Whose Theology? Which Economics?

In this paper I will explore some of the sources and consequences of disagreements among Christian economists on matters of economics and theology. In the course of this exploration I will have occasion to consider such fundamental issues as the nature of truth and the limits of human knowledge. Those familiar with the writings of Alasdair Maclntyre will (correctly) anticipate from the my title some connection with Maclntyre’s work on conflicting traditions of moral inquiry. I will also connect this inquiry with the work of Donald McCloskey, and others, who seek to replace the economist’s “rule-bound methodology” with a rhetoric of economics. Drawing on these various strands, I will address the question “What Should (Christian) Economists Do?” in light of our often conflicting views.

Given the broad range of issues discussed in this paper and the consequent need to stay on track, I will frame my argument in the form of eight propositions. These propositions range from the nearly self-evident and innocuous to the more complex and controversial. Yet even the former—which are not always recognized consciously nor appreciated fully—will serve to advance the argument.

Proposition #1: Christian economists who integrate their faith with their discipline, or who address issues related to the possibility or form of such integration, are doing theology, or making theological claims whether they acknowledge it or not.

To “do theology” is to make some statement about God’s attributes or His relations with, or desires for, human beings or the rest of His creation—including the economic dimension. Those explicitly engaged in some form of faith-learning integration are obviously “doing theology.” But so are Christian economists who think that they can avoid theology altogether by confining their economic inquiry to “positive” economics or who have adopted, consciously or unconsciously, a form of dualism: Christianity is irrelevant to “positive” economics, though it may serve as the basis for normative statements about the economy. Those who claim that positive economics and theology don’t mix, or whose work is an implicit endorsement of this claim, cannot escape doing theology altogether. For this claim is itself a theological statement, and must itself be grounded (explicitly or implicitly) in certain other theological propositions (e.g. that the Bible is

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addressed only to the church and not to secular society). We cannot circumvent the theological dimension of our work by clinging to some form of dualism.

Some Christian economists are uncomfortable with the necessarily theological character of their work, given their lack of theological training. While this is understandable, claims to theological ignorance do not let us off the hook here. Our ignorance may lead us to make statements which are poorly grounded or theologically naive, but bad theology is theology nonetheless.

Proposition #2: Christians hold conflicting theological views.

As stated, this proposition is little more than a truism, though some will find it disconcerting. I am not, of course, claiming that every Christian disagrees with every other Christian on each and every theological issue. Most Christians accept the statements contained in the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, and these are substantial and important points of agreement. But it would be a mistake to claim, as some Christians do, that our common assent to the creeds means that we have agreed on all the essentials and disagree only on peripheral or secondary issues. For it is surely the case that one Christian’s peripheral issue is another Christian’s primary doctrine. Is the mode of baptism—by immersion or sprinkling—a secondary issue? Not to some baptists who see it as a question of obedience to Scripture and ultimately to Christ himself. What about the nature of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist? A peripheral issue say some protestants; central to the faith respond the Roman Catholics. The list goes on. What about the nature of the millennium? The priesthood? Authority in the Church? The ordination of women? The inerrancy of Scripture? To some these are secondary matters. To others they represent the very core of the faith.

Proposition #3: Christian economists hold conflicting theological views.

Once again there is a sense in which this proposition states only what is obvious. We Christian economists are, after all (if I may use the trendy word) a “diverse” lot. We are Baptists and Presbyterians; Roman Catholics and Episcopalians; Lutherans and Congregationalists. The theological differences which have historically caused the separation of these groups (e.g., the efficacy of the Sacraments and the means of our justification) have a long history and have been much debated. Yet these long-standing doctrinal disputes need not concern us here, for these doctrines do not bear on whether we can or should relate our faith and our discipline. Other theological differences are relevant to this concern, however. A modified version of Proposition #3 will set us on the right course.

Proposition #3a: Christian economists hold conflicting theological views, some of which affect their views on economics or economic policy or their views on how Christianity and economics ought to relate to each other.

Readers of the ACE Bulletin will not be surprised by this. Three brief examples will suffice to make the point that distinct theological views affect the ways in which Christian economists relate their faith with their discipline. Consider first Jim Halteman’s article (1990) on the Anabaptists. Halteman notes that while Anabaptists have begun only recently to develop a systematic theology, they hold, nonetheless, “a set of core beliefs ... [which] are clearly articulated from the early leaders to the present writers.” These include: the “radical new life” which Scriptural teaching requires of Jesus’s disciples; the belief that “to reform the secular world toward Christian practice while people remain in their sinful state is futile as an overall strategy;” following secular authorities and practices only when these do not conflict with Scriptural teaching; living in a faithful Christian community which seeks to model the relationships (economic and otherwise) which God desires for his followers (pp. 7, 8). Halteman contrasts this strategy of “modeling” with the strategy of “infiltration ... which frequently
characterizes the mainstream protestant approach to secular reform” (p. 8). All too frequently, he claims, the practice of infiltration requires the Christian to compromise his or her values in ways that conflict with the radical demands Jesus placed on his followers.

He then sets forth “three separate agendas” which stem directly from this “two-kingdom theology” (p. 8):

1. “The first is to create a vision of what economic relationships might be like in a full reign of Christ.” The church would then seek to adopt and model this vision in its own, internal, economic relationships.

2. “The second agenda is to explore the alternative economic systems that are feasible in the secular world, and to support as much as possible the system which is least hostile to the values of the kingdom of God.”

3. “The third agenda is to carve out a strategy by which believers can relate to the secular institutions in which they are involved without selling out to the secular spirit of those institutions.”

The point I wish to emphasize here is that these economic agendas are a direct outgrowth of Anabaptist theology. When asked, “What should Christian economists do?” the Anabaptist, drawing upon his or her theological convictions, will give a response something like that given by Halteiman.

My second example comes from Reformed theology and its “economic agendas” as discussed by Roland Hoksbergen (1992) and Edd Noell (1993). The Reformed tradition begins with a different set of theological propositions and from these propositions flow precisely the sort of approach which Anabaptists criticize. While neither Hoksbergen nor Noell uses the term “infiltration” it provides, nonetheless, a fitting description. Hoksbergen describes one branch of the Reformed tradition—the Kuyperians—who emphasize: (1) that the “cultural mandate” given to Adam and Eve is still in effect; (2) that “Jesus is Lord over all creation” and “God cares as much for what goes on in our businesses, families, schools, neighborhoods, and farms as he cares about what goes on in our churches...”; (3) that God relates directly with his people, apart from the mediation of the church; (4) that the Christian task is to restore God’s creation to “what God intended for his world before it fell into sin.” Hoksbergen gives us the following summary: “Kuyperians do not hide from the ‘world,’ but try to have a revitalizing influence on it. They are what H.R. Niebuhr calls conversionists who see their work under Christ as being nothing less than the transforming of culture... They evaluate what’s happening in culture and try to live so that God’s intentions for culture are progressively realized” (pp. 8-10).

Building on this version of Reformed theology, the Kuyperians adopt their own agenda for Christian economists. This would begin with “worldview analysis”, wherein the Christian identifies the ways in which “faulty worldviews” have led secular scholars to embrace theories which “do not comport well” with Christian belief. Christian economists should, in other words, criticize thoroughly, and at the most fundamental level, all existing economic theories—neoclassical, Austrian, institutional—from the perspective of a Christian worldview. But in a more positive vein they should “base [their] own theoretical reflections... on that sound [Christian] worldview.” This amounts to a call for building a distinctively Christian approach to the discipline of economics, grounded in a Christian worldview. The Christian economist’s task is to “reflect on the character of economic life at creation, the distorting effects of the Fall, the ongoing redemptive work of Jesus Christ and his Church, and the expectations for economic life at the consummation” (p. 17). What separates this from the Anabaptist agenda is the belief that the “norms” which God established at creation are still binding on all people, not just...
Christians. "Modelling" the economic relationships which stem from these norms is not enough. Our task involves nothing less than bringing all economic institutions, practices, relationships, and indeed theories under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

A variant of Reformed theology—Christian Reconstructionism—reaches similar, yet far from identical, conclusions. Reconstructionists, according to Edd Noell (1993), speak of the "dominion covenant" derived from Genesis 1:26-28, which calls for "bringing the whole world under the rule of God's law." He continues:

This understanding is derived from two other principle doctrines ... its postmillennial eschatology and its theonomic approach to ethics. Postmillennialism contends that prior to the Second Coming of Christ, his kingdom will be manifested in a worldwide conversion to Christianity. The theonomic doctrine affirms that every detail of God's law as given through Moses is explicitly binding on Christians today. Reconstructionists who espouse theonomic postmillennialism assert that worldwide victory for the gospel will result in adherence by all nations to the standards found in Biblical law (p. 8).

The emphasis on God's unchanging law leads the Reconstructionists to promote some rather specific and controversial economic and social policies including a return to the gold standard, the prohibition of multiple indebtedness, and the death penalty for a variety of offenses, including blasphemy, homosexuality and adultery. Yet controversial as these may be to those outside the Reconstructionist theological orbit, they appear plausible and defensible from within. Once again we find that the views of Christian economists are determined, at least in part, by their theological beliefs.

As a final example consider Stephen Worland's analysis of the encyclical Centesimus Annus (1992). He points out that "The moral philosophy presupposed in the Church's social Magisterium [teaching office] is typically that of Aristotle..." (p. 5). Yet the Roman Catholic Church's adoption of Aristotelian "virtue ethics" is by no means arbitrary, but comes from a long tradition of theological reflection. Worland sums it up this way:

...in the Catholic reliance on Aristotle, the moral and cultural excellences are recognized as authentic human goods, but such perfections are recognized as taking their origin from the creative act of a loving God. With his inner life illuminated by prayer, the study of scripture, the sacraments, with his passions controlled by the moral virtues, the believer strives to exemplify Aristotelian excellence as a "strategy of love." He means to make of his life a "song of praise" offered to his Creator. And he realizes he can succeed in the grand endeavor only because he knows by faith that his struggle to please God with a good life will be met and guided by his Creator's gracious gift of the Spirit (p. 5).

What agenda does this suggest for Christian economists in this tradition? Worland does not answer this directly, but we can make a presumption based upon what he claims is the best interpretation of Catholic social teaching. The presumption is that Christian economists in the Roman Catholic tradition should contribute to the "effort to show how Aristotle's moral ideals—concerning property, justice, the use of wealth—play out in an industrial society" (p. 4). Recognizing that many protestants would be uncomfortable within this theological framework, Worland notes: "Evangelical and Lutheran theologians are disturbed by the characterization of the Christian's attempt to live out his faith as obligation to achieve Aristotelian excellence" (p. 5). Once again we find a close connection between a proposed agenda for Christian economists and the theological tradition out of which that agenda arises. It should also be clear that the Christian economists residing in one of these traditions will have reason to criticize the agendas set by, and determined within, each of the other traditions.
But our disagreements extend well beyond the various agendas described above. As economists we are no strangers to conflicting ideas and points of view. We are well aware that conflicts arise in part, to the existence of different economic paradigms (e.g., neoclassical, Austrian, institutionalist) but also due to theoretical and empirical disagreements within each of these paradigms. It is not surprising that these same disagreements are found in the works of Christian economists.

**Proposition #4: Christian economists disagree on economic issues, both within and across economic paradigms.**

Once again, I turn to recent articles in the ACE Bulletin for support. Roland Hoksbergen (1992) points out that he and other Kuyperians—he mentions specifically, John Tiemstra (1993), Douglas Vickers (1985) and Alan Storkey (1986)—are drawn to institutionalist economics. Tiemstra speaks for himself in a 1993 *Christian Scholar's Review* article in which he lists a number of advantages to institutionalism and calls for Christians to develop a “Christian version of institutionalist economics.” He, in turn, suggests that one or another form of institutionalism—either the “classical,” post-Keynesian, or “social economics” variety—is present in the works of a number of Christian writers including, in addition to those already mentioned, Cramp (1975), Goudzwaard (1979), and McKee (1987).

Edd Noell, in his article on the Reconstructionists (1993), points out that there are “many similarities to Austrian policy found in reconstructionist literature: the call for privatization of money, the limitation of government activity in relation to the economy, and more broadly speaking, a general endorsement of free market capitalism” (p. 14). While Noell may indeed be correct in labelling “simplistic” those criticisms of reconstructionist Gary North which claim “that he has baptized Austrian thought,” I nonetheless would argue for a closer connection than Noell admits.\(^1\) Tiemstra (1993) points to Ronald Nash (1989) as “an advocate for Austrian school economics” and claims, as well, that “Austrian economics has proven attractive to many evangelical thinkers...” Although this latter claim is made without any specific citations, I have no reason to doubt that he is correct, nor do I suspect that there is any reason to limit the association to evangelicals. For example, I doubt that Paul Heyne would be upset if someone claimed to find Austrian “leanings” in his work.

Perhaps most Christian economists, however, would place themselves somewhere within the neoclassical mainstream. I will cite only a few examples here: David Richardson (1988), who calls upon Christian economists to push themselves to the frontiers (presumably the neoclassical frontiers) of the discipline; my colleague Stephen Smith (in his paper for this workshop) and Laurence Iannaccone in his work on economics and religion (1991).

But even if my conjecture that most Christian economists are neoclassical economists is correct, we have no reason to expect, and indeed have good reason to doubt, anything like a consensus on all theoretical, empirical or policy issues. The exact nature and extent of our disagreements here are hard to pin down. Many Christian economists publish infrequently on “pure” economics, and those who do publish regularly tend to be spread out across the many fields which make up our discipline. Yet in the absence of evidence to the contrary, I shall assert that we have no reason to think that Christian economists are any more prone to agreement than are their secular counterparts. And if economists are known for anything—sometimes, but not always, unjustly—it is for their disagreements. I take it, then, that within the Association of Christian Economists we find support for an increase in the gasoline tax to balance the budget, and opposition to it; support for managed competition in health care, and opposition to it; support for an increase in the minimum wage, and opposition to it. Finding the “correct” policy, which is “known”
Christian economists make explicit or implicit theological claims when we integrate our faith with our discipline and when we speak to the possibility or proper form of this integration.

Through the “correct” theory and empirical evidence—where “known” and “correct” are defined by some unassailable consensus—has proven to be no less difficult for Christian, than for secular economists.

Perhaps a restatement of the first four propositions would serve us well at this point. Christian economists make explicit or implicit theological claims when we integrate our faith with our discipline and when we speak to the possibility or proper form of this integration. Yet, we disagree theologically, and some of this disagreement affects the ways in which we conceive of and carry out this integration. Finally, our disagreements as economists are not unlike those found within the discipline at large. I turn now to the matter of how Christian economists have viewed and responded to the existence of disagreement and competing claims within their ranks. As before I shall advance a proposition.

Proposition #5: Christian economists disagree about the need for, and urgency of, overcoming our disagreements.

Among those who have given thought to the matter, responses have taken one of two forms. The first is best represented by Paul Heyne’s article, “Christianity and the Economy” (1988). He begins by noting that, “The most interesting fact about Christian theological perspectives on economic systems is how many conflicting ones there are” (p. 26). He then wonders, “why the fact of such conflicting visions disturbs so few of those theologians who continue to draft or endorse new church pronouncements on the economy” (p. 26). Of course the “disturbance” of which he speaks, and whose lack he finds interesting, is not the sort which would urgently drive us to find the unity which has so far remained beyond our grasp. Though the work of theologians who seek unity represents an understandable attempt to respond to the “profound uncertainty in our culture about the status and meaning of ethical judgments” and is motivated by the desire to do what God requires of us, the result is a “confusion of tongues” reminiscent of the Tower of Babel. They are, in fact, chasing an illusion because there is no “single Christian vision on the economic order” which can gain the assent of all Christians and there is certainly no vision “that is also capable of commanding the assent of all those who profess to value human freedom and dignity” (p. 28).

Heyne’s advice, which carries a distinct Anabaptist flavor, is clear: “…our economic arguments should not be shaped in any way by our theology, which we should leave at home when we enter the public arena” (1990, p. 6). Practically speaking, this means that we should stop making “Christian statements” on the economy, which have as their implicit goal a unified Christian response to economic policy issues. We should be good economists and offer sound policy advice; we should also be good Christians, and live our lives in obedience to the New Testament’s radical demands. But attempts to mix the two will not bring us the sought after unity; they will only lead to bad economics and watered-down Christianity.

Others disagree. While not denying the current “confusion of tongues” they cling, nonetheless, to the goal of a “single Christian vision on the economic order.” The means of attaining such a common vision, along with its scope, is of course open to dispute. Some Reformers economists seek unity in a distinctive Christian approach to the study of economics. This they see as a necessary prerequisite to agreement on the proper structure of an economic system or on matters of economic policy. Others seek a more direct unity on policy issues, and call for a unified Christian response to pressing economic problems. My purpose here is not to dwell on these differences but to emphasize the common thread that connects them—namely, the goal of a “single Christian vision on the economic order.”

The reasons why some Christian economists cling to this goal are easy enough to understand. I suspect that some see the goal of a unified Christian economic vision
as a part of the more general goal of Christian unity. And this general desire for unity has clear biblical warrant in Jesus’s own prayer that his followers would be one and attain “complete unity” as a witness to God’s love and to the fact that God had sent Jesus into the world (John 17:20-23). This, perhaps, is what Heyne has in mind when he attributes the goal of a “single Christian vision on the economic order” to the belief that “it ought to be done,” that is, God expects this of us. This is undoubtedly the case.

Yet others add to this more pragmatic considerations. Mason and Schaefer (1990) claim that late twentieth century democratic capitalism “face[s] a more confused socio-economic reality, with regard to the most ethically appropriate means for achieving given objectives...” (p. 46). They go on to note that our disagreements extend to ends or objectives as well as means. And with regard to these disputed ends, neither democratic states nor “post-Enlightenment ‘moral philosophy’”—which they describe as being in “something of a crisis”—has found a way to settle competing claims about our moral obligations. But far from being a cause for despair, this moral crisis presents Christians with a golden opportunity to enter the public square. Mason and Schaefer write: “It is in this context that we appeal to Biblical teaching” (p. 47).

But what will ensure that Christians entering the public square—armed with “Biblical teaching”—will help to resolve, rather than add to the problem of conflicting claims? The answer lies in their proposed “hermeneutical and ethical framework,” based on the claim that, “...the foundations of Scripture’s social, political, and economic ethics all are laid in the Pentateuch, and are intended to inform all peoples” (p. 48). Implicit in this claim is the belief, or perhaps the hope, that Christian unity will come in the form of a common hermeneutical framework which will emanate in a common understanding of our ethical obligation.

This suggests another reason why Christian economists strive for unity. In setting forth our particular perspective on Christianity and economics we believe, not unsurprisingly, that we are setting forth the truth. If we did not believe it were true, we would not make public claims that subjected our claims to criticism. In the words of Michael Polanyi (1958), these ideas are held with “universal intent.” I take it that Mason and Schaefer believe that their proposed hermeneutical framework is the correct framework for Christians to find ethical guidance in just this sense. And as the correct framework it ought to serve as the basis for Christian unity. Another example of this belief is found in Roland Hoksbergen’s recent article (1993) on the Kuyperian tradition. After acknowledging that “Kuyperians have up to this point addressed much of their work to an explicitly Christian audience”, where even there it has not received widespread acceptance, he states: “Kuyperians also believe...that their perspective and their analysis merits consideration from a broader audience. That’s because they believe it to be the truth about the world...”

Let me summarize. The desire for unity among Christian economists as to belief, and method, and response to policy issues, is understandable. In a general sense it is nothing less than a faithful commitment to the fruits of Christ’s own prayer. Complementing this general desire for unity, we find a pragmatic call for Christians to fill the void left by secular moral philosophy and to do so united around the truth.

Yet even as we cling to the desire for unity, there are good reasons for proceeding with caution, and, from a human perspective, little cause for optimism. The phrase—“from a human perspective”—is important here. God could, if he chose to do so, touch the heart of each of us to bring about the Christian unity we seek, and He will, I trust, in due course. But so far He has not chosen to do so and we find ourselves with a number of disagreements of very long standing. Through
These states of disagreement have a common origin in the fallibility of our reason and our inability to "know" with certainty.

Finding answers to these questions will require us to enter the realm of modern philosophy, especially epistemology and the philosophy of science. But before we do I ask you to consider, in your minds, a certain similarity between the state of the discipline of economics and the state of Christianity. Both contain a number of "factions" based on disagreements over belief and practice. Christianity, of course, has been around much longer and this has allowed its "factions" to become more firmly entrenched. But the issues which divide the economics profession, and which have been the source of "factions" within the discipline, have also been debated for quite a long time. Take, for example, the issue of whether a market economy is inherently stable, in the macroeconomic sense, such that if left alone, it will automatically settle in at full employment. Economists have never agreed on this issue and consensus seems no closer today than it has been in the past. Can we learn something from our inability to agree as economists, that will help us better understand the difficulties we face as "separated" Christians? I believe the answer is yes. These states of disagreement have a common origin in the fallibility of our reason and our inability to "know" with certainty. I therefore put forth another proposition:

**Proposition #6: There are no neutral or objective grounds for settling our economic differences.**

I take this to be the central message of post-positivist philosophy of science as well as recent work by Donald McCloskey and others on the rhetoric of economics. A brief review of some of this literature is in order here, beginning with a critique of positivism, or "modernism" as McCloskey has labelled it.

The central thrust of positivism, which its proponents took to be "the true task of philosophy,... was to analyze knowledge propositions with the aim of making such propositions clear and unambiguous" (Caldwell 1982, p. 13). This involved separating "meaningful" or scientific knowledge claims—"factual statements which may be verified or falsified by evidence"—from meaningless, including metaphysical statements. As is now well known, the task of separating meaningful from meaningless statements proved far more difficult than the positivists first realized. Equally difficult to achieve was the goal of "rid[d]ing philosophy and the positive sciences of all traces of speculative idealism and metaphysics" (Caldwell 1982, p. 30).

Perhaps the best known post-positivist philosopher of science is Thomas Kuhn, author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970). According to Kuhn, the history of science shows that the decision to accept one theory over another is based on more than an appeal to logic and empirical observation. Philosopher Nancey Murphy offers this concise summary of Kuhn's work (Murphy 1990, pp. 56, 57):

[Kuhn] described the history of science as a succession of paradigms...that carry with them laws, theories, applications, and instrumentation. Those who share the view of science associated with a particular paradigm share the same rules and standards for scientific practice, but when paradigms change, so do these standards. Kuhn...show[ed] that it is the paradigm as a whole...that scientists accept, and that the acceptance of a paradigm involves at the same time acceptance of a certain domain of data that are interpreted in
terms of the paradigm’s view of the world. Thus there is no pool of independent data that allows scientists to arbitrate between competing paradigms (emphasis added).

To put it another way, since the very grounds for theory selection are set by and within paradigms, there is no neutral or objective basis for choosing from among competing paradigms. The decision to select one over another is, in the end, an act of faith.

This message—refined and further developed by a number of other philosophers—has been brought to the attention of economists by, among others, Bruce Caldwell (1982), Donald McCloskey (1985), and, somewhat critically, Mark Blaug (1980). Many Christian economists have embraced the work of McCloskey and other anti-modernist writers on the grounds that this new view opens the door for explicitly Christian scholarship. While positivism ruled out metaphysical statements as “meaningless” and ignored evidence that was not in conformity with the reigning methodological strictures, the new philosophy of science, with its recognition that all science involves a certain faith commitment and its methodological pluralism, seemed to place secular and Christian scholarship on a level playing field. Yet it is my belief that many of those who have embraced this new philosophy have failed fully to grasp its implications, especially for theological inquiry. These implications are stated in the following proposition:

**Proposition #7:** Theological systems, or traditions, guide inquiry in the same way as scientific paradigms; that is, they provide us with a starting point consisting of a set of foundational or underlying assumptions, a body of accepted knowledge, a certain range of issues to be explored, and agreement on the means to address these issues.

To some protestants the use of the words “theological systems or traditions” raises a red flag right at the start. Systems and traditions hinder, rather than help us in our pursuit of the truth. Yet it is impossible to argue against theological systems and traditions without ourselves drawing on a system or tradition, one which takes as its starting point or derives from another starting point, the belief that systems and traditions hinder the pursuit of truth. Even those who claim that they are drawing their insights directly from Scripture are in fact building on certain assumptions, whether recognized or not, which guide their approach to Scripture. And these assumptions are the constituent elements of a theological tradition. I will return to the matter of traditions and approaches to Scripture below in the context of a more general discussion of the role of theological traditions.

**Scientific Paradigms and Theological Traditions**

I have already used the term “paradigm” to refer to alternative approaches to economics (neoclassical, Austrian, institutionalist), and in my brief review of Thomas Kuhn’s work. In scientific inquiry (including economics), a paradigm constitutes a set of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs along with an accepted methodology and scope of inquiry. The paradigm provides the scientist (economist) with a starting point and agenda for further inquiry, a set of generally accepted tools for engaging in such inquiry, and the criteria by which the inquiry will be judged. Since these are shared assumptions, beliefs and methodological tools, the scientist need not justify them each and every time he or she engages in inquiry. In this way paradigms facilitate, rather than restrict, scientific inquiry.

A theological tradition is much like a scientific paradigm and each serves quite similar purposes. The theologian (or the Christian economist doing theology) needs a starting point, just like the scientist. Imagine a Christian economist working on environmental policy who wanted theological guidance on her work. What can she simply assume about God and His creation which can serve as the basis for
...theological traditions guide our work as Christian economists in much the same way that scientific paradigms guide the work of scientists. 

...her further inquiry? And where will she look to carry out such further inquiry? And to what end and for what purpose should such inquiry be conducted? Theological traditions provide answers to these and a host of related questions. I will treat only one example here, though one which I believe to be particularly relevant: sources of authority for theological inquiry. What is (or are) the acceptable source (or sources) of authority to which we can turn for theological insight? If there are actually multiple sources of authority, how are they to be weighted? And what is the exact nature of this authority and how are we to use it?

Consider, first, the Bible as a source of authority. All Christians—Protestant or Catholic, liberal or conservative—vest some authority in the Bible. But they differ as to the nature of this authority (e.g. whether the Bible is inerrant or infallible or contains internal contradictions due to fallible human authorship). Yet even if inerrancy (or perhaps infallibility) is granted, we must discern what it is that the Bible is in fact teaching on a given subject. This opens the door to other sources of authority, such as tradition, reason and experience. But what relative weight should be given to each of these and how are we to in the interpretation of Scripture? Traditions have differed historically in their answers to these questions.

A comparison between Roman Catholics and Protestant evangelicals provides perhaps the sharpest contrast on these issues. The authority vested in “tradition” has long been a source of conflict between Protestants and Catholics. It is not surprising, then, to see these differences in their respective attempts to address economic matters. A faithful Roman Catholic will find him or herself obliged to build upon and interact with Roman Catholic social teaching as it has evolved through papal encyclicals and other documents of the Magisterium. Indeed, the failure to do so places one, almost by definition, outside the circle of “faithful” Roman Catholics. Teaching authority, including the authority to interpret Scripture, is vested in the Magisterium, not in the individual. This, of course, does not preclude the use and application of Scripture in the writings of individual Christian economists. But it does suggest that such uses and applications must comport with the official interpretations put forth by the Magisterium.

Evangelicals, on the other hand, recognize no official Magisterium. Individuals are encouraged to read, interpret and apply Scripture on their own, provided that such interpretations are guided by the Holy Spirit and are not contradicted elsewhere in Scripture. To recognize a Magisterium, or official teaching body, is to place human teaching authority above that of Scripture itself. Such a view, of course, is not taken from thin air but is a product of the (broadly speaking) Protestant theological tradition.

In summary, theological traditions guide our work as Christian economists in much the same way that scientific paradigms guide the work of scientists. They provide us with a body of accepted theological data, direct us to sources of authority, and define the nature of that authority. As already shown, they may also set the agenda for further work. And of course these traditions may conflict at key points.

Before continuing I will briefly summarize the content of propositions one through six: Christian economists, who are engaged in a necessarily theological enterprise, hold conflicting views on economics and theology. In the realm of economics we find not only that some have identified themselves with each of the principle competing paradigms but even within the mainstream we find a range of conflicting views. Settling differences across competing paradigms may not be possible insofar as these paradigms are grounded in conflicting “faith commitments” and insofar as they establish conflicting criteria for judging what is, and is not, the truth. Even within the main-
stream, there are no certain and objective grounds given to us through some methodology, for pronouncing that one competing claim is true and another false. Finally, I have argued that theological systems or traditions play the same role in theological inquiry as paradigms do in other scientific disciplines. I state now what will undoubtedly be my most controversial proposition:

**Proposition #8: There are no neutral or objective grounds for settling theological differences.** (Once again I add that I am speaking in purely human terms.)

Let us imagine what the attempt to find such neutral ground would entail. To be neutral it would require us to stand outside of any of the existing, competing traditions. But such a standpoint would have to itself provide answers to those questions whose resolution are necessary for theological inquiry to take place. And either these answers would be those of one of the existing traditions, or new answers which, taken together, would themselves form the basis for a new theological system. In either case, the claim to neutrality is invalidated.

The work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1988), though directed mainly to the problem of conflicting moral claims, is instructive here. After examining a number of competing traditions of rational inquiry and views of justice, he concludes: “Each has its own standards of reasoning; each provides its own background beliefs. To offer one kind of reason, to appeal to one set of background beliefs, will already be to have assumed the standpoint of one particular tradition. But if we make no such assumption, then we can have no good reason to give more weight to the contentions advanced by one particular tradition than to those advanced by its rivals” (pp. 351, 352). Even clearer is this statement of his position: “There is no standing ground, no place for inquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other” (p. 350).

At this stage of my argument I have little doubt as to which question stands uppermost in the minds of my evangelical, and perhaps other friends and colleagues. What about the Bible? Does it not provide a sure foundation for truth? Can we not appeal to Scripture as our ultimate arbiter of conflicting theological claims? The answer to the latter question is “yes,” provided that we are part of a tradition which assigns this role to Scripture, since this assignment itself is not self-evident. But the question of whether the Bible provides us with a sure foundation for truth is more complicated.

Even the most ardent biblical-inerrantist will have to concede that an inerrant Bible in no way guarantees inerrant interpretation. Sincere Christians coming from different theological traditions, each committed to the authority of Scripture, will nonetheless reach different conclusions from the same text. Do we, for example, understand the words, “This is my body” metaphorically or literally? There is no way to give a definitive answer to this question apart from that provided by a theological tradition. The “correct” interpretation of these words—and I take these only as a well-known example—does not enter our consciousness through some form of osmosis. Theological traditions teach us the “correct” interpretation, but if these traditions are found to be in conflict, there is no neutral point of reference to point us to the one which is Correct.

Yet our difficulties are not limited to the problem of competing interpretations of one or more particular biblical texts. More fundamental is the question of which texts are relevant to the ordering of our economic relationships and the structuring of our economic institutions in a late-twentieth century industrial economy. A number of recent works have pointed us to the Old Testament—and specifically to the laws given through Moses to ancient Israel—for guidance on these questions (Griffiths 1984, Mott 1989, Mason and Schaefer 1990). For example, Mason and

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Schaefer make the following claim: “We argue that in the Mosaic provisions designed for early Israel lie intentions the God of creation holds for all peoples and nations” (p. 47). They are not alone in this belief.

But how are we to understand and apply these “intentions”? Are we obliged to take a literal approach which seeks to implement these laws today precisely as they were implemented in early Israel? According to the Reconstructionists we are so obliged. Or do we, instead, follow Mason and Schaefer in discerning and applying the “spirit” of these laws: “We do not call for application of the specific political and economic institutions of the Pentateuch in contemporary societies, but for discerning the moral emphases or norms which the institutions promoted” (p. 48).

Christopher Wright, an Old Testament scholar who takes a position similar to that of Mason and Schaefer, points out “that there were three major positions or traditions of biblical hermeneutics (specifically on handling the Old Testament) in the early centuries and that these three approaches have continued to be influential all through Christian history” (p. 101). These positions consist of: the “Marcion” tradition, which sees “a radical discontinuity between the Jewish scriptures and the Christian New Testament” (p. 102); the tradition of the Alexandrian fathers, which presupposes “continuity and harmony between the testaments” (p. 103); and the tradition of the Antiochene fathers which, while accepting the continuity between the testaments, also “allowed the New Testament to override the Old where necessary” and stressed “the importance of redemptive fulfillment of the Old Testament in the new” (p. 104).

Arguments can, of course, be advanced for and against each of these traditions and for and against their many possible variations. Where do we turn to settle these competing claims? We can derive arguments from the Bible itself, but the texts which we cite will themselves be open to various interpretations. Once again we find ourselves referring to and relying on the perspective and authority of a particular tradition. We understand the Old Testament law, or some other biblical text, in this way or that because it was understood in this way or that by John Chrysostom or Origen or Diodore of Tarsus or Augustine or Aquinas or Luther or Calvin or Pope Leo XIII.

Having responded to a question which I have impouted to the evangelicals present, I should, in fairness both impute and respond to a question from Roman Catholics. What about papal infallibility? Is it possible to accept consistently both the arguments I am advancing here and the doctrine of papal infallibility? I believe that it is. It must be remembered that papal infallibility is not based upon human reason. That is, when—and as a non-Roman Catholic I should say if—the pope speaks infallibly it is on account of divine inspiration, not infallible human reason. More problematic is how someone other than the Pope—who may presumably claim no direct revelation—can know that the pope is infallible. If the bible cannot provide us with the basis for indubitable knowledge, the doctrine of papal infallibility cannot provide it either.

Before proceeding to draw out the implications for Christian economists of the propositions which I have advanced, I should make clear what they do not imply. First, they do not lead inevitably to some form of relativism. In other words, we are not bound to give equal weight to all truth claims simply because these claims are made from the perspective of a particular tradition. This is not to say that the relativist argument lacks all plausibility. MacIntyre (1988) recognizes this seeming plausibility stemming from the “anti-Cartesian and anti-Hegelian” character of his tradition-bound conception of truth:

Traditions fail the Cartesian test of beginning from unassailable evident truths; not only do they begin from contingent positivity, but each begins from a point different from that of the
others. Traditions also fail the Hegelian test of showing that their goal is some final rational state which they share with all other movements of thought. Traditions are always and ineradicably to some degree local, informed by particularities of language and social and natural environment... Those educated or indoctrinated into accepting Cartesian or Hegelian standards will take the positivity of tradition to be a sign of arbitrariness. For each tradition will, so it may seem, pursue its own specific historical path, and all that we shall be confronted with in the end is a set of independent rival histories (p. 361).

How does MacIntyre respond to this "plausible" case for relativism? Can traditions be evaluated in such a way that one may perhaps be judged superior to its rivals? To understand his response, we must first consider the historical character of traditions. MacIntyre makes this clear in his definition of a tradition:

A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted (p. 12).

To fully understand a tradition we must study its history, a point to which I will return later. For now we need only recognize that a tradition need not be static, but rather may evolve progressively or perhaps degenerate based upon debates occurring within and outside the tradition. These debates may arise because of new data or new experience which appear to conflict with key beliefs or assumptions associated with the tradition.

The debates within the tradition will center on whether the tradition can assimilate or explain the new data or experience, based upon the standards of rationality established by the tradition itself. A tradition that is progressing will find ways to resolve these debates in ways that preserve the essential characteristics of the tradition. However, at some point the internal contradictions faced by a tradition might become so strong, and irresolvable, that its adherents will abandon the tradition altogether or modify it in such a way as to form a new tradition.

This general approach will also serve as a means of comparing rival traditions. Nancey Murphy (1993) summarizes MacIntyre's views on this:

One aspect of the adjudication between competing traditions is to construct a narrative account of each tradition: of the crises it has encountered (incoherence, new experience that cannot be explained, etc.) and how it has or has not overcome these crises. Has it been possible to reformulate the tradition in such a way that it overcomes its crises without losing its identity. Comparison of these narratives may show that one tradition is making progress while its rival has become sterile (p. 13).

The adherents of a "sterile" tradition may well look elsewhere—that is, to a rival tradition—and "ask whether the alternative and rival tradition may not be able to provide resources to characterize and explain the failings and defects of their own tradition more adequately than they, using the resources of that tradition, have been able to do" (MacIntyre 1988, p. 167).

But suppose, as seems often the case, that rival traditions face no such crises, at least not of sufficient depth to cause one or the other to be defeated. MacIntyre admits "that by restricting itself to such examples the relativist challenge can still be sustained..." (p. 366). But in response, he asks us to examine the position of the one who issues the relativist challenge:

Who is in a position to issue such a challenge? For the person who is to do so must during such period of time either be him or herself an inhabitant of one of the two or more rival tradi-

...at some point the internal contradictions faced by a tradition might become so strong, and irresolvable, that its adherents will abandon the tradition altogether or modify it in such a way as to form a new tradition.
tions, owning allegiance to its standards of enquiry and justification and employing them in his or her reasoning, or be someone outside all of the traditions, him or herself traditionless (pp. 366-67).

The serious relativist challenge will not come from someone who occupies one of the rival traditions, for this person “could have no good reason for putting his or her allegiance to it in question and every reason for continuing in that allegiance” (p. 367). But what of the challenge that is issued, allegedly, from outside of any tradition? Here is MacIntyre’s answer:

...it is an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for inquiry independent of all traditions. Those who have maintained otherwise either have covertly been adopting the standpoint of a tradition and deceiving themselves and perhaps others into supposing that theirs was just such a neutral standing ground or else have simply been in error. The person outside all traditions ... has no adequate relevant means of rational evaluation and hence can come to no well-grounded conclusion, including the conclusion that no tradition can vindicate itself against any other. To be outside all traditions is to be a stranger to enquiry; it is to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution, a condition from which it is impossible to issue the relativist challenge (p. 367, emphasis added).

Second, the propositions advanced in this paper do not require us to abandon the search for truth. Here I find helpful Uskali Maki’s critique (1988) of McCloskey (1985). Maki shows that McCloskey holds a “coherence theory of justification” which, consistent with the position I have taken above and consistent with that of MacIntyre, holds that statements are justified “by their relations to other beliefs or statements with which they cohere” (p. 27). A coherence theory of justification is anti-foundationalist in the sense that it admits no “foundation of certitudes” on which we can build our knowledge. We cannot justify claims to knowledge by appealing to any such indubitable foundations.

But McCloskey goes one step further and denies the very existence, or at least the relevance, of truth itself. He thus combines his coherence theory of justification with an anti-realist coherence theory of truth. The latter position holds that, “The truth of a statement consists in its coherence with a certain system or set of beliefs or statements” (p. 29). In other words, to McCloskey the grounds for truth itself are the same as the grounds for justification. He therefore concludes that a truth claim adds nothing to a statement, once we have offered our set of reasons as justification for the statement. Says McCloskey: “The very idea of Truth—with a capital T, something beyond what is merely persuasive to all concerned—is a fifth wheel, inoperative...” He says that after economists make their arguments for their theories, “there is not a point in asking a last summarizing question: ‘Well, is it True?’ It’s whatever it is—persuasive, interesting, useful, and so forth... There is no reason to search for a general quality called Truth, which answers only the unanswerable question ‘What is it that is in the mind of God?’ Such and such and so and so accord with a human checklist of arguments persuasive to humans. That is all ye need to know” (1985, p. 47).

But McCloskey is wrong in assuming that the adoption of a coherence theory of justification (in this case rhetoric) is necessarily linked with an anti-realist concept of truth. Says Maki: “... it should not be concluded that rhetoric is inseparably linked to anti-realism. Realist rhetoric is a viable option. We do not have to think that the reality of quarks and gravitational lenses is a matter of rhetorical persuasion even if we think that our belief in their reality is” (p. 23). Maki notes that the realist conception of truth (that is, what philosophers call the correspondence theory of truth), “is the traditional idea
which is more or less in line with people’s common-sense intuitions about the truth. With the correspondence notion, the truth of a statement is supposed to be something objective, independent of our beliefs in it and justifications for it. A statement is true or false by virtue of the way the world is, objectively” (p. 28). This distinction is important for Christian economists. It is not at all inconsistent to hold a realist view of truth—truth exists independently of anyone’s belief about the truth—and a non-founderalist, coherence theory of justification. We can, and indeed should, continue to pursue the truth. But we must recognize our human fallibility which prevents us from ever knowing the truth with certitude, in a foundationalist sense.

Third, the realization that theological and economic inquiry are tradition or paradigm bound, does not rule out all conversation across competing traditions. This would only be the case if the incommensurability were complete, in the sense that rival traditions shared no common ground whatsoever. But this is certainly not the case. Although I have focused in this paper on our disagreements, it is nonetheless true that we share a good deal in common both as Christians and as economists and this common ground forms the basis for dialogue. The successful sessions sponsored by the Association of Christian Economists at the annual ASSA meetings and the (apparent) success of this workshop provide ample support for this. It is not dialogue itself that is at issue, but the possibility that such dialogue will result in concrete statements agreeable to all concerned, or, at least move us closer to that goal. What then are the implications for the work of Christian economists?

Implications

First, while “statements” on the economy, signed by members of competing theological and economic traditions, may not be ruled out, they are likely to garner widespread acceptance only to the extent that they lack specificity. Suppose for example, I asked for agreement on the following three statements:

1. Christians should help the poor.
2. Christian help for the poor should come through private contributions and through efforts design and implement a national welfare program.
3. Christians should promote a welfare system that comports with the system found in ancient Israel.

The first statement would, I suspect, receive unanimous endorsement; the second, which makes a more specific claim, would have the support of many but would lose the support of libertarians; the third, a still more specific statement, would capture even less support. An actual example of this problem can be seen in The Oxford Declaration. James Skillen (1990), in an insightful review of this document, gets to the heart of the problem:

The difficulty... is that the statement allows important differences in economic judgment among the signers to be covered over by general confessional statements. Instead of sharpening the meaning of economic agreement among Christians, the statement allows one set of words to serve an equivocal purpose—to be interpreted in different ways by those who differ over economic policies and principles (p. 15).

Among the specific ambiguities noted by Skillen are the meaning of the term justice, “the criteria for judging responsible technology,” the content of “fundamental rights,” and the specific role that government should play in securing our rights. In spite of these ambiguities Skillen still finds the document to be “useful and encouraging” and expresses his hope “that [it] will encourage Christians who hold different views to keep on working together” (p. 21). What is not stated directly by Skillen, though strongly implied, is that a statement which clarified these ambiguities in one way or another would have proven to be unacceptable to one or another group of participants. Apparently, the organizers...
Somewhat ironically, the goal of unity may be served best by first learning well and subjecting to critical examination the historical development and current content of our own theological tradition.

and participants of the Oxford conference valued unanimous (or near unanimous) agreement over specificity and clarity.

Second, as long as Christian economists are found within conflicting economic paradigms and theological traditions, we should not expect a single Christian approach to economics. A Christian approach to economics would have to be grounded in certain theological presuppositions, just as secular approaches take certain presuppositions (perhaps epistemological, or pertaining to human nature) as their starting points. But on which theological presuppositions would such a Christian approach be based—Reformed, Anabaptist, Roman Catholic, or perhaps the much-neglected Orthodox tradition? Theological presuppositions for a Christian approach to the discipline—if specific enough to be useful—cannot be found in generic form. These presuppositions will inevitably be derived from one or the other of these competing theological traditions.

Third, Christian economists should become more aware, first, of their own tradition and, second, the traditions of others. As I have argued above, and as the work of MacIntyre makes clear, one cannot stand outside of all traditions of inquiry, for it is only within a tradition that we find grounds for justifying our beliefs. In seeking to justify our beliefs we will, at some point, be forced to fall back on the “first principles” of some tradition. Though these are not, as MacIntyre reminds us, “self-sufficient, self-justifying epistemological first principles” (p. 360), they serve an important, indeed essential function in the justification of beliefs. Foundationalism, it will be recalled, is dead. It is only from within a tradition that we can avoid the charge of being “ad hoc” in our form of argumentation.

Somewhat ironically, the goal of unity may be served best by first learning well and subjecting to critical examination the historical development and current content of our own theological tradition. For it is in first clarifying and then subjecting our own beliefs to such an examination that we may find cause to doubt the adequacy, coherence, or even the first-principles of our tradition. Or, just the opposite, we may find new and more convincing reasons, or more finely honed arguments for continuing to affirm the truth claims of this tradition.

Once we acknowledge and consciously accept and endorse the “first principles” of our own tradition we are in a position to consider the first principles and beliefs of a rival tradition. Yet such a step is far from easy, for to approach another tradition is to run headlong into the problem of incommensurability, especially the incommensurability of language. Consider such theological terms and expressions as “justification by faith,” “sacrament,” “the church as the body of Christ,” or, more relevant to Christian economists, “stewardship,” “justice,” “cultural mandate.” While not foreign to most Christian traditions, these terms and expressions nonetheless take on different meanings and carry different connotations within the various traditions. Members of rival traditions who attempt to converse with one another may find that the use of such expressions hinders rather than helps the resolution of such a conversation because of the different meanings and connotations.

Such difficulties do not rule out cross-tradition conversation altogether. As already noted, incommensurability is by no means complete. Yet deep, meaningful conversation will only occur when members of one tradition learn the language of the rival tradition, not as a “second language” but as a “second first language.” That is, we must learn the language not as those who translate—since translation is always subject to the biases of one’s own tradition—but as one who resides in, or in-dwells that rival tradition. This allows us to view and evaluate the rival tradition on its own terms. Such a view may cause us to see such advantages to the rival tradition that we have cause to adopt it as our own. Or, if such advantages are not found, our commitment to our own
tradition will be strengthened all the more.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, we must acknowledge human fallibility (including our own) even as we cling to the belief that truth exists and Christians are obliged to pursue the truth. It is not a contradiction to hold simultaneously a belief in human fallibility and in the existence of objective truth. Our fallibility prevents us from knowing, with certitude, when we have arrived at the truth, but this in no way negates the reality of truth. Acknowledging our fallibility should, however, cause us to make our truth claims with a proper sense of humility, always holding out the possibility that we are wrong and someone else has it right. And this attitude of humility should extend equally to economic and theological truth claims, for our fallibility is not diminished as we move from one form of rational enterprise to another. Ultimately, all knowledge claims—whether made by Christian or secular economists, and whether it is acknowledged or not—rest on an act of faith. But faith is not certitude. If we could know God’s truth with certitude then faith would not be necessary. But we cannot, and so it is. Let us pray, then, that the God of all truth will use to His glory our feeble gropings after the truth, carried out in His name.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**ENDNOTES**

1. If anyone doubts my assertion I refer them to the bibliography in North (1975).
2. For a readable summary of some of Polanyi’s ideas see Newbigin (1989).


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