Bruce Webb has helpfully outlined, in the first half of his paper, two viewpoints on the link between theology and economics. One is that the two disciplines should essentially be seen as separate. The other is that they are very much intertwined, and that a unified theology of economics needs to be our goal. I appreciate the wide reading and even-handedness that Bruce employs in his discussion.

Then, in the second half of the paper, he proposes a way forward in the debate that is built around respective theological “traditions” or paradigms. It is on this that most of my comments will focus.

**Shortcomings with “Tradition Thinking”**

In Christian epistemology, there are four different approaches commonly in use: Revelation, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Of these, only the first (i.e. Scripture) is an exogenous epistemology; the others are endogenous. That is, revelation as an epistemology best seeks divine sovereignty while the other three inevitably resolve into human sovereignty, and thus the greater potential for error and “fallenness.”

This is the theological reason for adopting a healthy skepticism regarding tradition-driven thought or practice. The Westminster Confession puts it well when it says that “Scripture is the interpreter of Scripture.” This is saying more than just using the Bible to yield answers. Importantly, it is saying we should use the Bible to yield the questions, as well. Scripture must be allowed to set the agenda, to rank priorities, and to tell us what God regards as important and unimportant. A basic principle is that if the Bible treats an issue, then we need to take that issue seriously; if the Bible ignores a given issue, then we are entitled to be flexible about it and need not attach theological significance to it. Indeed, we must not.

The second argument against a tradition-driven epistemology is the philosophical one. John Rawls, for instance, put this forward in his landmark 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*. It involves the principle of impartiality. Rawls asks us to imagine a hypothetical convention in which we all draw up the ethical rules of the game. As we do this exercise, it is in the presence of other members of the society, and is on the assumption that we each know nothing of our own talents, endowments or abilities. Knowing not what our potential status will be, it is likely we will draw up the rules so as to maximize the position of the weakest member. This is dubbed the “principle of maximin.” The point is, each culture, each thinker—each tradition—
Scripture must be allowed to set the agenda, to rank priorities, and to tell us what God regards as important and unimportant.

brings its own baggage to ethical debates, making impartiality unlikely. Once again, this points to the need for a Biblical epistemology.

The Middle-Axiom Approach
All of this naturally raises the question: how should we apply the Bible to economic science? It is helpful to think of three levels, like strata in a geological formation, which link theology and economics:
(1) core doctrines (e.g. God, Humanity, Creation, Sin, Redemption);
(2) middle axioms;
(3) final blueprint (e.g. taxation, welfare, trade blocs, money, regulation).

My contention is that the Bible does not address level 3 topics: it is not an economics textbook and contains no blueprint for economic design. In this sense, economics is no different from plumbing or cooking, theologically speaking. Economics is simply the science of how to get economic things done. At level 3, the issues are culture-dependent and so the forms will vary according to time and place.

However, the story does not end there. The Bible contains material that falls into level 2: “middle axioms.” These are connecting theological principles for how humanity should relate to God, each other and the environment in so far as economic questions are concerned. They are culture-independent. The significant thing about this material is that it tells us what is important, in God’s eyes, and what is not. It tells us what aspects of economic life are theologically “hot,” and also tells us that everything else is a “non-event” as far as discipleship is concerned.

What are these middle axioms? The table immediately following these comments summarizes the Biblical data where economics is concerned. To fully argue the list of middle axioms would require another paper in its own right, and will not be attempted here. Suffice it for me to suggest, tentatively, that as I read God’s revealed word it would seem the following axioms are close to the Lord’s heart:

**Contingency**—every economic endowment is a gift from God by his sheer grace;

**Idolatry**—economic life must not be allowed to usurp our worship of God;

**Needy**—to ignore the plight of the destitute is to offend God;

**Integrity**—conventional morality such as honesty, true scales, duty to rulers and fair work;

**Eschatology**—the “now, not yet” tension which cautions against pre-heaven idealistic blueprinting on social issues.

These are themes that unmistakably run through the Bible. The list of middle axioms is important not only for what it includes but what it does not include: the “missing axioms.” For instance, Scripture places little or no store on such matters as high efficiency (technically defined), precise horizontal equality, or aggregate growth in national income. This is not to say that God is actively opposed to them, but neither is he actively champion of them: they simply do not rank as theologically significant. Thus, neither should we elevate them to “sacred” status.

**Conclusion**
Returning to Bruce Webb’s original question, why then do various Christian traditions arrive at different economic views? One reason is that, there being no definitive economic blueprint in the Bible, this permits a good deal of flexibility and plurality at the modelling stage. Another reason is that various traditions arrive at differing lists of middle axioms, or weightings of these axioms. Bruce Webb’s paper is helpful in laying these differences out on the table and showing us that because one tradition may not have the same epistemology as another, its middle axioms will not be identical. Mark Twain once heard an acquaintance talk of being neutral about an issue of the day. Twain was heard to ask: “who are you neutral
against?” There is a point at which the authority of Scripture must be safeguarded: when we must stand “against” something. This point is reached when a tradition is out of line with the Bible: its list of answers, its list of questions, and its list of priorities. Faithfulness as economists requires us to humble ourselves before Scripture and let God’s agenda be our agenda.

### BIBLE AND ECONOMICS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Main Economic Message(s)</th>
<th>Some Specifics</th>
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| Genesis | 1. Created order belongs to God  
  2. Mankind has dominion mandate (1:28)  
  3. Sin has its effect on economic life (3:17-19) |  
  • Economic activity basically good  
  • Work part of God’s plan (2:15)  
  • Leisure part of God’s plan (2:2)  
  • God provides all needs (1:29)  
  • Economic activity develops its skills (4:20-22)  
  • Work becomes toil in fallen world (5:29)  
  • Promise of salvation somehow encompasses the economic (5:29, 12:1)  
  • Economic resources can be misused to challenge God (11:3-4)  
  • Famine and plenty both a part of fallen world (12:10; 41:46-49)  
  • Economic disputes can spoil relationships (13:5-7)  
  • Wealth in itself not necessarily condemned (13:2)  
  • Faithfulness includes right use of economic resources (15:9) | |
| Pentateuch | 1. Ethical guidelines for economic life given on assumption that covenant relationship exists with God.  
  2. Idolatry, lack of trust in God’s provision, and neglect of needy are seen as central econo-spiritual problems |  
  • Economic oppression taken seriously by God (Ex 2:24; 6:5-6)  
  • God expects people to trust His provision (Ex 16:4-5, 19-20)  
  • Grumbling about economic situation not good (Ex. 16:6-9)  
  • Economic not to become an idol (Ex 20:4; 20:23; Lev 26:1; Deut 4:28-29)  
  • Respect for other’s property (Ex 20:15; 22:1-15)  
  • Be gracious to the needy (Ex 22:25-27; Lev 23:22)  
  • Sabbath principle (Ex 23:12; Lev 23:1-2; 26:2)  
  • Can express love for God via economic giving (Lev 2:1-16)  
  • Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8-55; 27:17-24; Num 36:4)  
  • Sabbathical year (Lev 25:1-7) | |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israel's History</td>
<td>(No new economic themes)</td>
<td>- Idolatry (Judg 17:3-4; 1 Kgs 12:28)</td>
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<td>- Exploitation (Neh 5:1-13)</td>
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<td>- Various episodes of greed and dishonesty</td>
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<td>Prophets</td>
<td>1. Economic wrong doing amongst God's people harshly condemned in order to illustrate underlying spiritual malaise</td>
<td>- Isa 1:21; 2:7-8; 3:14-15; 5:8-10; 10:1-2; 32:16-17; Jer 2:34; 6:13; Ezek 18:8, 12; Zech 7:8-10; Mal 3:10; Hos 7:1-2; 12:7-8; Amos 2:1-7; 3:10; 4:1; 5:11-12; Mic 3:1-2</td>
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<td>- False weights and measures condemned (Prov 20:23)</td>
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<td>- Praise God rather than question Him (Job 40:7-8; Ps 9:11; 33:1-2)</td>
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<td>- Keep economic things in perspective (Eccles 4:4-6, 13-16; 5:8-20; 6:1-12)</td>
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<td>Gospels/Acts</td>
<td>1. Riches can be major obstacles to entering the Kingdom</td>
<td>- Give in secret (Mt 6:1-4)</td>
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<td>2. True treasure is heavenly not earthly</td>
<td>- Treasures in heaven (Mt 6:19-24)</td>
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<td>- Trust God's provision (Mt 6:25-34; Lk 12:22-34)</td>
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<td>- Riches a barrier (Mt 19:16-30; Mk 10:17-31; Lk 18:18-30)</td>
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<td>- Meeting obligations (Mt 22:15-22; Mk 12:13-17; Lk 20:20-26)</td>
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<td>- Give from the heart (Mk 12:41-44; Lk 21:1-4)</td>
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<td>- Rich fool (Lk 12:13-21)</td>
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<td>- Conversion brings new attitude to possessions (Acts 2:44; 4:32-37)</td>
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<td>- God the giver (Acts 14:17)</td>
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| Epistles | 1. Practical instructions  
           2. No apparent burden for altering existing social structures  
           3. Exhibit Christian character in your given situation | - Be thankful (Col 3:15)  
- Pay taxes due (Rom 13:6)  
- Generosity (Rom 12:13; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8:1-15; 9:6-15)  
- Hospitality (Rom 12:13)  
- Support Gospel work (1 Cor 9:11-12)  
- Hard work (Eph 4:28; 2 Thess 3:6-15)  
- Serve master/employer (1 Pet 2:18; Col 3:22-25; Eph 6:5-8)  
- Treat slave/employee well (Col 4:1; Eph 6:9)  
- Contentedness (Phil 4:12)  
- Obey civil authorities (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-14)  
- Avoid love of money (1 Tim 6:3-10)  
- Trust not in wealth (1 Tim 6:17-19; Jam 5:1-6) |