

Correspondence

A Theologian's Response Lunn

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As a theologian who has crossed swords on at least one occasion with John Lunn, I was surprised to find myself in agreement with his article "Capitalism as Heresy: On Why Theologians Criticize Markets," in the Spring 2011 issue of *Faith & Economics*. In spite of this agreement, I believe that Christian philosophers, theologians and economists still have important issues amongst us that will require future collaboration.

First, the agreement. Much of Lunn's survey addressed the Radical Orthodoxy (RO) movement in theology. That tradition holds that secularism must be thwarted everywhere, and that Christian theology and practices must again be regnant. Thus, theological concepts, doctrines and even rituals must rule in economics as well.

Lunn is right to reject this. Even if theology is queen of the sciences, she is not the God of them. She ought not be allowed to dominate the theory and practice of all other sciences. As a Kuyperian theologian, I see the RO crowd as making a simple but serious category mistake—they do not recognize the sovereignty of different spheres of life. Each sphere has its own character, goals and practices, but Radical Orthodoxy validates only that of theology. Nor does RO recognize that theology is but one science among many. Thus instead of viewing doctrines such as the Trinity or practices such as the Eucharist as unique to the Church, they attempt to universalize these theological and ecclesiastical concepts and practices as normative in all spheres of life. In so doing they attempt to "Christianize" all of life, but in my judgment, end up rejecting or confusing many aspects of life instead.

Though I agree with Lunn's critique of Radical Orthodoxy, there are still important issues that Christian theology has with the mainstream economic theory which Lunn and others practice. The principal issue is that mainstream economics also attempts conceptual and practical dominance over all other spheres. Via its doctrine of Rational Choice it too pretends to be an all-inclusive explanation of human thought and behavior. The strongest proponent of Rational Choice theory's comprehensiveness is probably Gary Becker, who attempts to show that not only economics, but marriage, family and politics are all explicable under its terms. This

seems to me to be a mirror image of the ecclesiastical dominance that characterizes Radical Orthodoxy.¹

The second issue goes to that of mainstream economic theory in general. When theologians do question aspects of economics we are sometimes dismissed out of hand, since we don't know *how* the market works. Lunn seems to do this in the last sentence of his paper. The charge is true, but irrelevant. I bet that neither Lunn nor I know exactly how our cars work, nonetheless we can drive them. And we each choose where and when we will drive them. Further, each of us can ask legitimate questions about the transportation system in general. Should we build more highways or rail? Who will this road serve? Is it better for society in general to reduce pollutants, even if the price of each auto will rise? Etc.

In the same way, as a theologian I ask questions about capitalism and the market model. Who does it serve? Why is the goal of satisfying rationally ordered preferences the ultimate good rather than, e.g. basic provision for all? Is Rational Choice Theory correct in its view of the nature of humankind? Etc.

As a Christian theologian my interest is to see whether my science as well as that of economics concords with our common, revealed, religious worldview. If my science or yours, for example, is operating with reductionistic or false anthropological presuppositions, we need to challenge each other about them. Thus while I challenge the Radical Orthodox theology of Kathryn Tanner,² for instance, I also challenge the orthodoxy of Mainstream Economics. For example, I do believe that the rational individualism espoused in mainstream economic theory does not harmonize with Biblical faith. I further question the goal of satisfaction of an individual's ordered preference as the greatest good.

I don't expect all economists to be also theologians or philosophers.³ Making better, more efficient cars is a very legitimate task, just as finding ways to improve market efficiencies is. But some economists, and especially Christian ones, need to acknowledge that there are moral, epistemological and teleological presuppositions in their models, and examine whether they do or do not comport with biblically-revealed faith. An economic model is not like an oak tree; it didn't just naturally grow. It is a complex human creation that is the product of cultures, ideas, and history. It may include lacunae or error. Since it is unlikely that any model of human action will hold the truth in its entirety, modesty is an appropriate stance as we raise questions for one another.

As we do so we will be scientists calling each other to live out our shared religion in our respective fields. The fact that the economist knows

how markets work, and theologians knows how Greek grammar works is all to the good. But there may be outcomes that tend to the bad in either theology or economics. One bad outcome is the one we currently see: Radical Orthodoxy and Mainstream Orthodoxy each claiming complete hegemony over each others' field. Worse still, I believe, would be to presume that since one does not know the mechanics of the other's field, Christian scholars in different disciplines have nothing to talk about at all.

Endnotes

- 1 Much interesting economic theory, beginning with Kahnemann and Tversky, has questioned Rational Choice Theory, but seems not to have dislodged it.
2. I critique Kathryn Tanner's book, *Economy of Grace*, on this point in my 2006 review of it in *Markets & Morality*.
- 3 My dissertation co-director, John B. Davis, is—he is leader in the field of Social Economics, a subset of economics that constantly inquires about just these issues. ■