
Reviewed by Kim Hawtrey, Fellow, Macquarie University

This engaging contribution to the deepening dialogue between theologians and economists grew out of a series of interdisciplinary encounters held in the United Kingdom. Scholars from the Tyndale Fellowship Ethics and Social Theology Study Group, the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, and the UK Association of Christian Economists met together on several occasions from 2011 through 2013 with the aim of bridging the so-called “disciplinary estrangement” (p. 1) between economics and theology.

Editors Jeremy Kidwell (University of Edinburgh) and Sean Doherty (St. Mellitus College) have assembled an impressive lineup of contributors to this volume in a concerted effort to foster “deliberately collaborative engagement” (p. 1) between the two disciplines. Of the sixteen contributors here, eight are primarily theologians by training and four are specialist economists, while the remaining four have professional credentials covering both fields.

The very format of the book echoes the meetings that preceded it, with its evident aspiration to promote constructive dialogue. Each of the main sections has several contributors—a mix of theologians and economists—followed by a response article for that section. The whole volume then closes with a retrospective chapter by the editors. This format suits the book’s use in a teaching context, for example as a weekly reader for an intermediate or advanced college class.

There are three sections. Part I kicks off proceedings with “Critical Engagements between Economics and Theology.” In a wise chapter borne of long experience with his topic, Andy Hartropp wrestles with why engagement between Christian economists and theologians remains so difficult. Readers of Faith & Economics may recall the same lament being aired in a lengthy exchange between James K. A. Smith and David Richardson in this journal in 2010. Hartropp doesn’t sugar-coat it, acknowledging that “there are real differences” in approach between Christian economists and theologians that “cannot be ignored” (p. 18) and that these differences—which can even be termed “conflicts”—are “evidently very sharp” (p. 20). Yet while difficult, the task is not seen as
impossible, and Hartropp ends the chapter on why engagement remains vital and necessary. Put simply: economists need theologians, and theologians need economists.

Michael Pollitt, currently professor of business economics at the University of Cambridge and convener of the UK Association of Christian Economists, follows up with an incisive chapter on what theologians need to know about economics. These are some of the best pages in this volume, because of their honesty and clarity. Pollitt first tackles a number of misconceptions theologians sometimes have about economics or capitalism ("an economic system focused on profits cannot be good," p. 30) and provides a well-reasoned response to each from economic theory ("for economists, profit is an information device," p. 30). The author then goes on to list the positive contributions made by modern economics (such as identifying the most efficient mechanisms for delivery of goods and services), to clarify category confusion (making use of consumer theory does not mean economists advocate consumerism), and to address easy-solutionism (well-intentioned efforts to help people by handing out money often backfire) commonly found among non-economist Christians. Pollitt’s chapter will no doubt make confronting reading for some theologians (and some Christian economists!), but it offers a reality check grounded in economics that is vital in the quest for common ground with theology. His bravery has done us all a service.

The chapter by Eve Poole explores a framework for doing theology in the marketplace and is perhaps the closest the book comes to pure methodology. Two “macro models” of theology are discussed: Worldview Theology (substance) and Etiquette Theology (style). The latter has two “moods,” realis (about facts) and irrealis (about possibilities). Irrealis is ideal for expressing hopes and interrogating options, and Poole says that "good theology in economics pivots around the irrealis mood" (p. 58). It allows for an element of genuine inquiry when accounting for one’s faith as an economist, without slipping into faithlessness. Respectful public theology will likely “flex its mood” (p. 60) in that direction by carrying a higher proportion of questions to statements.

Part II of this fascinating collection of readings explores “Resources for Collaboration.” Matthew Arbo (Midwestern Seminary, Missouri) sees a potential paradigm in the well-known Adam Smith problem, the apparent tension between Smith’s two great works, the virtue-obsessed Theory of Moral Sentiments on the one hand, and the businesslike Wealth of Na-
tions on the other. The founder of modern economic thought regarded inquiry into economics as inherently bound up with morality. And vice versa, because for Smith “a just state of affairs is a moral state of affairs” (p. 103) requiring that every action must arise from a proper motive to pursue a proper end, in a proper way. Smith’s defense of the free market was intended to provide this “proper” scheme and should therefore be rightly seen as part of his inquiry into morality, just as much as his economic inquiry led him to construct a theory of moral sentiments.

Jump forward 200 years or so. Andrew Henley (Aberystwyth University, Wales) feels that, despite its Smithian origins, contemporary economics appears ill-equipped to know what virtuous economic behavior might look like. For the modern economist, virtuous behavior is “behavior that satisfies the axioms of neoclassical consumer preference theory” (p. 113); self-interest is accordingly seen as auto-virtuous. But for Henley, economics today turns a blind eye to questions of the quality and motive of the behavior involved. So work becomes the means to external goods rather than a way of serving one’s fellow man. The global financial crisis resulted from “technical” failure rather than moral failure (p. 122). “Stewardship” behavior is motivated by self-interest rather than deontological concerns (p. 123). This all begs the policy question: Should the government seek to “exhort or even incentivize virtuous behavior” (p. 122)? Ironically, formal incentivization of virtue may be self-defeating in the sense that once an external agency pushes people towards virtuous behavior, “then that behavior ceases to be virtuous” according to Henley, a view that some may wish to dispute.

It’s a pity that Henley and Arbo, despite adjacent chapters in the book, don’t get to directly interact. Might the Adam Smith dialectic portrayed by Arbo alleviate Henley’s concerns about modern economics’ virtue ethic (or lack thereof)? Could Smith’s moral apologetic for markets, so deeply embedded in neoclassical economics still today, offer a way of understanding the “virtue” of self-interest? It would make for a very interesting debate. Either way, as Paul S. Williams (Regent College, Vancouver) points out in his response to conclude the book’s middle section, the very question alone exposes “the religious character of contemporary capitalism” (p. 159).

Editors Kidwell and Doherty add their own respective chapters to the book’s mid-section. Patristic John Chrysostom is offered by Kidwell as an unlikely sage for contemporary business and economics, noting the
ascetic’s positive emphasis on Christian enterprise and the just use of wealth which “is assumed to be an intrinsic part of the common good” (p. 138). Doherty wrestles with the dialectic tension in political theology between idealism (e.g., Marxist-type) and realism (say, Niebuhr-type). To what extent can the kingdom of God really be present in the earthly economic system that humanity lives in, here and now? Our answer to this question will determine how serious we are about Christian economic ethics.

The third and final part of *Theology and Economics* outlines “Visions of the Common Good.” Hans Ulrich (University Erlangen, Nuremberg) tests the “limits” of viewing human economy in theological perspective and opts for the proscribed Civil Economy model, rather than the more ambitious and all-encompassing Ethical Economy model. While the latter conceives of the economy itself as the very *telos* of God’s *oikonomia* (part of God’s household bound in with the kingdom and its governance and fulfillment), the former instead sees the economy merely as a particular field of human activity among others, instead of an all-determining reality. In this, Ulrich is inspired by Philip Blond who prefers that practical solutions to supply people’s needs be found within the market enterprise economy itself, rather than engineered as an afterthought by governments. Put another way, it is better to ensure a just distribution to begin with, thereby minimizing the need for political redistribution in order to correct injustices.

Blond (despite not being a listed contributor) has also influenced another author of our volume, Mark Chapman (University of Oxford), whose chapter appears in Part I. Under the intriguing title “Red Toryism, Common Good and one Nation,” Chapman favors a radical orthodoxy in everyday political economy that returns to the “absolute priority of theology and away from the autonomy of the secular” (p. 69). Red Toryism—a British term designed to capture a type of conservative politics that appeals across the aisle, a little like “Reagan’s democrats”—rejects what it sees as the excesses of the Left (welfare state with its dependency culture, undermining of marriage, fragmenting of civil life) while re-casting the Right’s vision of liberal individualism (social capital, re-establishment of civic virtue). Like Blond, Chapman advocates “moralizing the market” (p. 75) through the creation of a more participatory model involving all stakeholders (stockholders, workers, consumers) and a bottom-up emphasis in economic and political affairs. This is a vision of the
common good, a third way vision if you like. As such, perhaps Chapman’s piece might have been better positioned in Part III of the volume?

Likewise, in terms of the overall flow of the book under review, the chapter by Donald Hay and Gordon Menzies (“Seeking a better model of economic behavior”) probably would have sat more comfortably in Part II than in Part III. It is probably the most demanding chapter in the book in terms of economic theory, yet the authors have managed to keep their material non-technical so that it remains accessible to the non-economist reader. Hay and Menzies are dissatisfied with the reductionist model of rational economic man (REM) and rational choice theory (RCT), particularly when extended Becker-style to apply to other areas of life (marriage, children, crime, etc.). They canvass various critiques of REM and RCT, including philosophical (Amartya Sen), economic (V. L. Smith, Richard Layard), and ethical (Catholic social teaching, Christian Smith) critiques. The two authors then reiterate a proposal they have talked about elsewhere: a Mixed Motive Valuation (MMV) function for the individual’s optimization procedure, one that can encompass both self-interest and other-interest, in a “Jekyll and Hyde” formulation. It’s a step that fellow contributor Nicholas Townsend would likely endorse, given his predilection for moving to a “post-capitalist economy” that accounts for more than simply the material world.

In his Response to Part III, Oliver O’Donovan (a theologian) agrees that the economists’ model of rational choice does not answer all the questions we might ask of it, and feels economics needs a way of handling “multi-aspectual transactions,” noting that “one may buy wheat to keep a promise; one may nurse the sick to earn a living” (p. 242). This phenomenon of interdisciplinary transactions—where material transactions may be undertaken for spiritual reasons, and spiritual transactions can take place for material reasons—is arguably still an unresolved debate within economics itself. Could this be a way for theology—the Queen of the Sciences—to marry with the Dismal Science?

In the course of nearly three hundred pages, the contributors (protagonists?) in this volume offer us valuable new perspectives on the relationship between theology and economics. In that sense, the volume admirably achieves its goal. But the integration of the two disciplines is another question entirely, one that (unsurprisingly) still eludes us, despite the excellent readings in this collection. It may always elude us. As the editors point out in their closing remarks, no one can serve two masters.
References

