

## **Missing an Opportunity that Never Was? A Final Response to Richardson**

**James K.A. Smith**  
Calvin College

If the goal of our dialogue was to build agreement or consensus, then I suppose we have failed miserably. However, I am not sure that was either our assignment or our goal. So perhaps the success or failure of this engagement between economics and theology might be judged by other criteria. For example, if we have crystallized the depth of difference between the two fields, clarified the points of deep disagreement, and perhaps even demonstrated *in actu* the utter difficulty of even staging such a conversation, then even our continued disagreements will represent a certain accomplishment.

But before moving on to a couple of more substantive points, let me address one persistent criticism from Richardson. He seems to regularly suggest that I somehow failed to keep up my end of the bargain—that I basically refused to comply with the assignment. On his account, our charge was to answer the question: “Is economic globalization good or bad?” This explains the tack he has taken in this dialogue. And clearly that is not the question I was answering. But did I misunderstand or otherwise ignore the assignment? I do not think so. (Andrew Yuengert, our editor and hospitable referee, can make that call.) While Richardson seems to have come to the dialogue with this narrow assignment in mind, my notes indicate a different, broader version of our assignment. In particular, we had agreed that I should write an essay that would summarize “what every theologian wishes economists understood about the theological critique of globalization;” Richardson, in turn, was charged with writing a converse essay: “what every Christian economist wishes theologians understood about economic globalization.”<sup>1</sup> Somehow in the process Richardson came to the conclusion that we had quite a different task. This in itself confirms some of the worries and suspicions I have articulated in my previous essays.

This sets the context for Richardson’s disappointment. In particular, he notes that my essays “fulfilled few of [his] hopes.” This does not surprise me. Indeed, what would it have looked like for me to fulfill his hopes? Well, it would have required that I take as “given” *precisely* what is at issue in the debate between theologians and economists on these matters. In short, Richardson’s hopes could have been fulfilled only if I already

conceded most of the ground to his discipline and its assumptions. In other words, the only way this encounter could have satisfied his hopes is if we played the game on a field decidedly slanted in his favor—so he could play downhill, as it were. Richardson wanted the debate to be conducted according to the “house rules” of economics—and as we all know, the house always wins.

Let me address just a couple of further points from his response. First, I find his closing questions—about how theologians think about the disciplines and disciplinary standards—to be puzzling, frustrating, a tad haughty and condescending. He frames these questions by appealing to “theologians’ apparent distrust of organized thinking and observing.” This is simply a huge adventure in missing the point, now turned into some smarmy rebuke. It shows a remarkable lack of imagination since Richardson seems to assume that any critique of “foundationalism” is equivalent to a rejection of “organized thinking.” I suspect readers will be able to readily see the *non sequitur* here and can thus discern that Richardson’s questions are really non-questions. The issue is not whether there can be observation; the issue is the conditions under which such observation takes place. If Richardson thinks these criticisms of foundationalism are just the irresponsible musings of mushy theologians, I would encourage him to carefully consider the same arguments offered by social scientist Christian Smith (2003; 2010).

Second, Richardson was hoping for more constructive, concrete proposals about an alternative. Again, I do not think this was part of my assignment, particularly in the limited space provided. But I can make a couple of gestures in that direction, though I recognize that I am not an economist, so here range beyond my expertise. For instance, I do not think the theological criticisms I articulated entail an “inherently non-incremental” approach to these issues. It is not as if the theological concerns I sketched require some utopian, revolutionary instantiation of an ideal *ex nihilo*. However, what they do perhaps require is the ability to imagine a plurality of overlapping economies and orders of commerce and exchange. The alternatives that might be proposed, then, would not be proposed as national policies but rather as *alternative* economies that could be pursued by sub-communities who share a common sense of “the good” (and more importantly, share a narrative and practices that inform such a conception of the good). This, however, does not mean they have to be hopelessly localized. As Cavanaugh emphasized, the church catholic was globalized long before the market, so the church could be a transnational network of alternative economic orderings. But, following Augustine’s

lead (as I mentioned last time), even such an alternative economics would have to recognize that perhaps other economic orderings are dominant in the shared spaces in which we find ourselves. So the Christian community could encourage economic practices that embody an alternative to the dominant economy while also looking for strategic ways to collaborate with—and contribute to—the dominant economy, even if their ultimate goal might be to reform and reorder that economy.<sup>2</sup> In short, I think there is room in this theological vision for an intentional incrementalism. What might that look like? Again, I do not think I am in a place to say. Perhaps it would be along the lines of a distributism as sketched by Belloc and Chesterton. But I am sure such a suggestion is not going to win me any new friends among Richardson’s economists.

I remain grateful for this exchange and only hope, even in its zigs and zags, that the encounter will prove helpful in advancing a much needed conversation between Christian theologians and economists.

### **Endnotes**

1. I have the email correspondence to confirm this. So I strongly resist Richardson’s charge that I have not undertaken the assignment, or have somehow written in bad faith.
2. Sociologist James Davison Hunter’s conception of “faithful presence” might be a relevant way to describe the sort of alternative economy I am sketching (Hunter, 2010). Interestingly, Hunter observes that “there are ways in which one can rightly say that globalization was and remains in many respects Americanization writ large” (p. 197).

### **References**

- Hunter, J.D.** (2010). *To change the world: The irony, tragedy, and possibility of Christianity in the late modern world*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, C.** (2003). *Moral, believing animals*. New York: Oxford University Press.
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