

were interested but not attending those particular meetings. On the spur of the moment, with days before the deadline, I organized an identical session for the AEA meetings, with only one person overlapping (one of those Christian economists I met on Facebook, actually!). That panel will include Cunningham and Doleac, who were part of the inspiration for the discussion. While I don't know yet whether either session will be accepted, I feel like this is the kind of activity that a Christian economist can do as part of the larger profession: Help bring us back to some fundamental questions—including ethical ones—and perhaps help all of us learn to better articulate what it is we hope we are doing as economists.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://studycentersonline.org/membership/member-study-centers/>
- 2 I'm thinking particularly of organizations like CSWEP that pay particular attention to mentoring women through the pipeline, or other groups that gather and support underrepresented minorities, via racial or LGBT groups.
- 3 While choosing "Facebook friends" who are actually my friends—or at least colleagues—seems natural to me, my impression is that those even a little bit younger than I do not use these networks in the same way.
- 4 These are the rare cases where I was happy to add people to my network even though I had not yet met all of them in person.
- 5 Scott was even kind enough to Skype in and talk to my class about it (which I barely managed technologically, but it was worth it). ■



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Christian economists often find themselves in an odd position. For many of us, our Christian convictions are at the heart of our motivation for studying and understanding the economy. When we make economic policy, there are lives and communities at stake and serious questions of justice on the line. At the same time, however, we are trained to be scholars of the world as it is, dispassionately exploring and explaining complex phenomena. For many economists, it is not easy to see how being a Christian should make a difference in a person's practice

of economics. Ours is a profession that rightly prizes a high standard of scientific objectivity, and most of the ways that a person's faith commitments could alter the practice of economics seem to violate that standard. Nor is it immediately obvious that faith should make a difference, when the mainstream of the discipline is already focused on poverty, development, education, health, and improving peoples' standard of living.

There are many ways of resolving these questions, and one of the best places to start exploring these different ways is to read the back issues of this journal. I have been fortunate enough to receive a kind of guided tour, having accepted my first academic post at Calvin College and my second at Hope College, both Christian liberal arts colleges staffed with excellent and thoughtful economists. These colleagues, friends, and mentors have challenged me to seriously explore the different ways that Christians have thought about the practice of economics. One decade into my career, I am now convinced that being a Christian can and should make a difference for economists. Even if, most of the time, work by Christian economists operates according to the standards of our guild, there are a couple of places where Christians have unique marching orders and a comparative advantage over our colleagues. In particular, Christian economists should be able to do a better job, as a group, doing a kind of explicitly ethical interdisciplinary work, both in the classroom and in research.

There are likely a number of complicated reasons why economists avoid explicitly writing about ethics in our work, but my instinct is that it has its root in two facts about our position as intellectuals. First, we are working in a context of radical disagreement about ultimate things. As a society, we have deep disagreements about the nature of humanity, justice, and progress, not to mention God. In this environment, it is often easier to be precise and methodical in your work if you avoid these areas of big disagreement, focusing instead on those things that are easily bounded and measurable. This is what economists do really well. We studiously avoid the big ethical questions and write instead about minimal proximate goals that can garner wide agreement, such as pareto optimality. The second reason we avoid work that is explicitly ethical is that doing so requires that we do some very difficult interdisciplinary work. It requires that we read philosophy, theology, perhaps even some sociology. This is no small task, when the language of all of these fields is so specialized. The result of these two barriers—I will call them plu-

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ralism and specialization—is that economists let the philosophers do all of the heavy lifting when it comes time to define economic justice or business ethics.

While I do not have great hope that economists, as a guild, will turn back the clock and return to the days when our field was integrated with political philosophy, I do think that Christian economists could be in a unique position to overcome both of these barriers. First, consider the problem of specialization. While the language of economics is very different than the language of philosophy or theology, many Christians are already somewhat bilingual. Our common commitment to theology in the Church means that we share a partial language with other Christian academics, even if our disciplines are still far apart. Moreover, we have a built-in motivation to study and understand the work of theologians and Bible scholars because they can help us understand our own tradition and faith. Christian economists are, thus, already naturally invested in interdisciplinary work. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that among the ranks of ACE members, there are scholars with degrees in economics and also a background in theology or biblical interpretation. Many others have spent a good part of their careers delving into theology, ethics, and biblical studies.

Second, Christian economists are also probably better equipped to avoid being paralyzed by ethical pluralism. While there is a great amount of disagreement among Christians, we do share a long tradition of ethical reflection. We have centuries of work that we can draw upon, pulling us into distinctly Christian ways of thinking about markets, trade, wealth, and poverty. Among all the sources of disagreement about secondary matters in economics, Christians have a common agreement about ultimate matters of metaphysics, anthropology, and justice. Barrera (2014) makes this case in more detail, highlighting the common theological ground that allows Christian economists to address some important looming ethical questions about our economic system. Rather than avoiding these topics, Christian economists often have, and should, highlight them.

It is often the case that our training as economists, and our Christian theology, will both be relevant, if not explicit, when discussing questions of economic justice. If more in our discipline were more thoroughly read in Catholic social teaching, as well as MacIntyre, Nozick, Sandel, Rawls, and Hayek, we would be better equipped to contribute broadly to current debates about minimum wage laws, health care reform, inequality,

automation, and the many other conversations where economic expertise is essential.

To conclude, therefore, let me paint a picture of what I am proposing. Most economics research is focused and technical in nature, and need not include interactions with philosophers or theologians. At least some part of our work, however, should be devoted to contributing to the larger ethical questions facing us in our economic life. I have tried to do this kind of interdisciplinary work with animal and environmental ethics, and I have found that a number of basic ethical questions are better approached with an understanding of both philosophy and economics. I know this is true in many other areas of inquiry, and I look forward to seeing my colleagues dig into these opportunities.

References

Barrera, A. (2014). Economic justice. *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*. P. Oslington (Ed.). (pp. 533–548). Oxford: Oxford University Press. ■

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For this symposium, *Faith and Economics* asked a fairly wide range of questions to economists in the earlier stages of their career. I chose to focus on two of them: “What things have been influential and helpful?” and “What potentially worthwhile things have been missing?” I am focusing on these two particular questions because I think that some of what I have found to be particularly influential and helpful are lacking to a degree within our community—namely intentional Christian mentorship within the community of Christian economists and purposeful two-way communication between Christian economists and the larger Christian community.

Mentorship from senior Christian economists has been one of the most significant factors in my own development as an economist and academic. However, *intentional* mentorship is missing more broadly in the community of Christian economists, and there are some possibly simple ways that we can begin to engender this kind of intentional mentorship within our community. Secondly, I find the popular writings such as those