ABSTRACT. The paper starts by giving a historical and philosophical explanation for the current separation between theology and economics. It is then argued that postmodern culture offers the church and theology an opportunity to get reinvolved in the world of business, and especially in Business Ethics. Before opportunities for involvement is discussed, the question on the unique nature of Christians ethics is posed. The notion of Christian ethics as essentially an understanding of reality is proposed and defended against rival interpretations of Christians ethics. Finally the role that the church and theology can play in developing business morality on the macro-, meso-, and micro-economic levels are discussed.

1. Introduction

"Imagine someone in an airplane in the sixteenth century, flying over one of the large cities of Europe. The landscape would be dominated by a cathedral and its spires, with small shops and other places of commerce surrounding it. What one would see, of course, would reflect accurately on the distribution of power, status and wealth in the medieval world. Now imagine someone in a plane flying over a major city in the latter part of the twentieth century. The dominant buildings are no longer cathedrals and churches; rather, one sees the towers of financial institutions and centers of commerce and industry. This view, too, would adequately reflect the distribution of power, status, and wealth in today's world" (May, 1982: 167).

This fascinating, though hypothetical excursion to which William May invited his readers, can be extended. Suppose the airplane makes a landing outside the medieval city, someone in the airplane attends a town-meeting in that medieval city, and is given the opportunity to ask those present at the meeting the following question: "Should the church be involved in matters of business?" The response to our traveller's question is an overwhelming and unanimous "YES". Indeed most, if not all of the respondents would have considered the question somewhat weird, because they would hardly be able to imagine a society in which the church is not involved in matters of business. Suppose the same someone gets back in the airplane, flies to the late twentieth century city, makes another landing, and attends a similar meeting and poses the same question. An altogether different response greets our traveller. Instead of a unanimous answer, our traveller gets a debate. The positions in the debate vary from a definite yes, to a definite no, with all sorts of qualifications in the middle. Some of the people remain simply puzzled by the question, since the idea of church and theology having something to do with business has never crossed their minds.

This hypothetical journey through the ages focuses attention on the historical and cultural change from a time when the church and theologians considered it obvious that they have to deal with economic matters, to our present situation, where there is uncertainty about the relationship between church and the world of business (cf Wilbur, 1988: 453 and Williams, 1982: 131). The development of a distinct field of Business Ethics, mainly because of the need expressed by business leaders over the last three decades, indicates that there is a need for a moral dimension in matters of business and work. This new situation obviously offers opportunities for
those with expertise in the field of ethics to make a contribution to the disciplines and praxis of Economics and Business Management. The church, traditionally one of the main sources of moral formation in Western societies, is one of the players to whom the invitation to contribute is extended. This paper will ask whether the church and theologians should seize this opportunity, or whether they should see it as an attempt by the business community to compromise the church into an ideological partnership with capitalism. In order to address this problem the following strategy will be used: First, I offer an explanation for the present uncertainty about the appropriate relationship between religion and economic activity. Second, I raise the question of the nature of Christian ethics in order to determine whether it has implications for the world of business. Third, I identify the contributions that a Christian ethic can make to the development of moral business culture.

2. Where have all the Christians gone?

Medieval theologians were considered to be competent, if not dominant contributors to the economic debate. However, since the Industrial Revolution theologians have been asked, and later instructed, to close the factory door behind them — on their way out. Today they are once again invited back into the headquarters of at least some business corporations or into the luxurious homes of corporate executives. Is this simply a case of the wheel having come full circle? Understanding this dramatic development over the last six centuries is essential for a responsible response on the part of the church to this invitation. The story behind this story is indeed a complicated one, requiring a long memory. The version of the story presented here does not claim to be exhaustive. It is only broad brush-strokes in order to place the question of a theological contribution to business ethics in a meaningful cultural context.

In medieval society the most fundamental distinction was the one between the transcendent and the immanent (or to put it in ordinary language, the distinction between God and the world that he created). In this distinction the emphasis was placed on the transcendent. The whole of creation was subordinated to God and his plan for the world. Those institutions and people (the church and its officials) who were seen as representing God, were the ones vested with authority. Every dimension of society was subordinated to the divine plan as it was presented by the church. This was the case for education and politics, and also for economics. The existing social order was portrayed as being a divine order. To challenge the social order was therefore to challenge God's wisdom. Serving the social order was an act of obedience to God. The human body was taken as a paradigm for understanding society. In the same way that the human body consists of different parts, each with its own predetermined function, so the different classes in society also have predetermined roles to fulfill. Medieval society was therefore a closed society, in which no upward mobility was allowed. It was protective of the existing order, and therefore also repressive (cf Williams, 1982: 6—8 and Tawney, 1962: 22—62).

Given this mindset, it is obvious that economic activities should be subordinated to this divine order. Economic activities were judged on how they contributed to the maintenance of this order. The purpose of economic activity was merely to fulfill the needs of the person or the institution involved. Economic activities that disturbed this order, especially usury and avarice, were condemned by the authorities. Avarice, the pursuit of wealth for its own sake, could divert a person's consciousness from God, its proper focus. Usury, the lending of money or goods at an interest, was considered a form of avarice, and was seen as making a profit out of the need of another person.

The activities of the first entrepreneurs and the new class (bourgeoisie) created by these entrepreneurial activities, were therefore strongly condemned by the authorities of the day — for the reasons that were given. Not even the first generation of Protestants changed this situation. Luther did not condemn the church of his day for not accommodating the new class. On the contrary, he condemned the church, amongst other reasons, for being corrupted by this new bourgeois mentality. His emphasis on vocation and the importance of earthly life was not intended to legitimize capitalistic activities, but to motivate people to fulfill to the best of their ability the obligations assigned to them by traditional society.

The first major theological break with this social order was heralded by Calvin and the religious