

“All is interconnected: A Quaker Reflection on Ubuntu and the Economy”

Good afternoon, Friends. Thank you so much for having me, and I’m sorry not to be with you in person.

Today I was asked to reflect on how Quaker *spirituality* might inform our approach to the economy, through the lens of your theme, the Spirit of Ubuntu. After all, as we look around at the many deep economic injustices of our world, it’s tempting to rush into trying to solve those problems as social activists. But as Quakers, we’re called first to bring what we see to the Holy Spirit. To discern the spiritual causes underlying the material problems, and to listen to what specific work we’re led into in response.

[As Will said?] I’m a lifelong Friend, and was researching historic Quaker theology before working at Theos on the intersection of faith and society more broadly, so I’ll draw on all that in what I say here. I’ll start by suggesting some ideas that might shape *a spiritual approach* to the economy – focusing especially on the theme of interconnectedness, and the God-given spiritual *potential* of the economy as a site of interconnection. Then I’ll point to some symptoms of our economies falling short of (or even working against) this potential. And finally, I’ll consider just one reason I think this is, drawing on Theos’ recent work on our culture’s obsession with productivity growth as a case study.

So to begin – tools for a spiritual approach to the economy – I draw inspiration from one of George Fox’s most famous early visions in 1647. Fox was feeling deeply grieved by the state of the world around him, and tells us he was under “great Temptations”, but could find nobody to “bring his condition to” except “the Lord”. In leaning on God, he was shown that “the natures of those things which were hurtful without, were within in the hearts and minds of wicked men”. Then, God told Fox he should:

...have a sense of all conditions [for] how else should I speak to all conditions; and in this I saw the infinite love of God. I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. And in that also I saw the infinite love of God.

At first glance this doesn’t sound very ‘economic’, but it’s a vision that both acknowledges the pain and power of the wickedness around (and even within) us in all its forms, *and* attests to the power of Divine Love flowing over all this darkness. It reminds us that Divine Love cleanses and holds together what seems separate, and that we are called to channel that Love in however we respond to the world around us. It is a vision that speaks deeply to the inherent connectedness of all things – not only pragmatically, in terms of our *obligation* to try to speak to all conditions, but also more deeply, in that everything is ultimately held by this connecting and infinite love of God.

As Quakers in this tradition, then, we believe in a Spirit who directly teaches and loves *all people*. We look for, and encourage, signs of the Spirit’s Love connecting all (and act where it’s prevented). And we listen to our shared Inward Teacher, to discern which bit of this great, Divine work we are each led into. This might be an individual or collective concern, but it’s always guided by a Love that connects us all.

To me, this seems closely aligned with the Spirit of Ubuntu. Afterall, Ubuntu teaches us that we can’t be human beings alone. My wellbeing is your wellbeing; your distress is my distress. We must not

turn away from each other. This doesn't just mean we have the same material interests, but that we're united even at the level of our deepest being.

In the words of Desmond Tutu, "A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good. This is based from a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are... diminished."

Connectedness of all things is key to both Quakerism and Ubuntu. As a result, as London Yearly Meeting stressed in 1992:

We should not be creating structures to work for us, but empowering each other to do the work laid on each of us. However we plan ... the Spirit is unchanging and will always lead us... All is interconnected, worship with action, wisdom with love. (29.02)

All is interconnected, worship with action, wisdom with love.

This is my spiritual starting point today. Because nowhere does this Quaker refusal to separate spirituality from the whole of life seem more appropriate than on economic matters. After all, as a network of resources, relationships, and tasks necessary for the common good, the economy isn't just about survival – although for many it fails adequately even to deliver that. Actually, day to day, the economy is (for most people) *also* the primary shared space through which they do actually *connect* to something bigger than themselves or their household alone. Of course, the distribution of material resources is itself inter-connection, by which people share in the 'common wealth' of their town, their region, their nation – to varying degrees. But the economy is also the means by which millions – even billions – of people have been, at least until very recently, most likely *literally* to connect with people beyond their close friends and family (that is, those they would hopefully connect with anyway!). And more than just casual acquaintance, this is often *real, gritty connection*, to work together on shared tasks, building (we hope) shared benefits. The economy is where Love often grows most quietly between us.

Good economic arrangements are a key way in which human beings realise their spiritual potential for connectedness. And so, the lack of them is BOTH materially AND spiritually damaging to us all at the deepest level.

To draw a biblical analogy here, after Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam is famously cursed with "painful toil" as he must now work the land to produce food for survival. Sometimes we view the economy a bit like this: hard work for only the basics needed to survive. And this is certainly part of the economic picture – it might even be most people's experience of it – but we can't let it be the final word. This is an economy gone wrong. But if we go back a chapter before the Fall, Genesis 2 tells us that "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden *to work it and take care of it.*" Work was intended as part of a balanced and flourishing human existence even before things went wrong. And a chapter even earlier, deeper still, we see that *God himself works before he rests on the seventh day.*

The Divine exerts energy to create this beautiful Garden which we then take care of. Our work (in its broadest sense) is a response to the divine work of creation.

Poetically, these passages remind us that the *economy* isn't a necessary evil – a set of policies and logistical arrangements to get right and move on from – but a place in which we connect with the world. A place where God is revealed.

And a person is a gardener of creation – a caretaker of common resources which all come from God. So we're created for relationship, not just with other humans but with the whole non-human creation too; and this comes with obligation for the wellbeing of all things, including economically.

As William Penn (incidentally, I believe, convinced of his Quakerism in Cork) famously said:

True godliness don't turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it... [We] should keep the helm and guide the vessel to its port; not meanly steal out at the stern of the world and leave those that are in it without a pilot to be driven by the fury of evil times....

So we can embrace the positive potential of the economy as a potential site of Love and even spiritual revelation.

And yet the difference between how the economy could be – this beautiful site of interconnection, relationship, and collaboration – and how it is, is huge. So often, it seems guided by *exactly* the negative forces Penn warns us against. For many, it feels like the ocean of death and darkness.

The distance is especially obvious when we ask (inspired by a Spirit of Ubuntu) who is actually able *fully to participate and connect* in the goods of the economy. And who instead experiences the economy as unfairness, exploitation, or isolation?

For a start, we know demographics make a huge difference here – along all sorts of measures.

To take just a few examples, of those within the top 10% of Irish earners, 70.3% are male.

Meanwhile, a 2018 report found that Black Irish citizens were **much less likely** to hold a managerial job than their White Irish counterparts, although levels of employment were similar. Meanwhile in the UK, 77% of white people were employed in 2022, compared with only 69% of people from all other ethnic groups. That's a difference of 8 percentage points.

The Irish Central Statistics Office suggests that there is an average **difference in pay** of around EUR13,000 per year between the lowest pay in Donegal and the highest in Dublin, and in the UK the region differences are even starker.

And an asylum seeker in Ireland can **only work with permission** from the state, and only then if they have not received an update on their application after 5 months; in the UK, it is only after a year. In the meantime, how do they support themselves? How do they integrate?

So here are some clear inequalities from the start.

Less obviously, what about those who 'work' – who are doing something we all know is vital to the economy – but aren't paid at all? How should a fair economy ensure their wellbeing and full participation? Childcare is the biggest example here, and I realise Friends in the Republic of Ireland have very recently been through referenda on issues related to this. Before industrialisation, the work of raising children would have often happened alongside other forms of work in the home. But as home and work became separate spaces, 'home' became viewed as female space (unpaid of course) and – even more so as women entered the workforce – all that 'home-based' childcare became non-work, to be squished in around all other responsibilities. Those looking after their own children full-time are inaccurately described as 'not working', while for many others, huge amounts of childcare is now by necessity slotted in *around other, paid work*. At the same time, we pay others who are looking after our children, but not enough. For example, there has been media attention in

the UK recently around the fact that many nursery workers are quitting because they can basically earn more in supermarkets, with a huge staff shortage in early years education as a result.

How we value adult social care raises many similar issues. Many carers are unpaid, while *professional* carers are portrayed as low-skilled, usually earning very low wages. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the care sector is also in crisis – a huge political issue and a ticking time bomb, given that we live in ageing societies. And of course, in all these forms of work, the skills needed to do the job well are some of the most profound and valuable of all: loving and attending to the needs of the most vulnerable, paying attention to those who are otherwise unseen or unable to look after themselves.

The whole way we conceptualise and value different forms of work here is disjointed and indeed *disconnected*. And those on the other side of this view feel it: an online survey of mothers from 2023 found that nearly three quarters of them felt “invisible”, while 93% felt unappreciated, unacknowledged or unseen once they’d had children. All this is symptomatic of a lack of connectedness in our economic system.

Let’s look at another symptom of disconnection: even for those not experiencing economic hardship, the pandemic has turbo-charged an increase in lone working. 27% of the UK population worked alone for some or all of the week before the pandemic, and this is estimated to have risen to 59% since then. This doesn’t necessarily mean that they are lonely or unhappy; in fact, many of them are home-workers who enjoy being able to spend more with their families without a lengthy commute. For some, it’s a return to that pre-industrial blend of home and work I mentioned. But where employers manage lone working badly, we also know it leads to a lack of worker protections, and (the evidence shows) poor mental and physical health. It’s a huge *new* health and wellbeing issue in the economy. It also removes a major opportunity for mixing in wider society, with potentially profound implications for social cohesion.

And as another symptom of economic disconnection, partly as a culmination of many of these examples: increasing numbers of people are now classified as economically insecure even when they are in work. This is a question of how the economy as a whole is organised to deliver the real basics. In 2021, the RSA broke the UK population into seven economic ‘personas’, and even then - before the cost of living crisis - 35% of the population were already in highly economically insecure groups. Over a third of people in their “metropolitan precariat” group had a household income of above £34,000, yet still experienced high insecurity because of a low level of assets or high living costs. 60% of this group said they would struggle to pay an unexpected bill of £100; across the population this was estimated to be around 36%. This is millions of people, including millions in work, who have very little economic stability.

And of course, finally then, for these reasons and many more, increasing numbers of people in our societies now live in poverty. Both relative and absolute poverty have risen since the pandemic in Ireland, and in the UK the Joseph Rowntree Foundation calculates that it has been almost 20 years and 6 prime ministers since the last prolonged period of falling poverty in the UK.

Poverty is the sharp end where absolute need is the greatest and most urgent; many rightly focus their efforts here. But it is also a symptom of all the ways in which our economy *more generally* serves to disconnect, rather than connect, people. Of all the ways it fails to be truly inclusive.

These examples are by no means exhaustive, but I chose them because they all raise fundamental questions about how our economies enable meaningful connection, really enabling people to *give positively of themselves and receive from others*. Increasing numbers of people simply don’t experience the economy as a site of connection at all, but rather as a driver of the ways they are

marginalised, undervalued, or unseen. In all the areas I've noted above, our faith can be a witness, calling for a better way.

But why is our economy like this?

Inevitably, what our economy looks like depends partly on what we decide is important to measure, and to close with an example that is particularly close to my heart at the moment, Theos has recently been doing work on the harms of our disproportionate concern for productivity growth. I now feel this is contributing to many of the problems we see on the rise today.

In simple terms, productivity is how much economic output you get for what you put in, and productivity growth is how much that ratio improves over time. We generally expect it to go up, as it did massively over the course of the twentieth century. That was a major reason for the huge improvements in living standards over that time.

There's a lot that could be said here, but in our limited time, I'd just like to draw attention to the fact that productivity is therefore generally viewed as one of the major indicators of a healthy economy. And that's not totally a bad thing: for example, many of the reasons it's sluggish in the UK do reflect problems that need solving. A lack of investment in infrastructure, poor training, and so on. However, if we focus on productivity alone we are chasing a fundamentally impossible scenario: as limited and finite beings, on a limited and finite planet, we can't endlessly increase our productivity and the attempt to try – especially when it reflects the desire for greater output, rather than smaller input – is exhausting for both people and planet.

In fact, the Republic of Ireland and the UK have quite different relationships with productivity growth, though underlying both economies are economic strategies to improve productivity that should be interrogated. In the UK, we've had sluggish productivity growth since the financial crash and lag behind other G7 economies; this is largely due to a lack of investment. Meanwhile, Ireland consistently ranks among the most productive nations on earth, but this I believe is largely down to its low corporation tax which attracts many billions of dollars to the Irish economy through highly profitable multinationals.

So to square the circle, we make sacrifices in other ways to drive greater output. Lower wages, less spare time, reduced office space, poorer quality services and goods, or focusing on industries that produce huge profit that isn't shared more widely. All these 'solutions' cause their own problems.

To take a really important example, which I feel Quakers can witness particularly effectively towards, most developed nations also have an increasing proportion of service-based jobs, in which productivity is especially difficult to improve. Say somebody you love receives a daily care visit at home, and the carer needs to make two visits an hour to get round their list. Increasing funding constraints may mean they are then asked to make four visits an hour, but if they do, what bit of the care doesn't happen? Will your relative go unwashed that day? Will a key new symptom be missed? In this line of work (which more and more of us work in!) face-to-face human attention is key and eventually irreducible: growing 'productivity' alone will eventually destroy the core task. If a carer can't make more visits of the same quality in an hour, savings are made in other – often dangerous – ways. And yet, the drive to improve productivity in health and social care is seen as a necessity.

In all this, I'm reminded of the Gospel story of Mary and Martha, with Christ telling the over-worked and weary Martha, "You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

To me, this is a perfect summary of what I am trying to do in silent worship: putting aside the week's busyness aside to pay attention to the leadings of Christ in the midst. It is also a perfect summary of what we so often lose sight of as productivity-obsessed culture.

So by this example I hope to show that part of thinking about the economy spiritually might be identifying ways in which our economy pushes us away from the patterns we think are spiritually at the heart of what it means to be human – with material consequences for some of the poorest citizens, never mind the spiritual health of such a society.

Underlying the symptoms I rattled through, our economies are often pushed by incentives that make things less, not more, fair. Less sustainable. Less human-centred. Worse, not better. This often happens without most of us really thinking about *why* the economy is like this, or *why* we feel pressured in a certain direction. But we all feel the consequences.

To close, then, a final reflection: Quakers are well known for their long heritage of engaging positively with the economy, from the Cadburys and the creation of Bournville village, to honest banking, to the institution of set prices. We should rightly be proud of this heritage, and the ways our spiritual forebears sought to reflect their faith in their working lives. But there was also huge wealth generation involved in these well-known Quaker stories. In an age of climate crisis, and significant geopolitical realignment, reimagining our economy for connection, and addressing many of the issues I've outlined tonight, may not allow for those sorts of outcomes. It might be an altogether riskier vocation.

Nonetheless, whoever we are, and whatever our current socio-economic situation, there will be ways in which we are called to release greater connection between people – all of whom we believe have that of God within them – because that is the vision of Quakerism.

In words of Quaker Thomas Kelly in 1938:

In worship we have our neighbours to right and left, before and behind, yet the Eternal Presence is over all and beneath all. Worship does not consist in achieving a mental state of concentrated isolation from one's fellows. But in the depth of common worship it is as if we found our separate lives were all one life, within whom we live and move and have our being.

I've spoken mainly of diagnosing the problems tonight. But what might this 'one life' look like reimagined for our own discernment; our own generation; our own economy, today?