Editor’s Introduction: What Difference Does Christianity Make?

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As I helped pull together the symposium for this issue, I was also working on my contribution to a book-length debate about redistribution and preparing for a symposium on government and the economy for the 2021 Allied Social Science Associations meetings. In each of these projects, I was struck by the wide disagreements that Christians have about the most basic questions of justice in economic life. These deep disagreements are, of course, heightened by a political polarization that has become more potent in recent years. And yet, despite wide polarization and disagreement, there appear to be some common themes that run through Christian writing about economics. This common ground is not large, but I believe that it does constitute an important set of guardrails against the worst excesses of ideology; or at least, that has been my operating assumption as a Christian scholar for some time.

What might that common ground be? One place to start looking might be the authoritative documents that make up Catholic social teaching or classics of protestant social thought. In my reading, I decided to reach back thirty years to the Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics, where more than 100 participants from around the world and across a wide disciplinary and ideological spectrum collaborated to craft a consensus statement. Faith & Economics published the declaration in the Spring of 1990, with commentary on the process and content appearing in that issue and the following Fall issue as well. The declaration details principles and recommendations around four major themes: (1) creation and stewardship, (2) work and leisure, (3) poverty and justice, and (4) freedom and government. While there is much in the statement that most would find helpful, reports on the statement indicate some disagreement and frustration, despite the strong rhetoric about consensus. In reading the statement today, I would argue that it stands up pretty well after thirty years. It has many rich insights that distill a lot of solid Christian theology. At other places, however, the

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statement exudes a kind of moderate “third-way” politics characteristic of the period that followed the end of the Cold War.

I do not mean to disparage the Oxford Declaration. I agree with just about everything on those pages, with a few quibbles here and there. It is important, however, not to equate a moderate position with a real consensus or common ground. There are too many specifics built into the Oxford Declaration for it to operate as a rallying document for those who otherwise disagree. If Christianity has anything authoritative to say about economics, it should be able to say something that will have all thoughtful, educated, and faithful Christians nodding in agreement. It should also be something that really matters. I think there is such a consensus, and I think it is an important starting point for conversion and learning. To illustrate, let me offer five propositions that I think warrant wide agreement among Christians, have a strong basis in Christian theology, and can be a foundation for moral standards:

1. Every person is made in the image of God, and thus has a basic dignity that should be respected.
2. Each person is entitled to the same consideration in the law.
3. We have an obligation to respond to poverty.
4. Property rights, wealth, and the non-human creation are subject to God’s ultimate ownership and purpose.
5. Church, family, work, and rest, all have a real value that goes beyond their strict economic function.

Upon reading these, you might be struck at what is not included. I include nothing specific about wealth creation, pollution, minimum wage laws, redistribution, regulation, or the electoral college. Those are important topics but they are areas of legitimate disagreement. Of course, if we agree that we have an obligation to respond to poverty, we are only agreeing on a kind of moral goal. We will disagree substantially about what that obligation requires of us, and what it implies for government action. Put this necessary vagueness aside for a moment, however, and consider the kind of positions that these statements rule out.

There are plenty of people who have, even in recent history, argued that we do not have obligations to the poor, or that such obligations extend only to those of our race, or those in our country. I do not think Christians can hold these kinds of positions, and I do not think I have heard any thoughtful Christians make such a case. The pages of Faith &
Economics over the years have been full of disagreement about how to address domestic and global poverty, but at the same time, the amount of attention we have paid to poverty outweighs almost any other economic question. I believe that focus stems from the fact that Christian economists really can rally around this kind of baseline moral principle.

Similarly, in a culture that glorifies, in turn, a slavish devotion to productive work and a hedonistic celebration of leisure, there are plenty of pitfalls awaiting Christians. The Biblical story clearly resists both of these mistakes, in part because they are two sides of the same mistaken materialism. We all might fall prey to these temptations, but, nevertheless, Christian economists have spoken with almost one voice against this materialistic impulse at the individual level and at the systemic level. We do not believe that either work or leisure trump the other purposes for a human life.

Resisting Ideological Polarization

I engage in this short thought exercise not merely to comment on the literature we are building in this journal, but also because we live in a dangerous moment. The kind of ideological polarization and distrust that we are experiencing in the United States and the United Kingdom in recent years has, in my view, begun to undermine our ability to speak truthfully with one another about politically contentious issues. Disagreement is too often taken to signal that those we disagree with have bought into a whole worldview that should not be tolerated. Two recent popular books have focused my thinking on this. Ezra Klein, a progressive journalist, co-founder of Vox and now at the New York Times, wrote Why We’re Polarized (2020), and David French, conservative journalist and lawyer, now at The Dispatch, wrote Divided We Fall: America’s Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation (2020). These books try to explain why our political divisions have become so heated. French notes the way our culture and geography have become polarized, making us more prone to extreme groupthink. Klein notes the way previously apolitical parts of our identity have become politicized, so that politics has become personal, and all politics has become identity politics.

Read these books for yourself to decide if you find their arguments persuasive. For my part, I am interested in pursuing two goals. First, the academy needs to be a place where we can hear out and consider the
most thoughtful versions of the big arguments of the day. Second, the Christian faith should help unify us, not further divide us. Unification requires certain virtues, including humility, honesty, and charity. It also requires that we build on some common ground. In practice, I think this common ground already exists, as I have noted here. At least among Christian economists, we should be able to see that we do have some common high-level agreements that are more fundamental than our divisive politics would otherwise suggest.

I also believe that Faith & Economics, the events organized by the Association of Christian Economists, and our podcast Faithful Economy, can be places where we practice these virtues. It is for this reason that I am honored to serve in this editorial role, even when it means reading, reviewing, and publishing arguments that I disagree with. I know this to be true for the other editors and leaders of ACE as well.

Adding Our Small Part to the Long Conversation

Over time, some of the best work in economics has been motivated by a desire to delve into questions of economic justice. The scholastics that made early advances in price theory wanted to contribute to an understanding of just prices and just wages. Early classical economists like Smith and Malthus were trying to understand some of the hardest moral quandaries that attended the early days of the industrial revolution. The same forces motivated some of the foundational works in Christian social thought, coming from Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox leaders. In our lifetimes, some of the biggest economic debates have also been profoundly ethical in nature. Arguments for market economies have always been both pragmatic (wealth creation) and moral (human freedom and creativity), as have arguments for greater state intervention. This issue of Faith & Economics should count as evidence that this big conversation about economic justice continues.

This issue starts with two research articles. The first one features our first article ever to delve deeply into a work of classic fiction. Anthony Waterman and Geoffrey Brennan show definitively that the economic themes in Robinson Crusoe are second to the often-neglected religious themes, and that the religious elements substantively recast the simple economic allegory that economists often see in the story. The second article, by Glenn Butner, dives into the doctrine of the Trinity,
particularly the connections to economic thinking. The doctrine of the Trinity has too often been used in highly suspect ways, both in theology and in economics, and Butner argues forcefully that neither of the two dominant approaches to thinking about the Trinity stands up to scrutiny.

A large part of this issue is devoted to a symposium that resulted from a collaboration between *Faith & Economics* and the American Enterprise Institute’s Initiative on Faith and Public Life. We issued a joint call for essays with the prompt: “In the contemporary United States, what would a truly humane economy look like?” We received a number of submissions, which were reviewed by our editorial team, and only some of which are published here. As a result of the collaboration with AEI, the collection looks a bit different from what we might normally see in an economics journal. This difference shows up in small ways (citation style) and also in the breadth of interdisciplinary thinking, and a provocative edge to a couple of the essays. I hope you will find the collection to be varied and thoughtful. I appreciate all of the good work that these Christian social scientists have brought, here, to this long conversation.

This issue also features a particularly rich set of reviews of important books. I recommend that our readers peruse these carefully. There is so much really good work happening in the economics profession right now, and I am proud to have thoughtful scholars bringing some of these texts to our attention.

References

