

Economics and American Theological Curricula: What's Missing

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A bright, young, recent college graduate earlier this spring asked to meet with me over lunch. As we talked it became clear that he wanted to go to seminary with a view to Ph.D. studies afterwards. He wanted to become conversant with both New Testament studies and economics, and hoped to teach somewhere integrating the two disciplines from an evangelical Christian perspective. What would I recommend?

I had to explain that from the angle of theological curricula the options were somewhat limited. One excellent option was to consider the joint M.Div. and M.B.A. program offered by Palmer Seminary and Eastern University in the Philadelphia area. Emory and Yale both advertise similar programs but the curricula of each degree seem simply to be abbreviated; at least from the website information they do not appear to be as intentionally integrated as Palmer's/Eastern's program.

For someone looking for just one Masters level degree, Loyola in Chicago has an M.A. in Social Justice and Community Development as part of the Seminary Consortium of Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE). Northeastern Seminary of Roberts Wesleyan College in New York state has an M.A. in Theology and Social Justice. And I am sure there are other programs of which I am unaware.

Turn to many of the major evangelical seminaries, however, and one finds very little. Few even have a full-fledged ethics department of any kind. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has one of the more long-standing, developed ethics departments, but none of their course titles or catalogue descriptions suggest any specific focus on economic issues. The same appears to be true of Fuller, where Christian Ethics is one possible specialization within Theology. Gordon-Conwell has a good variety of offerings in Social Ethics, but the only one all about economics emphasizes free-market economics and does not appear to survey the biblical teaching in any detail.

In more liberal or liberationist settings, one would expect to find more, and one does find more in the area of social justice, but not necessarily anything more explicitly economic in nature. Union Seminary in New York City has a historically influential and extensive ethics department, but its current course offerings involve two phases of American Liberalism,

sexual ethics, virtue ethics, theoretical and methodological courses, and lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgendered-queer ethics! The Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago has a similar wide-ranging set of offerings in a discrete ethics department and program, also without anything obviously explicitly on economics. Princeton's offerings are narrower as ethics falls under theology more broadly. Harvard offers a couple dozen courses under Religion, Ethics, and Politics, but the only one that looks to be largely about economics is on the so-called "prosperity gospel."

The status quo is more depressing still. Trinity International University offers an entire degree in bioethics but the topic of material possessions appears only in one small part of one ethics course within the larger systematic theology department. As far as I can tell, Westminster Seminary has one ethics course in its entire M.Div. program, while from Dallas Seminary's on-line material I could discern no ethics courses at all. Denver Seminary, where I teach, has in recent years offered an elective entirely on the Bible's teaching on material possessions, stewardship, and related matters, which appears to be fairly unique nationwide, and it is launching a full-fledged M.A. in Missions and Justice beginning in the fall of 2011, but its curriculum has yet to be completely finalized so that it remains to be seen what role economic issues will play.

The historic reasons for this state of affairs are not hard to determine. Divinity degrees began in the Middle Ages in Europe, in university contexts that quickly developed a much broader range of disciplines for academic study, including economics. Seminaries or divinity schools in America, like other parts of the English-speaking world, were initially patterned after European models. Why try to teach economics (or any other social science, or natural science or fine arts or humanities) if one had experts in each of those fields lecturing in a full-fledged university whom divinity students could access? But as free-standing seminaries began to emerge more and more in the United States and, eventually, a few similar theological colleges elsewhere in the world, these resources were no longer nearby. And lecturers trained in the classic theological disciplines were, with rare exceptions, insufficiently rooted in any of these other disciplines, to do the necessary integration if anything like the academic discipline of economics were to cross-pollinate a theological seminary. In more conservative circles, additionally, it was generally assumed that such a discipline was not within the purview of the curriculum anyway.

Today, interdisciplinary efforts are being reinvented more rapidly than at any time since the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when it was still possible to be a Renaissance person and teach with skill and

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mastery of the literature in two or more academic departments at once. The information explosion of the last century or so has made this virtually impossible today without collaborative, team, and team-taught efforts. Still, interdisciplinary degrees, dual degrees (jointly or seriatim) and team-teaching are making interdisciplinary scholarship viable and widespread again, but theology (or Bible) and economics, for the most part, does not seem to have caught the interest and passion of nearly as many as various other combinations.

There is also often a disparity between what scholars in social-sciences like economics recognize they can and cannot manage in areas outside their discipline and what theologians recognize they can and cannot manage outside *their* discipline. Maybe because theology was once argued to be the “queen of the sciences,” one does find systematic theologians writing books on the Bible and economics without even trying to master the basic literature of modern economic theory (with rare exceptions). Meanwhile, it is almost unheard of for the scholarly economist to even imagine undertaking an interdisciplinary effort without becoming reasonably conversant with the key biblical and theological literature, both primary and secondary. Biblical scholars can survey the contributions of one or both testaments to economic questions or issues but have to rein themselves in not to claim more that is normative or prescriptive for modern economies than is justified unless they have at least a working grasp of modern economic theory. At the popular level, self-appointed experts, sometimes emerging out of the parachurch movement, write works that often lack sound academic grounding in *either* biblical/theological studies or economics. Yet, as with much popular literature, theirs often becomes the widest audience of all, with pastors and laity alike turning to what superficially appear to be clear analyses of situations for simple (if not downright simplistic) answers. These in turn disproportionately influence overly generalized half-truths that become the basis for political opinions, how Christians vote, and how they confidently pronounce on “the one, true Christian” option on all sorts of matters of public policy. Rigorous scholarly thought quickly goes by the boards altogether, on both the “right” and the “left” wings.

What is needed is a recognition that the biblical authors and cultures predated the invention of both capitalism and socialism by anywhere from sixteen to thirty-one centuries! A sizable majority of biblical scholars affirms that what prevailed in the ancient Near East and the ancient Mediterranean worlds was what sociologists today call the theory of limited good—the assumption that there was a fixed quantity of material resources

in the world so that the more one person had of the overall “pie,” the less there was for everybody else. Occasionally, biblical texts will suggest principles that correspond closely to small portions of either capitalism or socialism, as understood today, but never do they add up to anything close to support for one whole system or the other. This does not mean that we cannot evaluate these systems in their various aspects according to biblical principles, merely that we should not expect the results to add up to anything like unequivocal support for any modern system of economic theory over any other. And if they do, we should probably be very cautious about ever implementing it, since it is not likely to work very well in a non-agrarian, non-imperial, non-inflationary society.

Instead, let us learn from each other. Christian economists and theologians (including ethicists and biblical scholars) should interact with each other, exchange reading lists, critique each other’s papers and publications, come together for interdisciplinary symposia and conferences, work on joint research and writing projects, and team teach classes together. Then “faith and economics” will have something really worth writing about! ■