

- 1 C.F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, 25 volumes in 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), *The Pentateuch*, vol. 3, p. 369.
- 2 See the extensive evidence for this view in E. Calvin Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), pp. 58-62.
- 3 Although Hume has the reputation of an atheist or an agnostic, it is more likely that he was a theist whose arguments for theism ran along the lines of Joseph Butler: practical and common sense. See J.C.A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Library of Philosophy and Religion Series, 1978).

Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics
by Robert H. Nelson

Rowman and Littlefield. ISBN 0-8476-7664-1.

This is the sort of thought-provoking book that every member of ACE should read and consider. Those members who teach in Christian schools should find the book especially interesting, in light of the subtitle. Nevertheless, this reviewer is critical of the book. While I believe that ACE members ought to consider Nelson's analysis, I doubt that he has "got it right" in a number of places.

First, the positives. Nelson is an economist who is looking at the theological foundations and roots of our profession. Unlike some theologians or philosophers who don't understand much of the subtlety of the discipline (and who don't critique it very well), Nelson is well-trained in technical economics, and reads the literature correctly. In fact, he has contributed a fair amount of economic writing himself. As such, the book is likely to appeal to a wide range of economists.

Second, the book is at least as much a history of thought book as it is anything else. Nelson looks back to Aristotle and Plato as fathers of schools of thought in economics (and philosophy in general). His tracing of the development of their ideas, and the evolution of them from one generation

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to another, is well worth the price of the book.

At the heart of his analysis is the distinction between two approaches to economic thought and practice—the Roman and Protestant traditions. It must be pointed out that these are not to be confused with Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, in their current (or any particular historic) forms. This can lead to some confusion for the reader who has a faith commitment and membership—I often balked at some statements which Nelson made about “Protestants,” feeling that, “He can’t be talking about me or anybody I know who claims to be in this tradition.”

As Nelson sees it, “At the heart of the Roman tradition of thought is the conviction that there exist rationally grounded laws of nature and that mankind is both ethically bound and has strong practical reasons to behave in accordance with these laws.” This way of thinking has its origins (at least as we have come to know it) in Greek philosophy, and Roman implementation. Nelson sees Aristotle as the first “Roman,” and suggests that “Aristotelian” is as good a label for the tradition as any other. Respect for law grew with the spread of Greek influence and the Roman empire in the Mediterranean. The Romans argued that their laws were valid because they were based on the laws of nature. As a consequence, Nelson argues that “The deep respect for the rule of law was one of the most important legacies of ancient Rome and is a characteristic feature of the Roman tradition.”

Additionally, the practicality of the Romans in building cities, roads, and empire proved persuasive in acceptance of the Roman point of view. The view of the world as a rational place founded on laws of nature was certainly conducive to the establishment of an empire ruled from a single city. Following the barbarian invasions of later centuries, the Catholic Church provided a single organization to hold different ethnic and economic

groups together. Augustine was the major theologian in this tradition, who consciously drew from Aristotle in developing his philosophical views, and sought to tie together Christian thinking with wisdom drawn from the best pagan sources. During the late Middle Ages, the development of Natural Law as a distinct philosophy, and the Enlightenment in later centuries, were refinements and extensions of the Roman-Augustinian tradition.

What is most critical is to understand that “The basic underlying tenets of mainstream economics of today still rest fundamentally within the Roman tradition.” There can be little doubt of the validity of Nelson’s analysis on this point. Adam Smith was firmly within the Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century, and his use of language such as “natural price” in discussing markets leaves little doubt of his manner of thinking. And any economist who begins a technical piece with a series of assumptions which include “rational” agents, who pursue “self-interest” or “profits,” is just as firmly in the tradition as Aristotle. The concept of Utility is firmly based on Aristotle (even though he said little about economics in terms which economists would recognize).

Nelson views Aquinas as another crucial influence in the development of Western science, with his faith that “rational inquiry begins with a study of the facts of the world.” As humans grow in their understanding of the rational laws by which God runs the world, they will grow in their understanding of God. “Human progress thus becomes the advance of knowledge and the forward movement of science,” all of which are pleasing to God and constitute service to God. Rather than a rejection of God (as sometimes seen today), science is part of the search for God. Economic progress (probably unknown as such by Aquinas, but prominent in twentieth century thought) is also part of service to God. It would almost seem that one can indeed serve both God and mammon! Economic rationality, then, has

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both a natural and a moral basis. The consequences are an economics profession which acts like a priesthood:

If economists today see social rationality as leading along a path of efficiency, it is a path that, like the medieval injunction to reason, has a moral basis. It is the modern road of salvation, the means of banishing scarcity and thus evil behavior from the world, culminating in an earthly heaven of economic abundance to match the medieval heaven in the hereafter. Despite the fact that most economists deny a theological function, the economists of the welfare state [Nelson's term for late 20th century US] are in truth the most recent of the priesthods of history to exhibit the characteristic outlooks of the Roman tradition (p. 47).

This concept of an economic priesthood is one to which Nelson returns regularly. It is interesting to see our profession portrayed in the same terms as the ancient priests of oracles, who offered advice and warning to rulers. I suppose that Presidents who ignore advice of economists do so at their peril—the wrath of the gods may not be imminent, but loss at the polling place is a danger.

The second great tradition is the Protestant, based initially on the writings of Plato. "The Protestant tradition is the tradition of skepticism that human reason can be the instrument of human betterment. Instead, reason is as often the source of illusion." In contrast to the natural harmony of the Roman world, Protestants emphasize the discontinuities of life—and the foremost of these is the radical fall of Adam and Eve, with further decline in the human condition through war, conflict, strife and selfishness. "...progress in the Protestant tradition requires a fundamental transformation in the quality of human existence—the making of a whole new man." While both the Roman and Protestant traditions agree on the final goal for humanity—heaven—there is absolute

disagreement on the means to get there. At the heart of the matter is the role of human action. In the Roman tradition, reason and action are instruments in reaching the goal of ending scarcity and achieving morality. In the Protestant tradition, such progress is simply not possible for persons. Rather, left to themselves, people will inevitably degenerate into alienation and further strife. If there is a central theme of the Protestant tradition, it would have to be alienation, in the most radical sense.

What is held up with regard by the Roman tradition—law and prosperity—is seen by Protestants as dangerous at best. Law is as corrupted by the human heart, although it may have a valid role in restraining evil persons from even further sin. Prosperity is no longer a sign of progress but rather is a temptation to selfishness. Self-interest is distorted into theft, oppression, and other forms of greed.

What is perhaps most startling is Nelson's claim that "the United States exhibits a characteristic outlook that matches most closely the Roman tradition." Most of us are well aware of the Protestant origins of so many of the early immigrants into the thirteen colonies. One might have thought that their Protestant religion would have influenced the thinking and practice of the country. Instead, Nelson sees the Enlightenment as the means by which the Roman tradition was embodied into law and practice. On this, he is right, and this apparent contradiction requires some rethinking on the part of many Christians. In short, what is our theology? Is our theology consistent with our views on economics, and vice versa? These are not easy questions. They lie at the heart of integration of faith and learning, and are presumably near the top of the agenda of every ACE member.

What are the weaknesses of the book? Where does Nelson not dig deeply enough? One weakness has already been mentioned: the labeling. It is sometimes

not clear whether Nelson is referring to the Protestant and Roman traditions in some pure form or to specific persons who he claims lie in these traditions. In fact, it may come as a surprise to see Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Sigmund Freud in the Protestant tradition. (I'll leave this puzzle for the reader to resolve.)

Second, one must wonder whether two schools of thought are enough. Any dichotomy runs the risk of being simplistic, and of forcing strange bedfellows together for the sake of simple labeling. Are there not other schools of thought which might be represented here? H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* discussed five different means by which Christians have historically tried to resolve the tension between the world around them and the claims of Christ. Niebuhr's topic is closely related to that of Nelson, and could serve as a guide to developing more views. Interestingly, Nelson makes no mention of Niebuhr.

Third, I wonder whether he accurately describes the view of some of the theologians he does mention. I will refer only to the Protestant which I know best, John Calvin. In a summary table contrasting the Roman and Protestant views, Nelson says Protestants hold that "The poor receive a fate they deserve; charity undermines the will to improve." Later,

In a world intended for pain and suffering, questions concerning the distribution of material goods and services are beside the point. By comparison with the Catholic emphasis on special obligations to the poor, Calvinism showed much less interest in their well-being. Indeed, to be poor is to give a strong indication of being a sinner; the poor may perhaps be suffering because of their wickedness—and if so, deservedly (p. 79).

This view simply does not square with the view held by most sympathetic students of Calvin (although plenty of "Calvinists"

might be described with these words). It does not square with the portrait drawn by Graham in *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin & His Socio-Economic Impact*. Of course, it could be argued that Calvinists have consistently misread Calvin—or that they have read him correctly, and blinked at what they saw on the subject of poverty. Maybe we need an outsider to point out the beams in our eyes. However, the fact that Calvin spent much time running a whole host of programs and institutions to aid the poor, destitute, and refugees in Geneva should give one pause in accepting Nelson's descriptions of Protestant traditions—and if so, in accepting other descriptions as well.

Fourth, the book is silent on a number of other, and later, reformers such as Wesley. It is silent on the Eastern traditions of Christianity. It is exclusively Western in its orientation. Perhaps this is understandable, given the Western, analytic base of modern economic thinking. Most of the literature in economics is published in Western countries, and much of that in English. Nevertheless, if Nelson is intent on moving beyond the historical and considering the future (which he is in the last chapter), his exclusively Western outlook is a weakness. It is not clear that non-Western traditions have much to say about economic analysis—but it would be nice to have that question answered. As an example, what philosophical roots underlie Japanese economic systems and performance? What are the traditions which are behind Indian economic views and practices? (Recall E.F. Schumacher's "Buddhist Economics" in *Small is Beautiful*.) Perhaps beyond the scope of his book, they are nevertheless critical as Westerners encounter other cultures on the economic front.

In addition, Nelson omits discussion of the views of other critics of economics and technology. One example is Jacques Ellul, in a variety of books, such as *The Technological Society*. Ellul is not an economist by

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training, yet is an excellent example of a modern "Protestant" critic of the Roman view. Nelson's use of economists, while helpful in many ways, may lead to an incomplete consideration of the full range of materials on the subject.

Although there is much to fault here, I recommend Nelson highly. He is asking the questions which should interest ACE members. The book is useful in a history of thought course, or one which examines integration of faith and learning. I wouldn't recommend it for the casual reader—and I'd be careful about lending it

to my pastor! However, I'd recommend it to a senior seminar participant who wishes to delve deeply into the subject. The book is accessible to the advanced undergraduate, and has excellent bibliographic references for further reading. Faculty at Christian schools might provoke some controversy by circulating some of his Figures summarizing the Roman and Protestant traditions, without labels, and asking for colleagues to categorize themselves. This would surely raise an uproar at some institutions. But isn't that what a good book should do? ■