

The Conversation between Economics and Theology in Christian Colleges

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I have been teaching at a Christian college for sixteen years now. I want to suggest that Christian colleges provide a space for a type of integrative work by economists; it is not an ideal space, it was not self-consciously planned as such by most schools, and it requires a lot of self-motivated and professionally unrewarded effort, but it has fit my needs as a researcher interested in integrating economics and theology.

Consider what is needed to do truly integrative work across economics and theology: one must keep current in economics, become competent in theological ethics, and master the philosophy needed to bring the two disciplines into coherent conversation. At a school which is somewhere on the boundary between research university and teaching college the conditions exist in which integrative research by economists is both welcome and (barely) possible. A pure teaching college has teaching loads of four courses per semester. There is neither time nor financial support for this sort of work. There are some valiant researchers who have contributed from these schools, but the effort needed is very difficult to sustain for very long. Research universities—schools with 2-2 teaching loads or less, plus substantial research support and expectations to match—are not currently configured to support integrative work by economists.

A Christian college with a 3-3 or 3-2 load can combine the space to conduct integrative research with an openness to that sort of work by economists. Because a 3-3 or a 3-2 precludes a frantic push for publication, there is time for an economist to develop the intellectual tools needed for integrative work, and to take the first tentative steps. Furthermore, many Christian schools have pursued initiatives for integration between faith and the various disciplines.

I do not want to understate the challenges of this sort of work in a Christian college, however. The primary challenge is the lack of time and financial resources. A 3-3 teaching load leaves some time for research for the motivated researcher, but it does not leave much. It is a struggle to keep a research project moving during the semester, and one must resist the temptations of overseas summer programs and teaching. Not all of your efforts will be appreciated by your economist colleagues, who have the same positive-normative blind spots as the rest of the discipline,

or by some of your colleagues in other disciplines, many of whom are comfortably inactive in research. As a Christian college becomes more research oriented, as Pepperdine has begun to be, the space for integration may shrink, as the demands for mainstream peer-reviewed economic research (and its associated prestige in the broader academic community) increase.

I do not want to overstate the place of the Christian college scholar, even in Christian economics. Quantitatively, our contributions are modest. I recently counted the articles published in *Faith & Economics*, categorizing them by the type of institution of the author: research university, college (mostly Christian), and non-academic. Even in *Faith & Economics*, two-thirds of the articles are contributed by economists from research institutions. One-sixth come from Christian colleges, and one-sixth from non-academic economists. Of course, *Faith & Economics* may be an unrepresentative sample; economists from Christian colleges may be more active in publishing in heterodox outlets like the *Review of Social Economy*, or in the more philosophically minded (and free market) *Journal of Markets and Morality*.

For an economist who wants to devote his or her scholarship to this sort of integrative work, the task is difficult—the few niches in the field of economics which you can fill are not really built for you. There is no real career path for this sort of work within the field of economics. A career path does exist, though—but it is located in theology, not economics. A surprising number of the most productive Catholic scholars trained in economics but addressing theological questions also have graduate degrees in theology. There is intellectual support for theology and economics from the theology side—programs, endowed chairs, funding. None of the Catholic economists I am referring to have a position solely in an economics program.

Most of the conversations about theology and economics are initiated by theologians. Pepperdine's religion department teaches core courses in social ethics, many of which address economic questions. Much of the economics is poor. You might think there was an opportunity for some real value added from economists, but attempted exchanges between economists and theologians, even in a Christian college setting, often end in mutual incomprehension and annoyance. Theologians doubt the moral imaginations of economists, and economists question the ability of theologians to think clearly and carefully.

I wish Christian social ethicists had more economics training, but I think economists can help to get the conversation going by developing a

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deeper understanding of what it takes to place economics at the service of theological ethics.

We all know that positive economics is supposed to be about prediction, and that the nature of the assumptions made about human beings does not matter. If rational egoist utilitarian models predict patterns of exchange, economists do not care whether people really are rational egoist utilitarians. This sort of value-free positive economics can be justly criticized as not really value-free, but I want to make a different point, often overlooked by economists: analysis which has some success in prediction does not *by that fact* qualify as a useful framework for normative evaluation.

Theological ethics is a normative inquiry; it asks whether current or potential future economic institutions are good for people. By “people” I mean “real, existing people,” not the rational egoistic utilitarians of economic models. Positive economic models, however well they predict and explain, will not help us to evaluate the outcomes of the economy for people who are not rational egoistic utilitarians. If theological ethics can give us anything, it should be an understanding of the actual human condition: our fallen nature, our created goodness, and the purpose and fulfillment of human life both in this world and in eternity.

A positive economist who wants to offer insight to theologians, when confronted by the fact that his models are poorly constructed for normative analysis, will duly note that, to the extent that real people differ from the assumptions made about them in positive models, the normative claims based on those models will be incorrect. Since the theologian seeks normative understanding, someone will have to undertake the task of modifying the positive models to reflect more accurate assumptions about human nature and behavior. To this need the economist may respond in one of two ways:

1. Leave it to the theologians to do the math. This will often lead theologians to reject the entire economic framework, because mathematics is not part of their graduate training.
2. Sketch out a *normatively useful* framework for the theologians. Economists have a decided comparative advantage in this sort of thing: it is our specialty. We do not have to build a full-blown normative model to provide insight into how the results of our positive models are likely to change when their assumptions are relaxed.

In their archetypal account of positive and normative, economists often

refer to the mythical “policymaker,” who provides the values framework, but who is conveniently vague, and who makes few demands on modeling choices. What if, for Christian economists at least, theologians are our “policymakers?” Perhaps we should shape our models and analysis to answer the questions they are asking, or to help them ask clearer questions.

A final word of advice to young Christian economists who might be interested in this sort of work. Be prepared to develop a basic expertise in philosophy or theology. You do not have to get a degree in either; some of the most active scholars in Catholic economics have two degrees, but graduate training in either discipline may draw you into a different set of academic debates and institutional circles, and away from economics. You may become a theologian doing economics, instead of an economist doing theology; there is a difference. Nevertheless, you cannot just make up the philosophy and theology as you go along. Just because they do not use formal mathematics does not mean that they are not rigorous; both fields have methods and systems of careful thought—they have serious scholars, and traditions of scholarly inquiry. You do not want to hack new scholarly paths through the underbrush when there are well-traveled philosophical or theological trails close by. Seek the help of theologians and philosophers (especially philosophers); you need their help, even if not everything they offer will be useful to you. ■