

Misconceptions about Schaeffer's (political economic) conservatism

A very significant figure

Francis Schaeffer (1912-84) undoubtedly had a considerable influence as; "...a physically small man with a great passion for the truth" (Duriez, 2008). He was one of the key leaders of the evangelical and Reformed community in the US during the 1960s-early 1980s. In 1997 *Christianity Today* argued he had been the evangelical world's greatest public intellectual.ⁱ Schaeffer provoked something of a reassessment amongst many evangelical and Reformed Christians as to how we engage with culture. His approach to evangelism and apologetics remains a subject of controversy but is certainly significant.ⁱⁱ Finally, almost three and a half decades on from this death his ideas remain influential- many have benefitted from the network of L'Abri communities which he created.

The "problem" to be considered

This article does not deal with Schaeffer's views on Biblical inerrancy or philosophy or Western art- all important subjects. Rather, the focus is what he wrote (or perhaps what he did not write) about economics and related political matters.

At the time of his death and since Schaeffer has been perceived as a conservative in political and economic terms. Commentators such as *Der Spiegel* (16 May 1983) assigned him a leading role in the development of the so-called "Religious Right" in the US during the 1970s-80s. In the view of Garry Wills (1990) Schaeffer, "...deserves more credit than anyone else...", for reigniting a desire in evangelicals to recover America's (alleged) Christian foundations. President Ronald Reagan issued a warm tribute after Schaeffer's death on 15 May 1984. D.A. Johnson (1990) argued that Schaeffer persuaded US fundamentalists to overcome their traditional separatist pietism. And, alongside that, he persuaded evangelicals that it was permissible to campaign in a co-belligerent way with those who did not share they own beliefs.

Schaeffer's son Frank also contributed to the impression that his father had been an inspiration to the political right. Over time, Franky changed his position in the sense that he began to regret what he perceived to have been his father's very powerful political legacy. The title of Frank's sometimes erratic autobiography tries to sum it all up; *Crazy for God: How I Grew up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of it Back*.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is fair to note that Schaeffer himself contributed something to these perceptions. When Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, Schaeffer hailed this as like, "...a unique window opening" (*A Christian Manifesto*, Complete Works (CW), vol. 5, p. 457- for all his works we refer to the edition in the five volumes of the CW). Admittedly, the actual content of the chapter in his *A Christian Manifesto* rather qualifies this optimism. Schaeffer also argued that he and people like him should not be unduly concerned about the labels which were applied to them. If he was called a "fundamentalist" and a member of the "New Right", so be it. The content of one's beliefs must trump the perception which others have of their provenance (*The Great Evangelical Disaster*, CW 4, p. 404).

The "problem" is therefore this- the US Christian Right has become associated with a particular set of views about economics and economic policy; a preference for capitalism and the market economy, as well as for low taxes, low government spending and minimal environmental regulation. To what extent did Schaeffer share these views?

When one tests such perceptions against the reality of what Schaeffer wrote in the 23 books of the five volumes of his Complete Works, I believe a rather more nuanced picture emerges.^{iv} If we define “conservative” in the sense that it is often now used in the US, that is, someone who places a very high value on capitalism and the use of free markets as opposed to government to determine economic outcomes then Schaeffer’s conservatism was rather qualified. This is not to deny that in many other senses he was a political or social or cultural conservative- his opposition to communism, his appeals to old political traditions in countries like the US, Scotland, England and Switzerland, his very socially conservative position on “life issues” such as abortion and euthanasia and his hawkish position on retaining a nuclear deterrent.

What he wrote about economics and politics

The goals of economic life: How the capitalist economy must be morally constrained

Like Abraham Kuyper before him,^v Schaeffer belonged to that Christian tradition which believes Christ should be Lord of all aspects of life (*The Great Evangelical Disaster*, CW4, p. 363).

Schaeffer assigned technology some value, as one part of human “arts and science”, to part repair the natural damage done by the Fall (*Genesis in Time and Space*, CW2, p. 77). In that sense, Schaeffer endorsed the judgement made by Francis Bacon in the early 17th Century that human creativity including science and technology was a means through which some of the material damage done by the Fall could be reversed (*The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*, CW4, p. 6).

Whilst praising the profit motive, Schaeffer thought it must be kept within limits. Intriguingly, Schaeffer compared the desire to get profit to the sexual urge (*Pollution and The Death of Man*, CW5, pp. 500-1). He applauded the attempts by the Medieval Church to control prices and interest rates (*How Should We Then Live*, CW5, p. 95).^{vi} A piece of pastoral advice Schaeffer offered that it could be better to accept a lower socio-economic position if by so doing one had more peace and quietness before God (*No Little People*, CW3, p. 12).

He warned that we should not use economic cost-benefit analysis to attempt to settle moral issues such as abortion and euthanasia (*Whatever Happened to the Human Race*, CW5, p. 317); “The discussion of life must be brought back to where it belongs- not to emotional, extreme examples, not to selfish questions or rights, not to expedience and certainly not to economics. The matter should be discussed in terms of right and wrong”.^{vii}

Schaeffer claimed that increasingly most people in the US and the rest of the West were driven by the pursuit of personal peace and affluence. They wanted to be left alone and to be comfortable (*No Little People*, CW3, p. 182). He thought that whereas in the political radicalism and student revolts of the 1960s there has been some who were willing to challenge those objectives, by the 1980s those goals were pretty much universally accepted (*The New Super-Spirituality*, CW3, p. 384 and p. 386). Duriez quotes Schaeffer as saying the students had stopped revolting but that was sad.

It was critically important to Schaeffer that wealth be property acquired and used with compassion (*No Little People*, CW3, p. 186). Schaeffer also argued that attempts by government to radically redistribute wealth would probably lead to a reduction in prosperity (*How Should We Then Live*, CW5, p. 247).

Schaeffer's interpretation of what had gone wrong in the past in terms of economic life

One of his major criticisms of the post-Reformation Church was that there had been insufficient attention to the question of how to use wealth with compassion (*How Should We Then Live*, CW5, p. 143). He noted that some Christian leaders had had a more positive impact (he quotes the historian Synder's (1980) judgement that John Wesley has helped the British working class to organise, but the implication is that this was exceptional; *A Christian Manifesto*, CW5, p. 452).

Alongside all of that, a strong theme in Schaeffer was the extent to which the Reformation produced not just spiritual benefits but also political and economic ones as well. Freedom without chaos, as Schaeffer put it. At the same time, Schaeffer was realistic enough to recognise the dark side of the Reformation tradition- a willingness to defend slavery, an unwillingness to criticise the misuse of wealth and, with reference to the US position, buy-in to concepts of Manifest Destiny (*The Great Evangelical Disaster*, CW4, p. 309). In all of this, as in a number of other areas, Schaeffer strove to be careful and balanced; societies where Reformation beliefs were strongly represented have tended to enjoy socio-economic benefits but none of this constituted a golden age (*The Great Evangelical Disaster*, CW4, p. 417). Schaeffer did not wish to promote pride or complacency amongst evangelical and Reformed Christians but he did write that they should avoid under-valuing the wider benefits produced by the Reformation (*The Great Evangelical Disaster*, CW4, pp. 383-4).

Whilst extremely critical of Marxism and its derivations like Russian communism (he shared Solzhenitsyn's assessment of the latter), Schaeffer agreed with those commentators who have defined Marxism as a Christian heresy (*Back to Freedom and Dignity*, CW, p. 1, and *How Should We Then Live*, CW5, p. 217).^{viii}

Schaeffer was no naïve American nationalist. He wrote that (US) Christians should be beware of having equal loyalty to "two flags"- the flag of the US and flag of Christianity (*The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*, CW4, p. 71, also, *The Christian Manifesto*, CW5, pp. 485-6).

Environmental problems, Schaeffer argued, were caused by wrong behaviours which in turn reflected wrong beliefs. Schaeffer showed some support, though qualified, for the views of Lynn White Junior (as expressed in his 1960s article, "The historical roots of our ecological crisis") (*Pollution and The Death of Man*, CW5, pp. 5-6, that book included White's entire article as an appendix). The divine mandate to have "dominion"^{ix} over nature had indeed been misunderstood and abused.

Schaeffer's outline of the future in terms of economic life

Looking to the future, Schaeffer argued that if the Christian consensus in the West continued to collapse then it might not matter very much whether our countries lurched to the political left or right. He quotes with approval Garry Wills' assessment that about 80% of those who had voted for Reagan in 1980 did so because of the "economic numbers"; in other words, their concern for affluence and personal peace (*A Christian Manifesto*, CW5, p. 460). Either a continued movement to the political right or left could lead to increased authoritarianism. That would beg the question whether Christians would have the courage to resist such increasingly tyrannical politics (*The Great Evangelical Disaster*, CW4, p. 310 and p. 254).

At one point, Schaeffer argued that Western societies, with their relentless pursuit of individual affluence, could have a bias towards inflation (*How Should We Then Live*, CW5, p. 247). In *A*

Christian Manifesto (CW, p. 462) he writes of inflation in the UK being caused by 50 years of, “...flagrant spending”.^x

Schaeffer was at one with some old style conservatives though not necessarily with all more recent pro-market economic conservatives when he emphasised the possibility that the US and other Western societies were now on the same trajectory of decline as the late Roman Empire.^{xi} He noted that Edward Gibbon had identified five key characteristics of the Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries AD and two of these were increased inequality and an increased reliance on state welfare (*How Should We Then Live*, CW, p. 227).

Some assessment

It might be objected, “...so what”. Francis Schaeffer may not have regarded his views on political economy as his top priority and perhaps neither should we! However, as Christian economists one subject which might interest us is how people who have an expertise in theology inter-relate, if at all, with those who have an expertise in economics. Schaeffer provides a case study of a Christian leader who was trying to provide very extensive cultural commentary. As part of that commentary, how well did he engage with economics?

In terms of his 23 books, it can be seen that Schaeffer had comparatively few direct references to economics in general or to what might be defined (in an economic sense) as “conservative politics”. Moreover, what he did write was quite brief. He does not elaborate, for example, on how the inflationary bias works or what the just and compassionate acquisition of and use of wealth might look like in practice.

Some might wish that either he had written less or written a lot more on economics^{xii} either of these scenarios might have helped his posthumous reputation or at least made less likely the apparent misrepresentation of Schaeffer as a straightforward “conservative”. However, I will make a couple of points in Schaeffer’s defence (though, in a way, I’m reminded of Spurgeon’s line when he was asked to defend the Bible, the Bible needs as much human defence as a lion!):

First, Schaeffer covered so many fields of human activity and disciplines of thought that it was very understandable he did not say much about economics.

Second, Schaeffer would have been the first he insist he was not a man for systems. His preference was to talk one to one and relate to individuals.

I think that Schaeffer’s experience provides a cautionary tale. He is an example of how if someone puts ideas out into the public realm there is a risk they will then be misrepresented. As economists we should be familiar with this pattern. According to Friedrich Engels, Marx in his later years would say, “I am not a Marxist” (Singer, 1980). We cannot know, of course, what economic advice J.M. Keynes would have offered in the 1950s and 1960s but there is some ground to believe it would have been less Keynesian than the Keynesians (Skidelsky, 2010).

In 2007 John W. Whitehead, Schaeffer’s research assistant for *A Christian Manifesto*, argued that without Schaeffer there could have been no political Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell,^{xiii} Jim Dobson and Tim La Haye, However, according to Whitehead, “This despite the fact that much of what comes out of the mouths of these people would today alarm Francis Schaeffer”. The immense contribution of Schaeffer is that he taught us that ideas have consequences but did all those who claimed to follow on from Schaeffer think carefully about their own ideas?

One final irony, if Schaeffer is as an old-style conservative who opposed socialism and communism and yet was highly critical of the morality of capitalism in practice, then his approach looks somewhat similar to that of another mid twentieth century intellectual “exile” in Switzerland- the German Christian economist Wilhelm Röpke.^{xiv}

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ⁱ 9 March 2005, <http://www.intervarsity.org/news/francis-schaeffer-changed-the-landscape>

Schaeffer's life was characterised by phases; a working class childhood in Germantown Pennsylvania, a decade as Presbyterian pastor across the US East Coast and Mid West, the movement to Continental Europe with his wife Edith in the early post-War period, a crisis of faith, renewed confidence in the truth claims of Christianity, one-to-one ministry at L'Abri in Switzerland which was then supplemented by, first, conference speaking, followed by the books and then several films.

ⁱⁱ Follis (2005) provides a good consideration of the philosophical and apologetic aspects of Schaeffer.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amongst other things, Frank alleges that in his later life Schaeffer suffered a severe loss of faith such that much of his intellectual and apologetic activity was something of a display lacking underlying reality. Others who lived and worked with Schaeffer deny this (Duriez, 2008).

^{iv} I am restricted to the evidence of Schaeffer's written word. For Schaeffer, more than most, there is an enormous quantity of the "spoken word"; his talks and one-to-one conversations. Duriez (2008) was able to base his biography partly on what he called an "oral history" built up through many interviews with those who had known Schaeffer over the years (Duriez was assisted in this task by Christopher and Paulette Catherwood). I think, however, it reasonable to assume that Schaeffer maintained a high degree of consistency between what he wrote and what he also said.

^v On Kuyper's Christian worldview approach see Kuyper (1898, and 1943) and Heslam (1998). Whether Kuyper was able to follow through from a strong Christian philosophical and apologetic position to a coherent position regarding economics is debatable. One contrast between Kuyper and Schaeffer was that the former was actually a practitioner regarding economic policy; he was Dutch Prime Minister (1901-5).

^{vi} An interesting aspect of this is that Schaeffer's more philosophical works were highly critical of Thomas Aquinas and accused the medieval theologian of opening a door to an autonomous human reason which would gradually eat away at the realm of Biblical revelation. In contrast, it looks as though Schaeffer was more sympathetic to Thomistic economics.

^{vii} Schaeffer quotes (*A Christian Manifesto*, CW5, p. 339) an estimate that in 1977 an abortion cost US \$150 but the annual cost to the taxpayer of an "unwanted child" was \$2,200. He also (*ibid.*, p. 342) refers to an Nazi-influenced mid 1930s German mathematics textbook which asked pupils to calculate how many houses could be built using the money otherwise spent on the crippled and insane.

^{viii} Bertrand Russell, Arnold Toynbee and Jacques Maritain all viewed Marxism as an atheistical deviation from Christianity.

^{ix} Genesis chapter 1, verse 26, in, for example, the King James and English Standard Versions. This verse is sometimes argued to provide the basis for a creation mandate for human cultural (including economic) development.

^x Which suggests to me, although Schaeffer does not spell this out and was probably unaware of the relevant economic theory, that Schaeffer was approximating to some sort of Friedmanite idea that UK governments had tried to maintain the economy at a high level of demand beyond full employment.

^{xi} For an example of the recent literature on, "Are we (i.e. the US) the Rome?", see Murphy (2007).

^{xii} Schaeffer's predicament reminds me of that nineteenth century Scottish church leader Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) who was also an academic economist during the Malthus-era. Some modern historians have claimed him as an apologist for unrestricted *laissez faire* capitalism and others have seen him as a proto-socialist. I think neither is true. Murray (2007) writes that Chalmers's reputation today would stand higher today if he had written *less* about economic theory and Poor Law reform. I do not agree with Murray but it is an interesting point.

^{xiii} For the impact of Schaeffer on Falwell see Hart (2011).

^{xiv} Having fled Nazi Germany, Röpke lived in Switzerland from the 1930s until his death in 1966. I have found no evidence that Schaeffer and Röpke actually met which is a great pity since I suspect they would have found a lot to talk about. Röpke shared with Schaeffer an appreciation of the wider Western cultural tradition in arts and literature, and therefore the need to have an economic system which would help to preserve that heritage from the "barbarians" of the extreme right or left. There is in Röpke's works a passionate defence of the market as a means of allocating resources alongside a recognition that especially since 1945 economic growth in a consumer and mass society was eroding the moral capital that type of economy needed. His critique of consumerism parallels Schaeffer's condemnation of what he called the "plastic society". Perhaps the best introductory book by Röpke himself is his (1957, and 2014) *A Humane Economy* and a good book about his life and thinking is Zmirak (2002).