Passing Judgments

I don’t believe that there is a distinctively Christian way of doing economics. That’s a view widely, though not universally, shared among Christian economists. But neither do I believe that there is a distinctive set of Christian ethical insights or principles that can effectively guide Christian economists in putting their discipline to work. Because the latter belief is not widely held, that is where I’ll focus these comments.

My reasons for denying the existence of a Christian ethics that can be useful in economic policy making can be summarized in three statements: (1) No one has yet described such an ethics. (2) The attempt to derive and apply such an ethics pollutes the democratic discussion of public policy. (3) The persisting determination to find and apply such an ethics obscures the force of the Gospel.

(1) I have been impressed by the inability of anyone thus far to state such an ethics. The most careful and painstaking efforts to derive from Christian sources principles that might guide our society in the formulation or reformulation of public policies have failed, in my judgment, to come up with principles that are both useful and Christian. No one can have tried more earnestly or marshaled the resources more competently than John Mason in his article in the last issue of the Association’s Bulletin, in which he sought to gather from Biblical teaching suggestions for the reform of welfare policy in the United States. He says many wise things in the course of that article; but I do not believe that he has found any distinctively Biblical principles that can be effectively used in public discussion of welfare reform in the United States. I agree that the Torah emphasized the family and the local community and wanted these to be society’s welfare-providing institutions. And I agree too that the welfare system that has evolved in the United States not only fails to enlist the strength of these institutions but actively undermines them. My contention is simply that the truth and relevance of the latter claim are not in any important way dependent on what is found in the Pentateuch. I would claim that the author selected these particular aspects of the Biblical record (and ignored many other aspects of that record) because he approached his task already convinced that an effective system of social welfare must employ and not subvert families and local communities; that this conviction could have been derived from secular sources; and that it would not have been so central to his study had secular sources not suggested it so strongly at this time.

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Author’s Note

I have benefited from dialogue on these matters with P. J. Hill and Bruce G. Webb, neither of whom should be assumed to agree with what is said here.
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Of course, I'm not really telling you where John Mason gets his ideas. I'm telling you how I work and suggesting—which is all I can do—that everyone else works in a similar manner. Christian sources are vast and varied, which is why the presuppositions with which I approach them play such a large role in determining what I will extract from them in any particular situation. The knowledge and other prejudices that I have acquired by practicing economics for so many years will shape any effort I make to find Christian insights that might be applied to public policy issues. It is also true that when I do economics I am shaped by many years of practicing Christianity. Since my position is so easily misunderstood, I want to make it clear that I completely repudiate the claim that values do not or should not influence social inquiry. Because my faith shapes who I am and who I want to be, it affects the way I do economics: the issues in which I am interested, the methodological conceptions with which I approach them, and even the theories and evidence I find persuasive. My contention is only that the Bible and other Christian sources provide no clear guidance for the formulation of economic policy in our society.

(2) Someone might agree at this point that the guidance is not clear, or at least not completely clear, but object that this is no reason for not trying to get it clearer. My response would be the second of my three initial claims: that the attempt to employ explicitly Biblical principles in the construction of government policies of any sort pollutes the process of public discussion. And government by discussion is in my judgment the only definition of democracy that makes democracy a value worth defending at great cost.

The United States is not a Christian society. The fact that the Bible affirms this or calls for that is not a proper argument for any government policy in our pluralist society. If our system of old age insurance weakens family ties, or our welfare system discourages the formation of families, or the nationalization and consequent centralization of social policies renders local communities increasingly impotent and irrelevant, the facts of these matter and their implications must be established through inquiry and discourse that does not depend in any explicit way upon religious judgments. Let me emphasize that word "explicit." Implicit dependence is unavoidable. Religion inevitably influences public policy by influencing the values and the perceptions of those whose ideas and activities finally determine any policy. It is religious arguments that I want to exclude from the discussion of public policy.

Why? Because they generate so much more heat than light. There are people who will reject a sound argument because it has been supported with religious arguments. There are far more who reach public policy conclusions on the basis of entirely secular arguments and then use religious arguments to give their conclusions an authority they don't deserve. There are too many who use religious arguments in an attempt to seize the moral high ground and thus to choke off disagreement by pretending that dissent indicates immorality. And in almost all cases where religious arguments are used, attention is diverted from the difficult questions whose answers really ought to determine policy outcomes to general principles that are actually not at issue. All this pollutes the democratic discussion of public policy.

(3) But the abuse of religious arguments, someone replies, does not preclude their use. I turn in reply to my third statement: I believe that the efforts of Christians to find an ethics that can be used to construct government policies obscures the Gospel and diverts Christians from their proper task. Here we come up against the difficult hurdle of theological differences. In the time available I cannot do more than state my theological reasons for not wanting to see Christians introduce religious arguments into public policy discourse.

It seems to me that while Christians have been called to be "the new Israel,"
this does not imply that the laws of the Pentateuch are binding upon Christians. They could not be, because those laws presuppose a unity of society and religious faith that does not even begin to exist among us. The reigning (and evolving) ethics of the American public square do descend in part from Biblical sources, but in ways that no one can adequately trace. They also descend in complex ways from the Greeks and Romans, from Locke and Rousseau and Adam Smith, from the Founding Fathers, from the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, and from many additional sources that we are inclined to forget when we try to forge specific links between Christian principles and public policy. Moreover, the “new covenant”—so I believe—radically suspended the “old covenant,” not by abolishing it but by fulfilling it. That fulfillment entails a new command in which all the old commandments are summarized: Love your neighbor as yourself. And our neighbors, I am persuaded, are not “everyone” or “everyone in need of our assistance,” but fellow members of the household of faith. “Honor all men,” the first letter of Peter exhorts, but “live the brotherhood.”

While I cannot hope to persuade many of you to accept this unconventional view, I would like you to give it a few moments of attentive consideration, especially in light of all the harm that religious people, including Christians, have done in their efforts to impose on a recalcitrant world what they took to be God’s will. Moreover, I believe that we Christians have found the ethical teachings of Jesus “impossible” largely because we have tried to apply them where they were never meant to apply: to the secular society in which we live. We were not called to legislate for that world. I would like to quote at the end the lines which I concluded my “Viewpoint” essay on this topic in the Spring 1990 issue of our Association’s Bulletin:

[T]he only effective witness to the secular society is the witness provided by Christian communities: the witness of those who live together as if they were justified by nothing but the grace of God, and who by that witness invite others to join their community. The world ought to see how we love one another, not how cleverly or forcefully we argue.

ENDNOTE