

While it is a bit repetitious and lacks integration throughout, *Economics and Ethics* is a substantive book which probes the ethical foundations upon which economic theory is constructed. Christian economists especially, being in relationship with God and recognizing His transcendent values, must stand up

against the decoupling of ethics from economics. The book is tough sledding. But if we are to fight the battle to reverse the "positive" tide, we must do so in the context of the scholarship to which the secular academic world relates. I highly recommend this book. ■

*Economics, Ethics and Religion:
Jewish, Christian and Muslim
Economic Thought*
Rodney Wilson

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Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1997.
ISBN: 0-8147-9313-4, \$45.

Most economists educated in North America are familiar with the distinction between positive and normative economics. I have heard some go so far as to say, "Economics is about the world as it is, not as it should be." If you are willing to question that sort of thinking, you may find this book interesting.

Rodney Wilson's book is a survey of literature on the integration of religious ethics, economic theory, and economic practice. Teachers will find it useful as a summation of the important writings, including most of the notable books, on integration. Not a work of original research, Wilson instead displays his knowledge of how economic thinking has been acted out in three major religious traditions.

Perhaps most interesting is his first chapter in which he discusses whether "there is a place for morality in economics" (p. 3). He answers affirmatively, drawing on a history of economists who have written on ethical concerns. Economics considers both ends and means, and is a way of "doing" ethics. Any simplistic notion of maximizing utility, where utility itself is collapsed into money income or profit, can be discarded as a caricature. Real people are some mixture of *homo economicus* and *homo religiosus*. Wilson shows that definitions of economics in the past, and in particular those found in the older political economy, were more clearly

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ethical in content than some current definitions found in Principles texts. Economics in practice has always been far more normative than many are willing to admit, and there is a growing literature in the field of ethics and economics.

Having made his point, Wilson then considers how three different monotheisms develop ethical thinking, and how that is integrated into the narrower field of economic thought. Jewish economic thinking is the oldest of the three, and draws from Old Testament law and the rabbinic interpretations of it over the centuries. Of course, as a survey the book can't act as a commentary on each topic—but the summary of differing approaches to prices is interesting as it includes attitudes and policies toward competition, monopoly, and whether money can serve as measure of value. Scholars of comparative systems will find the treatment of how secular influences have affected economic law and regulation in the secular state of Israel interesting, although probably too short for their needs. In fact, the same might be said about many of Wilson's topical discussions—they are fine as far as they go, but one wishes they were longer. Fortunately, the notes and bibliography will permit additional research.

Wilson then treats economics and Christianity by asking if "there is a distinctive Christian approach to economics?" (p. 68). Wilson holds an answer to his question and discusses how various Christians have gone about integration. Christianity draws from scripture, but there is little consensus on how to read and then interpret scripture. (This is true today, although the scholastic tradition was arguably more consistent.) Even among the traditions that take a high view of scripture there is little agreement on the relative importance of social versus personal justice or righteousness.

To further complicate things, there are two strands of writings. Though there are exceptions, economists generally emphasize scarcity, rationality, and how a market system creates opportunity and wealth. Theologians generally (again, there are

exceptions) emphasize (in)justice, greed, and how a market system worsens the human condition by sustaining inequality and environmental degradation. The two groups talk past each other more than with each other. Most of Wilson's sources were written during the Cold War, when far too much ink was spilled defending or attacking some version of state-sponsored socialism and planning. In that bi-polar world subtlety was lost. Probably all of us can recall a text that argued that, since state-communism is clearly atheistic (and therefore ungodly), the opposite, libertarian markets and low taxation, must be more to God's liking. I don't think Wilson appreciates how polemical some of that rhetoric was. In any case, it failed to significantly advance the project of integrating faith and economic thinking.

Wilson concludes the section by observing that "[t]he contributions of the trained economists who are committed Christians are in the end disappointing" (p. 113). He considers the work of Donald Hay (*Economics Today: A Christian Critique*, 1989) as the best, but concludes that it

"raises more questions than it provides answers" (p. 113-114). The work of Christian economists is disappointing because "there appears...to be a separation of realms, as there are many first-class economists who are also committed Christians, but they do not choose to make their Christian beliefs explicit in their economic writings, or indeed to question the positive assumptions on which much of modern economic analysis is based" (p. 114).

Wilson is probably correct in his description and in the thinking that lies behind the symptoms. By and large many Christian economists worship God on Sunday, and then do secular economics five days a week, and never the twain shall meet. Many see no conflict between secular economic dogma and any version of Christian revelation. However, he has neglected some interesting writings on the topic. In particular, Wilson mainly considers books and only a few articles. Some

significant omissions in literature include Tiemstra et al 1990, and their attempt to critique economic methodology. Recent writings in this *Bulletin* aren't in his bibliography. One hopes that ACE is more than just talking about the problem. (And plenty of non-ACE folks are thinking about these questions, too—see Beed and Beed 1996.) These omissions raise the question of whether it's as bad as Wilson says. My view of the Association is that we are addressing this matter, although we still have some distance to go. (Here's a plug for attending an ACE session where members discuss their struggles with integration and add to what appears in print.)

It is in the treatment of Islam that Wilson displays his own research on Islamic and Middle Eastern institutions and practice. As numerous as Muslims are on the world scene, the lack of understanding of Islamic analysis of economics in the West is sad. Anyone interested in a quick summary of the topic would do well to start here. Again, the bibliography allows further study of any topic.

Many Islamic writers have proposed some "distinctly Islamic economics" as an alternative to capitalism or socialism. In reality, however, the proposals are often defensive in tone and simplistic in nature, intended more to hold off outside influences in a society than to propose a well-considered basis for addressing the needs of a traditional society in meeting the material requirements of a growing population. Perhaps his intent is not to offend, and if so, Wilson's soft critique of Islamic economic thinking is understandable. He mentions some critics within the tradition, but he doesn't develop their ideas into a lengthier critique of this form of integration. While there is much that Christians should learn about how another tradition integrates faith and practice, much of the recent literature on Islamic economics is poorly argued and is more polemic than serious economics.

The concluding section is an excellent treatment of business ethics, and is itself worth the price of the book. Here the focus

is practical rather than theoretical, and covers such topics as ethical mutual funds, private and corporate values, and the links between values and actions. This section could stand alone, but if one is interested in building business practice on economic foundations, the relationship with the other chapters is clear. He writes mainly for the Western student, however, and has only a few words for the Islamic setting.

I would recommend Wilson's book to teachers of economics and of business ethics. It is a useful library addition, and portions could serve as readings in several courses in a college curriculum. Pastors would do well to read it in order to understand the sorts of questions that economists ask—especially if the pastor intends to preach on any aspect of economic policy or practice.

Wilson makes a good case that Christians integrating economics and theology haven't done a good job, and need to address others outside the profession and within the church. Whatever ACE's accomplishments, we have work ahead of us. North American Christianity is so fragmented that a consistent theological perspective is highly unlikely, even if economists can agree on a common methodology.

ENDNOTES

- Beed, Clive, and Cara Beed. "A Christian Perspective on Economics," *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 1996, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 91-112.
- Tiemstra, John P., W. Fred Graham, George N. Monsma, Jr., Carl J. Sinke, and Alan Storkey. *Reforming Economics: Calvinist Studies in Methods and Institutions*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990.
- Tiemstra, John P. "Christianity and Economics: A Review of the Recent Literature," *Christian Scholar's Review*, March 1993, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 227-247. ■

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