. How might our view of God end up shaping how we view our wealth?
- The final parable looked at in detail is one of the most famous, the sheep and the goats. This parable has most often been read in the last century as a mandate for general social justice initiatives. While not denying that, Hargaden proposes that its primary meaning is almost sacramental. The focus in the text is not so much on the doing of the good action – feeding, clothing, visiting, etcetera – but in the one we do it with. Matthew seems to insist that we encounter Jesus when we encounter those who are marginalised. How would we invest our resources and time differently if we believed this to be the case?
- We find a central piece of the book’s argument summarised on page 68: “Jesus is too radical to even be safely classified as something the world identifies as ‘radical.’” An advantage of the argument that Hargaden makes here is that Christianity is given enough flexibility to avoid being co-opted by any particular political project. What drawbacks do you think might come with this argument?
- The chapter closes with the proposal that “the problem of wealth is often reconstituted in the parables as a question about the age in which we live (and the putative Lord under whom we serve)” (80). Where in your life does this ring true? Where is time money, so to speak?



CHAPTER 3 : TELLING STORIES ABOUT IRISH MONEY

- The chapter begins with Hargaden pointing out that “theology, as a basic guiding assumption, denies that the world is marked by scarcity” (82). How does this differ from the prevailing economic view of the world?
- Hargaden writes three micro-narratives in this chapter in an attempt to account for recent Irish economy history without foregrounding the typical vocabulary of economics. When theology engages with other disciplines, what do we need to think about to ensure that interaction maintains the integrity of each subject and reaches effectively towards the truth?
- Hargaden dedicates a whole sub-section to discussing his sources for the account of the history of the last decade of the Irish economy because due to the nature of the events happening so recently, he relied heavily on newspaper reporting and popular writing. Why would such a clarification be important?
- The first “parable” in this chapter details the remarkable losses made by the German bank, Depfa, in Dublin. Hargaden concludes that the neoliberal age is one when the “possibility and the potential of different futures evaporate under the relentless pressure to meet present demand” (101). How, even on its own logic, is this a self-defeating approach to economy and politics?
- The second “parable” describes the final days of the Anglo-Irish bank. Reflecting on this story from a distance, Hargaden muses that often in Ireland, “corruption is not self-interest but communal concern” gone awry (108). How would you define corruption, and in what ways do you think it is corrosive of genuine community?
- The third “parable” tells the story of the collapse of the business empire assembled by the Irish entrepreneur, Sean Quinn. The protests in support of Quinn are a very tangible expression of how beliefs in neoliberal dogma – that some people are “job creators” – has real-world impact. What seems to have been rarely appreciated among those crowds was that Quinn’s ambition was to corner the market for Irish housing debt. We live in a context now where a small group of people control debt, and a vast swell of people are controlled by debt. Seen in this light, how might neoliberal policies impact the vitality of our democracies?
- This chapter closes with a stark warning that the boom-bust cycle that ground to a halt in 2008 seems to be reappearing in the Ireland. Why do you think it is that this cycle never seems to stop?



CHAPTER 4 : RICH WORSHIP AND THE RESPONSE TO WEALTH

- It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of neoliberal capitalism. To what extent is this apparent inevitability connected to the fact that neoliberal regimes often make protests very difficult to organise?
- This chapter discusses examples of Christian efforts to craft alternative economies (like the Christian Socialists) and to reform the present economic system (like the Association of Christian Economists), but Hargaden recommends that we “shift the conversation from the problem/solution dynamic into a discourse between God and the church” (137). How does reframing the conversation in this way change the responses possible?
- As against the paths of retreat, reform, or revolution, Hargaden makes the apparently counter-intuitive suggestion that worship is the right response to wealth. The argument here is explicitly “grounded on the confidence that the Spirit is at work” (143). By thinking about worship as a space where God can do new things, how is Hargaden challenging our typical accounts of economics and politics?
- This chapter warns that ready-made solutions will quickly be co-opted by capitalism. Where have you seen this dynamic at play elsewhere in your life?
- Hargaden again draws heavily on Barth to launch a critique of religion. In this, he closes down the idea that worship is generically a protest against neoliberalism. Without God’s action, this would all just be consolation and Marxists (for example) might be right to dismiss it as nothing but empty pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die promises. Our praise is often self-delusional. How can worship fall into this trap of being self-congratulation in a pious tone of voice?
- Hargaden maintains that the combination of preaching and sacrament can be just the kind of slantwise assault that can shatter neoliberalism’s hold on our affections. Why might “the preaching of the Bible, especially those strange tales Jesus tells, or the enigmatic prophetic confrontations with wealth and comfort, or the direct protestations of Paul or James in the face of wealthy and privileged Christians avoiding inequality” (164) be so central in this response?
- In the conclusion of this chapter, Hargaden predicts that a response to wealth from the church will take a vast array of forms, including alliances with non-Christian movements. This proposal can appear to be dodging the question, but its clear answer is that rely on “an action of God, a waiting on his encounter, a hopeful anticipation of a liberation that only he can provide” (170). For Christians, this ought to be the most secure and clear path that can ever be offered. Why do we find it hard to wrap our heads around it?

AFTERWORD

- Hargaden grants in the Afterword that setting prosperity up as a problem is, in many senses, a shocking, even immoral claim. What comfort is there for the thousands of homeless in Ireland today if all the comfortable middle-class people decide to gaze at their navels and wait on God to apocalyptically break in on their consciousness! But paired with the poem from Eavan Boland which begins the chapter, it appears that Hargaden is claiming in that in the kingdom of God, consequences cannot always be clearly mapped in advance. What aspects of this book has helped you to see wealth as a problem?
- There is an extended discussion in this chapter of mushrooms! Why does Hargaden find them such a useful metaphor for understanding the church in a neoliberal age?
- “Lament is born of the humility that comes from encounter with the insistent Lord” (181). How does a conclusion that lands at the end of lament offer a real note of hope?



A VERY LOOSE AND LOCAL GLOSSARY

- APOCALYPTIC:** Literally an unveiling; specifically, the theological contention that the meaning of history is in fact revealed in the arrest, trial, torture and death of Jesus, followed by his very unexpected resurrection three days later. We need God to show us that this foolishness is in fact the wisdom at the heart of creation.
- CAPITALISM:** The belief that those who start out with extra money that they can invest should end up taking the first and largest return on any endeavour.
- BARTH, KARL:** A Swiss Reformed theologian who wrote more words than God and reminded theologians that Jesus was at the centre of everything to do with Christianity.
- DEBT:** The present reality that your future conduct will be shaped by your past decision to take a loan.
- ECCLESIOLOGY:** What theologians call it when they start talking about the church instead of talking about God.
- ECONOMICS:** The social science that arises from the mistaken observation that there might not be enough to go around.
- ENTREPRENEUR:** The name we give to someone who sells solutions, regardless of whether there was ever a problem.
- ESCHATOLOGY:** What theologians call it when they start talking about the future instead of talking about God.
- EUCHARIST:** Literally a thanksgiving; specifically, the meal Jesus gave Christians to knit strangers together into a family.
- KINGDOM OF GOD:** Wherever God reigns. It is here and not-yet-here right now, but it is much more real than any other kingdom you've ever visited.
- HYPHAE:** The thread-like filament through which a fungus spreads across a space and an excellent metaphor for how communities of Christians could end up resisting neoliberalism even though they are fully focused on simply worshipping Jesus.
- MAMMON:** The name Jesus gives for what we call "capital". He seems to think it has a personality, and I would be inclined to trust him.
- MARKETS:** The name for when humans exchange things in ways that are not gifts. They exist in practically all cultures in all places at all times but they were never capitalist until a couple of centuries ago.
- NEOLIBERALISM:** The name for the many-tentacled movement which has reshaped our political, cultural, educational, even spiritual lives to look more and more like a competitive market.
- PARABLES:** Odd little tales of indirection that Jesus spun to get us to see that the Kingdom of God is not a fairy-tale imagined by religious people.
- PREACHING:** The oldest and most interesting and most politically potent form of performance art yet developed by humankind.
- SACRAMENT:** TTfrom God to man.
- TOTALIZING:** That greedy desire that ideologies have to stray outside their native boundaries and start shaping how we view every single thing.
- WEALTH:** The ability to draw upon lots of money, either as assets or in liquid form as cash. Only rich people think that this could mean something like cultural capital or a large circle of close friends.
- WORSHIP:** What happens when Christians gather on Sunday mornings to pray and sing and give their money and read the Scriptures and listen to a sermon and drink way-too-hot tea and barely-consumable instant coffee with each other while small-talking about the major sports event, television hit, or celebrity gossip dominating the collective consciousness that week. Also, almost certainly what you do every time you click "Add to Basket" on Amazon.