

A Closing Response to James K. A. Smith

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I found in Jamie Smith's follow-up essay a great deal of constructive insight and differentiation. This is a good beginning on what I had hoped this symposium would itself begin, substantial scholarly work together on "better globalization," building on the strengths of both economists and theologians.¹ In Smith's apt summary, our symposium was "productive talking past each other."

A small start at talking *with* each other in inter-disciplinary communication is always agreeing on terms. For example, I fundamentally accept Smith's first observation ("theme") in his second-round essay. He says that I and other economists "take what is contingent as if it were natural." But our term for "natural" would more typically be "a reference point." We take what we see in "economic nature" around us and ask how it differs across culture and time, and how it might be evaluated (ethically or economically) or re-structured.² We make no apology for taking "what is contingent" as a reference point. We worry that as theologians try to respect the "contingent," their reference points in scholarly discourse are unclear or shifting or imprecise.

Smith himself seems sensitive to our "worry" about them. He says,

In some ways, what is at stake here is a matter of *imagination*: I think the theologian tends to have a more supple, elastic imagination about how things *could* be. But the economists remind us that our sometimes unfettered imaginings need to be disciplined by social scientific attention to empirical realities.

That is a helpful way of imagining how economists and theologians might dialog to establish a common reference point.

Smith's discussion of "optimal end points," to use economists' jargon, is also helpful. This is his second "theme." Economists often do assessments of how close existing (contingent) economic systems come to some ideal system, almost always defined by measurable material criteria (e.g., ideal systems that are efficient, or sustainable, or efficient/equitable across generations). Smith reminds us that we Christians have a far higher, far richer set of ideals against which to measure our systems,

ideals that are sometimes immaterial and unmeasurable, ideals captured in Biblical descriptions of *shalom*, ideals associated with eschatology, ideals associated with the coming city in the coming kingdom of God. The theologians he cites in his second-round response are, in my opinion, far more promising for fertile joint striving toward his own stated aspiration than those he cites in his first-round essay. He prescribes that “in order to evaluate social and economic configurations we need to measure them against a criterion of flourishing (an ‘ideal’), but then evaluate the *degrees* to which such configurations track with, or depart from, the ideal.” Amen to that, and to his forthright dismissal of intellectual extremes that are hell-bent on defending or destroying the status quo.

Finally, I think that Jamie and I *are* reading from the same script—we are *not* in “[deep] continued disagreement”—when he observes that economists and theologians can constructively dialog only once they share a *common* sense of what constitutes the “common good” in regard to economic globalization. I thought I was suitably humble in my opening essay about how primitive my conception of “good” was. I in no way “accepted” that conception as adequate, and I explicitly appealed to ethicists and theologians to help us economists conceive it better in economic matters. I used language that echoed the phrase “human flourishing” because whatever *else* human flourishing involves, it certainly involves material prosperity, too.³ It is substantial as well as spiritual, material as well as immaterial. It is not mere wispy sentiment.

Defining the good for the world of global economics is good ground on which to labor together with theologians. Unlike Smith, I do not think eschatology matters for the prospects of fruitful joint labor. Laboring together to define the good *relevantly* is vital whether the current world and the world to come have continuity or are radically discontinuous.

At the end of our exchange, I note how preliminary it has been. I also note how little related to globalization it has been, and how much more on broader questions of economic structures and disciplinary methods.

So I say a good start on a more substantial and constructive dialog. But I had hoped for more than a good start.

Endnotes

1. Paul Oslington, an Australian economist *and* theologian, has spent several years actively exploring a more expansive project involving economists and theologians. His hope is to establish, if possible, a

respected disciplinary intersection, a new and mediating scholarly discipline.

2. The economist Robert Frank, in his intermediate microeconomics textbook, famously describes us as “economic naturalists,” using the word in the same way as people describe naturalists in parks and nature preserves. See also Frank (2007).
3. That statement in no way endorses the so-called health-and-wealth “gospel.”

References

Frank, R.H. (2007). *The economic naturalist: In search of explanations for everyday enigmas*. New York: Basic Books.■