

## **WHITHER CHRISTIAN ECONOMICS?**

### **Further reflections in the light of a conference, “The Future of Economics and Theology as an Interdisciplinary Research Field”**

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A past issue of the UK Association of Christian Economists Journal (Issue 36, 2006) included a roundtable discussion entitled, “Whither Christian Economics?”, with thoughtful contributions by Donald Hay, Andrew Britton, Michael Pollitt, and Ian Smith. Each was asked to answer three questions:

1. Is there a distinctively 'Christian Economics'?
2. What areas would you identify as promising areas for further development of Christian thinking in economics?
3. How do you think a group like ACE can support 1 and 2?

The editor hoped this would stimulate ongoing dialogue, and my purpose is to continue this dialogue, drawing on a conference I organised recently on “The Future of Economics and Theology as an Interdisciplinary Research Field”, supported by the John Templeton Foundation. A report on the conference, together with the programme and participant list, is included in the appendices to this paper. A bibliography distributed at our conference is available at:  
<https://apps.acu.edu.au/staffdirectory/?paul-oslington>.

Our focus was not Christian economics, which I would see as one possible response to the encounter between Christian theology and economics. In the interests of full disclosure I should say that I am increasingly sceptical about the project of building a distinctively Christian economics, after beginning in the field with that agenda. As a young economist and Christian growing up in Sydney, some in my church suggested that the only legitimate option in view of the faulty anthropology of neoclassical economics was to work at an alternative Christian economics. The strong Reformed tendencies of the Sydney Anglican Church were no doubt influential, but also joining the Sydney Christian Economists Group (run by Kim Hawtrey), and undertaking theological studies at the same time as my PhD. in economics at the University of Sydney. While I respect those who have attempted to construct a distinctively Christian economics in recent years – the courage and technical skills required to pull it off are daunting - I'm sceptical about the wisdom of the project. It is not just the oft repeated charge that most of the economics produced does not measure up to the relevant standards of argument and evidence, but that there are theological problems with the project. In terms of Kuyperian economics - perhaps the most significant of the Christian economics projects in recent years - I argued in a paper at a recent American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting that it misreads Kuyper's fundamental antithesis, and fails to do justice to his notion of common grace. It finds even less warrant in Calvin, and may be compared (following Timur Kuran's work on Islamic economics) to various other identity politics movements flowing from the recognition of the collapse of Christian society in the West in the late 1960s.

I'd like now to pick up some of the points made in the roundtable and offer some further reflections. Firstly **Donald Hay**, who helpfully distinguishes between currently existing Christian economics and the aspirations for Christian economics. He sees Christian economics as currently made up of four strands of work:

- (i) Historical work on the relationship between Christian theology and political economy, where he justly singles out Anthony Waterman's books and papers on the 18th and 19th century alliance then separation.
- (ii) The use of economics in interpreting biblical texts and elucidating Christian doctrine. As he points out Biblical scholars have made a great deal of use of the other social sciences but little of economics. In relation to Christian doctrine several authors, including ACE roundtable member Andrew Britton have attempted to use economics, with limited success so far. A half serious attempt of my own was published some time back in the ACE journal (now published in the Australian e-journal of Theology with commentary by a couple of eminent Australian theologians), and the main thing I learned from this was that we have a long way to go before we can talk of making a serious theological contribution. I agree with Donald that there is a great deal of potential for economists to contribute in both biblical studies and systematic theology, and even if contributions remain limited the exercise is valuable for translation and perhaps mission.
- (iii) The economics of religion. This area has exploded in recent years, especially in the US. We are perhaps now entering a more mature phase where the participants realise that more nuanced accounts of religion are needed, and more attention to actual Christian doctrine. In other words they are beginning to address the concerns Donald briefly expressed.
- (iv) The interaction of theology and economic analysis. It seems to me here that Donald is not advocating a distinctively Christian economics, but rather the combination of more or less conventional economics with Christian ethics, directed at particular issues of concern to Christians. Implicit in Donald's position is the view that economics is something different from Christian ethics, and can be fruitfully combined with it. There is some similarity with the view David Richardson has been expressing for many years on the future of Christian economics. Something too of Anthony Waterman's (in my view excessive) attachment to the positive/normative distinction, and advocacy of combining value free economics with values obtained from Christian theology, to give "normative social theory". Donald Hay would allow Christian ethics to have more of a voice in how the economics is done. All this seems to me entirely possible and sensible.

Donald began his discussion of further development of Christian thinking in economics with a call for interdisciplinary work. I think he is right but the implications are more radical. It is not just a matter of the economist becoming conversant with theology, or finding co-authors with this expertise, but of a reorienting our endeavours so that we address theologians, historians and

philosophers as much as economists. We need to cross over into these communities and accept their standards of evidence and argument as well as our own. I would like to apply Wilfred Cantwell-Smith's rule for interreligious dialogue to interdisciplinary conversations – our portraits of other fields must be at least recognisable to participants in the other fields, even if they cannot agree with our judgements. This is demanding, but the issues at the boundary of economics and theology are far too interesting and important for us to restrict the conversation to economists. Our natural audience is probably more historians, philosophers and theologians than economists, especially the way the economics profession is moving. Look at the examples of history and philosophy of science, or the history of economic thought. There is of course the practical issue that most of us are qualified in economics and earn our living in that field, constraining the time we can devote to engaging with those in other disciplines. I am in the fortunate position of having a position jointly in economics and theology, with support from my university to engage in this sort of work, and would love to see more people in this position.

Finally in relation to Donald's roundtable comments, I would like to question whether ACE is an appropriate vehicle for this sort of research, especially the more radical interdisciplinary version I have outlined. Perhaps ACE is better suited to supporting Christian economists, especially students and younger scholars, in their Christian discipleship in academia or business or government. While ACE can challenge and support Christian economists in research, it seems to me that research is best organised through interdisciplinary centres located in universities and the like. Such centres are more able to mobilise the resources and make the scholarly connections necessary to advance research in the field.

The second roundtable contributor was Andrew **Britton**, who began "Economics as currently taught and practiced derives from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, so its relationship to Christianity is often problematic. The main problem areas include rationality, individualism and utilitarianism, all close to the heart of neoclassical theory. It is right and proper, therefore, for us to aspire towards the creation of alternative models." I am not persuaded that the words which precede "therefore" constitute a convincing argument for constructing alternative models. He continues by suggesting there are several varieties of distinctively Christian economics. In my view, the call for Christian economics to be distinctive is one of the less appealing ideas floating around the literature. If other varieties of economics get it right, then the call for something distinctive pushes Christian economics away from the truth. An emphasis on something distinctive suggests to me that identity politics is in play. Also Britton suggests that Catholic social teaching offers a distinctive Christian economics, but my reading of the papal encyclicals is they judiciously refrain from offering an alternative economics. His assertion about liberationist economics offering a distinctively Christian economics is questionable too - it is mostly baptised 1960s pseudo-Marxist dependency theory. Like Donald Hay, Britton calls for Christian economics to reach out to other disciplines, although in Britton's case the call seems to be to widen the audience for the existing product rather than any questioning of the Christian economics product being sold.

Thirdly we have some wise comments from **Ian Smith**. His opening sentence, "While there are undoubtedly certain themes, approaches and topics that particularly attract the interest of Christian economists, there is no clearly established

method for doing Christian Economics”, is a good description of the current situation, as well as being a beautiful piece of British understatement. Ian then suggests two areas for future work - rational choice theology, and the economics of religion – to which he has made important contributions himself. As I said in relation to Donald Hay’s comments, I believe they are promising areas, but especially with rational choice theology we are yet to see a paper that makes a significant theological contribution. Divine action, interactions among the Trinity, and religious knowledge are the areas I would be looking for such a contribution.

**Michael Pollitt**, who suggested the roundtable, offers a fine essay on being a Christian economist. The characteristics he suggests are just those an organisation like ACE should be nurturing among its members.

Overall, I agree with much of what was said in the roundtable, but would push a lot harder on the necessity of interdisciplinary engagement in order to progress on the key questions at the boundary of the two disciplines. Some of these key questions are mentioned in the conference report which follows. I don't think the sort of radically interdisciplinary endeavour I'm advocating is any less “Christian” than attempts to reconstruct economics on Christian foundations, nor some sort of soft option, nor any less missional. Getting to the truth about these matters is surely the overriding concern of the Christian academic, and as I see it our Christian commitments can be well displayed as we search for the truth in dialogue with others, especially when the search is conducted in the way that Michael Pollitt has written about as part of the roundtable, or Donald Hay, David Richardson, or Ken Elzinga on other occasions. I do hope that others will join this important conversation about the future of Christian economics, and the role of ACE in it.

## **Report on Conference: The Future of Economics and Theology as an Interdisciplinary Research Field, Montreal, November 2009.**

As part of the John Templeton Foundation funded project at Australian Catholic University, “Exploring Economics and Theology”, I organised a workshop in Montréal from 4-6 November 2009, “The Future of Economics and Theology as an Interdisciplinary Research Field”.

A group of distinguished scholars from different disciplines spent three days discussing historical questions theological questions and economic questions at the boundary of the two fields, plus a number of practical issues for the new interdisciplinary field. A list of participants and our programme schedule are provided as appendices to this report.

The opening session discussed how we might bring expertise of different disciplines to bear on the key questions in the field. The hope was to make progress on these questions, or at least to identify the key questions for future work. Part of the aim was also to build links between scholars in different disciplines in different countries who were working on similar questions. To focus our discussions I wanted us to restrict ourselves to Christian theology, to economics rather than the economy, and to mainstream economics. The last restriction turned out to be controversial. My view was that if we were talking about an encounter between Christian theology and economics we had to be talking about the recognised mainstream of both disciplines. Others felt that contemporary mainstream economics was problematic, and wanted consideration of alternatives. The consensus was that we should proceed with an inclusive definition of mainstream economics - something like what could be conceivably presented at the largest professional meeting of economists: the American Economic Association meetings each January.

I was particularly eagerly awaiting the session on historical questions, which was to cover the influence of Christian theology on the development of economics, and the influence of economic ways of thinking on theology. As with each of the sessions we began with short contributions from about three of the invited scholars, designed to identify issues and stimulate discussion. There was some disagreement about the importance of pre-modern discussions of economic matters – or to put it another way, the extent to which the beginnings of political economy in the 18th century represented a new start. Following the existing literature we discussed the influence of theology on political economy in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (e.g. Smith, Malthus), but a recognition that historical influence did not stop with the separation of economics from theology in England some time in the middle of the 19th century. We recognised the need to consider the American situation, and beyond the Anglo world. Historical study of the recent rise of Christian economics is likely to be fruitful. Reflecting on the session, two hours was nowhere near enough to go deeply into issues, and the different degrees of familiarity of scholars with the important primary texts limited us.

Discussion in the next session on theological questions was spirited. The recent Papal Encyclical *Charity in Truth*, together with some of the work on renewal of a civil economy which seems to have influenced Benedict, shaped the early part of the session. I thought the session was valuable in identifying as key issues: the

theological significance of scarcity, the treatment of poverty, our view of the human person and rationality, and the applicability of a Christian ethic of love within a complex commercial society. Our approaches to these issues depend on the view we take of how economics and theology meet. Do they offer the same kind of knowledge? Are they on the same level in some sort of hierarchy of the disciplines? Are they separable but ultimately connected parts of a circle of knowledge? Is theology the master discipline which frames all others? What is the significance of the positive/normative distinction for relations between the disciplines?

Our next session was an opportunity for economics to address some questions to theology. We discussed the culture of economics extensively, and how different disciplinary cultures as much as different ideas make it difficult for economists and theologians to communicate. There do seem to be tensions between economic and theological ideas, for instance the views of the human person and rationality. What then do we do with them? Is an appeal to methodological instrumentalism a cop-out? The idea of unintended consequences is central to economics, but not one that theologians readily appreciate. Historical questions came up again in this session as we talked about the falling away of teleology from discussions of economic matters in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and how this might be related to the rise of unintended consequence theories among economists.

Our next sessions dealt with practical matters of involving young scholars, and involving scholars from outside the West in the new interdisciplinary field of economics and theology, and what structures are needed for the new field. I found the most striking thing about the discussion of involving scholars from outside the West was the importance of reconnecting economics and theology for places like Africa, where a vibrant and growing church operates in an environment where economic development is sometimes proceeding rapidly, though problematic. Solid theologies of economic development are lacking. Often there is little attention to the systemic questions, or an inadequate prosperity theology or some form of neo-Marxist dependency theory is all that is available. The sorts of discussions, to which scholars from outside the West can contribute, could be very important to the future of Christianity in these regions.

In relation to younger scholars we need to be aware up of the professional realities. Despite the regular calls for more interdisciplinary work from senior university leaders, and distinguished economists, jobs and promotions for younger scholars in economics come with specialisation, and interest in theology is often not an asset in the job market. Younger scholars are often more interested in these sorts of questions, the barriers against them working seriously on them are high. It is interesting that many younger scholars in theology and religious studies are interested in economics, and the professional barriers for them seem lower.

The discussion of structures began with a brief review of existing centres, professional associations, conferences, journals and funding sources for economics and theology. What structures are needed to improve the flow of knowledge among scholars working in the field, to facilitate useful feedback, and maintain standards? Many ideas were discussed, but funds and serious time commitment from already-stretched scholars is needed to turn these ideas into reality.

Following on from these sessions on practical matters, I wanted to discuss how research in economics and theology could have an impact beyond academia. Impact is not just academic impact, though a solid academic basis seems necessary for long-term positive impact. Economic education from the clergy was discussed, along with work with entrepreneurs.

After these days of small group discussions, we then ventured out to the American Academy of Religion for a public panel session. Panel members spoke for about 10 minutes each, followed by questions and discussion. Attendance of about 30 was good with favourable responses from younger scholars who attended. One came up to me later in the conference to say that she had never heard anything quite like it at the American Academy of Religion, how good it was to hear theologically informed economists and speaking, and it had changed her views completely about economics and theology. Another said that it was more informative than the usual excoriations of the neo-liberal economic order in social science sessions at the Academy. Some others wanted to renew the proposal for a formal group at the American Academy of Religion.

**Appendix 1 - Invited Participants**

Dr Sam Gregg  
Research Director, Acton Institute for Religion and Liberty  
Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

Professor Deirdre McCloskey  
Distinguished Professor of Economics, History, English, and Communication  
University of Illinois, Chicago

Dr Peter Heslam,  
Director, Transforming Business  
University of Cambridge

Professor Patrick McArdle  
School of Theology  
Australian Catholic University

Professor John Milbank  
Department of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Nottingham, UK

Professor J. David Richardson  
Professor of Economics and International Relations  
Syracuse University, NY, USA.

Professor Max Stackhouse  
Princeton Theological Seminary, USA

Professor Paul Oslington  
School of Business and School of Theology  
Australia Catholic University

Professor Anthony Waterman  
St Johns College, University of Manitoba, Canada

Professor Paul Williams  
Academic Dean and Director of the Marketplace Institute  
Regent College, Vancouver, Canada  
(Paul Williams had to withdraw)



**Appendix 2 - Programme**

Weds 4<sup>th</sup> Nov

5.00-6.00pm Opening Session (Oslington)

Thurs 5<sup>th</sup> Nov

9.00-10.30 Historical Questions (Waterman, Gregg, Oslington)

11.00- 12.30 Theological Questions (Milbank, Stackhouse, Waterman, Williams)

2.00-3.30 Economic Questions (Richardson, McCloskey, Waterman)

4.00-5.30 Involving Young Scholars and Scholars from Outside the West  
(Richardson, Heslam, Stackhouse)

Fri 6<sup>th</sup> Nov

9-10.30 Structures for the Interdisciplinary Field  
(Oslington, Gregg, Heslam)

11.00-12.00 Maximising Impact of Economics and Theology Research  
(Gregg, Heslam, Milbank, Williams)

12.00- 1.00 Future Directions (Oslington)

3-6 pm Panel and Reception  
American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting