

*The Market Economy and Christian Ethics*, by Peter H. Sedgwick

reviewed by [Daniel Rush Finn](#) in the [August 2, 2000](#) issue

Peter Sedgwick has provided a fine service in reviewing a vast number of sources related to economic life today, though the title of his book should have been *Consumption, Work and Human Identity: A Treatise in Christian Anthropology*. Readers misled by the present title into expecting to learn what Christian ethics has to say about the morality of markets will be left scratching their heads.

Central to Sedgwick's thesis that "the market world has created the modern society" is Jürgen Habermas's account of personal identity. Habermas's view of the "colonization of the life world" by instrumental rationality provides a fundamental critique of economic life. According to Sedgwick, he "provides the theologian with a philosophical account of contemporary social structures, authority and state power." At the same time, "there are profound problems for the theologian in Habermas's understanding of language, tradition and moral value." Sedgwick leaves the reader to figure out how the contributions and problems arising in Habermas's work interact if that work is utilized by theologians. The author identifies some of his misgivings (Habermas has no role for worship and no substantive notion of the good) but says remarkably little about his own resolution of the tensions in Habermas.

The form of Sedgwick's treatment of Habermas is typical of the book. He provides a masterful interweaving of diverse scholarship on the ways that contemporary patterns of consumption and work effect personal identity. Most of the book is an extended (and quite perceptive) bibliographic essay. The author gives a brief glimpse of his views at the end of each chapter. In the short concluding chapter he includes a strong paragraph outlining his own view of Christian identity. It should be creative, restrained (i.e., without compulsive desire to consume), based in the Spirit, and provide "a security in the fragmented world of the global economy, where all local identities are challenged and even sometimes destroyed by the power of the market." Yet the reader is frequently left unsure as to how much of what Sedgwick reviews he himself believes.

The one exception to this pattern is the treatment of consumerism, where Sedgwick sharply disagrees with Thorstein Veblen's view of consumption (for Sedgwick,

consumerism is a misguided but religiously significant search for identity) and with M. Douglas Meeks's "failure to engage seriously with contemporary economic life."

The book includes a chapter titled "Globalization," in which a treatment of broader moral issues might be expected. Yet the author advises the reader that "the focus of this chapter is not, however, globalization per se. It is rather the nature of human identity, as shaped by consumption, work and the market." The final major chapter recounts the response of the churches. Here too the author limits himself almost exclusively to reviewing existing literature. Sedgwick, who is assistant secretary for the Church of England's Board of Social Responsibility, provides more than 25 pages of summary of the U.S. Catholic bishops' 1986 pastoral letter on the economy. Though this will be helpful to many, the author does not make his own case.

In the book's final paragraph Sedgwick concludes that we should not "take such a clear-cut position" as have critics of the market like Meeks and Stanley Hauerwas. "Alongside the poverty and exploitation there are also the great benefits provided by the next stage of global capitalism," he states. Proponents of capitalism argue, of course, that the poverty and exploitation are incidental to global capitalism and unnecessary. Poverty has long antedated capitalism, and exploitation caused by human sinfulness has marked every era.

Unfortunately, we never hear Sedgwick's own resolution of the conflicting accounts, from right to left, of just how poverty and exploitation are related to globalizing markets today. We know only that he agrees with the critics of globalization that global capitalism exploits and with the supporters of capitalism that it provides sufficient benefits that it shouldn't be opposed outright. But since the book has been largely about the view of the human person and not about the morality of the market economy, Sedgwick leaves us to guess the logic behind his own position.