

Christian Scholar's Review

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Willis, Robert J. (1987), "What Have We Learned from the Economics of the Family?" *American Economic Review*, 77 (May), pp. 68-81.

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Comments on J. David Richardson

By Kenneth G. Elzinga

There is a strong tradition in the world of books and ideas that a discussant should have grave reservations about a paper. If a discussant actually likes a paper, this means the conference organizers failed in making the session lively and the discussant simply was not clever enough to dismantle the paper. Whether the blame lies more with our hosts, or with me, is for you to judge. But I like Professor Richardson's paper and learned from it. Indeed I must confess a second shortcoming of mine as a discussant. In rereading the paper, I violated one of the most venerable principles of economic theory: namely, the law of diminishing marginal utility. Incremental readings added to my appreciation of Richardson's work.

To achieve some credibility as a discussant, let me go through the motion of correcting one error in the paper. I shall select the first one I encountered. Richardson begins by claiming that "Economics was born at the Fall." Economics actually is older. The wise husbanding of resources is what economics is all about and this begins not with the fall but with creation. Now to be sure, the demand for the services of economists is increased as a result of the fall, because the fall changed the economic problem profoundly. But economics was born at the time of creation.

For both the insider and the outsider, Richardson's paper contains a concise and informative summary of what economics is today and where it is going. Make no mistake about it: for better or for worse, economics is the imperialistic science. The study of law for example has been altered profoundly by economics. For several years, I have taught federal judges the third in a series of courses they're taking in economic analysis. One might contend that the fact that the courses are taught on the island of Captiva is what explains the interest of judges in economic theory. But the classes are too long and the assigned reading too

In his reply to Richardson, Kenneth G. Elzinga applauds Richardson's suggestions but also voices support for an alternative agenda—one in which Christian economists "integrate their work with the fields of biblical studies and ethics" with the hope of

difficult to be offset by the congenial Gulf Coast location. The main reason for subjecting themselves to this course of study is that the judges recognize that it is more and more difficult to do law without an understanding of economic analysis.

Historians and political scientists, many of whom can restrain their enthusiasm for its inroads, find economic theory invading their journals and classrooms. I suspect sociology and religious studies are next to be invaded. The Richardson paper, if anything, underplays the aggressive character of economics as it pries into every nook and cranny of life.¹

After telling us what secular economics today is all about, the Richardson paper contends that Christian scholarship in economics is or should be different from merely Christian economists doing what non-Christian economists do. How does it differ? As I understand him, it is doing economics like orthodox economists, but with a twist of Orthodoxy. Richardson suggests topics in economics that, because of their biblical themes, should appeal to Christian scholars. This is new stuff, not commonly found in the literature on Christianity and economics. Richardson's impressive familiarity with mainstream economics and its tributaries enables him to suggest a range of topics that lend themselves to exploration by Christian economists. I was taken by Richardson's suggestions that believing economists should be drawn to the study of the debt crisis, the economic consequences of inheritances and bequests, and the influence of takeovers on a firm's non-pecuniary goals.

Let me underscore here the direction Professor Richardson is recommending. It entails a rerouting of much of the work done in Christianity and economics. Most secular economic research is problem-specific. Example: some economic goods are sold door to door, like encyclopedias and vacuum cleaners, and often are purchased by one spouse in the household without an evaluation by the other whose welfare is affected by the purchase. The suggestion is made that if the economic welfare of the household is to be maximized, then designing and mandating a finite waiting period into the transaction before it is legally consummated would improve the economic allocation of such consumer durables. Query: after assessing the economic costs and benefits, what would be the optimal waiting period before such market transactions became, in business school parlance, "done deals"?

This is problem-specific economic research. It is a meat and potatoes kind of problem—focussed, narrow, tightly drawn—that many economists select, or have dished out to them. Most economists will study a problem like this with the mindset of modernity: methodological individualism, philosophic naturalism, and the goal of quantification of results. Perhaps a Christian could study a

¹A former graduate student of mine, now on the faculty at the University of Chicago, sent me a paper entitled "The Efficient Organization of Religions: A Club-theoretic Approach." The paper is by Fred S. McChesney. Increasingly, I predict, at least the structure of religions will be studied along economic lines.

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problem like this with a special twist; I am not certain. But my example is not the kind of topic normally addressed in the literature of Christianity and economics.

Instead this literature typically addresses big themes: the market versus central planning; government as instrument of justice versus the state as economic bungler; enlightenment versus Christian views of economic man; voluntary versus forced income redistribution; lending with interest: OK or not OK; fiat currency versus a gold standard; international trade by multinational corporations: engine of economic development or institutions of exploitation; laissez faire versus reconstructionism. What does the Bible and what does economic analysis say about these?

Richardson wants to divert the discussion from such themes. This is not because he is unread in the literature. It may be because he is read. Anyone who cites Harold Lindsell and Phil Wogaman, Bob Goudzwaard and Ronald Nash, and who is acquainted with the writing of Gary North and Douglas Vickers, to select only six names from his reference list, bears watching for signs of schizophrenia.

Richardson is to be commended for daring us to think beyond conferences on Christianity and economics in which evangelicals who are liberal on economic policy (usually social ethicists) mix with evangelicals who are market-oriented (usually microeconomists), where the former conclude the latter are captive to the enlightenment and the latter conclude that the former don't know any economics. He challenges us to think about different kinds of collective efforts and conference agendas than right wing-left wing dialogue mixed with devotions. Richardson even challenges us to think about retooling economists at Christian colleges to be at the frontiers of the discipline.

But let's face it: most people who write on Christianity and economics want to tackle the big themes and they eschew empirical investigations of oil field unitization or the consequences upon family stability of tariff reduction in the textile industry. As a professional economist, I am reluctant to see economists abandon the debate of market versus plan and individual choice versus collective calculus. I would be more enthusiastic about supporting Richardson's recommendation to economists to get on with a less expansive and politically charged research agenda if I could be assured that others would too. But there is a problem about doing economics. Here's what it is. No one except a quack or a fool attempts to do brain surgery without long and careful study. But there is an abundant supply of people eager to write about economic policy who have never had the discipline to work through an intermediate economics text. And these writers have an observed tendency to be poorly informed about how markets, firms, consumers, and bureaucracies function.

If economists who are Christians are to be set apart, a peculiar people so to speak, because they are winsome and loving in their dealings with others, more sensitive in the topics they choose to address in their research, more open than pagans to rethinking how their view of man affects their epistemology, and generally mindful that they are to see the world as having windows beyond time

and space, then Richardson and some others before him have covered the agenda of Christianity and economics well. And it is an important agenda because stewardship of scarce resources is important. But this agenda will seem myopic to many, I am sure.

I may be the only person who believes that the music of Peggy Lee is more of a threat to the propagation of the gospel than Bertrand Russell's writings. One of the most haunting of Peggy Lee's torch songs is entitled "Is That All There Is?" To paraphrase the title of that song, Professor Richardson's paper makes me wonder: is that all there is to Christianity and economic scholarship? If so, just as circuses and love and life itself ended up as crushing disappointments in the torch song, if that's all there is to Christianity and economics, i.e., caring scholars doing mainstream work on a non-random selection of topics, this will be a disappointment to those with higher expectations for the impact of Christianity upon economics. For if economics as done by Christians is to offer a new paradigm that is so bold, so useful, and so close to the world of reality that it will influence the discipline, this has not happened. The Richardson paper does not purport to offer such a paradigm and I suspect the author would argue that not many resources be spent in its pursuit.

Furthermore, if economics as done by Christians is to offer a public policy framework that is so bold, so useful, so close to the world of reality and biblical truth that it will carry the day within the community of faith, that too has not happened. The Richardson paper, if anything, seeks to reduce the quantity of debate at this level.

The title Professor Richardson chose for his paper is intriguing: "Frontiers in Economics and Christian Scholarship." I can read that title two very different ways. If it implies there is a Christian scholarship that operates on the frontiers of economics, the title is too bold. Most attempts to integrate Christianity and economics have not been in the mainstream of the subject. In candor, backwater is the better term. The locus of most publications is only one signal of its position out of the mainstream. The debate is not carried on in the leading journals of economics nor via the major university presses. Modern economics, to use Paul Vitz's term, is based on functional atheism. It is always prudent to remember this. It means Christian economists are, in a sense, pilgrims in the underlying control mechanisms of their discipline. For this reason, a case can be made for some Christian economists to interact more aggressively with the fields of biblical studies and ethics. Perhaps more economists should be willing to do serious study in theology. Some are doing just this, my friend John Mason for example.

Richardson makes a case for a competing agenda. His first priority for Christian scholarship in economics is professional economists doing excellent work at the frontiers of the discipline, toiling in the same vineyards as unbelievers, using principles and techniques from the same toolkit they use. That way Christians as individuals are at the frontier, even if Christianity as dogma is not.

I am hard pressed to choose between these agendas. This is awkward to admit. Economics is supposed to be the science of choice. When a little girl is

asked whether she wants a soda pop or an ice cream cone, she is thinking like an economist if she knows that "both" is not an acceptable answer. But in this case both agendas are commendable. So I shall waffle and say, I'd like both, please, rejoicing when I observe scholarship in economics that involves thinking Christianly, be it modern economics leavened by the faith, or the faith illumined by economics.