Tell us something about your pilgrimage as a Christian. Did you grow up in the Church of England?

My father was an evangelical minister in the Church of England and the Church has been part of my experience as long as I can remember. As a university student I went through a period of really radical questioning of what I believed and why I believed. That was good because my father had always emphasized that the Christian faith was not anti-intellectual and he always had good reasons for what he believed. I owe a lot to him. I think perhaps for an American audience one ought to say that within the Church of England there is a very large evangelical wing and that is where I am placed within the Church.

Are you an active churchman today?

Yes, quite active. I have been in a church here in Oxford for the last thirty years and in the church I’ve played all kinds of different roles. I’m what’s called a lay reader; that is someone who has a license to preach and lead services. I am not doing so much of that now because the church has grown and we have several ministers. But I have also been involved with teaching in small groups. At one stage I was quite heavily involved in the administration of the church, more like a deacon.

Shifting to your professional writing and research, what are your areas of specialization and current research?

I’ve worked for the last twenty years in the area of industrial organization and the theory of the firm. Perhaps slightly unusually I have always argued that the two should be linked. There is a tendency to see them as separate disciplines. The main focus of my research is a two way traffic: the way in which market structure influences the behavior of firms, particularly oligopolistic firms, and then how it works in reverse—how the behavior of firms and the conduct of firms feed back to market structure. I am working on two things at the moment. One is the design of antitrust policies for open economies. I did a piece for a book of essays edited by Dave Richardson on global competition policy and I am very interested in
that area. There is a lot going on in competition policy in Britain at the moment; there has been a reform of the whole structure so I am interested in that currently. The other thing that I am working on is trade liberalization. You may know I spent a year of leave in Brazil and I did some work on the way in which large Brazilian manufacturing firms reacted to what was a very sudden, and really quite sharp, trade liberalization. The work is panel data econometrics basically, but also building models of response to competitive shocks; it’s quite technical stuff.

Are you comfortable that this work comports well with your Christian faith?

[Laughter.] I remember a few years ago a non-Christian friend of mine saying to me that he found it strange that I worked in industrial organization and the theory of the firm. He thought that as a Christian with my particular concerns I would have been much more into poverty, development and welfare. In some ways it is quite strange that I have ended up doing something where the ethical issues are not quite so sharply defined. On the other hand as stewards of creation we are supposed to engage in productive work; most productive work which people do is within firms; firms operate mainly within markets; so understanding these things is part of my calling as a Christian academic, to understand how they work and to identify the implications of that way of organizing production, that way of ‘doing’ stewardship.

Taking this a step further, are there ways in which your faith affects the substance or methods of this research?

On the substance, as a Christian I am always aware of a wider agenda than just the standard productive and allocative efficiency story. So for example when I am looking at these data on Brazilian firms one of the issues that really interests me is the impact on employment. When you are evaluating what happens you cannot just say these firms became more productive or less productive or whatever; you also have to ask what were the consequences for employment, for poverty, etc. So I think that maybe my agenda is a bit wider than most.

On methods of research I suppose the thing which really is important is to be broadly empirical. It seems to me that there is no justification for doing research which is pure theory without input from the real world. I think we need to look at data. I have always worked as far as I can with real world situations. That doesn’t mean I don’t believe in doing theory well; I do. I also believe in doing econometrics well; those things are important. But I like to think I am finding out what is actually happening. This is God’s world; I want to know what’s happening.

You have questioned, on Christian grounds, the legitimacy of the limited liability corporation. Doesn’t this make it difficult for you to work as an I-O economist?

No, I don’t think so. As I have already said the ways in which firms operate, and the ways in which markets operate, are of interest in their own right. Clearly I have reservations about the limited liability corporation. One of the things that really interests me is how widespread it is. There must be something in the way it is set up, its constitution, which makes it a very good way of doing things. But I am concerned about the way in which someone can be an indirect equity owner, and yet not have any real responsibility for what a corporation is doing. There is an ethical issue here that is raised not only by Christians but by non-Christians as well. But in terms of doing my work, I really want to understand why we have this institution, why is it so widespread, why is it apparently so successful, what are the costs and benefits of it. So I don’t have any problems.

I like to think I am finding out what is actually happening. This is God’s world; I want to know what’s happening.
As a Christian, what troubles you most about mainstream economics?
I think the thing which troubles me most is lack of humility. I am concerned by the way in which leading economists can apparently take an idea, and it’s only an idea, and quickly translate it into what they see as priorities for policy, before it has been tested out. I find that very troubling. I think for some reason economics breeds a kind of arrogance which you don’t find in the physical sciences. There is a real lack of humility in the discipline and an unwillingness to look back and learn from mistakes. We ought to look back at the things we said fifteen or twenty years ago, and ask what impact they had. Let’s take one example. In the 1970s there was an emphasis in development circles on very big projects, on a big role for government. Looking back, that was clearly a mistake. What we need to do is to recognize the mistakes we have made and be a little less willing to rush in with policy advice before we have really worked things out.

The other worry I have, particularly on the theory side, is that sometimes economics has become what I call a ‘Greek’ science. That is, it is fascinated by the beauty of its own internal logic and structure. I think it fails to connect with the real world, and it doesn’t seem to worry too much if it fails to connect. That concerns me a lot because if it becomes very ‘Greek’ in that sense, it will become useless.

Looking back over your career, which published work has given you the most satisfaction? Why?
My book on Christian faith and economics, Economics Today: A Christian Critique. I have been very happy with some of the other things I’ve published, but in terms of which publication contains most of what I deeply care about, the answer is Economics Today. It gave me satisfaction because I think it was the first time anybody had sat down and done the biblical ethics and economic analysis in a consistent way. It had been done piecemeal before, but not consistently, and that is what I really liked, and still like, about the book.

It’s been nearly ten years since the publication of that book. Do you have any plans to bring out a new edition?
I would love to do a new edition but at the moment I have too many other things to do. I am going to take over an administrative post in the university for the next couple of years that will knock out any major writing project. Part of the problem of the book is it covers so many different areas, that you have to read material you wouldn’t normally read. I hope I will bring out a new edition but it’s going to have to wait for a while. I have a problem about where it might be published. I was very disappointed that it went out of print so quickly. The only place it’s available now is in Korea but that is in Korean!! I still get letters and e-mails from people asking where they can get the book. I never really understood why Eerdmans decided after a couple of printings not to reprint. That was a disappointment.

In the paper you wrote for the Wheaton conference last January, you state with regard to Economics Today: ‘there is not much of substance I would wish to change if I were to revise it, though I would be willing to give more weight to efficiency as a desirable value, arising out of the need to exercise stewardship responsibly in a world characterized by great human need and the waste of natural resources.’ Could you expand on this?
Yes, I probably made a mistake in presentation though not, I think, in substance. One of my critics said that the book said very little about the creation of wealth.

Might that have been Brian Griffiths?
[Laughter.] It wasn’t Brian, interestingly enough. I think one reason I didn’t use the phrase ‘the creation of wealth’ was partly because it was a phrase which Brian had
used but also because at that time it carried all kinds of ideological baggage with it. What I failed to do was to spell out what I see as a very positive role for stewardship, that is we are expected to use resources productively. Our role as stewards is to use what we have, to use our minds, and to use our resources so that people can be clothed and fed and housed. I think that lines up with the economist’s notion of productive efficiency. I thought it was there in the book but I don’t think I emphasized it enough. Maybe now I could use the phrase ‘creation of wealth’ because the connotations have disappeared.

Has your perspective on any issue changed significantly since the book was first published?

As far as the Biblical analysis is concerned I would want to say more about the nature of work and also about the nature of rest. A friend criticized the book by saying it didn’t really deal with the need for rest, the Sabbath rest, and I think that is a fair criticism. Also the impression is sometimes given in the book that work is only paid work and that is a mistake. I need to look again at the question of usury. In the book I rather dismissed it and a number of people have said there is more that I really ought to think about.

Hasn’t the Jubilee Center published something on usury?

Some time ago. There have been one or two other contributions which suggest it is a deeper issue than I realized at the time I wrote the book. Also I wrote the part on socialism before its demise. There is a whole section on economic planning which is completely irrelevant so that would all have to go. Those are the kind of changes I would make.

When I first read Economics Today it seemed to me that your criticism of socialism was not as strong as it could have been nor as strong as your criticism of capitalism. I thought there was an imbalance in the level of criticism. Is that a fair criticism?

Yes, that is a fair criticism. The thing which I find most objectionable about socialism, certainly of the Communist kind, is the idea that the state becomes God and attempts to control the future. The other problems are the incredible inefficiency of planned systems in practice, and their neglect of ecological issues.

Would there be room for a Christian evaluation of the welfare state as well?

If I wrote the book again, I would probably drop all the discussion of planned systems and look at the welfare state in detail. The welfare state has become a very big issue in market economies, and would therefore need a much fuller treatment.

You begin Economics Today with a very extensive survey of Biblical principles and the application of these principles to social ethics. You may be familiar with David Richardson’s argument that Christians who do integrative work ought to hold degrees in theology and ethics. Do you agree and do you have formal training in either of these fields?

Well of course one should agree with David. [Laughter.] The answer is yes, I agree, but we can’t wait for ever. There are very few of us who have that kind of training. But I’m not convinced that one has to have formal training in these areas. I have never had formal training in the sense of taking a degree in theology or ethics: what I have always done is to consult some theological ethicists and ask what I should read, and then having read, go back to them and see if I have understood. I think there is quite a lot to be said for working with a theological advisor. My worry would be that if we wait until we know it better, we’ll never know it. That’s the way I would respond to David.
Could you describe briefly the method of Christian social ethics that you use and advocate?

In the last section of Economics Today I set out the method I use. I have a little diagram which has a T, then an arrow going to the right to DSP, then another arrow going to the right to R. T stands for the theological framework and I think that must be normative for a Christian, you start with your theology. In my case it will be a Biblical theology; other Christians might have a different way of looking at it. But I don’t think you can go straight from your theological framework to the economics. You have to put on a filter, and I think that everybody does this either consciously or unconsciously. I think one should do it fairly formally, and that’s what I do in the book. I start with the biblical framework; from that I derive derivative social principles (that’s the DSP) which are going to impinge on the issues of economic life. The DSP are then used to evaluate R, the ‘real world’, in our case different aspects of economic life and activity. I think it’s very important, and I stress this in the book, that what is normative is the theological framework, and not the derivative social principles. The derivative social principles are provisional, they are open to further debate and discussion, and they can be revised when somebody points to something in the biblical material which hasn’t been properly accounted for. Or it may be that some problem gets thrown up from the economic analysis which the principles don’t address; then you think how to adapt the principles, or develop them, to make them applicable. So there’s an interactive process going on all the time. I think of it like this: I’m Christian and I’m an economist, and the DSP’s are where the two meet. On the other hand although the schema is intellectually interactive, authority lies with the theological framework, that’s what you always go back to. That’s the way I do it. It is, however, much criticized, mainly by liberal theological ethicists who say you can’t do it that way.

Perhaps Ronald Preston?

Yes, Ronald Preston doesn’t like it, that’s very true. I had a number of critical reviews of the book by liberal theologians, quite respectful reviews, but critical of my method.

Is there anything particularly Anglican about that approach? Does it draw on an Anglican tradition in any way?

Yes, I think it does. I think the person who did it first was William Temple, though he would not have done the biblical analysis; he would have seen his theological framework, which was very orthodox incidentally, as the basis for the derivative social principles. Indeed he discusses derivative social principles.

How about the Oxford economist Denis Munby?

I think Denis started at the other end. He was more in the tradition of social ethics which looks at the market and at the problems which it throws up and then brings in some kind of Christian reflection. I think that weakens the Christian input. There’s an interesting theologian in Britain at the moment, called John Atherton. He has reached the point where he won’t allow us to say anything from a specifically Christian viewpoint. He says that the market has its own value system and the best we can do is get within that and criticize from within. He rejects completely the idea of bringing authoritative values from outside. I think that’s an abdication of anything Christian.

I think perhaps you’re on the side of the majority of Anglican bishops these days.

I am.

Should the reality of human sin predispose the Christian economist to be skeptical about the free market producing automatic harmony in the economy?

I don’t know many economists who believe that the free market produces automatic harmony. I think you have to be
pretty Hayekian to take that view. My view is that markets are a very good way of allocating scarce resources and preventing conflict over the use of resources, so in the Smithian sense, they promote harmony. The Smithian notion that they harness human selfishness and human self-interest is correct. That’s how I understand theologically the way in which the market is operating. Having said that, the ability to operate in markets depends on having resources to bring to market. If you live in a situation where there are a few people who have a lot of resources to bring to market and many people who have few resources, then there isn’t much harmony. Living in Rio de Janeiro for a year draws attention to that because you can see people living in an apartment on the beach, who have wealth which even in American terms would be regarded as extreme, and then you only have to go half a mile to find people who are only just eking out a living. Where you have such huge disparities the market doesn’t bring harmony, it brings a lot of tension, and a lot of violence.

Let’s say a student is beginning a study of economics with a well developed understanding of the reality of human sin. Should that person be skeptical of claims that the market always generates full employment, even before he or she were to undertake a study of that topic?

I think that Christians should be skeptical about all human institutions whether they be markets, corporations, governments, churches, whatever. We need to remember that humans are sinful, and given the opportunity they will do evil as much as they will do good. But you can overdo it. The capacity for human beings to do good is also very considerable; even the wicked man can love his wife and children. As Christians we belong to a different people, and we are living in a different kingdom. As we analyze the kingdom of this world we have to be very skeptical about it and very alert to its capacity for corruption and evil.

Where, in your view, does the British economy most fall short of the Biblical standards you set forth in your book, and what could be done to move closer to the ideal?

I find it quite difficult to respond to this briefly because there are a lot of things to comment on. What concerns me most is unemployment, the capacity of market economies to generate stable employment for all their members. The Biblical principle is that part of what it means to be human is to work. I am very concerned about young people who cannot get jobs, or older people who have been unemployed for a long time and the impact that it has on them. Lots of other things flow from that. For example, a lot of poverty comes from the fact that people don’t work or won’t work. A lot of family breakdown comes from it as well. So that would be my number one issue.

The other issue which concerns me is the sheer materialism and consumerism of our society. We have some friends who have been missionaries in Kenya for about twenty five years, and they have just returned to the UK. They were remarking that consumerism and materialism really are at the center of people’s lives here now, even within the church. They saw that as a very big change from the 1970s.

Do you have any policies in mind, particularly for unemployment?

The present administration in Britain is trying to use the carrot and stick. On the carrot side it’s putting a lot more resources into helping people to search for jobs, a lot more retraining, trying to improve basic education, those sorts of labor market supply side policies. The general view is that there isn’t much more that could be done to liberalize the markets themselves. There’s a good deal of discussion about the fact that the administration has brought in a minimum wage. Most economists I’ve talked to who know this area say that the minimum wage, given the way it’s going to be applied, is not going to create a major problem for employment. I don’t know
Where does the Oxford Declaration come from, what authority does it have? It has no more authority than that of the signatories.

about that. On the stick side, the administration has made it much harder, particularly for young people, not to work and just take welfare payments. Many people have said that in Britain we have had welfare benefits that are too generous for too long. The suggestion is that we should move in the direction of having generous benefits, but for shorter periods of time, so the system helps those who genuinely have lost their job and have to find another one, but does not subsidize people who have chosen not to work. There are some more controversial things. The government is setting up schemes to encourage single mothers to work and there’s a good deal of argument as to whether that’s really a good idea. I don’t think there is any easy solution. I think you have to work with a whole range of measures, and some of them are going to be very long term, like improving primary education, so that you don’t have people coming into the labor market who lack basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Can your views on these issues be adequately addressed outside the biblical framework? If you were addressing a group of non-Christians on these topics, a secular audience, could you adequately present your views without recourse to the Biblical arguments or theology? Would you find that difficult to do?

I think a lot depends on the context. If I’m talking to economists then on the whole the arguments tend to be technical. Most people would say, sure, we ought to do something about unemployment. I don’t know any economists who say we shouldn’t, so in a way the Christian principle becomes less relevant. Where I might be more inclined to bring in Christian arguments would be with a non-professional group, some Christians, some not. I might say as a Christian why I regard this issue as very important. But in terms of straight academic debate, there isn’t a forum into which the Christian viewpoint could be inserted.

Were you a participant in the conference which gave rise to the Oxford Declaration? What are your reflections on the process which shaped this document?

I was a participant at the very beginning. There was a meeting in Oxford, I can’t remember when, which was prior to the whole process. When it came to the conferences which gave rise to the Oxford Declaration, I was abroad when one was being held, and the other was held in the middle of term here, and there was no way in which I could go.

I am a bit reluctant to criticize, because lots of good friends have been involved. But I have two comments. The first is that the whole process, and the way it was set up, cannot claim to be representative of Lausanne Covenant evangelicals or anything of that kind. It was very much a private initiative. I know they tried to invite a wide range of people, but they lacked any kind of authority and that has a big impact on how seriously people take the end product. Let me take a very different example. Compare it with Centesimus Annus, the papal encyclical. Centesimus Annus comes out with the authority of the Pope, written after a very long process of consultation within the Roman Catholic church. I don’t agree with all of it, but you can take it as an authoritative document which comes from an authoritative source. Where does the Oxford Declaration come from, what authority does it have? It has no more authority than that of the signatories.

Is this more a problem of evangelicalism as a movement which crosses denominational lines? Could such a group ever produce an authoritative document since there is no central authority?

Something like the Lausanne Covenant did have authority because it came from an authoritative group of evangelical Christian leaders. So I don’t think it’s impossible. The real problem, and this is my second reflection, is that the disagreements in the area of economics are just far too great. It was foolish to try to
draft a document which everybody could sign. They should have admitted after the first conference that agreement simply wasn’t a possibility. There was no way they could get everybody to sign a document which said anything very definite. It would have been better, but much less exciting, to have a series of mini-conferences to identify why we disagree and how we disagree, and to ask what work we might need to do to resolve those differences. That would have been a more useful exercise.

Do statements such as the Oxford Declaration serve a useful purpose? I have my doubts. I don’t know who reads them. Even Centesimus Annus, which every Catholic is supposed to have read, seems only to get down to a certain level in the Church and then it stops. Its concerns are very remote from the ordinary Roman Catholic in the pews. Parish priests may refer to it but they won’t actually use it as a teaching document. I think a Christian group needs to ask who is it addressing. Is it addressing its own members, and if so, is this an appropriate teaching vehicle? Or is it addressing governments, and if so, what kind of mechanisms does it have for getting their views inserted into the public arena?

I remember reading a booklet entitled “Perspectives on Economics” from the mid 1980s. I believe that this was a Church of England publication which grew out of some meetings between theologians and economists, including yourself. Is this group still active? Have there been, or are there currently, other such groups? I wish you hadn’t mentioned that booklet. I try to forget about it. It was not a happy experience, for two reasons. The economists in the group (with one exception) were evangelicals, whereas the theologians were liberal and that caused problems because we were using different working methods. The other economist turned out later not to have any Christian faith at all, though he didn’t reveal this in the meetings of the working group, and he upset the process. The meetings never got going because he was always saying ‘No, that’s not the agenda, this is the agenda.’ I found it a very difficult process, and I thought that what came out at the end was more or less useless.

So you wouldn’t be an advocate of another such attempt. No, I wouldn’t.

Do you find that theologians and economists can engage in fruitful dialogue? Yes, we can, but it is very important that we are operating with a common theological framework; if not, then we are playing different ball games, and it becomes very much harder to get agreement. I have worked closely with a couple of theologians here at Oxford who share my broad theological framework, and that is very fruitful. We can have a learning process because we are talking about the same things. I think the problem is doing it with theologically diverse groups.

Are there particular names you would want to mention, theologians you think Christian economists ought to read? The person I worked with originally on Economics Today was Oliver O’Donovan who I think is an extremely important and careful writer. He is the theologian I have benefited from the most.

Has the Church of England issued any recent statements on the British economy? The Church of England as such, no. A year ago a council of churches for England and Wales had a study group on unemployment and work, and they produced a very interesting report. Most of it was written by Andrew Britton, who is a very good economist. I think that the value of the
report reflected the fact that it had a frontline economist doing the work. In terms of a review of the problems of unemployment and work in Britain, and what the policies are, I think it’s very well done. I would have thought it was a bit thin on the theological side, mainly economics written by a Christian economist.

Should churches issue such statements? Are there dangers here?
We have covered this a little. If it is the Roman Catholic Church producing *Centesimus Annus*, then given the structure of authority in the Roman Catholic Church I can see some point, though Catholics tell me that it doesn’t have the kind of impact you might think. On the other hand I am told that the Catholic church is very active in lobbying on social and economic issues in Europe. They have an office in Brussels and they are very alert to social and economic issues. I suspect that most people don’t realize that the whole concept of subsidiarity, which has become a buzz word in European circles, comes from Catholic social teaching. A lot of the material on conditions of employment and work was informed by Catholic social teaching. They see themselves as getting in there, talking to decision makers and getting ideas taken on board.

In the US there seems to be some disagreement about what Christian economists should do. David Richardson, for example, thinks that our professional calling is to do economics, and do it well. Others argue that our unique calling is to bring our faith to bear on our discipline. Is this a matter of debate among Christian economists in the UK?
My view is that it shouldn’t be either-or: we should do both. Christians particularly have to be very good economists because nobody is going to listen to us if we’re not. I also think that if we are Christian economists we should bring our faith to bear on our discipline. I can’t see how you can claim to be living under the lordship of Christ if you’re not doing that. Integration of faith and the discipline of economics is something which is very important. This is not debated in the UK, it’s taken for granted. I have a young colleague here in Oxford called Ben Cooper. At our annual meeting of the Association of Christian Economists he produced a very interesting paper entitled “Ecclesiastes and Futile Growth.” In the first part of the paper he looks at the overall message of Ecclesiastes, the futility of the pursuit of wealth and pleasure, and in the second half of the paper he asks what that would look like if we put it into an economic model. He ends up with a model of the futility of economic growth. It is very well done. Here is an example of someone who is doing very good technical work as an economist, who also reflects on the Scriptures, and tries to incorporate a Christian understanding into an economic model. I like that a lot.

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the chances of reaching, or at least moving towards, a unified Christian view on economic issues? What are the obstacles?
If we take ‘Christian’ very broadly, the main obstacle is theological differences. If people accept the Atherton view, take the market as a given with all its values and not use their Christian ethics to critique it, it’s very hard to see how they can dialogue fruitfully with someone who holds my view that the Scriptures are normative. So if it is a question of theological differences then I remain very pessimistic. Even if we confine discussion to people with a normative view of Scripture there are some differences within that group. I think that there are two obstacles to progress. There is an obstacle in the area of hermeneutics, that is, how do you apply the Biblical material: there are quite deep disagreements among evangelicals as to how that should be done. Whether in principle those can be resolved, I am not sure. The other obstacle is that far too many people are ideologically committed. I think that is a bigger problem in the
States than in Britain. Reading some American material I feel the writers started with an ideological commitment to the market which they don’t want to see questioned by the Biblical critique. So long as that is the case it’s going to be hard to get consensus.

Are you sympathetic with the Reformed project of developing a distinctively Christian approach to economics?

I find this very difficult to answer. I am not convinced by the Reformed project. I’m sympathetic to what they are alerting us to, but I’m not sympathetic to how they have actually set about it. Take for example the Tiemstra book. I started with a lot of sympathy for the way they were thinking about the problem, and I ended up not at all convinced by their economics, which often seemed to be missing the point. But if Christians are doing anything, in some sense they should do it distinctively. In that respect the Reformed project is on the right track.

Do Christians have anything unique to contribute to the substance of positive economics?

I think they do, and the main area would be the model of what a human being is. Most economists agree that the model of human action economists work with is incredibly narrow, and that we really need to have a broader model than the utility maximization model. The problem is to know how to develop that broader model. My guess is that there is something we could contribute though I have not worked on it myself. The other area would be the focus of our research, not narrowing our focus to just productive allocative efficiency, but being prepared to ask broader questions about the impact of economic institutions on the way in which people live.

Have you noticed any differences between Christian economists in the UK and their US counterparts, with regard to their major concerns or the sort of work that they do?

It strikes me that there is a great deal more concern in the US Association of Christian Economists about personal Christian life in academia, and rather less stress on Christian intellectual life and the Christian intellectual task. I think that is a major difference. In Britain there are concerns about what it is to be a Christian academic but the UK ACE does not address that issue in terms of personal conduct and lifestyle. There is more concern to get on with the intellectual issues. Now obviously there are some people in the States who do this in a very impressive way. I have been impressed with the work of John Mason and Earl Grinols, who have tried to think Christianly about issues, but I think we do more of that here than you do in the States.

Do you think that the reason that academics in the US are concerned more with the personal life of the Christian academic is because the academic scene in the US is even more thoroughly secular than it is in Britain and therefore Christians feel more at odds with their fellow academics?

I would have thought that the situation in Britain was much the same as in the States. One of the things that interests me is that many of you are at Christian colleges. I then find it a bit surprising that you should be concerned with Christian personal life because I would have thought that this would not be a significant issue. I am also a bit surprised that there isn’t a bigger emphasis on how we can make Christianity impact the discipline; at least that doesn’t come across in your Bulletin.

Were you involved in the establishment of ACE in the UK?

The truth is that I can’t remember. [Laughter.] It was Brian Griffiths I think who got the Association going. I remember going to a number of meetings...
which he convened. Then he went off into
government and the Association went
through a fallow period when nothing
very much happened. We took it up again
in the late 80s. So I think the right answer
is historically, no; but in its present form,
maybe yes.

How large is this organization and what
are its activities?
It’s basically a network. The formal
membership list contains about 80 names
of whom I reckon 60 are active. About half
of that 60 have teaching posts in UK
universities. Basically we have two
activities. We have an annual conference
which normally takes place in early July,
with a number of sessions where papers
are given; some are more theological, but
most of them are by members of the
Association who ask, as Christian
economists, what can be said about
particular topics. For example, this year
we had Andrew Dilnot, who is the
Director of the Institute of Fiscal Studies in
London, talking about the Labour
governments’ plans for reforming the
welfare state, and asking how a Christian
might react to what they are trying to do. I
talked about Christian perspectives on the
National Health Service, which has been
going through a pretty rough ride in the
last ten years. There are many puzzling
issues about the ways in which health care
should be allocated, so I was trying to
develop some biblical principles which
might apply in the health care area, and to
ask what kind of critique we can bring to
bear. On the whole the papers are pretty
competent, not low level; people have
spent some time thinking about them. The
other activity is a little publication,
nothing like as grand as your American
publication, where we publish pieces
which members of the Association have
written, and use that as a way of keeping
people in touch. That is where the
Association is at the moment. We are
hoping to think more about ways in which
the Association might develop. In some
ways we are a little bit disappointed by the
size of the membership, because we know
there are quite a lot of Christians
economists in the UK who know about the
Association, but apparently don’t see it as
a priority to come on board as members.

Is membership open to Christian
economists in the US? Whom should they
contact?
Yes it is. At one stage we tried to set up a
joint membership arrangement. I have a
feeling that our secretary-treasurer is
going to try and arrange it again. If people
want to join they should contact Professor
Jonathan Thomas at the University of
Warwick, e-mail, ecrte@csv.warwick.ac.uk.

How are Christians treated in British
universities generally, and Oxford in
particular?
The general climate in British universities
is extremely liberal, that is, nobody
worries too much about peoples’ faith
commitments. Faith commitment used to
be regarded as very strange; it no longer is.
Maybe it is a postmodernist thing. It is
accepted that people have different life
choices, different ways of looking at the
world. Obviously what is not generally
accepted is when Christians claim that
what we believe is important not just for
us but for others as well; that is
unacceptable and makes it very difficult to
pursue any specifically Christian agenda
on intellectual issues. If you go back to the
70s there was more hostility towards
Christians than there is now. That could
change very easily. Many liberals will be
outraged with what the Lambeth
Conference has said about homosexuality.
There may be some sort of backlash; it
wouldn’t surprise me if there was.

What did your professional colleagues
think of Economics Today?
Somewhat to my surprise there was
almost unanimous support for the general
project. And indeed there was something
of a feeling that it is good for an
Economics Department to have somebody
who takes a different view because it gives breadth.

_We have our Radical and we have our Christian._

Yes, that’s right, a few oddballs around; I’m your Christian oddball. The only professional colleague who read the book in its entirety was Amartya Sen, who wrote me an extremely friendly letter about it saying that although he’s an atheist, he found it stimulating, and thought it was a very useful contribution.

_I would think he would have general sympathy for your consideration of ethics._

Exactly. My other professional colleagues haven’t read it.

_Are your colleagues and students generally aware of your Christian faith? Do Christian students seek you out for advice and counsel?_

Yes, it’s well known that I am a Christian. Sometimes I have people coming to find me; other times I don’t have anybody. For students there are several good churches in central Oxford with skilled student pastors, so if students have personal problems they would go there rather than to somebody like me. There are very few Christians who study economics, very few.

_Why is that?_

I really don’t know. There are many more student scientists who are Christians.

_Other than your own work, what authors would you recommend for Christian students of economics?_

I like Brian Griffiths’ work because he is a highly intelligent, committed Christian, who really is concerned about bringing his faith to bear on economic issues. He writes clearly. As an economist he knows what the issues are; he can’t be faulted on the economic analysis. I have found his work very stimulating, particularly _Morality and the Market Place_. It’s sad that he has completely withdrawn from this area. He went into policy as an advisor to Margaret Thatcher for many years, and when he ceased to be an advisor he went into investment banking. He is not active any more in the area of Christian faith and economics. Maybe he feels he made his contribution and he’s got other things to do. I certainly regard him highly. Bob Goudzward’s work I find stimulating, particularly his last book _Beyond Poverty and Affluence_, which is well worth reading. In the States I find myself going back to the essays in the book edited by Chewning, _Biblical Principles and Public Policy: The Practice_. The essays by P. J. Hill, Earl Grinols, and John Mason were really very good models of how these issues should be approached. John Mason’s work is very good. From a different viewpoint I think it is a good idea to read _Centesimus Annus_ just to see how the task is done from within a different Christian tradition, very rigorously, carefully and thoughtfully. Unfortunately, there is a lot of junk out there. I’ve got quite a lot of books on my shelf that I wouldn’t recommend to anybody. I think the range of really good work is quite narrow. What I’m talking about here, incidentally, is rigorous intellectual work. I’m not talking about the next stage down which is where people are writing for non-professional audiences, where there’s quite a lot of good material.

_Are there important issues concerning the relation between Christianity and economics that we have not touched upon, and about which you would like to comment?_

I think there are two things. I get the impression, certainly in Britain, but also I think in the States, that the life-style issue has gone rather dead in evangelical circles. People don’t talk about life-style anymore. I’m no particular advocate of what Ron Sider recommended in his book but I think the issue he raises is a very important one—the life-style of individual Christians and the life-style of the church. I am concerned that the evangelical church in
...we should have more Christian economists coming to grips with policy issues and economic analysis from a Christian viewpoint at a professional level.

Britain looks as though it has the same materialistic goals as the rest of society. We are indistinguishable in the way we live our lives. I think Christian economists should live as Christian economists as well as speak as Christian economists.

The other area is that we should have more Christian economists coming to grips with policy issues and economic analysis from a Christian viewpoint at a professional level. I would love to see academic Christian economists devote maybe one third or one quarter of their effort very specifically in the area of Christian economics. There is an intellectual model that can be followed, but we need to develop it. The only way we can develop it is by getting more people in on the action, more people writing and comparing notes. If we can build an intellectual critical mass then the point will come when we can move outside Christian circles and address a wider public. At the moment I don’t see that happening. What is happening is that ‘Christian economics’ is either writing popular material or church reports, or writing by people who are outside mainstream economics. So one of the things which I am really concerned about in Britain is to encourage younger Christian academic economists to make this a part of their calling. Obviously they have got to do their academic economics as well, but perhaps once a year they could write a paper where they apply their Biblical faith, so we can begin to build an intellectual tradition. We need to do this but we are not doing it at the moment.

Are there ways that we could have more fruitful interaction between the US and the UK Christian economists. Would you welcome some US Christian economists at your meetings?

Yes indeed we would. A few years back John Mason came over, and he was very well received. There should be a sufficient critical mass to get good material written and good debates going. One suggestion put to me at the last ACE (UK) meeting was that we should have smaller gatherings of people who are actively thinking and writing, where there could be a more profound level of debate, more like a workshop. If we could get some American colleagues to come, that would be great. I would like to think that my intellectual ‘legacy’ might be in this area. I would love to know that Economics Today began a tradition of people writing biblically based critiques of economic analysis and policy issues, because there is a lot of work to be done.

One of the problems in the US is that we seem almost never to get beyond discussions of methods, the foundations of the Christian intellectual effort. Almost all of our conferences are dominated by that issue.

That’s not the case here. We don’t argue over method. Maybe people who have different views don’t turn up to our meetings.

Are most of your members evangelicals?

There is a predominance of evangelicals. We have a number of people who would not describe themselves as evangelicals but are comfortable with the general method. We have some Roman Catholics, but they have their own networks. They tend to remain on the edge and don’t get fully involved. There are one or two theologically liberal Christian economists in the UK who won’t have anything to do with us because they regard us as fundamentalists!