

Moral Economy: The Afterlife of a Nebulous Concept¹

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*[T]he multitude of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and not even one of them would say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common...
No one was in need...
distribution would be made to each one according to his need*
(Acts 4:32, 34a, 35b; New World Translation).

Abstract

Since the re-purposing of the concept of the moral economy by the British historian, E.P. Thompson in the late 1960s, scholars from a variety of disciplines in social sciences and humanities have attempted to apply it as a tool for empirical analysis. As a migratory concept, the meaning of ‘moral economy’ has shifted from theology to philosophy to anthropology and history. Scholars of religions and historians of religion, however, have shown a reluctance in deploying the concept in their field of study. A flexible and vintage concept such as the moral economy may seem to be an oxymoron when applied to the study of religion and religious reforms. Its utility, however, is demonstrated by a collection of four critical articles in this special issue of this journal to explore wide-ranging empirical materials and contexts. These include the contemporary analysis of religious morality and regulation in Northern Nigeria, the entanglements of Muslim-owned restaurants and Islamic morality in Mumbai (India), Zulu ethnic nationality and morality in the

¹ Research for this essay is supported in part by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Reference number [UID] 85397). The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed are those of the author, and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.

Nazareth Baptist Church in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa), and finally, the pre-modern theoretical and philosophical reflections of the 14th-century Tunisian Muslim philosopher, Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun. In these diverse scenarios and contexts, the moral economy concept illustrates its theoretical and analytical capacity and potential in the field of the study of religions.

Keywords: Moral economy, market capitalism, Neoliberalism, the Early Church, Pentecostalism

Religion, economics, and morality share some properties in common, one of which is the attempt to live a good life in a humane and meaningful environment and sense. All three domains of human activities, also in their different ways determine and prescribe what counts as value. In other words, they constitute sources of value for individuals. Religious beliefs and worldviews supply justifications and principles for living a moral or ethical life. Broadly, the economy concerns the means and method of making a livelihood through the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services, while religion deals with how humans relate to other-worldly entities and the infrastructures that enable and sustain this relationship. Both spheres focus on managing human uncertainty and vulnerability of the unknown and the unknowable, rooted in or emerging from human fallibility and limitations. All these spheres of social life (religion, morality, and economics) overlap in significant ways in principle and practice. Religious morality is an important aspect of religious engagement, which often informs the perspectives and practical lives of religious individuals, for example in decision-making regarding the production of value and livelihoods (Khatib 2022).

From a Durkheimian perspective, religious rituals and practices produce a ‘community’ of individuals which, through mutual obligations, constitute a ‘moral community’ (Durkheim [1912] 1995:362). Morality, therefore, defines the set of mutual obligations that a shared belief system produces and maintains, such as the solidarity of respect, obligations, and entitlements that guide and police the boundaries of belonging. Further, the Weberian Protestant ethic hypothesis argues that certain religious beliefs of the ascetic Calvinist Protestants of Europe influenced practices that had significant economic and physical, specifically capitalist, outcomes (Weber [1920] 2011). Merging these two perspectives, it could be argued that religious practices are

imbued with a moral economy of their own, which derives from mutual obligations that imbricate patronage relationships and networks that are internally (and sometimes externally) perceived as moral. Religion produces a valuation of the ethical basis or orientation of action among believers, making it possible to argue for a variety of moral economies of the religious life or specific religious traditions and religious organizations.

The concept of moral economy has evolved over several decades of articulation and represents explicit and implicit obligations and solidarities which members of a common society (or even a religious group) owe one another to maintain and sustain social life, imbued with expectations and a vision of what is good and valuable. According to Norbert Götz (2015:147-162), the first known usage of the phrase ‘moral economy’ was in a sermon, preached at the University of Cambridge in 1729. In that instance, it was used as a Christian, theological idea, referencing the economy of things as mirrored or intended by God, according to which creation represents an ethically informed divine standard. In this usage, it is the divine order of things given to humans by God – conceived of as a moral entity. The moral economy (of God) represents the human condition and creation from the perspective of God. In this sense, creation and all that is in it belong to God and have a divine purpose. Human beings are designed to seek, decipher this purpose, and align their behavior to it – in so doing, to live out their lives in line with a divine commitment and intention.

In the nearly 300-year history of the concept, it has changed and multiplied meanings. The moral economy has traveled a checkered path from a theological concept, representing the intentions of a divine will or Creator for creation, to emerge in the usage of the British historian, E.P. Thompson ([1963] 1996, 1971, 1991) as a sociohistorical concept, articulating customary ways of life with all its obligations in a traditional society, before the irruptions of the modern market system. It appears in Thompson’s *The making of the English working class* ([1963] 1966:63), where he deploys it seven times ([1963] 1966:63, 66, 67, 361², 548, 550, 583) to ar-

² Without acknowledging any borrowing or reliance on an extant source, Thompson points out on this page that the term ‘moral economy’ was part of a chapter title in the work of Andrew Ure, *Philosophy of manufactures* (Ure [1835] 1967). Thompson ([1963] 1966:359) further points out that Ure’s book was ‘a complete anticipation of the “economist” case for the function of religion as a work-

gue that the moral economy that undergirded the British food riots of the 18th century, ‘was legitimised by the assumption...which taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people’ (Thompson [1963] 1966:63).

The riots were ‘to reimpose the older [paternalist] moral economy as against the economy of the [emerging] free market’ (Thompson [1963] 1966:67). As indicated by Thompson, moral economy expresses a set of normative attitudes concerning social relations and social behaviors that relate to subsistence, local production, and the maintenance of livelihoods. In simple, non-complex societies, moral economy describes moral obligations and solidarities of respect and reciprocity created by kinship structures and relationships, gift giving, and rituals in contradistinction to impersonal exchange, based on self-interest, profit, acquisitiveness, greed, or the impersonality of the (free) market forces. As described by Thompson (1971:79) in the context of the 18th-century bread riots in Britain, the moral economy articulates

a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and where were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This...was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, or the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. [These are] definite, and passionately held, notions of the common weal.

As defined here, it is a traditional consensus of ‘crowd rights’ in pre-industrial societies, confronted by emergent capitalist market forces. The argument is that the modern market economy inexorably erodes the concerns that shape and structure traditional consensus in pre-modern societies. As developed and deployed by Thompson, the moral economy is imbued with norms concerning the responsibilities and rights of each member of society towards others and regarding the types and quality of goods, relationships, and services they provide for one another. According to this understanding,

discipline’, a point that may be argued as hinting at the religion-based or theological basis of the concept of moral economy and its possibilities for the analysis of religious practices such as religious reform.

the moral economy equals commonly held assumptions or notions of fairness and justice as opposed to the impersonality of the (capitalist) market. It expresses the ‘legitimising notion’ or the norm of justice that creates a consensus among people and undergirds their course of action (Thompson 1971:78). As an analytical tool, it can be used to explain the timing of a social event, or describe the event itself, or interpret the individual and collective actions that make up the event. The idea of a moral economy as used by Thompson is tied to the value system, assumptions, and notions of justice and fairness in a pre-modern (British) society. It is a traditional entitlement that demonstrates historical agency against capitalist, profiteering disruptions.

While the moral economy interrogates the absence or uncertain presence or the ambivalence of morality in modern economic transactions, it is important to ask, when employing this concept, if there are other forms of economic transactions that are also driven by profit or utility maximization. The answer could be in the affirmative, for example, in charity transactions or potentially in religious and altruistic engagements and humanitarian activities, as Webb Keane (2021) has argued and even went as far as describing certain religiously motivated activities as ‘anti-economy’.

There are some ambiguities with the concept of moral economy in the extant literature. It is often assumed, for example, by Jeremy Adelman (2020:189) that the concept was ‘coined’ by Thompson. However, this is not the case, as shown above, although Thompson repurposed and retooled it as a sociohistorical and analytical concept. He is, however, rightly acknowledged for popularizing it and giving it a contemporary life of its own. The second problem with the concept, especially as developed in the work of Thompson is that the concept is placed in the past, as an analytical lens to scrutinize and reinterpret social history, especially a social history of strife and resistance to violations of shared norms or oppressive interventions such as the impersonality of market forces or government intermediaries and agencies. Third, the concept has been developed as an oppositional framework, pitted against capitalist and neoliberal ideas and practices. In this sense, it is a reactionary concept that functions as a tool of resistance and conflict over and against certain market forces.

Fourth, while Thompson ([1963] 1966:548) spoke of ‘a general theory of moral economy’, he left it open to possible multiple interpretations and engagements. As a generic concept, it is fluid and elastic and could potentially be applied to a variety of social conditions and practices. Moral economy

is plural (moral economies, which may sometimes be a contradiction, for example, in immoral economies of fraud and corruption or war and exploitation – cf. e.g., Whyte & Wiegratz 2016; Casciano 2021) and tension-filled. What has emerged from these features is that the moral economy concept is both generic and vintage and could be adapted to various histories, contexts, and societies. The migratory and fluid nature of the moral economy concept shows both its possibilities and limitations as a tool of social analysis and interpretation (cf. Harvie & Milburn 2013; Natrass 2004).

In line with the potentials of the concept, moral economy has come to significance, not only in the consensus of entitlements and solidarity of justice, respect, and sustenance among the members of a group or society, but as an alternative and informal social and economic provisioning in response to the ravages of the capitalist extraction system. This usage predominates what Margaret Somers (2020:229) calls the ‘invention of market justice’. Yet, a different usage of the concept is found in the definition of Andrew Sayer (2000:80), as the study of how economic activities – in the broad sense – are influenced by the study of moral-political norms and sentiments, and how, conversely those norms are compromised by economic forces – so much so in some cases that the norms represent little more than a legitimation of entrenched ‘political power relations’. The reinterpretations of the concept to underscore the morality of the market could be regarded as a reaction to the critique of the capitalist market system as embedded in the Thompsonian original repurposing of the concept to indicate the dialectics of domination and resistance in the face of the disruptions of external forces³.

Different religions offer their adherents different economic orientations in facing their quotidian situations and in their relationship with the wider society. Buddhism, driven by the singular pursuit and vision of enlightenment and compassion, still has its ‘sangha economies’ which are ways in

³ It is easy to confuse the moral economy concept with the ethical economy framework. The latter concept (chiefly propounded by Adam Arvidsson and a few collaborators [Arvidsson 2009; Arvidsson & Peitersen 2013]) is a newer framework for the post-capitalist theory of value, articulating the nature and features of social production such as open source or free software and Creative Commons publications. The ethical economy theory argues for a value logic attached to such productions that may on the surface seem free, but are attached to certain hidden, implicit costs that drive diffuse connectivity promoted by such production.

which a diverse range of interest groups within it ‘deals with money, goods and services [and] the entanglements that come with sustaining Buddhist institutions’ (Abrahms-Kavunenko, Brumann, & Świtek 2021:2). Jewish sacrificial practices and doctrines, debt, and jubilee practices constitute a delineated moral economic norm (Graeber 2011:82). The Islamic economic and financial system is often described as an alternative orientation to the capitalist and neoliberal systems, for example (Kustin 2017:125-126).

To give a historical example of a religious moral economy from a Christian perspective, one may point to the early Christian community as recorded in Acts 2-4. Considering that the book of Acts was written some 40 years after the death of Jesus, critical scholars of the Bible confirm it as a ‘historical source [that is] dedicated to clarifying Christian self-understanding’ (Dillon 1990:722-723). It narrates and records a seemingly widespread economic practice among the nascent Jesus movement, taken to be foundational to the community’s self-understanding. The Jesus movement, which later morphed into the Early Church, was a reformist sect of Judaism which incorporated, redefined, and repurposed ancient Jewish economic practices (Chidester 2000:1-11; Stark 2007:282-338; Montero 2017:104). The emerging Early Church, to demonstrate and practice their faith and self-understanding, engaged with informal and formal communism where the central principle was, in the words of Karl Marx (1928:17), ‘from each according to their ability and to each according to their need’. Marx’s statement seems to be an expansion of Acts 4:35b, such that Roman Montero (2017) argues that the Early Church practiced both formal and informal communism. As the story of the fraud and death of Ananias and his wife, Sapphira shows, for the early followers of Jesus, adhering to these core moral economic principles was a matter of life and death (Ac 5:1-11).

This principle of voluntary renunciation or surrender of goods was consistent with Jesus’ recommendation of total divestiture (Lk 14:33) and was counter to the generally prevailing economic practices of the larger Roman Empire of the time to be taken to represent a moral economy of the Early Church. The practice of common ownership of sustenance and an alternative economic practice of the Early Church could have been informed by an interpretation of a doctrine embedded in its history as a Jewish sect. The Pauline doctrine that envisages Christ as the ‘head’ of the church and believers as its different body parts, entails that where one is suffering lack and hunger, the rest of the body feels the pang of pain (Eph 4:12, 5:23; 1 Cor

11:3; Col 1:18). Hence, the economically marginalized and excluded (i.e., the weak, the orphan, and the widow, otherwise known as the *anawim* of Yahweh) were of special concern and interest to the mission of the Christian community (cf. Barga 2017:68-83).

The ambiguities highlighted above are evident in how Pentecostalism in Africa has evolved and how it relates to the market. Pentecostalism is arguably the most widely accessible religious form, both in the cities of Africa and in the popular media. Pentecostal megachurches have an ambivalent relationship with the market in their dominance of the social and economic landscape from establishing media houses (radio and television stations), educational institutions (nursery, primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions), and commercial entities such as mortgage houses and banks. In some instances, they *seem* to resist the inroad of the neoliberal policies and practices by creating, for example, alternative structures of relationship and living, such as Miracle Cities – sprawling residential and ritual infrastructures that allow them to operate with a minimal of state or municipal oversight (Ukah 2016, 2018).

Some have also, in the guise of creating prosperity and banishing poverty, embraced the market by simply using its structures, practices, and rhetoric to organize their activities, for example, by establishing banks and commercial entities that rather than resist neoliberal policies and practices, clone them and incorporate them in their organizations, thereby furthering the reach of the market. What informs these diverse practices, it may be argued, is a certain self-understanding of being in the world, ‘but not of the world’ (Jn 17:15), working out a notion of common norms and obligations of the proper economic functioning of society. One important practice of the Early Church which the Pentecostal community of Africa has ignored, is the ownership of all things in common as described in Acts 4. It is of scholarly interest and importance to understand why there is a resistance within the Pentecostal community to ‘owning all things in common’, and identifying and articulating pentecostal norms of economic fairness and justice.

As demonstrated by the articles published in this special issue, the moral economy framework remains a potentially helpful conceptual tool, capable of functioning in three principal ways: An explanatory (generic), prescriptive (critical), and heuristic (vintage) analytical lens. It critiques the excesses of capitalism from both spiritual and moral perspectives (Rogan 2017). Such a critique is at the heart ‘of the economic approach to human behaviour

and of market society' (Booth 1993:949) in which religious organizations of all hues and traditions and believers inexorably are drawn into, and inescapably operate (cf. Smith & Dreher 2016; Dreher 2020; Brumann, Abrahms-Kavunenko, & Świtek 2021; Guest 2022; Chitando 2021).

While champions of the market focus on prosperity and observing how the free market has created billionaires, theorists and scholars of moral economy focus on injustices, riots, poverty, inequity, and unfairness in the distribution of the necessities of life. Neoliberal ideas, practices, and policies, it is argued, engender certain sociocultural transformations that facilitate the creation of poverty and fraud. Advocates of the market focus on accumulation while moral economists who are often social activists (like Thompson) talk about looters and rioters and the need to limit the rampage caused by the market. The critique does not claim to resolve all the contradictions of capitalism, the market, or the neoliberal turn of life. The case studies discussed in this volume expand on the applicability of the moral economy concept and our awareness of contexts where such a concept may be applied. As Adelman (2020:192) points out in a recent dossier, the moral economy offers us 'a critical vocabulary, alternative histories, and political counterpoints to mainstream thinking about' the market society.

This led us to the core question of the conference where these papers were presented: What sort of moral consensus – notions, legitimations, assumptions – undergirds religious reforms? Is it possible to understand a religious reform without first identifying and articulating the assumptions upon which it is based and driven? When religious organizations or groups set out to change either themselves (as a group or members of the group) or their immediate environment, through the introduction of specific doctrines,ologies, rituals, and practices, what moral vision, what 'view of social norms and obligations, of proper economic functions of several parties within the community' (Thompson 1991:79) inform, structure, and sustain their energy, their campaign, their zeal, and emotion? Religious reforms are informed by the belief that religion can transform society and that religion is often transformed by the society within which its members live and their being – just as the Christian believer is assumed to 'live and move and exist' in God (Ac 17:28; Revised New Jerusalem Bible).

What is the conceptual utility of the moral economy concept in understanding contemporary religious transformation and innovation? What does the moral economy perspective add to understanding the rapid and on-

going transformation of the religious field of Africa? Questions such as these are what the different case studies have discussed during the July 30, 2021 conference, organized by the African Centre for Religion, Ethics, and Society (A.C.R.E.S) in conjunction with the SARCHi Chair on Islam, African Publics, and Religious Values, which gave rise to the special issue of this journal. The papers presented at the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Cape Town, offered stimulating case studies and discussions that illustrate to what extent and what outcomes the moral economy concept has as an exploratory, explanatory, interpretative, and analytical tool in different locations across Africa and elsewhere.

As the articles in this collection were presented during a conference on the *Moral Economies of Religious Reforms*, it is important to examine the assumptions – moral, religious, social, and economic – for religious reforms and reformers either in the past or in the present. Although seven papers were presented during the conference of July 2021, only two made it into this special issue. Musa Ibrahim’s paper was presented at a subsequent workshop on *Religion and Moral Economies*, held in July 2022 in Berlin, while Magnus Echtler’s was commissioned by the issue editors. Both the conference of July 2021 and the workshop of July 2022 were significantly funded by the National Research Foundation of South Africa’s SARCHi Chair on Islam, African Publics and Religious Values⁴.

The article by Shaheed Tayob presents a deep ethnography of two Muslim-owned restaurants in Mumbai and their entanglements with Islamic morality and Hindutva politics. His essay focuses on the discourse of food preparation and consumption and not on teleological expectations of how religion and the economy may converge or diverge. In this complex discursive unfolding, religious practices and values are deeply embedded in the economy of food preparation and trade in Mumbai.

Using the July 2021 riots in Kwazulu-Natal and Gauteng as an entry point to examining ‘a religious moral economy’, Magnus Echtler’s article examines the Zulu moral ethnicity of Isaiah Shembe’s Nazareth Baptist

⁴ The authors of the articles published in this special issue acknowledge the research support of the NRF (Reference Number [UID] 85397). The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in these essays are those of the individual authors, and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this respect.

Church and how it coalesced into a discernible moral economy of the marginalized. For him, there is an intimate entanglement between ethnic morality, ethnic identity (as a measure of moral agency) and moral economy in the preaching of Shembe and the practices he established before his death in 1935. Echtler's rich article draws on insights from Zulu history, apartheid political economy, and Shembe's teaching to argue for the existence of a variety of Zulu moral economies – of which that of the NBC is a religious type – undergirding the July 2021 riots in parts of South Africa, overlapping with a strong membership presence of the NBC.

The article by Musa Ibrahim interrogates the promise of a moral economy of Sharia in Northern Nigeria by politicians and Islamists. He shows how moral economic values were enforced by the *Yan Hisba* (moral police) in the city of Kano, and its disastrous consequences for the economy. His ethnography points to the contradictory outcomes of a moral economy that thrives in the 'immoral economy' from which it had promised to deliver Nigerian Muslims.

The final article in this special issue is by Abdulkader Tayob, who argues that moral economy is used in diverse ways, but seems to be characterized by a general failure to thrive in the context of capitalist hegemony. In order to pose different questions to moral economic values and practices, he suggests that we turn to premodern theoretical reflections. His essay offers an example in the work and thought of the well-known 14th-century Tunisian historian and philosopher, Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun. Tayob shows how the latter brings together two different ways of looking at livelihoods and sustenance, one led by historical and sociological insights and the second by ethical considerations.

In different ways and with different ethnography contents and contexts, the essays in this special issue raise stimulating ideas about the nebulous character and analytical promise or potential of the moral economy concept for understanding the complex and complicated entanglements of religion, morality, and the economy in both historical and contemporary conditions.

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