

- FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:
1. In light of the postclassical sources and comparisons, how would you rate the argument that no matter what their professed values, most people and societies are motivated by a desire for profit and will expand commercially whenever they can? Is a desire for economic gain an inherent part of human nature?
 2. Which came first in world history: concern about trade or economic limitations? Did Christianity cause Western Europe's initial commercial lag in the postclassical period, or did economic decline encourage Christian concerns? How did Confucianism affect actual Chinese economic patterns in the post-classical period and beyond?
 3. How do postclassical discussions of trade and merchants compare with the discussions probable in the modern world?

A MUSLIM VIEW: IBN KHALDUN

Ibn Khaldun was one of the greatest historians and geographers of all time. Born in Tunis, North Africa, he lived from 1332 to 1406. He served as an official in Tunis, Morocco, and Spain and traveled widely, finally settling, as a scholar, in Egypt. His great work was the *Kitab al-Ibar* (universal history), which included comments on the active trade that he saw around him, at the time when Muslim commercial success was still near its height.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADERS

Commerce, as we have said before, is the increasing of capital by buying goods and attempting to sell them at a price higher than their cost. This is done either by waiting for a rise in the market price; or by transporting the goods to another place where they are more keenly demanded and therefore fetch a higher price; or, lastly, by selling them on a long-term credit basis. Commercial profit is small, relatively to the capital invested, but if the capital is large, even a low rate of profit will produce a large total gain.

In order to achieve this increase in capital, it is necessary to have enough initial capital to pay in cash the sellers from whom one buys goods; it is also necessary to sell for cash, as honesty is not widespread among people. This dishonesty leads on the one hand to fraud and the adulteration of goods, and on the other to delays in payment which diminish profits because capital remains idle during the interval. It also induces buyers to repudiate their debts, a practice which is very injurious to the merchant's capital unless he can produce documentary evidence or the testimony of eyewitness. Nor are magistrates of much help in such cases, because they necessarily judge on evident proofs.

As a result of all this, the trader can only secure his meagre profits by dint of much effort and toil, or indeed he may well lose not only profits but capital as well. Hence, if he is known to be bold in entering law suits, careful in keeping accounts, stubborn in defending his point of view, firm in his attitude towards magistrates, he stands a good chance of getting his due. Should he not have these qualities, his only chance is to secure the support of a highly placed protector who will awe his debtors into paying him and the magistrates into meting justice out to him. Thus he gets justice spontaneously in the first case, and by compulsion in the second. Should a person, however, be lacking in boldness and the spirit of enterprise and at the same

... if he have no protector to back him up, he had better avoid trade altogether, as he risks losing his capital and becoming the prey of other merchants. The fact of the matter is that most people, especially the mob and the trading classes, covet the goods of others; and but for the restraint imposed by the magistrates all goods would have been taken away from their owners....

The manners of tradesmen are inferior to those of rulers, and far removed from manliness and uprightness. We have already stated that traders must buy and sell and seek profits. This necessitates flattery, and evasiveness, litigation and disputation, all of which are characteristic of this profession. And these qualities lead to a decrease and weakening in virtue and manliness. For acts inevitably affect the soul; thus good acts produce good and virtuous effects in the soul while evil or mean acts produce the opposite. Hence the effects of evil acts will strike root and strengthen themselves, if they should come early in life and repeat themselves; while if they come later they will efface the virtues by imprinting their evil effects on the soul; as is the case with all habits resulting from actions.

From Charles Issawi, ed. and trans. *An Arab Philosophy of History: Selections from the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun* (London: John Murray, 1950), 68–70, 78, 80, 81. Copyright © 1987 by The Darwin Press, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

These effects will differ according to the conditions of the traders. For those of them who are of mean condition and in direct contact with the cheating and extortion of sellers will be more affected by these evils and further removed from manliness.... The other kind of traders are those who are protected by prestige and do not have to undertake directly such operations. Such persons are very rare indeed and consist of those who have acquired wealth suddenly, by inheritance or by other, unusual means. This wealth enables them to get in touch with the rulers and thus to gain prestige and protection so that they are released from practising these things [viz. buying and selling] themselves; instead, they entrust such business to their agents. Moreover the rulers, who are not indifferent to the wealth and liberality of such traders, protect them in their right and thus free them from certain unpleasant actions and their resulting evil effects. Hence they will be more manly and honourable than the other kind of trader; yet certain effects will still make themselves felt behind the veil, inasmuch as they still have to supervise their agents and employees in their doings—but this only takes place to a limited extent and its effects are hardly visible....

... Consider, as an example, the lands of the East, such as Egypt, Syria, Persia, India, or China; or the lands lying North of the Mediterranean. Because social life is flourishing there, notice how wealth has increased, the state has grown stronger, towns have multiplied, trade has prospered, conditions have improved....

As for Trade, although it be a natural means of livelihood, yet most of the methods it employs are tricks aimed at making a profit by securing the difference between the buying and selling prices, and by appropriating the surplus. This is why [religious] Law allows the use of such methods, which, although they come under the heading of gambling, yet do not constitute the taking without return of other people's goods....

Should their standard of living, however, rise, so that they begin to enjoy more than the bare necessities, the effect will be to breed in them a desire for repose and tranquillity. They will therefore co-operate to secure superfluities; their food and clothing will increase in quantity and refinement; they will enlarge their houses and

plan their towns for defence. A further improvement in their conditions will lead to habits of luxury, resulting in extreme refinement in cooking and the preparation of food; in choosing rich clothing of the finest silk; in raising lofty mansions and castles and furnishing them luxuriously, and so on. At this stage the crafts develop and reach their height. Lofty castles and mansions are built and decorated sumptuously, water is drawn to them and a great diversity takes place in the way of dress, furniture, vessels, and household equipment.

Such are the townsmen, who earn their living in industry or trade. Their gains are greater than those working in agriculture or animal husbandry and their standard of living higher, being in line with their wealth. We have shown, then, that both the nomadic and the urban stages are natural and necessary.

A CHRISTIAN VIEW: REGINALD OF DURHAM ON SAINT GODRIC

This excerpt from a biography of Godric, an English merchant who later became a saint, both describes actual merchant activities in Europe and provides an example of an established literary-religious form of writing in Christian Europe in which the main point was to stress the saint's virtues and use biography as an inspiration to others. There may be some distortion of reality here; certainly, some aspects of the merchant condition have to be discovered by reading between the lines.

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This holy man's father was named Ailward, and his mother Edwenna; both of slender rank and wealth, but abundant in righteousness and virtue. ... When the boy had passed his childish years quietly at home; then, as he began to grow to manhood, he began to follow more prudent ways of life, and to learn carefully and persistently the teachings of worldly forethought. Wherefore he chose not to follow the life of a husbandman, but rather to study, learn and exercise the rudiment of more subtle conceptions. For this reason, aspiring to the merchant's trade, he began to follow the chapman's [peddler's] way of life, first learning how to gain in small bargains and things of insignificant price; and thence, while yet a youth, his mind advanced little by little to buy and sell and gain from things of greater expense. For, in his beginnings, he was wont to wander with small wares around the villages and farmsteads of his own neighborhood; but, in process of time, he gradually associated himself by compact with city merchants. Hence, within a brief space of time, the youth who had trudged for many weary hours from village to village, from farm to farm, did so profit by his increase of age and wisdom as to travel with associates of his own age through towns and boroughs fortresses and cities, to fairs and to all the various booths of the market-place.... He went along the high-way, neither puffed up by the good testimony of his conscience nor downcast in the nobler part of his soul by the reproach of poverty....

From Reginald of Durham, "Life of St. Godric," in G. G. Coulton, ed., *Social Life in Britain from the Conquest to the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918), 415–20. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

Yet in all things he walked with simplicity; and, in so far as he yet knew how, it was ever his pleasure to follow in the footsteps of the truth. For, having learned the Lord's Prayer and the Creed from his very cradle, he oftentimes turned them over in his mind, even as he went alone on his longer journeys; and, in so far as the truth was revealed to his mind, he clung thereunto most devoutly in all his thoughts concerning God. At first, he lived as a [salesman] for four years in Lincolnshire, selling on foot and carrying the smallest wares that he travelled abroad. First to St.