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Extended Abstract

From Concept to Life: The Relationship between Religion, Morality, and the Economy in the Pre-Modern Period

Selma Karışman¹

Abstract

Humanity has been interpreting all metaphysical and social phenomena about themselves and their environment through a body of faith that they consider “holy,” and found meaning in their ontological and social existence in this body of faith. In this interpretation process, a person’s level of consciousness is shaped by the faith system they belong to, while their attitudes and behaviors are governed by the same system. Living in a social community, a human’s endless struggle to meet their needs is one of the other indispensable requirements, such as “religion” and “morality” of life. Social life entails that human beings seek a “division of labor” to meet their economic needs and also establish economic relations with each other. For the sake of stability and integrity of social life, necessity of realization of economic relations like all other relations in a specific order and discipline stipulates questioning of how these relations will be arranged. It is put forth in this article that economic life was executed in a form that it was within religion and morality in the theoretical/epistemological context and embedded to all aspects of the social life by the 18th century in when the East-the West adverseness didn’t have a clear meaning: While as governing and binding rules, legal regulations form the legal framework of economic activities, religious/moral values give them direction through shaping people’s structure of individual and social consciousness. This framework made religion prevailing system of values in traditional societies; economic, social and political fields would be determined by the religious rules. Modernity is recognized as the turning point in breaking away of economic activities from religious and moral norms, economics from theology and morality philosophy as a science as well as the differentiation of both humanity’s ontological integrity and of various areas in the social fields of activities that have been intermingled in a way that is similar to this ontological integrity. Therefore, all of this dictates that any article that seeks to examine the relationship between faith systems and economic activities within a society in which the system is prevalingly adopted will need to examine the nature of the relationship between religion, morality, and the economy, as well as the historical adventure of this relationship.

Keywords

Economics • Religion • Sociology • Ethics • Pre-modern/Modern

¹ **Correspondence to:** Selma Karışman (PhD), Bursa 16140 Turkey. Email: drselmakarisman@hotmail.com

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Humanity has been interpreting all metaphysical and social phenomena about themselves and their environment through a body of faith that they consider holy, and found meaning in their ontological and social existence in this body of faith. In this interpretation process, a person's level of consciousness is shaped by the faith system they belong to, while their attitudes and behaviors are governed by the same system. "Morality," which as a system of values relies on human nature on the one hand, and targets one's relations with the entire system of existence through one's personality structure on the other, makes normative requests of its interlocutor, to construct one's character and social relations even in its non-religious form. Living in a social community, a human's endless struggle to meet their needs is one of the indispensable requirements of life. Social life entails that human beings seek a "division of labor" to meet their economic needs and also establish economic relations with each other. While as governing and binding rules, legal regulations form the legal framework of economic activities, religious/moral values preach their execution in line with accepted values through shaping people's structure of individual and social consciousness. In this regard, what is intended by "moral economy," at a point where the paths of religion and morality intersect with that of the economy, "is nothing more than preaching and motives regarding practical values and norms for preference over people's daily lives" (Ülgener, 1981a, p. 24).

All of this dictates that any sociological research that seeks to examine the relationship between faith systems and economic activities within a society in which the system is prevalingly adopted will need to examine the nature of the relationship between religion, morality, and the economy, as well as the historical adventure of this relationship. It is even possible to argue in accordance with our updated theological and sociological viewpoints that the history of humanity is shaped through the content and course of such a relationship. In this perspective, sociological research on religion must be conducted as research on the sociology of religion, on political sociology, and particularly moral sociology, following the trail blazed by Weber, one of the pioneers of the field (see Freund, 1986).

When Economy is Hand-in-Hand with Religion and Morality

Tracing any subject about *early communities* will inevitably compel us to examine the forms and features of common life that take the attribute of "traditional" to the fore. At this point, we see that all endeavors that would like to theoretically and

practically examine the characteristics of *traditional societies* from their own point of interest, present comprehensive arguments and comments that economic life stands in close relation with all aspects of life, particularly religion and morality: according to MacIntyre, the pre-modern world is based on a united *moral community*, in other words on *gemeinschaft*. In this kind of community, there is a natural union between moral practice, religious belief, and Christian symbolism: “people were living in a world that there was no strict cultural differentiation between religion, morality and law; traditional communities did not face the challenge of contemporary pluralization problem. As a result, social roles directly expressed social values” (MacIntyre, 1967, as cited in Stauth & Turner, 1995, pp. 49–50). In the pre-modern world, the idea that a system built on the basis of *personal gain* is legitimate did not become widespread, and the economy did not have a separate sphere of existence in any traditional community. Therefore, a separate and self-sufficient economic world, one free from its communal context, was never envisaged. In other words, in traditional communities, the economy operated not as a separate entity but as completely embedded in social structures. In principle, tradition governs economic activities in these communities.

According to Eliade, “the old prevalent model materialized in this environment through the connection of the community, the microcosm, to the religious cosmos order, the macrocosm. Whatever happens *here below* is but a pale reflection of what takes place *up above*” (Eliade, 1959, as cited in Berger, 1995, pp. 437–438). In other words, social order can only exist thanks to the religious characteristics of the order. Therefore, all social problems are at the same time religious problems, and all religious problems are similarly social problems (Berger, 1995, p. 438). Hence, there no separate body of economic thought existed, and such was not needed by society in any case. Religion, which sublimates social institutions such as the family, the right to property, and the state, was almost the sole source of legitimization (Özel, 1991, p. 14).

Berger has expressed this, “Religion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference” (1967/1990, p. 16). While this framework of reference makes religion the dominant system of values in traditional communities; economic, social, and political spheres are governed by the rules of religion. In other words, various functions in different spheres are performed by religion as virtually the single institution. Contrary to modern industrialized societies where religious values have a certain degree of flexibility that makes people behave according to the specific situation in economic, political and other social spheres, in traditional societies, religion, as the sole prevalent value, constitutes the genuine and basic form of tradition and aims at regulating every aspect and detail of social life (Saribay, 1985, pp. 27–28). Therefore, in every society that possesses a religious heritage, the moral impact of religion on apparently secular institutions such as business life

and politics can be indirect but is hard to ignore. On the other hand, not only with its excessive and abstract but also pragmatic and socially beneficial functions (Abu Rabi, 2003, p. 70), the normative feature of religion, which applies strict rules in traditional societies, has gradually been transformed into a mere principle (Saribay, 1985, p. 2) in modern societies.

On account of all of these reasons, there are no grounds for any academic objection to the recognition of modernity as the turning point in the differentiation of both humanity's ontological integrity and of various areas in the social fields of activities that have been intermingled in a way that is similar to this ontological integrity. The development of an independent identity for economic relations and activities through their differentiation from the complex structure of other social relations and its becoming a subject for science and politics with this identity is a relatively recent phenomenon for societies. As a result of the gradual expansion and deepening of monetary and market relations in modern times, economic activities developed an identity independent from other social relations (Genç, 2000, p. 44). The author of *The Great Transformation* weighed in on this topic: "The human economy than is embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economics and non-economic. The inclusion of the non-economic is vital. For religion and government may be as important for the structure and functioning of the economy as monetary institutions or the availability of tools and machines themselves that lighten the toil the burden of labour" (see Block & Somers, 1984, p. 63; Polanyi, 1965, p. 250). Polanyi continues to insert important parentheses to common quests that we mentioned before: "If so-called economic motives were natural to people, we would have to judge all early and primitive society as thoroughly unnatural" (Block & Somers, 1984, p. 64).

The above picture of integral life, where the world of practical business merges inseparably with political, social, and religious life, indicates that the *profit motive*, as we know it, is only as old as *modern people*. In the traditional world, neither the will to win nor loose moral principles conform with the idea of hard work as a virtue or a moral obligation: "Its (wealth) pursuit is not only senseless as compared with the dominating importance of the Kingdom of God, but it is morally suspect. The real moral objection is to relaxation in the security of possession, the enjoyment of wealth with the consequence of idleness and the temptations of the flesh, above all of distraction from the pursuit of a righteous life. In fact, it is only because possession involves this danger of relaxation that it is objectionable at all" (Weber, 1985, p. 125–126). By itself in communities, which are the products of a period when the East and West were not separated from each other by dichotomic lines "as long as the paramount idea was that life on earth was only a trying preamble to Life Eternal, the business spirit neither was encouraged nor found spontaneous nourishment." Although "work was an end in itself, encompassing, of course, money and commodities, but engaged in as a part of a

tradition, as a natural way of life. In a word, the great social invention of ‘the market’ had not yet been made” (Heilbroner, 1953/1999, p. 26).

When we accept that motivations such as honor and easing conscience constitute the bases of economy along with “personal interest,” we also see that the motivations that are acknowledged as the basis of economic life are in fact consequences of the social life. This has directed endeavors to understand economic activity to examine it in line with its relationship with the sub-system that was formed by a closely related system of values, which sociologists called a moral values system (*éthos*), mentality (*esprit*), or more frequently a “world view” or “view of life” (Günay, 1986, p. 111). We should bear in mind that the main field of interest of one of these sociologists, Max Weber, was how religion defines the “world,” i.e. activities that are not directly related to the sacred, analyzing the consequences of various definitions regarding the economy. Thus, Weber’s analysis supports our perspective as part of modern literature. The basic arguments and intellectual efforts of this prominent sociologist of religion, parallel to this field of interest, focused on the analysis of “moral economy” (a term that he introduced to sociology), which is a “world of spirit and mentality lying beneath a mass of shape and matter” (Ülgener, 1981b, p. 12).

All these arguments, which can be summarized as saying that economic life and social life are one and the same, point to how “no matter where or in what century, economic life is not solely a material world that consists of the convergence of external data, but is also fundamentally shaped by human reality with specific attitudes and behaviors” (Ülgener, 1981b, p. 13) and direct the subject to other inferences of the humanities and morality: economic activities are carried out in line with the common behavioral patterns of individuals in pre-capitalist communities.

The economic mechanism is so simple, pure, and transparent that all rational individuals in a society can understand the activities in the field of “the economy.” The basic economic unit in the social structure is the *household*, which produces and consumes in its own inner processes. The economy functions not around individuals but around families. In pre-modern societies, both wealth and the efforts to acquire it are not themselves a goal but are at the disposal and service of a higher goal. Land and labor (nature and human) are not subject to the market, apart from, minor exceptions. Therefore, through the mid-eighteenth century, using the term *material activity* rather than *economic activity* might be more accurate (Özel, 1991, p. 14).

When we assess the economic picture that we have drawn above on the basis of religious belief and moral norms, the result we reach is as follows: Contrary to the deterministic effects of economic forms, which became more rational in the modern period over other fields of life, activities related to work and profit in the pre-modern

period were passive, motivated by the mentioned fields. This does not indicate that these activities are unimportant or invaluable but does show the normative influence of religion and morality in social life.² In line with this influence, the economy was seen as forming a single entity with morality, and behaviors deemed morally wrong were also considered wrong and destructive in terms of the economy. Earning and working are not goals on their own but are at the disposal of other higher goals and purposes (Ülgener, 2006, p. 262–263), and that is a natural result of this consideration. The characteristic of moral norms prevailing in the spirit of all traditional communities made Aristotle argue that “For Money was intended to be used in exchange, but not to increase at interest, which means the birth of money from money, is applied to the breeding of Money.” (Ülgener, 1973, p. 47), and suggests that “There are two sorts of wealth-getting, one is a part of household management, the other is retail trade: the former necessary and honorable, while that which consists in exchange is justly censured; for it is unnatural” (Ülgener, 2006, p. 29–30). Aristotle’s model sets not only external boundaries but also internal ones to growth: the moral norm of being moderate restrains one’s desire to save (Baeck, 1997, p. 96). Along with other Islamic philosophers, Averroes’ embrace of this hierarchical separation between the economy, politics, and morality does not seem to arise from anything aside from its conformity with Islamic principles. The continuation of this conception of the economy as a religious/moral norm from Augustine of Hippo, the first prominent Christian philosopher, to significant medieval authorities such as Magnus and Thomas Aquinas during the Middle Ages, is the manifestation of another important social dimension of morality: Whether an activity arises from the divine or the human, morality expresses itself in a comprehensive order of objective relations (Aydın, 1993, p. 47). Moreover, the scientific literature where the above explanations can be found also includes arguments indicating that economic thought goes hand-in-hand epistemologically with religion and morality. “Just as an economy cannot be viewed by its participants as a separate social institution, so economic thought cannot be viewed as distinct from total social knowledge” (Wisman, 1988, p. 58). In this regard, “a kind of economic thinking which was totally abstracted from social knowledge did not emerge” in a social form where economic activities are directed by the tradition

2 As mentioned above, economic activity has existed with the natural motives of humans, who live in a community, a part of their “personal interest” such as working, earning, owning, with some negative motives like selfishness (having more than others), opportunism, profiteering, a desire for domination and authority, vital individual/social needs, and the necessity for exchange, and with his social-cultural relationships like gaining social role and status. This existence overlaps with the ontological and historical reality that “the physical aspect of man’s needs is part of the human condition; no society can exist that does not possess some kind of substantive economy.” Consequently, according to Polanyi, “To narrow the sphere of the genus economic specifically to market phenomena is to eliminate the greatest part of man’s history from the scene (1977, p. 6).

expressed in faith systems (Özel, 1991, p. 14). As the smallest details of economic activities were inspected by society anytime and anywhere by means of tradition and the law until the seventeenth century, these activities were covered as a whole or as sub-sections in philosophers', moralists', and theologians' works, based on social/political stability and the moral order. Therefore, economic ideas are generally derived from works attributed to philosophers in ancient times and theologians in medieval times (Eskicioğlu, 1995, p. 8). While compiling a list of philosophers who dealt with morality and the economy since ancient times, we came to realize that the emerging picture confirmed the above views. All the thinkers who dealt with morality on the basis of humanity and community were at the same time philosophers. We also found that most of them were clerics (theologians, Muslim scholars, priests, sufis, religious, guides) in the era of monotheistic religions. Moreover, these thinkers -in addition of their positions philosophers and moralists- dealt with all the problems of society, such as the economy, politics, education, and the law, until modern times...³ Hence, beginning with Aristotle, Greek philosophers' ideas and general interests regarding *home management* can be traced through their way of thinking about philosophical, moral, and political opinions, not only in their own eras but also almost through the eighteenth century.

Since the mechanism and context of the above scientific transfer or interaction go far beyond our scope here, it will suffice to mention that:⁴ The more we examine the economic thoughts of the Islamic world, the pre-Scholastic economics books of Muslim scholars, and the economic processes as well as the institutions of both the Muslim East and the Muslim West that existed from the seventh until the fourteenth

3 Based on this list, we can add more examples as evidence for this argument. Perhaps the most striking example is that of Adam Smith. If we needed to set an exact date for when economics became an independent discipline, separate from philosophy and morality, the publication date of Smith's "The Wealth of Nations," would be a good consensus choice. Yet if we consider how Smith was an economist as well as a moral philosopher, with the latter being his real career, we can see that the fundamental break between modern science and philosophical/human sciences that Wallerstein complains about as well as that the differentiation of fields of discipline and epistemic goals had not yet taken place in the Western world even as of the eighteenth century, for even then, the founding father of liberal economy is known for being a sociologist/philosopher interested in all the problems of society.

4 Islamic philosophy influenced the Western mindset not only from the economic point of view but also in several other respects. Muzafer Sherif compiled a list on that subject: "Muslim philosophy influenced Western thought in several ways: It (1) initiated in the West the humanistic movement; (2) introduced the historical sciences and (3) the scientific method; (4) helped the Western scholastics in harmonizing philosophy with faith; (5) stimulated Western mysticism; (6) laid the foundations of Italian Renaissance and, to a degree, moulded the modern European thought down to the time of Immanuel Kant, in certain directions even later" (see 1966, p. 1349).

century, the more we become skeptical of Schumpeter's Great Gap,⁵ which attributed "economic stagnation" to these periods. Likewise, we grow more skeptical regarding the historians of economic thought, who overlooked the contributions of Islamic scholars to the development of economic thought and institutions in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries (Mirahor, 1997, p. 43). "Yet even if scholars wish to ignore to research in the history of philosophy, theology, ethics and science the mere fact that anyone who consults original writings of Medieval scholars can see references to names such as Alfarabius, Avicenna, Averroes, and Algazal should raise questions regarding their role in the development of thought" (Mirahor, 1997, p. 42).

Before the world's breaking away from a common understanding that was integrated around the axis of belief/religion, through "a modern leap" whose social consequences provide fodder for research even today, even economic activities were conducted by religious motives in Western social life, where all moral, aesthetic, political, legal, and scientific activities were steered by a body of beliefs and values, as in the East. People's mentality patterns, values, and economic activities are interrelated to a great extent: In Islamic art, the beauty of objects designed for everyday use ranging from textiles and carpets to bowls and lamps, testifies to the extremely wide range of those fruits of human labor which reflects love, devotion, joy and peace. These elements are inseparable from the question of the ethical dimension of work in Islam. The traditional guilds, brotherhoods and orders not only made possible the production of these works and creation of the material bases of Islamic civilization on the bases of beauty and harmony, but also provided a work ethic which embraced aesthetic considerations as well and which related the moral condition of work. It also placed the moral consequences of the making of things upon the soul of the maker, who in making objects according to the norms of traditional art also remolds his own inner being (Nasr, 2004, p. 41–42). Similar to this trend, we can see from Renaissance architecture, namely the cathedrals built in the early Middle Ages and the crosses put in windows as well as household goods, and the coinciding industrial developments, that the real reason for Europeans' interest in increasing their production and

5 Following his discussion of the economy in ancient Greece in his most prominent book, *History of Economic Analysis*, Joseph A. Schumpeter states: "So as far as our subject is concerned we may safely leap over 500 years to the epoch of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), whose *Summa Theologica* is in the history of thought what the southwestern spire of the Cathedral of Chartres is in the history of architecture. This is why he called this part, of Chapter 2 of his book, "The Great Gap," thus implying that nothing had been told, written, or even implemented throughout these five hundred years. In this context, we say easily conclude that Schumpeter reflects the widespread approach that has been existed since the end of 1800s and permeates the content of nearly all studies, including textbooks, about the history of economic thought (Mirahor, 1997, p. 39).

manufacturing takes root from religion and the relationship between art and religion.⁶ Hence, not even the individualism created in the first years of the Renaissance and the novelties of the Reformation were strong enough to completely overturn the moral heritage of the Middle Age's general theological philosophy. The decline of the religious/theological view started as late as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although individualism and the Reformation impaired the integrity and challenged the authority of the mentality and mindset arising from religion, one searches in vain for any advocates of completely getting rid of this mindset during the Reformation and early Renaissance. To the contrary, a wish for the continuation of this spiritual heritage can be seen (Çağatay, 1987, p. 11).

A Sort of Conclusion

The developments in this process necessitated a change in social life both vertically and horizontally and started to shape it in line with the new “modern” considerations of life (Akgül, 2002, p. 42). Over many centuries “It always been accepted that the three kinds of questions –intellectual, moral, political– were inseparable and that in any case, where they appear to be conflict, moral considerations should take precedence and determine out comes. In the modern world those who have called themselves scientists have asserted that science is the only domain of the pursuit of the true and have relegated philosophy, letters, and the humanities to the role of being the domain of the pursuit of the good and the beautiful. The modern world distinguished the fields of these disciplines and their epistemological objectives along with these problems.”⁷ No other historical system has instituted a fundamental divorce between science and philosophy/humanities or what I think would be better characterized as the separation of the quest for the true and the quest for the good and the beautiful⁸ (Wallerstein, 2004, p. 82–83).

In this process, there was an effort to achieve a transitivity between the individual and society through the new instruments of legitimacy that exclude the social role

6 As we consider that architecture forms the first and most important phase of the universal culture of humanity with the order, system and discipline, collective consciousness, will and determination during the construction process of a work of art in its nature and its common usage by the masses, the genius and works of Ottoman architecture can be assessed in terms of faith and culture together with their precedents in the West under a common social ground. For the cultural characteristic of history (see Sorokin, 1997, p. 21–66).

7 For this insistence Wallerstein argument also see that (2001, p. 98).

8 “The break in the geo-culture of the contemporary world system had not been so easy; its establishment required a period of three centuries. However, this break forms the basis of geo-culture and the foundation of the university system” (Wallerstein, 2000, p. 200).

of tradition and the new social structures of modernity, which established modern life. While modernity, which displays the biggest impact of its characteristic of liberalization in the individualization of people faithful to their community: “Modern social structures have provided the context for the socialization of highly individuated persons. Concomitantly modern society has given birth to ideologies and ethical systems of intense individualism” (Berger, Berger, & Kellner, 1973, p. 196). Sociologically, industrial society is growing modernized, while capitalist rationalities are becoming more and more determining. At this stage of society; faiths, laws, and the modes of living together and interpersonal relations are completely transformed, and the beliefs and attitudes of modern society will be determined by parameters such as capitalist institutions and factors such as consumption, individualism, private property, and profit-seeking. From that date on, people began to treat one another, life, and even nature; in the Capital and Market, which had been liberated together with all other areas of life, in line with the prominent motto of capitalism: “Laissez faire, laissez passer!” In this regard, it would be unfair to deny opinion to Smith, the founder of classical economics and champion of the idea of free markets: Economics is not only interested in the production of goods and services. As a science of welfare, economics deals with everything about production, transition and the distribution of wealth. Practically, the greatest obstacle to welfare is government intervention in the natural functioning of the market (Smith, 1776/1998). However, humanity has not emulated the moral opinions stated in Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but instead followed *The Wealth of Nations*. The personal interest that forms the backbone of the “norm” constructed by Smith in the latter was not challenged throughout the two centuries of the history of abstract economic thought; rather, it has become the only power managing real-world economics in the economically liberal societies. Nevertheless, experience, as stated by Blanqui, has particularly mutilated one of Smith’s doctrines: the idea that all social needs can be taken care of by the absolute freedom given to industry! Although the idea has been practically crippled, “The problem of Adam Smith” will need to be elaborated in another paper, as it still rules over the dilemma of “moral sentiments versus welfare” and continues to dominate arguments in intellectual circles either practically or epistemologically, and the search for its analysis seems to continue to exist because of the tremors in capitalism and its ethical foundations.

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