

Economics: A Student's Guide

Greg Forster. 2019. Wheaton, IL: Crossway. ISBN: 978-1-4335-3923-7. \$11.99 (paperback).

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As someone with a mild addiction to collecting books on religion and economics, there is a certain irony that one of the smallest books in my library is one of the best. John Mueller's book, *Redeeming Economics* (2010) comes in at 470 pages. Paul Oslington's *Oxford Handbook on Christianity and Economics* (2014) is 640 pages. Both books have proved their worth. However, for value per page, it is hard to beat Greg Forster's *Economics: A Student's Guide*, weighing in at 117 pages, and the subject of this review.

Forster's book is part of the series "Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition" edited by David S. Dockery. This series, covering disciplines from art to psychology and many in between, has much to commend it. *Economics: A Student's Guide* is a worthy addition. With only six chapters (and a helpful glossary and suggestions for further reading at the end), my review need not be long. I shall summarize each of the six chapters, describe what I think is a missing chapter, and close with an encomium.

Chapter 1, "The economy: How we steward the world together," is a concise introduction to the Christian concept of stewardship and an explanation of how being a steward is at the heart of economic endeavors. Readers will understand that how resources are allocated is a question of theology as well as a question of efficiency. While Forster's book is not a textbook, the first chapter makes clear that economic life involves specialization and exchange. One sentence from the book illustrates this: "We do not simply own and use property, but steward the world by the way we do so; we do not simply exchange with one another, but steward the world together through this process" (p. 11).

Chapter 2, "Justice and mercy: Key scriptural teachings for economic arrangements," is the chapter that tilts most heavily to the Christian side of the economics-Christianity nexus. These two terms – justice and mercy – do not make frequent appearances in most economic textbooks. Forster develops the concepts of justice and mercy from both Old Testament and New Testament references. I particularly liked the manner in which the author connects the writings of Dallas Willard and

Thomas Nelson to the themes of this chapter. Some readers might be surprised to learn that the Christian faith is so much more than worship, prayer, and Bible reading. Citing Willard, Forster writes: “. . . our daily work is a primary place where we pursue spiritual formation” (p. 49).

Chapter 3, “The ancient crisis: From natural to supernatural economics,” is, among other elements, a brief chronicle of how (and why) the world is transitioning from a “natural state” (or a “limited access order”) to an economy based on extensive specialization and trade across political boundaries. Forster explains how Christianity contributed to this transition from a top-down, tradition-based, largely agrarian economy to one in which individuals were no longer as bound by family or tribe to a particular form of labor or income level. He explains how the Christian faith fostered an economy in which “. . . people at the bottom did not exist to serve the people at the top. Everyone exists to glorify God and show holy love for God and neighbor, so in terms of economic work, everyone is supposed to be working to serve everyone else” (p. 61). I especially appreciated Forster explaining how the Bible’s accounts of Joseph, Moses, and Daniel “were breathtaking to their original audiences” (p. 57), because in a “limited access order,” nobody rose beyond their preordained rank.

Chapter 4, “The medieval crisis: From conventional to reforming economics,” is in part a history of economic thought, going back to the Scholastics: Christian scholars who first began to wrestle with questions of the economic order. Forster mentions that Adam Smith was a product of a system of thought – about trade and prices – that began in medieval times; Smith was, after all, a professor of moral philosophy. Aquinas initially takes center stage in this chapter, but Martin Luther and Niccolò Machiavelli enter as lead characters in closing the chapter, as “a new world emerges.”

Chapter 5, “The modern crisis: From static to dynamic economics,” is about the “new world.” How does Forster handle such a huge topic in a few pages? First of all, by description: he shows the astonishing trend in economic growth from the 1700s on (what used to be called a hockey stick graph, here has become like a boomerang). Forster then describes how a combination of technological change and economic growth has “undermined many oppressive and dysfunctional” economies but has also undermined “many good and fruitful” aspects of economic life (p. 86). In a few pages, Forster endeavors to explain how modern

economies have “increased opportunities for understanding and cooperation” but also “robbed cultural systems of meaning and purpose” (p. 87). In an attempt to be balanced, my own sense is that Forster errs in short-changing market allocation. It is not clear to me that “the open access order and its accompanying economic growth” are responsible for the “breakdown of the family, the church, and other key social institutions.” In many parts of the world, socialism and communism do not merit high grades and deserve critical acclaim for the flourishing of “the family, the church, and other key social institutions.”

Chapter 6, “Economic idols and economic wisdom: From ideological captivity to theological transformation,” is the shortest chapter in a short book. Here Forster cautions Christians against making an idol of the market system, a spiritual danger he brings against some libertarians and conservatives (whereas making an idol of government intervention is the spiritual danger of those on the “progressive/globalist left”). This taxonomy is not fully persuasive. One might instead argue that the idol of the libertarian is not the market system; market allocation is the means to the end of individual liberty (which might then become the idol). In like fashion, those on the progressive left may prefer central planning because they see themselves as the planners. For them, the idol may well be power and control over others. In fairness to Forster, he does recognize that central planning, even in its “softer and more immediately attractive forms,” can “still lead people away from dependence on God and into dependence on the state” (p. 105).

My only reservation about the book is that I had hoped for a chapter describing how economics is taught and applied today where there is no (explicit) connection to the Christian faith. Students being introduced to the intersection of Christianity and economics, and who also are brand new to the subject of economics, will not come away from the Forster book with an understanding of what mainstream economics is like *sans* any purported theological grounding. A chapter that describes the various fields in economics, and how economics is taught in most colleges and universities, would reduce the “surprise factor” some Christian students encounter when they take intermediate and advanced courses in the dismal science.

For whom would I recommend *Economics: A Student's Guide*?

I would recommend this book to anyone with even a casual interest in Christianity and economics. Because *Economics: A Student's Guide* is

so short and inexpensive, unless one has a very high opportunity cost of their time, the book is worth the candle even for those widely read in the field. In my case, I found a couple of footnote references that were new and provoked further reading (and additions to my library). If I were teaching introductory economics at a Christian college, I would have my students read this book at the start of the class. Even though I teach at a secular institution, I found some snippets that I intend to work into my lectures.

For those who recognize other scholars who have contributed to the intersection of Christianity and economics, the Dedication sheet of *Economics: A Student's Guide* provides a strong signal about the book's high quality. Forster dedicates his book to P.J. Hill, Victor Claar, and Brian Fikkert, all scholars who have done important work on the topic that *Economics: A Student's Guide* seeks to summarize. Indeed, the roster of those who endorse the book in some ways obviates the importance of a review. The Forster book also has endorsements from Steven McMullen, Tom Nelson, and Edd Noell. Encomia from these individuals only underscore the high praise I have for Forster's contribution to the literature on Christianity and economics.

References

- Mueller, J. D.** (2014). *Redeeming Economics: Rediscovering the Missing Element*. Intercollegiate Studies Institute.
- Oslington, P.** (Ed.). (2014). *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*. Oxford University Press. ■