

## Formation: A Symposium on Living as a Christian in Economics

**Kurt C. Schaefer**  
Calvin College

In the Fall 2017 issue, *Faith & Economics* published the symposium “Translations: A Symposium on Readings for Christians in Economics.” It consisted of essays by economists late in their careers who have made a sustained contribution to the project of connecting the Christian intellectual and cultural tradition to the work of economists. They reflected on the readings and other influences that were foundational to their work.

For this issue, *F&E* has commissioned a complementary group of essays by Christian economists who are still (roughly) in the first half of their careers. The participants were asked to participate in the same project of addressing the connections between the Christian tradition and their work as economists: What things have been influential and helpful to them? What potentially worthwhile things have been missing? How would they want the conversation about economics and the Christian tradition to be shaped? What are emerging fruitful areas for further work? What would be most helpful to them and their peers as Christian scholars? What conversations would they like to see initiated among Christian economists?

Both symposia are pastorally strategic. They are pastoral in giving us thoughtful scholars’ insights and advice about the art of forming a professional life with meaning. And they are strategic by, cumulatively, helping the community of like-minded economists chart a course of effective service to the profession and the culture at large.



**Kristen B. Cooper**  
Gordon College

I appreciate this opportunity to reflect on how the conversation about economics and the Christian tradition might be shaped in the future. It’s humbling to consider how much literature, and how many life-

## 26 FAITH & ECONOMICS

times of reflection, this conversation now encompasses. I will begin with some observations about how the conversation has been shaped so far, as I understand it. By way of background, I teach economics at Gordon College, a Christian liberal arts college, and I also did my undergraduate studies there. I'm an applied microeconomist by training. My research interests are in behavioral economics and environmental economics, with an emphasis on welfare issues.

First, the conversation seems to be shaped by at least three distinct motivations or purposes. A first, longstanding purpose has been called "integrative scholarship." Scholars with training in theology and economics can create new scholarly understanding at the intersection of these fields. I have found Mary Hirschfeld's (2011) insights about these conversations to be very helpful. Despite their high barriers to entry, conversations serving scholarly purposes seem well-developed and active. Personally, I have found material from these conversations to be helpful for teaching. At many Christian colleges and universities, including my own, faculty members are expected to bring students along on a faith integration journey. A book that I have found extremely helpful in this regard is Victor Claar and Robin Klay's (2007) *Economics in Christian Perspective*. To further facilitate and enrich faith integration curricula, perhaps pedagogical conversations could be promoted within *Faith & Economics*, or at an ASSA session of ACE. I can find only one example of a *Faith & Economics* article that is focused on pedagogy (which is O'Neill, 2003). Comparing teaching experiences, and perhaps even thinking about assessment (!), could be fruitful both for practical reasons and for identifying difficult issues that could benefit from further integrative scholarship.

A second purpose for the conversation is economics pedagogy. Often, the desired audience is other Christians who are not trained as economists. For example, writing about integrative scholarship on unemployment, Bruce Webb (2006) concludes that, "Christian economists have responded to what they believe to be fallacious claims, misunderstandings, or simplistic solutions of other Christians." (p. 54). I have also found Klay and Gryzen (1995) and McMullen (2012) to be helpful examples of outreach to non-economist Christians. Pedagogical goals can also be approached more academically. Dean (1997) is a prime example of a Christian economist interpreting her field for Christian students of economics and economists in other fields.

Christian economists' outreach to non-economist Christians could potentially be expanded or made more systematic. Personally, I feel called to make deeper connections with colleagues in other disciplines and to engage with economic questions raised by my church and pastor. When it comes to engaging with Christian brothers and sisters who may have inaccurate understandings of economic issues, my intuition is that relationships are the best path to mutual understanding. We should take seriously their concerns and embody a spirit of mutual learning. Conferences that draw together economists and practitioners could also play a useful role. A rich network of Christian economists in economic development has already brought two such conferences to fruition with high praise. The first conference followed the ASSA conference in Washington, DC in 2003, and the second, *The Economics of Global Poverty*, followed the ASSA conference in Boston in 2015 (Mason et al., 2008). A different expansion of the conversation with Christian pastors could take the form of an organization similar to BioLogos. "BioLogos invites the church and the world to see the harmony between science and biblical faith as we present an evolutionary understanding of God's creation" (BioLogos, 2018). One could imagine a parallel statement about inviting people to see the harmony between economic reasoning and helping people meet their material needs. "EcoLogos" does have a nice ring to it.

A third purpose for the conversation seems to be personal reflection and "faith seeking understanding." It is the reflective tones of mature Christians—such as the writings of the late Paul Heyne, John Mason, and Lisa Klein Surdyk—that most resonate with my desire to contribute, somehow, to this conversation.

Thinking of how the conversation should be shaped in the future, it seems natural for all three purposes—integrative scholarship, pedagogy or outreach, and personal reflection—to continue unfolding. And of course, these purposes are not mutually exclusive. As an early-career scholar pondering the possibilities, it is helpful to learn how different individuals have taken different approaches in their careers or at different points in their careers. I am also grateful that within its first two decades of existence, the Association of Christian Economists had already come to a common understanding that there is no one "correct" way to approach scholarly life as a Christian economist (Webb, 1994; Mason et al., 2008).

A second observation is that the conversation about economics and

Christianity is inherently relational. Although the conversation often takes a written form, it seems to always have been molded by personal interactions. In the Fall 2017 issue of *Faith & Economics*, in which senior economists reflect on their formative experiences in Christian economic thought, one common theme is the importance of personal connections with other Christian economists. This has been true for me as well. I had the privilege of being a student of John Mason, Stephen Smith, and Bruce Webb, and more recently to work alongside Stephen and Douglas Puffert. One can learn much about the pattern of a person's thoughts by sharing a meal or talking about a new journal article or news story in the hallway. I also attended the Economics of Global Poverty Conference mentioned above. The hard work of conference organizers Chris Barrett and Stephen Smith produced an inspired (and inspiring) gathering with a high level of discourse and scholarship. That conference also showed the benefits of focusing the conversation on a particular field of economics. Perhaps ACE could develop an easier method for finding members by field to facilitate this (in the present directory, a manual search is required). I trust that ACE events at the ASSA meetings will continue to play a relationship-deepening role for many of us. And informal meetups of ACE members at smaller conferences also seems worthwhile.

I appreciate the multi-purpose and relational nature of the conversation between Christians in economics. And, thankfully, there is no sense in which the conversation will ever be "done." Yet, the conversation seems mature enough, thanks to the work of previous generations of scholars, that I am eager to see how far we could reach if we drew others in. One form of winsome connection with the broader academy is careful and creative traditional scholarship, like Rebecca Blank's (2002) "Can equity and efficiency complement each other?" I see many potential benefits from expanding this form of engagement. I hope that the ASSA sessions sponsored by ACE continue to attract non-members as well. An even more ambitious way to expand the conversation could be to create a forum where the analysis of economic issues is more explicitly tied to normative schools of thought (e.g., Catholic Social Teaching or Jewish Social Teaching) in a way that is accessible for mainstream economists. This idea owes in part to something Dave Richardson wrote on the twenty-fifth anniversary of ACE: "In retrospect I think we also missed some great opportunities: to better engage Jews and Muslims, especially, in serious faith-based economics . . ." (Mason et al., 2008, p. 4). Perhaps

this looks like a special issue of *Faith & Economics* or something else. I suspect that many people who might be interested in such a conversation don't know that it already exists among Christians.

Finally, I was asked to consider what might be emerging fruitful areas for further work. While disclosing my own bias, I'll note that the impact and implications of behavioral economics seem to be under-discussed in the conversation to date. Green (2003) explores time inconsistency as a self-control problem. Other topics where insights from behavioral economics could potentially be developed from a Christian perspective include fairness, altruism, belief formation, and subjective well-being. The "imperialist" expansion of economics has also greatly shaped the field in recent decades, and it would be interesting to hear reflections about this from the perspective of Christian scholars both within and outside of economics. It could also be useful to consider what venues Christian economists have for learning about and discussing normative issues related to the latest subfields and techniques—genoeconomics, neuroeconomics, "big data," and machine learning come to mind as current examples.

### **References**

- BioLogos.** (2018). About BioLogos. <https://biologos.org/about-us>.
- Blank, R. M.** (2002). Can equity and efficiency complement each other? *Labour Economics*, 9, 451–468.
- Claar, V. V., & Klay, R. J.** (2007). Work and vocation: What is in your hand? *Economics in Christian Perspective*. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Dean, J. M.** (1997). Are we turning poor countries into pollution havens?: Understanding the trade/environment debate. *Faith & Economics*, 30, 7–14.
- Green, S. L.** (2003). Time inconsistency, self-control, and remembrance. *Faith & Economics*, 42, 51–60.
- Hirschfeld, M.** (2011). Discussion: Economics and theology in conversation. *Faith & Economics*, 58, 24–30.
- Klay, R., & Gryzen, C.** (1995). Six economic myths heard from the pulpit. *The Christian Century*, 112(6), 204–208.
- Mason, J., et al.** (2008). Looking back, looking forward: Twenty-fifth anniversary remembrances of the Association of Christian Economists. *Faith & Economics*, 52, 1–10.

30 FAITH & ECONOMICS

- McMullen, S.** (2012). Can we be good stewards of the economy and the environment? *The Banner*. Retrieved from <https://www.thebanner.org/features/2012/10/can-we-be-good-stewards-of-the-economy-and-the-environment>
- O’Neill, P. B.** (2003). Including Christian principles in principles of economics courses at a state university: An initiative in expanding the curriculum. *Faith & Economics*, 42, 47–50.
- Webb, Bruce G.** (1994). Whose theology? Which economics? *Faith & Economics*, 23, 45–62. ■



**Dan Hungerman**  
University of Notre Dame

**Economic Scholarship and Contemporary Religious Vitality**

In this essay, I will discuss the need for a particular type of economic research on religion. Research in this area has seen exciting developments in recent years. Scholars in economics (as well as fields like sociology and political science) have used recently-developed empirical tools, and recently-created datasets, to answer long-standing questions and to pose new questions no one has thought to ask before. Those interested in learning about this recent work could start with a review by Syria Iyer (2017) and an older but still very worthwhile review by Laurence Iannaccone (1998). Those reviews make clear that it is an exciting time to be a quantitative social scientist working on questions related to religion.

But will it stay this way? It appears to me that we may be living through a sea-change era for religion. I wish that more people agreed with me about this and that more people did work trying to understand the causes and consequences of these changes.

The sea change I see is a decline in religious activity in the United States. Not everyone is interested in talking about, or acknowledging, that such a decline is occurring. I can understand why. First, when your career depends upon getting (often secular) scholars to pay attention to your work on religion, your first worry might be convincing your audience that religion matters. Talking about religion’s steep decline is an awkward way to get that conversation going. Second, my own (unscien-