BUILDING BUSINESSES EMBEDDED IN RELIGIOUS CULTURE
A REVIEW ESSAY OF
LORNA GOLD’S THE SHARING ECONOMY
(Burlington: Ashgate, 2004)

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A Version of this essay can be found in
Review of Social Economy March 2006

“One of the greatest challenges of human life is that of ‘rising to the highest contemplation whilst remaining in the midst of the world’” (107)
Chiara Lubich

If a person wanted to understand one of the most exciting economic movements embedded within a rich moral and spiritual vision, he or she should read this book. In a highly well-organized and clearly well-written book, Lorna Gold provides the reader with the historical, theological, moral, economic and managerial contours of the Economy of Communion (EoC). Her ability to maneuver between theoretical discussions and practical application is rare among writers. Gold neither dismisses academic debates nor ignores practical experience, but rather she weaves the disciplines of economics, theology, philosophy, geography, and management, providing the reader with a comprehensive picture of both EoC and what it means to be in business.

The EoC movement claims over 800 businesses world wide premised on a Trinitarian perspective engaged in inter-religious dialogue. Not only is EoC attempting to create organizational conditions in the workplace that foster the growth of people, but it is also creating a global network of businesses. Each business within this movement senses that its actions are not merely an idiosyncratic response to its own moral and spiritual orientation, but that the business is participating in a new global movement that can bring greater solidarity to an increasingly fragmented world.

Economy Embedded in Culture: A powerful characteristic of this book is how it contextualizes the practicality of the EoC movement within a broader theoretical rethinking of the relationship between culture, and in particular religious culture, and the economy. EoC as an economic movement is embedded in a profoundly religious vision of the Focolare as a cultural movement. The book explores how this cultural movement informs the values, relationships and practices of the businesses of this economic movement, as well as how the existence of EoC contributes to the dynamism of the Focolare movement. Gold illuminates the mutually influencing character between the culture and the economy, and she provides a massive case study of sorts that shows that when religious culture is at its best, it can generate an economic order that humanizes the
business realm and still be competitive. This relationship that Gold maps out for the reader is important both since all sorts of companies are and have been influenced by their religious culture: Quaker and Cadbury, Dutch Reformed and Herman Miller, Catholic and Mondragon, Protestantism and Reell, Buddhism and the Kikkoman Corporation, Parsi and Forbes Marshall, etc. What Gold brings to the fore is a crucial question for every business: what moral source has the capacity to create conditions in the workplace to humanize the relationships among people in a competitive economic environment? The secular mind a priori eliminates any religious source to this question, but Gold argues convincingly that a religious source and in particular a Trinitarian perspective has much to show the world.

The Focolare (comes from the Italian “hearth”) Movement began in the city of Trent [during the height its bombing in World War II]. Founded by Chiara Lubich and several of her companions, the movement consists of communities of people who change the patterns of conflict and division to dialogue and cooperation, first through small steps of acts of charity and conversation and then through larger steps of institutional change and inter-religious dialogue. Its charism is one of unity in an age of division.

Chiara Lubich believed that a source of this division had to do with wealth distribution. Grounding herself in the gospels, especially the gospel of Luke, she believed that “the selfish use of private property is one of the most serious causes of division” (72). She saw that “the desire to claim possessions for one’s self as opposed to feeling connected to others as family” was not simply an economic problem but at its core was a spiritual one (73). For when the poor suffer and the rich are satisfied, there cannot be unity. When the Focolare movement began, Chiara Lubich and friends dealt with this problem by giving away what they possessed, like the first Christian community, and shared their wealth with the destitute and poor. But to overcome this inequity, this fracture, the solution was not only a change in a more equal redistribution of goods, but also in a transformation of the inner life. What the rich had to realize is that the poor were their brothers and sisters in Christ and they had a duty not out of law, or their own so-called “enlightened self-interest” to share their possessions with the poor, but out of a deep love for the other. This is why the movement’s notion of giving was never restricted to material goods. They were not satisfied to share only material goods, but they also sought deeper union with others to share moral and spiritual goods through authentic forms of dialogue. They wanted not merely philanthropy, but a deeper union that touched people’s social and spiritual core. “[T]he value of the person is judged not on their capacity to have or give materially but on their capacity to give of themselves to others” (78). Claiming 4 million members world-wide, it is precisely this deep transformation of beliefs, attitudes, and values that made the Focolare Movement a cultural movement, and not merely another NGO.

While this personal response on behalf of the members relieved the suffering of millions of people throughout the globe, it did not address why people were in the impoverished situation in the first place. In 1991, when visiting Focolare communities in Brazil, Chiara Lubich was overwhelmed by the poverty of her members and the inequities between rich and poor, and she realized that something more radical needed to be done. She began to
reflect with the communities in Brazil, on what else can Focolare communities do to respond to the impoverished situation. Just before this experience, she read John Paul II’s new encyclical, *Centesimus annus*, which focused on the importance of the business economy and how business can be “communities of work” and give meaning to productive and consumptive activities. It is this dynamic of informed faith, especially a socially informed faith, and a deep sensitivity to the suffering of others, which gave birth to the EoC. The EoC emerged both because of the failure of the modern economic system to humanize business communities, and because the charism of unity in the Focolare movement impelled it to heal the division that poverty was causing.

The significance of the EoC within the Focolare Movement is how the EoC was able to move the Movement from what Gold calls a *personal economy* to a more a *public economy*. While those in the Focolare responded out of their personal commitment to redistribute their wealth, the *personal economy*, the EoC operationalized the Focolare’s spirituality into the realm of business, in the *public economy*, by first creating wealth and then distributing it (82). Whereas the Focolare movement sought communion in the distribution of goods, EoC sought communion both within the creation of goods and in its distribution. It sought communion in creating productive communities of work that served the needs of society in creating goods and services. It sought to address the origins of wealth inequity by reestablishing the workplace on a new economic/managerial ethic that was “motivated by an attitude of creating wealth to share with others, so as to build up the community” (171).

EoC moved the Focolare Movement to expand its charism of unity into the most dynamic wealth creating institution—business. It moved theological and spiritual discourse that would often be applied to one’s private life and applied it to one’s work life, especially in terms of how to run the business. What this theological grounding does for the employer and employee of an EoC business is to transform the *motivating desires* of why they are in business, how they view their employees, customers, and suppliers, how to distribute their profits, etc. In other words, one’s vocation could be lived out in the business itself, where the business would play “a critical role in the transformation of modern society into a more equitable and just society.” (117)

**Trinitarian Vision of Giving and Communion:** It is important to take note of what this theological ground consists of and how it informs the activities of the business, especially to understand the embedded cultural character of the businesses. Gold explains that one of the fundamental premises of the Focolare Movement that informs the EoC is unity, premised on a spirituality of unity founded in the theological doctrine of the Trinity (61ff). The Trinity explains how each Person gives to the other not in a way that exhausts but fulfills in perfect communion. Made in the image of this Trinitarian God, our fulfillment lies in both the giving of ourselves and in communion with others, but this image is not only encoded on our individual souls, but also in how we pattern our institutions. This Trinitarian perspective is the promotion of the culture of *giving* and a culture of *communion* within the business itself. Unlike Karl Rahner’s assertion that if the Trinity was eliminated from theology nothing would change in practice in the life of the
Christian (61), the EoC sees the Trinity as the fundamental interpretive category of God’s design for humanity not only in how we worship but in how we live and work.

In terms of the *culture of giving*, what begins to heal both the division between others and the division within oneself, is creating a culture of giving that enables each person to nurture her giving impulse which is at the heart of a spirituality of work. Without this “gift relationship” spirituality itself becomes a therapeutic means to deal with the stress of work rather than a way to see the deep patterns of God’s creative and redemptive activity. In terms of its organizational expression, EoC businesses distribute its profits into three parts (88):

- Distribute to the poor through the Focolare Networks;
- Distribute to reinvest in the business for the future sustainability of the firm;
- Distribute to Focolare programs that will foster the culture of giving—model towns, publishing houses, formation centers, etc.

To the entrepreneur cash flow is considered the life-blood of the business, so the ability of the entrepreneur to take cash out of the business in order to expand the Focolare’s function for distributing greater amounts of wealth has a powerful humanizing effect. While similar to tithing, EoC was keen to put forward that giving to the poor was not a convenient afterthought of the business, but is crucial to the self-understanding of the business itself. The purpose of the business is not only for shareholders, but for the poor. These profits go to help support the Focolare projects throughout the world. This giving of profits also creates a stronger ends/means relationship between how profits are made and how they are distributed. As one EoC businessperson put it, “the profits that were to be shared had to be ‘clean’.”

While the culture of giving and its distributive function characterized the EoC businesses at the beginning, the *culture of communion*, or its participative function has grown to be seen as one of the unique characteristics of EoC’s businesses. As Pope John XXIII wrote in 1961:

> Justice is to be observed not merely in the distribution of wealth, but also in regard to the conditions under which men engaged in productive activity have an opportunity to assume responsibility and to perfect themselves by their efforts. . . . Consequently, if the organization and structure of economic life be such that the human dignity of workers is compromised, or their sense of responsibility is weakened, or their freedom of action is removed, then we judge such an economic order to be unjust, even though it produces a vast amount of goods whose distribution conforms to the norms of justice and equity (*Mater et magistra*, 82–83)

What became quickly obvious to the leaders of EoC businesses is that a distributive function, even distributing to the poor, was not enough. Business was a place where people’s participation in the activities of business should lead to their growth and not their demise. The culture of communion was “that of transforming the production process
to bring it into line with the spiritual and social ideas of the Focolare” (142). In chapter 7 Gold lays out various business practices that create conditions to foster a community of work:

- Living wages
- Layoff as last alternative
- Participative management
- Product quality and service and deep customer relations
- Protection of the environment
- Honest relations with government
- Promoting the social character of the ownership of capital

It is actually in the “culture of communion” where one encounters the weakest link in the book as well as in the movement, which I will discuss in the next section. But before going to these criticisms, it needs to said that Gold has provided one of the most sophisticated descriptions of a Trinitarian vision for organizational life. Either theologians avoid the organizational implications of what it means to be created in the image of a Trinitarian God, or organizational theorists ignore completely the theological anthropology of Christianity. Gold makes a significant contribution to both theology and the organizational world in bringing these sources together by both avoiding a Trinitarian fundamentalism as well as crass instrumentalism and providing a foundation for synthesis and integration.

Critique and the Difficulty of Middle-Level Thinking: As with all movements, especially young movements, EoC has problems, which Gold examines. One particular problem is that while the owners of these businesses are committed to the principles of EoC, many of their employees are not aware of the company’s participation in EoC. Can a purpose as rich as EoC be fulfilled when a majority of the employees are unaware of it? While actions are more powerful than words, actions lose direction when a clear articulation fails to accompany them. Gold also points out that as a global movement, there are tensions among the particular businesses as to where the profits should be given—should they stay to help local needs or be distributed to where the greatest need exists on the globe? Gold is commended for bringing out these an other tensions and gaps within EoC.

As with all books, The Sharing Economy has its shortcomings. One of the few disappointing moments in the book is Gold’s discussion of justice (Chapter 10) and the failure to engage the tradition of justice that would be most akin to the Focolare movement and Trinitarian vision, namely a Aristotelian/Thomistic vision of justice embodied in the Catholic social tradition. She engages utilitarian, egalitarian, feminist, but no Catholic view. Someone like Alasdair MacIntyre, who represents a Thomistic vision of justice, would have enriched this chapter.

The shortcoming of both the book and the movement join in the lack of what Jonathan Boswell called “middle-level thinking.” While Gold articulates a profound Trinitarian vision in how it informs the distributive and participative functions of the business, she
does not articulate how the practices within the business are informed by this vision. Despite the attempt to integrate the dual purpose (profits for the poor and transforming business culture), EoC struggles with pushing the Trinitarian perspective deeper into the organizational policies and practices of the EoC businesses. One reason for this struggle is the lack of mediating principles of a tradition that arises out of the Trinitarian perspective that EoC holds. This Trinitarian vision and life offers fundamental inspirations, dispositions, motivations and values for economic action, but it does not offer direct organizational principles in how to run a business (168). In order to move to the practical, what is necessary is a moral tradition that is grounded in this Trinitarian perspective and is engaging in business issues. This is precisely what the Catholic social tradition has been attempting to do, and the absence of the Catholic social tradition in the book is surprising. One of the most disappointing chapters of the book was chapter seven, “Transforming Business Space,” since I was hoping that the move to the practical would have been informed not only by the Trinitarian perspective, which by itself is too general, but also mediated by principles and virtues that would be able to translate this Trinitarian vision into the practical. Gold tends to go too quickly from a Trinitarian perspective to practical policies, leaving a certain gap for the reader about how the translation took place. This may be more a problem with EoC than with Gold, but she herself should have noted it as a problem.

Let me give three examples in chapter seven where an engagement with the Catholic social tradition and its middle-level thinking would have enriched the conversation.

1. Wages: While the discussion in the book on wages is brief, it could have been enriched by the Catholic social tradition’s understanding of a just wage as livable, equitable and sustainable. For example, Gold points out many companies would give wage increases, bonuses and extra benefits because of their participation in EoC, but there was no sense of how these companies thought through these activities as connected to the vision of EoC. While such impulses on EoC managers to give employees more income and benefits suggests good will on behalf of the employer, it does not indicate whether these activities are sustainable in the competitive market; nor is there any connection of how a Trinitarian perspective is connected to wages.

2. Participative Management: While the principle of subsidiarity is mentioned throughout the book, it is never applied to the authority and decision making within the firm itself and especially in terms of how it applies to participative management. Here the EoC could progress the Catholic social tradition itself by developing the application of subsidiarity to business and not just the state.

3. Ownership of Capital and Employees: Gold explains that the connectivity of ownership with the local community where management and shareholders are one is important for control purposes (141), but she does not examine the importance of widening productive ownership, especially to employees, which ought to be important to the EoC’s distributive ethic. The Catholic social tradition, while never mandating employee ownership, has argued that it is a practical way for
employees to become more fully connected both to their workplace and to a
supplemental source of income (see *Laborem Exercens*, 14, *Gaudium et Spes*, 71,
*Mater Magistra* 77, *Quadragesimo Anno* 65). With employees uninformed by the
wider mission of EoC and with little sense of including them in the ownership of
the company, it is questionable whether the mission of EoC is sustainable for the
long term. This is not to say that all EoC companies should be employee-owned,
but it does say that EoC businesses need to examine more fully how its mission
and values can be better embraced throughout the firm by having employees
connected to the firm through multiple ways.

The reasons for this absence of middle-level thinking especially in light of the Catholic
social tradition are many. One reason rests with the Catholic social tradition itself, since
it has tended to examine macro issues than micro organizational ones, leaving
movements such as the EoC to apply principles such as subsidiarity on its own. Another
reason is that EoC is a young movement and Gold, as well as its members, realize that it
has more maturing to do. Throughout the book, one is struck by the humility of both Gold
and members within the EoC. There is no hint of self-congratulations in creating 800
businesses, but rather a deep conviction to deepen and expand the values throughout each
of the businesses and the movement itself. One suggestion for further maturing was the
development of an EoC business association which could be a place for this middle-level
thinking to take place (160). Still another reason for the lack of middle-level thinking is
that the EoC is not simply a Catholic organization. As the movement becomes more
pluralistic, it is attempting to be more inter-religious. This of course is an extraordinary
strength of EoC, but one wonders whether in its desire for greater inclusivity, it has left
its origins too quickly.

**Conclusion:** Despite these criticisms, the relationship between the Focolare Movement
and the EoC has witnessed both to the Church and to the world a vision of what happens
when a moral and spiritual culture (Focolare) embraces and informs economic life (EoC).
EoC has begun to transform “economic spaces into social and even ‘sacred’ ones” (178).
It reveals a conception of business that challenges dominant notions of instrumental
rationality by grounding its operations in a moral and spiritual culture that can permeate
business life.

For many, especially for secular ears, this spiritual permeation will sound strange and for
some dangerous. But what Focolare and EoC help us to face is what has the moral and
spiritual capacity to foster deep human values within the economic sphere? What has the
capacity to ward off the immense instrumentalist forces in our world that turns businesses
into maximizing financial machines? No doubt law helps, and no doubt a humanistic
ethic can contribute to humanizing business, but they are prone to the creeping
instrumentalism of modern culture or what Habermas calls “economic colonialism.”
Gold brilliantly explains that within capitalistic societies, dimensions of life that were
once freed from the instrumental logic of profitability have “been gradually taken over by
the expansion of the market into every sphere of life. Every such sphere has been
commodified and no space is left untouched – family, health, education, leisure time: all
of these aspects of the life world are colonized by economic action” It is precisely this
distorted relationship between a weak culture and an over-stimulated economy that has in part created the crisis in business today—a crisis of division. Our liberal model of economic life has fostered this division by creating a language not of distinctions but of isolation between public and private, spiritual and material, reason and revelation, faith and work, church and state—a division that ultimately weakens culture’s capacity to humanize economic and political life.

What Gold has provided in *The Sharing Economy* is a theologically grounded understanding of a robust culture that has the capacity to engage the whole human person as a unity to overcome the divisive effects of a fragmented and divided self in economic life. It not only tells the story of EoC, but it provides a model for entrepreneurs and managers who are interested in building communities of work and not merely nexuses of exchange. It is a book that should be widely read in the U.S., especially in the academy, which too often lacks such integrative and interdisciplinary analysis between theoretical visions and practical experience.