



## Human and Divine Economy in Dialectical Relation: An Inter-Disciplinary Approach

Ioannis Aznaouridis<sup>1</sup>; Ioannis Gazetas<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hellenic Army General Staff, Greece

<sup>2</sup> Orthodox Church of Greece, Greece

E-mail: [aznajohnny@gmail.com](mailto:aznajohnny@gmail.com); [ioannisgazetas@gmail.com](mailto:ioannisgazetas@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

The article explores the dialectical relationship between human and Divine Economy through an interdisciplinary lens that brings together economic theory, theology, sociology, and philosophy. Focusing on ontological, teleological, ethical, and anthropological foundations, it proposes an alternative model of economic thought in which economic activity is not confined to a technical system of resource management, but is understood as a relational act between person, centered on the Eucharistic experience and concern for the common good. Within this framework, Divine Economy emerges as a paradigm for an economy that respects the human being as a person rather than as a means of production or consumption; an ethical and socially just oikonomia that places human dignity and responsibility back at the center.

**Keywords:** *Human Economy; Divine Economy; Ethics and Economy; Teleology of Economy; Critique of Instrumental Reason; Social Ethics; Christian Social Thought*

**JEL Code:** A13, Z12, Z13, D63

### **1. Introduction**

The history of humanity, throughout all its evolutionary stages -from primitive societies to the modern nation-states- is predominantly marked by a continuous struggle for survival. This struggle, even before the emergence of the first organized civilizations and societies, encompasses a range of pressing economic issues and problems in need of resolution. During the long period of the primitive economy, humans fought against the forces of nature for their sustenance and to confront the various dangers surrounding them (Humanidis, 1969; Polanyi, 2001).

A defining feature of this earlier and longest-lasting world was the absence of social or political institutions and structures (Bottomore, 1987), and naturally, the absence of economists—who at that time were not merely unnecessary but entirely inconceivable. Their emergence took place essentially over the past three centuries, when a number of economic philosophers and thinkers, through their theoretical perspectives, sought to interpret the socio-economic reality by modeling a disordered world as a disciplined process (Heilbroner, 1999), and, based on these models, proposed solutions aimed at meeting needs and achieving material prosperity.

The term 'economy,' as used in the context of human activity, is often rendered with a materialistic and monetary connotation, focused on the management of resources and the pursuit of material prosperity. In contrast, within apostolic and patristic Christian literature, 'divine economy' carries a profound spiritual meaning, expressing God's salvific plan for humanity<sup>1</sup>.

In recent years, the broadening of the horizon of economic thought has come to include the dimension of religion, with the rise of the interdisciplinary field known as the 'economics of religion' (Iyer, 2016; McCleary & Barro, 2019). This development coincides with two major transformations within the discipline of economics itself: on the one hand, the digital revolution, which is reshaping the field of economic historiography (Abramitzky, 2015; Mitchener, 2015); and on the other hand, the so-called 'credibility revolution' that characterizes contemporary empirical analysis.

The convergence of these scholarly currents has laid the foundation for the formation of a dynamically evolving field of study that explores the bidirectional relationship between religion and economics: how religious values and practices influence economic behaviors, and how economic changes, in turn, shape religious beliefs and institutions (Rubin, Woessmann & Becker, 2020, 2024; Chung-Kim, 2021). Within this framework, the concept of *divine economy* re-emerges—not only as a theological term, but also as a critical interpretive lens for understanding how spiritual values and existential meanings are interwoven with economic phenomena.

## **2. Σκοπός και μεθοδολογία *Research Objective and Methodological Approach***

The present study explores in depth the dialectical relationship between human economy—as a system of interpretation and intervention in social, moral, and political behaviors—and Divine Economy, as an expression of divine providence for humanity and creation. The aim is to highlight Divine Economy not only as a theological concept, but also as a dynamic model capable of inspiring contemporary economic thought, contributing to the reorientation of economic action and the reconsideration of social and value structures.

The methodological approach is interdisciplinary, combining theoretical and interpretive tools from philosophy, theology, sociology, and economic theory. The analysis is based on a literature review and theoretical synthesis, with an emphasis on contemporary studies that examine the relationship between religion and economy within the framework of the "economics of religion." Particular emphasis is placed on the patristic and theological approach to Divine Economy, as well as on its conceptual evaluation as an alternative paradigm for economic thought.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the biblical references in which the term '*oikonomia*' is used with a spiritual and salvific meaning: 'the stewardship from God that is by faith' (1 Tim. 1:4), 'stewards of the mysteries of God' (1 Cor. 4:1), 'the dispensation of the grace of God' (Eph. 3:2), 'the economy of the fullness of times' (Eph. 1:10), 'according to the divine economy of God' (Col. 1:25).

### 3. Originality and Contribution

The originality of the present study lies in its comprehensive and systematic articulation of the dialectical relationship between human and Divine Economy—an approach not commonly found in either Greek or international scholarship. Its contribution consists in highlighting Divine Economy as a critical, existential, and moral paradigm capable of illuminating and transforming aspects of contemporary economic theory and practice, beyond the ideological boundaries of dominant systems. Particular emphasis is placed on themes that are rarely examined in conjunction: economic teleology, the concept of scarcity, power as service, and the transition from *homo economicus* to the person as a bearer of relationality. In this way, the study develops a theologically grounded interpretive framework for re-signifying the entirety of economic life and opens a fertile field of dialogue between theology and the social sciences.

### 4. Human Economy: A Brief Review of an Evolutionary Trajectory

Human behavior and actions are largely shaped by the effort to satisfy their various and numerous needs<sup>2</sup>. Among the totality of human needs, only those that are met through the use of economic goods pertain to the economy. These are goods that result from human productive effort. The needs that are satisfied by such goods are called economic needs. According to the legal regulatory framework, economic activity is defined as "*an activity carried out by natural or legal persons with the aim of generating income and profit within the functioning of the market, such as, indicatively, the production and distribution of goods, the provision of services, the conduct of trade, and the execution of projects*" (Hellenic Ministry of Development, 2025)<sup>3</sup>.

Economics as a science is connected to the humanities (Spiegel, 1971), and the ideas it introduces are 'products of time and place' that cannot be examined in isolation from the 'world' they describe (Galbraith, 1987, pp. 1–2). Consequently, 'economic theory reflects the various socioeconomic and philosophical conditions' from 'which the different ideas and theories emerged' (Stark, 1943, p. vii; 1944, p. 2). The self-evidence of this view lies in the fact that the functioning of the economy has always been based on the behavior of individuals, who over time have been organized into specific social entities.

During the primitive economic phase, humans evolved from gatherers and hunters into cultivators and herders, gradually domesticating the animals they observed. At the same time, by utilizing dugout canoes, rafts, and nets, they developed fishing and bird hunting using seeds, arrows, and spears (Thurnwald, 1932)<sup>4</sup>. This period was marked by technical and cognitive innovations such as the stone pestle, fire production, the dugout canoe, the modification of dietary habits (e.g., smoking and grinding meat), the wheel, and the institutionalization of exchange (Humanidis, 1969). Many of these defining events, although considered negligible today, contributed decisively to human evolution (Charalambous, 2022, p.18). Primitive humans developed a 'collective identity' (Charalambous, 2022, p.26), living in matriarchal and later patriarchal clan-based groups under the supervision of a progenitor who regulated activities and exchanges (Thurnwald, 1932). These clans formed hordes, which in turn constituted tribes headed by a chief, accompanied by a shaman and a council (Humanidis, 1969). The notion of private property was limited to personal items, and wage labor did not exist. The first form of compensation was

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<sup>2</sup> Plato notes that every person avoids what causes them distress, primarily seeking pleasure, which he defines as spiritual enjoyment rather than sensory gratification (Plato, *Laws*, V 733 B). The needs that individuals seek to fulfill are classified into five categories: survival, the will to dominate, creativity, reproduction, and pleasure (Doukas, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Framework Law incorporating Directive (EU) 2022/2464 of the European Parliament and of the Council, of 14 December 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Here, R. Thurnwald refers to E. Laveleye and his work *De la propriété et ses formes primitives*, Paris, 1891.

attributed to the shaman, who held a prominent position in the social structure (Thurnwald, 1932, p.280; Eliade, 1951; Lewis-Williams, 2004)<sup>5</sup>.

In the ancient Near East, from as early as 3000 BCE, major civilizations emerged with intense and multilayered activity, such as those of the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Sumerians, Babylonians, Hittites, Assyrians, Hebrews, and Persians—all of whom contributed to the shaping of the region's political and cultural identity (Vasile, 2016; Van de Mieroop, 2025) and its subsequent economic development. For over three millennia, significant social, political, economic, and cultural processes unfolded, with Egypt and Mesopotamia adopting precious metals as means of exchange as early as the 3rd millennium BCE (Humanidis, 1969). Between 1500 and 1300 BCE, territorial states were consolidated, major urban centers developed (Bauer, 2007), writing systems were created<sup>6</sup>, diplomatic and commercial relations were institutionalized, and concepts such as justice, moral conscience, and law emerged—as attested by the Code of Hammurabi. During this time, arbitrary systems of social hierarchy and religious belief also took shape (Charalambous, 2022).

Archaic and Classical Greece provided the foundation for early economic thought, marking the transition from Neolithic self-sufficiency to the development of commercial, maritime, and administrative structures during the Minoan and Mycenaean periods (Charalambous, 2022; Humanidis, 1969). In the Classical period, the philosophical grounding of economics was shaped by Socrates, Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle, with distinctions drawn between household management (*oikonomia*) and wealth acquisition (*chrematistics*), and an emphasis on the political dimension of economic life (Aristotle, 2013a; 2013b; Plato, 2022; Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*). Athens emerged as a model of rational governance and public finance (Amemiya, 2007; Cohen, 1973), in contrast to Sparta's frugal and self-sufficient economy (Kyriazis & Economou, 2015). The ancient Greeks laid the groundwork for economic science and ethical economic thought (Doukas, 2005; Karagiannis, 2007; Schumpeter, 1954). Economic history continued through the Hellenistic Alexandrian world and Roman rule, during which economic activity was systematized through Roman law (Cartledge, 2005; Garnsey & Saller, 2014). In the Middle Ages, feudal and ecclesiastical structures predominated, while Islamic economic thought offered early theories on labor, taxation, and development (Irwin, 2019).

From the 15th to the 17th century, the Renaissance and the Commercial Revolution paved the way toward Modernity, marking the transition from feudalism to a new economic and social framework. Key features of this period include the birth of capitalism, the flourishing of international trade, and the development of banking. Mercantilism, represented by figures such as Colbert (France), Mun (England), and Serra (Italy), advocated for state intervention, colonial exploitation, and the protection of domestic industry, establishing the doctrine of gold accumulation as a means of national wealth.

In the mid-18th century, the Physiocratic school emerged, primarily in France, with François Quesnay as its leading figure. The Physiocrats argued that agriculture was the only truly productive activity and introduced pioneering concepts such as the economic circuit and surplus. They emphasized the natural laws of the economy, which they believed the state should respect.

Classical political economy was formally established with Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), in which key concepts such as the 'invisible hand' of the market, enlightened self-interest, the division of labor, and the distinction between use value and exchange value are analyzed. Subsequently, Ricardo, Malthus, and Mill expanded the classical school's

<sup>5</sup> In these societies, the shaman was a spiritual leader, healer, guide and advisor, seer and prophet, guardian of tradition, bearer of knowledge and wisdom—a symbol of social power capable of influencing decisions

<sup>6</sup> This refers to cuneiform, the earliest known form of writing in human history, which predates Egyptian hieroglyphics, Linear A and B (Minoan and Mycenaean), and Chinese script (Crawford, 2020).

analysis by focusing on issues such as labor, land, profits, and population, thereby laying the groundwork for Marxist critique. Karl Marx transformed political economy into a tool for analyzing class relations, introducing a radical approach to understanding both the economy and history.

The Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries radically transformed the economy: factory production, mechanization, and urbanization increased productivity but also exacerbated social inequalities. In the 19th century and into the early 20th century, capitalism became firmly established both in practice and theory through the classical and neoclassical schools. Despite the challenge posed by the October Revolution—which introduced centralized state ownership and economic planning—the dynamics of the free market ultimately prevailed.

The global crises of the early 20th century (1918–1945) revealed the limitations of classical economic theory and paved the way for Keynesianism and increased state intervention. During the post-war period (1945–1970), the Keynesian model prevailed, supported by institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the GATT. From the 1980s onward, neoliberalism, championed by Thatcher and Reagan, promoted market liberalization<sup>7</sup> and a reduction in state intervention. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1989–1991) further strengthened the global dominance of the free-market model.

In the 21st century, the global economy is once again being tested, the financial crisis, the rise of the digital economy, cryptocurrencies, artificial intelligence, and new approaches such as the green economy and social entrepreneurship highlight both the potential and the challenges of the neoliberal paradigm (Piketty, 2014). Overall, the history of economic thought and practice reveals the enduring interaction between economic, social, political, and cultural factors. The concept of property, the role of markets, money, wars, religions, technologies, and institutions—such as laws, banks, and labor—reveal the dynamics of growth and decline. Patterns of crises, inequalities, and innovations recur, shaping the present and the future of the globalized economy.

Although humans have faced economic problems since the time of the Pharaohs, economics as a science, at least as we know it today, is a creation of the last three centuries. It was shaped by a diverse group of thinkers: philosophers like Adam Smith, clergymen like Malthus, financiers like Ricardo, noblemen like Saint Simon, cultivated mathematicians like Keynes, revolutionaries like Marx, skeptics like Veblen, eccentrics like Fourier, and outsiders like George (Heilbroner, 1999). Their theories sought to impose order and laws upon a chaotic world, but they differed radically in their approaches and often contained disastrous errors (Samuelson, 1973). Nevertheless, as Keynes (2007, p. 383) pointed out, the ideas of these thinkers, whether right or wrong, are often more powerful than we realize: 'the world is ruled by little else,' and those who consider themselves 'practical men' are often the slaves of some defunct economist.

As secular belief systems, some economic theories evolved into secular religions<sup>8</sup>, as they address well-being, which, for many, is 'the meaning of human life' (Nelson, 2019). Statements such as 'Marx was the Jesus Christ of the 20th century' (Claeys, 2018: 1) or 'Marxism... is the historical successor to Christianity' (MacIntyre, 1984) contributed to the formation of a Marxist religion. Similarly, phrases like 'we must see capitalism as a religion' (Lowy, 2009, p. 61) sacralized the capitalist mode of production. The eschatological predictions of Keynes in his essay *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren* shaped a prophetic Keynesian 'religion.' Similar traits can also be found in Classical, Neoclassical, and Neoliberal economic theories, which are often approached with dogmatic devotion (Nelson, 2019).

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<sup>7</sup> TINA – Reaganomics.

<sup>8</sup> The term 'secular religion' is used in the sense of faith or devotion to a specific economic system or ideology. It encompasses the notion of absoluteness and dogmatism.

A fundamental question concerns the extent to which so-called “economic religions”<sup>9</sup> can effectively address the problem of resource scarcity—a structural and decisive element in every economic decision. The limited availability of resources, combined with the complexity and potentially unlimited nature of human needs, necessitates their rational and fair allocation for the benefit of society as a whole. The triad “what, how, and for whom to produce” lies at the core of economic analysis and serves as a criterion for the efficiency and justice of any system (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2010). Nevertheless, the emergence of phenomena such as poverty amidst abundance (Gandhi, 2009) highlights the limitations of systems that fail to manage scarcity effectively—not due to a lack of resources, but due to unequal distribution, institutional distortions, and ideological rigidity. When a theory becomes a dogmatic framework, it ceases to serve social well-being and contributes to the perpetuation of inequality and exclusion.

## ***5. Divine Economy as the Foundation of Providence and Salvation***

At the heart of Orthodox Christian theological thought, the concept of Divine Economy constitutes one of the fundamental structures governing the relationship between God and the world. Etymologically, the term “economy” derives from the Greek words *oikos* (household) and *nemo* (to manage), meaning “household management.” In the ecclesiastical context, however, this concept acquires a deeper meaning, as it refers to the manner in which God acts within history for the salvation of the world and the restoration of His relationship with fallen humanity (Zizioulas, 2023; Lossky, 1974).

Divine Economy is not a theoretical framework of soteriological interpretation, but rather the reality of God's active self-revelation within history. It culminates in the incarnation of the Son and Word of God and continues within the Church through the Holy Spirit, as the manifestation of God's plan of love for the salvation of humankind.

This fundamental revelation is already recorded in the scriptural tradition, especially in the Apostle Paul, where it is stated: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son [...] so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4–5). God's divine economy is not limited to the incarnation alone, but extends to the entire mystery of divine condescension, which includes the Passion, Burial, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ (Lossky, 1974). In patristic literature, Divine Economy is defined as the philanthropic and salvific activity of God, through which humanity is called from fall and corruption to renewal and participation in divine life (John of Damascus, PG 94, 1108).

Beyond this, patristic theology highlights Divine Economy not merely as a response to sin and the Fall, but as the eternal will of God for communion with humanity. The Incarnation of the Son is not solely a soteriological “reaction” to human apostasy, but is part of the original plan of creation, in which humanity is called to reach its fulfillment through deification by grace, that is, through participation in the uncreated life of God (Zizioulas, 2023; Matsoukas, 2003). As St. Athanasius of Alexandria states, “He became man so that man might become god” (PG 25, 192B), emphasizing that union with God is the authentic purpose of creation. At the same time, Divine Economy offers a model of relationship and authority not based on domination, but on service. Christ, as the incarnate Logos, introduces a new form of leadership based on sacrificial love and voluntary service to others: “I have washed your feet [...] you also ought to wash one another's feet” (John 13:14–15), “the Son of Man [...] came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45).

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<sup>9</sup> Economic systems or theories characterized by dogmatic adherence, lack of self-criticism, and ideological rigidity, which cultivate collective expectations and lead to specific policy and legislative interventions.

Divine Economy is inextricably linked with God's providence. Divine Providence is the Creator's continual care for the order, preservation, and salvation of creation. According to St. Basil of Caesarea, God attends to all things (PG 29b, 3–208), not out of necessity, but as the fruit of His free and selfless love. Providence, therefore, is not to be understood as a unilateral imposition by the divine will, but as an offering of relationship, within which the human being retains the freedom to accept or reject divine salvation (Romanides, 2004).

Based on this Christological perspective, the Church, as the "Body of Christ," is not only called to continue the Divine Economy within history, but also to function as a living community of salvation, where "by grace" is not merely a doctrine, but a lived experience. The Church is not confined to an institutional presence, but is called to embody the love of God in every dimension of human life.

At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the Christian Divine Economy is unique, God does not wait for humanity to approach Him, but He Himself becomes human in order to draw near to humanity. As the Apostle Paul writes, this mystery "was made known by revelation... according to the economy of the mystery which has been hidden from the ages" (Eph. 3:3–9), meaning that it is not the result of human searching, but of divine revelation. As St. John of Damascus states, the Incarnation is the way in which God heals and saves the human being (PG 94, 1072C). In this context, the concept of Divine Economy is understood as God's personal concern for the salvation of the world (Matsoukas, 2003).

Therefore, although many religions articulate teachings concerning redemption or liberation (such as *moksha* in Hinduism, *nirvana* in Buddhism, or posthumous reward in Islam), these are not associated with a specific divine plan of historical revelation and salvific condescension. Consequently, we cannot speak of a "Divine Economy" in other religions in the way it is understood in Orthodox Christian Theology. Only in Christianity does God act personally: He enters into history, becomes human, is crucified, and rises from the dead in order to save humanity and lead it to *theosis*. In other words, God reveals Himself as a Person and personally offers salvation to humanity, within history and within each person's individual existence. It is not humanity that moves to discover Him, as in other religions, but God Himself who comes toward humanity and acts for its salvation.

God's entrance into history through His incarnate love for humanity is not merely a theological event; it becomes a model of life and a calling for humankind. In Christianity, Divine Economy -that is, God's personal plan for human salvation- offers the standard by which human economy is also called to be inspired: the historically evolving effort to meet material needs through the production, consumption, and distribution of resources (Gazetas & Aznaouridis, 2025). Just as God acts with love, condescension, and purpose, so too is humanity called to manage the world with providence, responsibility, and care for others, transcending individual self-interest.

In conclusion, the concept of Divine Economy emerges as the cornerstone of the Orthodox understanding of salvation and divine providence. It is not an abstract soteriological notion, but the concrete, historically active love of God, culminating in the Incarnation and extending throughout the entire mystery of divine condescension. Economy is not limited to the restoration after the Fall, but bears witness to the eternal plan of communion between God and humanity — a plan the Church is called to embody as a community of salvation. The connection of Divine Economy with providence highlights the personal, free, and loving character of divine action, while at the same time offering a model for human responsibility in the stewardship of the world.

## **6. Axes of Dialectical Relationship**

The dialectical relationship between human and Divine Economy expresses a process of synthesis and creation, in which any contradictions between them are overcome and replaced by a higher level of

truth centered on the event of Christ (Grigoriadou, 2019). The following are the axes upon which human and divine economy engage in dialogue:

## **a. Ontological Foundation and Teleological Orientation**

The Divine Economy is grounded in the ontological love of God for Creation, and especially for the human being, who is understood as a “person-in-relation” rather than as an autonomous individual (Zizioulas, 2023). This love is manifested as providence and as a salvific plan. Its purpose is the restoration of the relationship between humanity and its Creator, and the deification (theosis) of the human person by grace, through participation in divine life. In this way, the soteriological teleology of the Divine Economy is established (Lossky, 1991).

In contrast, human economy is designed based on technical and functional criteria, aiming at the rational allocation of resources for the satisfaction of needs or the maximization of benefit (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2010), often through cost-benefit analysis (Bertsimas & Freund, 2000), and is driven by unrestrained individualism (Lavdiotis, 2012). This economy is founded upon anthropocentric analyses of production, distribution, consumption, saving, investment, expenditure, and so forth, aiming at dominance, prosperity, rational satisfaction of needs, or profit maximization—depending on the prevailing economic system.

In this dialectical relationship, we observe the teleological superiority of the Divine Economy, as it redefines the ultimate goal of economic activity, not merely as survival or well-being, but as existential fulfillment and theosis by grace.

## **b. Conception of the Human Being and of Creation**

The Divine Economy regards the human being as a person endowed with sacredness and unique value, gifted with freedom, rationality, and the capacity for participation in the divine. Creation is perceived as a gift from God and a universal community of life, offered to humanity not for domination, but for a eucharistic relationship and shared responsibility (Zizioulas, 2023; Russell & Chiapetti, 2022). On the other hand, the dominant perspective within human economic thought—especially in neoclassical and neoliberal discourse—often conceives of the human as *homo economicus*, a bearer of self-interest and rational calculation, and views nature merely as an exchangeable resource or means of production (Friedman, 2020).

The dialectic between these two approaches enables the development of an ecological and person-centered model of economic planning, in which the human being is called not to exploit or plunder, but to serve Creation. A personalist and communal understanding of existence can effectively subvert the instrumental and individualistic orientation of the modern economy.

## **c. Management of Resources and Relationship to Scarcity**

Human economy is built upon the condition of resource scarcity, which underlies the necessity for efficiency, allocation, and the prioritization of needs. In contrast, Divine Economy presupposes an ontology of gift and plenitude, wherein God’s care and providence are unconditionally poured out upon the world. This comparison highlights a critical distinction: while human economy offers solutions based on technical distribution, Divine Economy proposes a moral-existential mode of management, in which relationship -with both neighbor and creation- takes precedence over ownership. This provides an alternative paradigm for addressing phenomena such as poverty and the environmental crisis, wherein the issue lies not in scarcity per se, but in misallocation and greed.

God gives without limit, and humanity is called to manage with responsibility and thanksgiving (Baltas & Drygianakis, 2016). The dialectic here reveals that Divine Economy can propose a model of resource stewardship grounded in gift and concern for the common good, rather than in efficiency or individual utility. Poverty amidst abundance is thus primarily identified as a moral problem, not merely a technical one (Gandhi, 2010).

#### **d. Ethics and Value Framework**

The Divine Economy is shaped by values such as love, humility, justice, freedom, and service, values that flow from the very nature of God and His relationship with Creation (Ware, 1982). In contrast, human economy is grounded in values generated within the system itself. These include utilitarianism, efficiency, meritocracy, competitiveness, and accumulation, while its ethical orientation varies according to the prevailing system (capitalism, socialism, social economy), with personal interest as the dominant element (Friedman, 2020).

The dialectic between the two reveals that the Divine Economy can serve as both a counterbalance and a critical paradigm in the face of the value distortions, ethical relativism of modern economic thought, and the moral failures of commodified markets (Sandel, 2013). It repositions the common good and personal responsibility at the center of economic reflection.

#### **e. Conception of Providence and Authority**

In human economy, concepts such as providence and authority are institutionalized, taking the form of mechanisms like the welfare state, central planning, regulatory frameworks, and governing agencies. Their institutional presence is closely tied to political power or legitimized managerial authority, translating the intangible into action and providing operational substance to abstract principles (Luhmann, 1990; Foucault, 2008). By contrast, in the Divine Economy, providence is understood as the expression of God's selfless love for all creation, while authority assumes the character of service and sacrificial offering, as exemplified by Christ, "the servant of all" (Luke 22:27; Mark 10:45; John 13:12–15). This approach introduces a radically different conception in which authority is detached from its despotic dimensions and reinterpreted as responsibility and service to the other (Hengstmengel, 2019).

The integration of this theological perspective into economic thought holds the potential to reshape the understanding of authority within the economic sphere, transcending its often abusive manifestations and redefining it as a responsible and servant-oriented function for the sake of the common good. In this light, the Divine Economy inspires a model of leadership imbued with the spirit of sacrificial offering, in stark contrast to the instrumental or exploitative exercise of power (Volf, 2001).

#### **f. Economy as Relationship – Not Merely as System**

In its dominant expressions, human economy is analyzed as a system, that is, a network of markets, institutions, rules, measures, and procedures. While this perspective may prove effective on a technical level, it often overlooks the interpersonal and social dimension of economic life (Latour, 2005; Sennett, 2012), a neglect that bears negative implications for both humanity and society. By contrast, the Divine Economy is constituted as a dynamic relationship: God-human-world, grounded in freedom, love, and gratitude—within the context of a personal communion. Projecting this Divine Economy onto human economic life introduces a new understanding of economic activity, not merely as a field of mechanisms but as a realm of relationships.

Such a model can inspire the development of communal, cooperative, and embodied forms of economy that honor the value of the person and the sacredness of creation (Hibbs, 2023; Chryssavgis,

2019). Transposing the notion of economy as relationship into the human sphere could lead to a more social, dialogical, and collaborative economic vision.

## 7. Discussion

The ontological deficiencies and moral distortions manifest in contemporary economic reality render the Divine Economy a critical paradigm—one that can operate in a substantial and multi-dimensional way, as follows:

### 7.1 Re-Signification of Economic Teleology

Modern economy and politics, which focus almost exclusively on material interest and technological efficiency, are characterized by a process of creative destruction, where structural collapses and business failures create the conditions for something new to emerge. This new reality arises from the release of productive forces and economic resources (Schumpeter, 1975). The continuous and dynamic process of adaptation has now become a commonplace and widely held belief across all economic systems globally. Particularly within the modern capitalist framework, it is based on intense competition, the promotion of individual self-interest and gain, and the exploitation of resources (Smith, 1977; Bowles, Edwards, Roosevelt, 2005; Friedman, 2020).

Marx, in *Capital* (1867), presents the science of political economy as a means of exposing the exploitative relationship between capital and labor, precisely identifying the role of class in the economic process (Marx, 2013). In contrast, Carlyle adopts the term “dismal science,” offering strong criticism—especially against its positions on equality and slavery (Carlyle, 1849). In its modern usage, the phrase is detached from its original context and used to describe the pessimistic nature of economic science when it focuses on scarcity, crises, or recessions.

The teleological dimension of Divine Economy, transcending the material sphere, functions as a criterion for the re-signification of all human-generated economic activity by introducing the moral parameter (Bulgakov, 2014). In this way, Divine Economy offers a teleological redefinition of the meaning of economic activity, one that is not confined to securing well-being or survival, but instead introduces the purpose of existential fulfillment and theosis by grace (Kharlamov, 2011; Byrne, 2021).

This constitutes a critical intervention in the realm of modern economics, reintroducing purpose at the core of economic theory. It invites a reassessment of the aims of economic planning beyond mere profit maximization, damage minimization, or cost-benefit analysis (Stephen Long, 2003).

In practical terms, the above is implemented through the pursuit of both intergenerational and intragenerational social cohesion and justice, promoting the common good by bypassing narrow individual self-interest and highlighting economic activity as a relationship and a form of service. Aiming toward a moral economy centered on the human person, the principles of efficiency, competition, stock market profit, relentless accumulation of wealth, and the social-Darwinist framework in which only the strong survive—and hubris more broadly—must be challenged by the values of respect, shared responsibility, solidarity, service, virtuous Eucharistic stewardship of resources, and sustainable development. Examples of economic organizational models aligned with this vision include the social economy, cooperatives, the circular economy, and so on.

### 7.2 An Anthropological Critique of *Homo Economicus*

The dominant economic theory presupposes an autonomous individual who is shaped and reproduced on the basis of an individualistic utilitarianism (Keane, 2019). This is the *homo economicus*,

whose economic rationality and behavior are founded on the "internal consistency of choice," the "maximization of individual interest," and the "maximization in general" of economic outcomes and, by extension, the utility those outcomes provide (Sen, 2017, pp. 301–306).

Although the human economy is shaped by values, moral standards, and perceptions drawn from social, political, cultural, religious, and even metaphysical frameworks, moral imperatives such as the common good, dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, support for vulnerable individuals, ecology, and adaptation to sustainable development often come into dynamic conflict with the spirit and values of *homo economicus* (Enderle, 2018, pp. 7–13; Keane, 2019).

The instrumental logic of *homo economicus*, which prioritizes individual interest (Gazetas & Aznaouridis, 2025), is incompatible with the human being as the image of God, a bearer of love and relationality. Divine Economy presents the human person as a *being-in-relation*, a person with sanctity, freedom, and the potential for participation in the divine (Zizioulas, 2023; Lossky, 2006; Ware, 1997). Human existence attains fullness not through material possessions, but through communion with God and with others (Zizioulas, 2023). This person-centered perspective offers a radical anthropological alternative, capable of transforming the economic subject from a bearer of self-interest to a bearer of relationship and responsibility, as Divine Economy embodies the paradigm of selflessness, offering, and unity.

In practice, the above are realized by the human being who, inspired by divine love, acts as a *person-in-relation*, operating within networks of responsibility, love, and social interdependence. Such a person embraces practices of economic coexistence, such as the social economy, cooperativism, fair trade, and exchange communities—models grounded in reciprocity and in the understanding of goods as gifts from God, rather than as objects of ownership. This is the economic human characterized by a selfless ethos, just distribution, ethical investment, social philanthropy, and ecological responsibility (Volf, 1997; Chryssavgis, 2019).

### 7.3 Ethical and Value-Based Resistance to Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism, as founded by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and developed by John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), proposes as a moral criterion the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Bentham introduced the concept of "*moral arithmetic*", promoting the quantification of utility, while Mill incorporated qualitative dimensions, linking utility with moral cultivation and freedom (Bentham, 1789; Mill, 1863). As Mill notes: "*Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness [...]*" (Mill, 1863, p.9).

In contrast, Kant grounds ethics in the categorical imperative and the autonomy of the person (Kant, 1785/1998). Utilitarianism first emerged in economic thought (Smith, 1776) and served as the philosophical foundation of Classical Liberalism, which emphasizes individual initiative and the free market. It profoundly influenced economic science and the Neoclassical and Neoliberal schools, with examples such as the theory of marginal utility (Pindyck & Rubinfeld, 2013), cost-benefit analysis (Boardman et al., 2018), and social welfare policies (Samuelson, 1973; Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2010; Barr, 2020; Stiglitz, 2012).

Modern economic systems, by prioritizing consumption, efficiency, and wealth accumulation as indicators of prosperity, often neglect justice, solidarity, and sustainability (Galbraith, 1999; Skidelsky & Skidelsky, 2012; Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2010; OECD, 2020). The utilitarian logic tends to lead to individualistic forms of ethics, where the human being becomes a means to economic ends.

Divine Economy is not merely an alternative ethical stance against utilitarianism, but is grounded in values that oppose the relativism and instrumental logic of the dominant economic system (Patriarch Bartholomew, 2008). Unlike the utilitarian evaluation of actions based on outcomes, Divine Economy focuses on the person as a bearer of relationship and responsibility, and on action as an expression of love and selfless unity (Zizioulas, 2023; 2024).

It transcends the logic of reciprocity and is embodied in the eucharistic life of the Church as a paradigm of gift (Chryssavgis, 2019). The critique concerns the anthropological foundations of economics: it is neither neutral nor autonomous, but calls for a reordering of values centered on the person, the community, justice, and offering. Selfless love constitutes a response to utilitarianism and a form of resistance to the de-sacralization of the human being, who is not defined by productivity, but by the image of God. The economy cannot legitimize injustice as a norm, but must become a place of repentance, justice, and social restoration (Yannaras, 2004; Patriarch Bartholomew, 2008).

The application of Divine Economy in contemporary reality is expressed through political practices that affirm the primacy of the person over the instrumental logic of utilitarianism. Economic activity is called to be transformed into an act of social responsibility and selfless offering, where human value is not rooted in productivity but in the ontological identity of the person as the image of God (Zizioulas, 2023). This is reflected in community-based economic models such as cooperatives, social enterprises, and solidarity networks that serve the common good (Chryssavgis, 2019). The eucharistic experience inspires forms of giving that transcend the logic of reciprocity and give meaning to prosperity as *communion*, not as accumulation (Patriarch Bartholomew, 2008).

In contrast to systems that impose “their own truth” (Galbraith, 2004, p. 23), Divine Economy offers an anthropological and moral imperative, redirecting economics toward a society of persons. Within this framework, economic action becomes a space of re-foundation—rejecting injustice as normality and affirming the truth of the person, community, and justice (Yannaras, 2004).

## 7.4 A Response to the Ontology of Scarcity and the Redefinition of Economy as Relationship

Human economy considers scarcity a fundamental axiom, ἀξίωμα<sup>10</sup>, legitimizing every logic of competition or individual accumulation. Specifically, the stark disproportion between finite economic goods and unlimited human needs and desires generates the demand for choice and allocation of available resources in order to maximize the utility derived (Schumpeter, 1954; Samuelson, 1973). This reality renders decision-making based on efficiency necessary, while reinforcing instrumental reasoning and the notion of opportunity cost (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2010; Stiglitz et al., 2010). However, perceiving human existence and society through the lens of scarcity transfers market logic into every aspect of life, strengthening competitive and individualistic forms of organization (Stiglitz et al., 2010). Ethics itself begins to operate as an accounting act of benefit exchange, a feature directly linked to the utilitarian conception of value.

Divine Economy proposes an ontology of fullness and gift, in which God’s providence renders the world a space of abundance rather than a space of lack. This model offers a critique of the ideologies of scarcity and greed, proposing instead an economy of thanksgiving and care for the common good (Zizioulas, 2023; Patriarch Bartholomew, 2008; Zizioulas, 2024). Divine Economy, as an ontology of fullness and gift, takes on concrete form through social practices rooted in the eucharistic logic of selfless offering and communal sharing (Chryssavgis, 2019). Examples such as social grocery stores, charity

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<sup>10</sup> The theory of scarcity constitutes a fundamental principle of classical and neoclassical economic thought

meals (*trapeza agapis*), and free healthcare structures are tangible expressions of economic action that reject the logic of scarcity and redefine abundance as the fruit of relationship, providence, and love.

Within this framework, the economy ceases to operate on the basis of individual gain and turns toward concern for the common good, restoring the fundamental social dimension of the human person. Economic life is not presented merely as a technical system, but as a space of relationships between God, human beings, and creation. This approach challenges the depersonalized character of modern economic institutions and promotes the cultivation of a communal and dialogical economic life. This model reveals economy as relationship and inspires the creation of cooperative economic forms based on respect, trust, and shared responsibility (Zizioulas, 2023; Volf, 1997; Goodchild, 2007).

### 7.5 A Redefinition of Authority (Power) and Leadership

Economic power has historically been founded on the control of productive resources, money<sup>11</sup>, investment, and labor, exerting a decisive influence on social structures and decision-making processes (Marx, 1867; Weber, 1922; Gramsci, 1971; Foucault, 2008; Piketty, 2017). This control has magnified income inequality<sup>12</sup>, and has placed every democracy at risk (Stiglitz, 2012). At the same time, political power—as an institution that makes binding decisions for a society and as a mechanism that legislates and regulates citizens' behavior is the power to govern, to organize public life, and to exercise control and coercion either to maintain order or to advance a political agenda (Hobbes, 1651; Rousseau, 1762; Foucault, 1995).

Today, these two secular powers appear more centralized and interconnected than ever before. The separation between political and economic actors is no longer as clear; often, economic power shapes politics—and vice versa (Piketty, 2014; Wolin, 2017). In modern liberal democracies, economic interests and political power tend to merge, forming a managed political system that serves the elites (Wolin, 2017), who constantly seek to reproduce their own power (Lasch, 1996). Under these conditions, leadership seems to have largely lost its authentic meaning. In other words, it has forfeited inspiration, responsibility, and the spirit of sacrifice for the many, evolving instead into the management of interests and media strategy. There is a strong trend for the leader to be presented as a manager or investor of political capital, rather than as a bearer of vision and moral purpose (Rosanvallon, 2008; Galbraith, 1977, 1987, 2004). Of course, we cannot ignore those leaders who strive to uphold vision and values, though they remain less visible due to the nature of modern media and the contemporary political marketplace.

Essentially, today we can identify: (1) the privatization of politics, where major corporations and economic elites shape the agenda; (2) the multinationalization of power, with decisions being made at levels beyond the nation-state (e.g., the EU, World Bank, etc.); (3) communicative power, where whoever controls the narrative holds the real power (media, social media, etc.); and (4) the crisis of representation, with citizens feeling they are no longer truly represented (Hardt & Negri, 2001; Rosanvallon, 2008; Castells, 2009; Piketty, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012). This reality gives rise to the need for genuine leadership—exercised by individuals who do not "govern" on behalf of the few or for their own interests, dominating or manipulating, but who selflessly serve the many and lead based on principles rather than interests.

<sup>11</sup> And more broadly, of the Financial System.

<sup>12</sup> In the world's largest economy, the United States, more than 40 years ago, the top 1% of earners received only 12% of the national income ... by 2007, before the recession, the wealthiest 1% had seized over 65% of the increase in national income ... the benefits of the recovery that followed the recession have overwhelmingly gone to the richest Americans: the top 1% captured 93% of the additional gains...", "the ratio of CEO annual compensation to that of the typical worker had, by 2010, returned to pre-crisis levels — that is, 243 to 1. (Stiglitz, 2012, pp. 40–42).

An alternative model of leadership and authority is offered by the Christian perspective, as expressed in Divine Economy, where power is not understood as domination but as service. Leadership takes the form of sacrificial offering, modeled after Christ (Matt. 20:25-28)<sup>13</sup>. This is a form of authority expressed without coercion, as humble care within God's plan for the salvation of the world. The strong becomes a servant to the weak, offering himself (John 13:12-17)<sup>14</sup>, not seeking personal gain but sacrificing for the sake of others. The ultimate example of this servant leadership is Jesus Christ Himself (Zizioulas, 2023, 2024). This redefinition of power and leadership as sacrificial offering—one that transcends the Ego—provides a critique of instrumental, technocratic, or abusive forms of authority, restoring the element of service and responsibility in the design and exercise of political and economic power.

Practically speaking, in order to foster leadership that serves rather than dominates, the following are required: (1) the establishment of institutions that ensure transparency and accountability, (2) the adoption of forms of political and social education that cultivate virtue, selflessness, and commitment to the common good, (3) the selection of leaders based on their moral integrity and social contribution, (4) the counterbalancing of the power of multinationals, the influence of elites, and the privatization of politics through institutions and regulations that limit their reach and negative impact, (5) the liberation of public discourse from the filters of mass media and social media; and (6) the revitalization of representation through direct and participatory forms of democracy, leveraging technology.

## 8. Conclusions

Divine Economy does not merely function as a “counterweight” to human economic action and science, but rather as a critical paradigm—a constant point of reference, a standard for evaluating, inspiring, and transforming human economic thought and practice. It brings to light the moral, existential, and ontological dimension of economics—dimensions often silenced or neglected within dominant models.

This dialectical relationship is observed: (a) in the ethical dimension of economic practice (e.g., social justice), (b) in the tension between individual benefit and self-giving, (c) in the role of Divine Economy as a model of solidarity, (d) in the theological and philosophical critique of modern economic thought, and (e) in the practical application of religious values within social and political life.

More specifically Divine Economy:

It offers an existential and moral redefinition of economic activity, prioritizing the common good and the service of humanity over narrow self-interest, profit-driven practices, and the unrestrained competition that characterize the modern economy.

It proposes an anthropological redefinition of the economic subject, highlighting the human being as a “relational person,” a bearer of responsibility and selflessness—standing in contrast to the individualistic and instrumental *homo economicus* of dominant economic reasoning.

It stands in opposition to utilitarianism, presenting an economic and moral paradigm grounded in selfless offering, the sanctity of the human person, and a community of love—reorienting economic action from utility toward justice and social responsibility.

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<sup>13</sup> "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

<sup>14</sup> "Washing of the disciples' feet."

It contrasts the principle of scarcity with an ontology of fullness and gift, laying the foundation for an economic life based on selfless giving, concern for the common good, and the restoration of the social dimension of the human person.

It redefines power and leadership as service and sacrificial offering, offering a critique of the instrumental and abusive exercise of authority, and proposing a model of leadership that selflessly serves the common good—in contrast to the collusion of economic and political interests that characterizes modern democracies.

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