

What Do Economists and Theologians Have to Say to Each Other? The International Situation

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I am very grateful to Paul Oslington for asking me to contribute to this discussion (and for presenting my thoughts at the ASSA meeting, when I missed my flight to Denver!).

It has been my great honor to convene the Association of Christian Economists UK Annual Meeting since 2000. In this short reflection, I begin by looking briefly at the situation among sister organisations to ACE UK. I go on to present some analysis of ACE UK's output. I then present some evidence from a recent book on theological thinking on the market within the Church of England, and close with some reflections on the state of the relationship between economists and theologians.

Over recent years ACE UK has welcomed Christian Economists from Germany, Japan, and Serbia. I wrote to them for their reflections on the topic for this forum. Dr Stephan Holthaus (Institut für Ethik & Werte) runs the Forum Christlicher Wirtschaftswissenschaftler, which has around thirty members and meets annually. Stephan writes:

The connections between Christian economists and theologians is very weak.... There is not really a working cooperation. That has to do with both sides—two worlds, different languages, etc. I speak only about the evangelical initiatives. The liberals are working much more together. Only Prof. Lachmann studied theology and economics. But things are changing. In March 2010 we started our Forum Christlicher Wirtschaftswissenschaftler, and I hope that we will start a degree program in economics at our theological university in 2012.

Hiro Hayafuji (WTO) has convened the Association for Christian Economics in Japan, which has seven members. Hiro writes:

Author's Note: *Warm thanks to Peter Heslam, Andy Hartropp, Stephan Holthaus, Mrdjan Mladjan, and Hiro Hayafuji for their help and advice.*

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So far, our group, which is rather inactive these days, consists of economists and business people who have faith, but none with formal theological training. We have had occasional get-togethers, but have not published anything. It has been rather difficult to encounter with economists who are interested in Christianity. As less than one percent of the Japanese population is known to be Christians, I am not much surprised, but would indeed like to reactivate next year the Japanese ACE.

Mrdjan Mladjan (Pompeu Fabra) convened a meeting of Serbian Christian Economists in 2005-06. Mrdjan writes:

The involvement of theologians was—none. All the people in the group were religious, engineers and economists. On the other hand, there is quite a bit of “joint” work (mostly by a single person with dual training) in history (of institutions) and theology, and law and theology. For example, some people study medieval Serbian laws, which are a combination of autochthonous institutions and Roman Law of Eastern tradition ... including the rules from the Church Councils of the early centuries. There were many laws concerning charity.... The Church in Serbia has, since 1990s, mostly been occupied with receiving several million new members, the number of temples roughly doubled in the last 20 years.... Education of a large number of priests and religious science teachers is a recent phenomenon, and the fruits are expected to be seen only in the decades to come.... <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/3/14.aspx> is a document that gives an Orthodox opinion on many modern issues, the Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Having read these fascinating pen portraits from other places, I turn to ACE UK. ACE UK has around ninety-four members at the beginning of 2011, and our ACE Journal (now Working Paper series) has been going since 1985. The articles and book reviews published in the Journal/ Working Paper series allow for some analysis of the relationship between economists and theologians within ACE UK over the period 1985-2010 (on the basis of my somewhat imperfect knowledge of the ACE membership). All the articles are online on our website (<http://www.christian-economists.org.uk/>).

Over the whole period there were 104 articles. Of these, seven were by

theologians, thirty-five by economists with some theological training, only two jointly authored by an economist and a theologian. By “an economist with theological training,” I include everyone I know who has studied theology in any formal way (either as part of a pastoral qualification—e.g., to become a lay reader in the Church of England—or as a formal academic degree). In these numbers, I count all the articles of the individual as reflecting the same disciplinary background, regardless of when they acquired their qualifications. Comparing 2001-2010 and 1991-2000, the number of articles falls but the share of authors with joint training rises (I suspect some economists acquired theological training during this period).

The theologians writing in the Journal/Working Paper series have mainly written about the market and distributive justice issues. Economists without theological training (who write the majority of the articles) write on game theoretical analysis of the Bible, empirical analysis of religion, aspects of policy, or what theologians have said about economics!

The books reviewed in the Journal/Working Paper series provide a good insight into the intellectual interests of ACE UK members, though the choice of books to review is somewhat (only lightly) influenced by the preferences of successive Journal editors. Over the whole period (1985-2010) there were thirty-one book reviews. Of these (according to my own, again somewhat imperfect, knowledge of the authors), fourteen were authored by theologians, six involved both theologians and economists, and six were written by economists with some theological training. Comparing 2001-2010 and 1991-2000, the number of book reviews falls but the share of authors who are economists with some theological training rises. I take these numbers to indicate that as economists we are very interested to read what theologians are saying about economics!

Eve Poole has written a fascinating book (2010) entitled *The Church on Capitalism: Theology and the Market*. The book essentially discusses the current relationship between theology and economics within the Church of England. This provides a further snapshot of the dialogue between the two disciplines in England (I should of course say that while many of ACE UK members are members of the Church of England, many are not). According to Poole (2010), the Church itself has debated a large number of economic topics at its General Synod meetings. These include: foreign trade and policy, debt, sustainable development, development in developing world, private enterprise, consumer choice, government intervention, regulation, and private ownership. Poole has a fascinating chapter on “Church of England Commentators,” in which she discusses the work of named individuals on the theology of capitalism. She identifies seven theologians

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(Preston, Atherton, Sedgwick, Brown, Gorringe, Higginson, and Heslam), one economist (Donald Hay), three bishops (Harries, Selby, and Jenkins), and three business people (Green, Wright, and Wilde).

Poole points to the particular contribution of Donald Hay (my predecessor as convenor of ACE UK): the potential damage done by teaching economics to morality! However, what is more interesting is whom she does not mention! Andy Hartropp (who is the only ACE UK member, to my knowledge, who holds two PhDs, in both economics and theology); Michael Schluter (who founded the Jubilee Centre); and Andrew Britton, whose work is mentioned in the section on Sedgwick but does not earn him a separate write-up. Andy, Michael, and Andrew are members of ACE UK (and the Church of England). ACE UK does not get a mention.

In the light of the above, my general reflections on how theologians (without training in economics) tend to view economics are as follows. Theologians tend to want to discuss the economic system as a whole, whereas economists are more reluctant to do this, because “it’s complicated.” Theologians tend to be critical of the economic system rather than to engage with sophisticated economic analysis. There is still a marked lack of co-authorship between economists and theologians (in contrast to increasing co-authorship and inter-disciplinarity *within* economics). Some of the economists who do work with theologians (e.g., Britton & Sedgwick, 2003) tend to stick (in their joint work) to easy targets (like Homo Economicus) and not to focus on the massive amount of economic analysis on market failures and shortcomings. Theologians in their discussions of the economic system tend to leave little room for political differences and the role of economic evidence in pronouncing on policy. This is the major thing I learned from Donald Hay.

However, theologians are very useful in focussing on justice and poverty issues, which economists need to be held to account on. Bishop Peter Selby gave a great illustration of this when he came to ACE UK—getting us as economists to play the role of the unmerciful servant and give our excuses to the Master (from Matt. 18: 21-35). Theologians are also good at highlighting the importance of tradition and reason (ethics) in Christian economics, which economists who are Christians but not theologians (such as me) tend to neglect. Drawing on Gustafson (1988) writing on varieties of moral discourse, we might suggest that theologians are good on *prophetic* discourse and *narrative* discourse, but need professional economists to help them on *policy* discourse.

I conclude with four observations on the relationship between

theologians and economists and how it might be bolstered. First, it would be good if economists worked with theologians in interpreting scripture, and helping us learn from tradition and Christian ethics. Second, we need to engage more as Christian economists with the details of modern economics—e.g., game theory and econometric analysis of policy—rather than just sticking to high level themes (such as critiques of the capitalist system as a whole). Third, we need to pick subjects of joint interest to theologians and economists, as these would seem to offer the prospect of much fruitful interaction—e.g., issues of social capital, the credit crunch, and debt and poverty reduction. Finally and encouragingly, more Christian economists are likely to also have theological training. This augurs well for the average quality of the interaction between the two disciplines in the future.

References

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