Economic and Environmental Religion: The Work of Robert H. Nelson

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Abstract: This article contextualizes and assesses Robert H. Nelson’s writing on economics and religion, following his sudden death at a conference in Finland in 2018. Despite his Scandinavian Lutheran background, he always operated as an outsider – never identifying with any religious institution. He viewed religion as expressing our ultimate concerns. This led him first to read economics as religion, and to a series of books and articles about this. He saw environmentalism as the major contemporary competitor to economics and he wrote another series of books and articles on the religious nature of environmentalism. In the process, Nelson asked important questions about the nature of religion, economics, and environmentalism. As a non-specialist in these fields, his command of the details was sometimes shaky, but he had an excellent sense of the big-picture relationships. His most significant contribution is perhaps his analysis of environmental religion and some of the policy publications arising from this. He was particularly proud of a book finished towards the end of his life on philosophical arguments for God.

Since Bob Nelson’s sudden death at a conference in Finland in 2018 aged 74 there have been short obituaries (such as Stroup, 2019) but we have not seen the contextualization and assessment that his work on economics and religion warrants. Before this unhappy event there was surprisingly little extended discussion of his work other than parts of Kate Blanchard’s Duke PhD thesis supervised by Craufurd Goodwin and Stanley Hauerwas (published in 2010), a symposium organised by Andrew Morriss at Case Western Reserve University (see Nelson, 2004a, along with the other articles in that issue of Case Western Reserve Law Review) and a retrospective mostly on his environmental work (Morriss, 2020).

I first met Bob at conference on Christianity and economics at Baylor University in 2002. Having won a travel grant to cover the airfare from Australia, and arriving after 30 hours and four planes at the Waco airport, the just closing tourist office was shocked that I had come
from Australia and added that they were all “trying to get out of this place” – not a great start. The same could be said of the taxi driver who took great pains to explain that the recent incident involving Branch Dravidians, security forces, and too many guns occurred “at least 10 miles from here.” The conference, however, turned out to be highly illuminating and an opportunity to meet many of the people whose work I had read over the last few years. Including Bob who perhaps unwisely confessed his atheism in a long autobiographical introduction to his keynote talk, “Theological Meaning of Economics” (published in the conference volume as Nelson, 2005) making him a prize target for all the budding evangelists in Waco, as we sat around tables washing down our salad with lashings of cordial. On the last day of the conference Bob had had enough of this and suggested we try and find a place nearby where we could wash down a steak with a glass or two of red wine.

After that meeting, Bob participated in sessions on economics and theology that I organized at the American Academy of Religion meetings in Washington 2006 on “The Promise and Pitfalls of Dialogue between Economists and Theologians” and in San Diego 2007 on “Theological Readings of Economics.” I also spent some time with Bob at conferences on economics and theology where we were both invited speakers in Rome 2014, St Petersburg 2014, Copenhagen 2017 and then Heidelberg 2018, just before he died. I got to know him best at the end of Larry Iannaccone’s 2011 ASREC conference in Washington DC when I (and my daughter Ruth who was travelling with me) were invited to stay with Bob and Jill at their country house for a few days. I didn’t brave the sauna, but we talked at length about shared questions that drove our work, about who was worth reading, and about economics and theology.

Much of Bob’s reading happened in the house, and he would emerge with an idea then run with it at the writing desk. He loved talking about ideas, and conversations with friends spread across several disciplines supplemented his wide reading. Drafts of writing projects also regularly appeared in friends’ email inboxes after conference discussions, with Bob always eager for comments. Herman E. Daly wrote in a foreword to one of Bob’s books: “His mind is like a huge sponge that absorbs everything, but what he wrings out of it on to the pages of his own writing is not simply what he absorbed, but rather a high-proof distillation that stimulates further thought and insight” (Nelson, 2015b, p. ix). This seems
to me to sum up perfectly Bob’s methods. Sadly, that house later burnt down, with most of Bob’s books.

How did Bob become interested in religion and economics? Though Bob himself had no particular religious convictions, he did have a Scandinavian Lutheran family background, and his great grandfather had been a Lutheran pastor. Bob’s education included an undergraduate degree from Brandeis in mathematics, and then a PhD in economics from Princeton in 1971, supervised by William Baumol. This meant he lacked formal training in history, philosophy, and theology, and everything he picked up about these subjects was through reading and discussion. During his time at Princeton, he was, I gather, an occasional visitor to the wonderful Princeton Theological Seminary library, and he talked about how Paul Tillich’s work (especially Tillich, 1967) made an impression on him. After graduating from Princeton, he was briefly an Assistant Professor of Economics at City University of New York, before joining the Office of Policy Analysis in the Department of the Interior where he worked from 1975 to 1993. From 1993 he was Professor of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. During that time there were periods visiting the University of Zimbabwe and the Collegium for Advanced Studies of the University of Helsinki, and time as a Fellow at the Independent Institute.

Bob’s interest in religion and economics emerged from his work in environmental policy, where he observed that the conflicts tended to be about values and seldom resolved through rational argument. It is remarkable how many of the themes of his review (Nelson, 1987) of the relationship between economists and government recur in his later work on religion: the persistence among economists of American progressive era assumptions about the policy process, the intractable nature of disagreements, the impossibility and undesirability of economists just sticking to their data and models, their role as advocates for efficiency, and so on. He once related that the suggestion of reframing his arguments about fundamental conflicts of values over environmental policy as religious conflicts, as he did in the book that became *Heaven on Earth*, came from the publisher, but Bob took up this idea enthusiastically. McCloskey’s (1983) arguments about the rhetorical nature of much economic writing also influenced Bob’s thinking about the economics profession.
If religion came to be the analytical category through which Bob explored value conflicts in economic and environmental policy over the next few decades how, then, did Bob understand religion? He took from Tillich a functional definition of religion where it was about ultimate concerns. From his economic background and the emerging discussions about the economics of religion (summarized by Iannaccone, 1998) came the idea of the religion of economic progress and environmental religion as competitors with traditional religions such as Christianity. From the literature on America as a religious project and John Courtney Murray’s observation about America being founded in natural law, Bob came to see economic progress as a new American religion. Later he picked up the idea of implicit religion (Bailey, 1998) and utilized it in his work on environmental religion.

How robust is Bob’s conception of religion? Running with Tillich’s functional definition of religion makes sense for Bob’s project, and he defended it vigorously at various conferences, but I do feel that his arguments would have benefited from acknowledgement of the diversity of understandings of religion (surveyed, for instance, by Jonathan Z. Smith 1998). His lack of formal training in religion and theology meant he missed Wilfred Cantwell-Smith’s (1980) argument that religion was a category invented to deal with the Western discovery of systems that looked a bit like Christianity, or of other arguments such as those of Peter Harrison (2006) and Brent Nongbri (2013) about the category of religion being a modern invention. Especially as Bob was arguing that economic progress and environmentalism were new invented religions.

Bob’s first book on the religious nature of economics (Nelson, 1991) sought to “set modern economic theology in the context of a much longer history of theology” (p. xx). Theology is defined along the lines of his functional definition of religion as a “system of thought that is a source of fundamental meaning and purpose” (p. xv).

The book turns on his decidedly odd division of economic theology into “Roman” and “Protestant” traditions. The Roman tradition sees the world as fundamentally ordered, values reason and has a “this-worldly, commonsensical, and pragmatic” approach to economics matters. It includes Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Keynes, Hayek, Ely, Veblen, Galbraith, Samuelson and Friedman. The Protestant tradition sees the world as fundamentally disordered, is sceptical of reason, and seeks revolutionary change. Proponents include
Plato, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Rousseau, Charles Darwin, Freud, Karl Marx and, above all, Frank Knight. No prizes for guessing which side Bob’s sympathies are with.

A good summary of the argument is the article Bob wrote for *Christian Century* (Nelson, 1993b), which I included in my *Economics as Religion* collection (Oslington, 2003). He begins with the observation that economics is not value-free and suggests it is in fact a theology:

Economists like to claim that their discipline is “value-free.” In this view, an economist is a technician, like a plumber or electrician. Hence religious values are no more a factor in preparing economic proposals than they are in repairing a furnace. In reality, however, many economists do adhere to a set of values – to what I call an “economic theology.” This secular faith shapes their way of thinking about, judging and building the world. (p. 777)

The next step is to add some content to economic theology:

Original sin, according to economic theology, is material privation, the condition in which most people have lived. If this diagnosis is correct, then the means of abolishing evil is clear: salvation lies in eliminating all shortages of goods and services. And the path of redemption can be found in the teachings of those who understand how to get rid of material scarcity: the new priesthood of economists. (p. 777)

He then recounts the history of economics as different ways of solving this problem (pp. 778–780). The final move is the suggestion that economics has displaced traditional Christian theologies and that this undermines the contemporary Christian church:

The problem for theology is that throughout the modern age the institutions of the market place have received their strongest support when they have been considered not merely a provider of the good life but the path to secular salvation. Millions of people in the modern age have found a moral basis for capitalism in the preaching that its economic workings will – in the long run at least – bring about heaven on earth. Economic theology has been not a complement to but – at least for many people – a substitute for a genuine theology. (p. 780)
One connection which does not seem to have been noted by any of the reviewers is with the Australian economist Barry Gordon’s (1989) reading of the history of theology as different solutions to the problem of scarcity, corresponding to Bob’s different economic solutions to the original sin of scarcity.

Reviewers such as Paul Heyne and Anthony Waterman liked his attempt to read the history of economics theologically but almost all were puzzled by the division between Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, and Bob’s allocation of various figures to the traditions. In correspondence, Bob emphasized to me that the distinction did not align with “Roman Catholic and institutional Protestant churches” but admitted “I may have been trying to be too clever and ended up simply being confusing.” Max Stackhouse was particularly enthusiastic about the way the book connected economics and theological ethics, writing that “this is the most profound book on the boundary of theology and economics in the past couple of decades.” John Dodge (1992) wrote in Faith & Economics that “This is the sort of thought-provoking book that every member of ACE should read” and that it provokes important questions for Christian economists such as “What is our theology? Is our theology consistent with our views on economics, and vice versa?”

His next book, Economics as Religion (2001), which extended the argument to contemporary economics, was similarly well-received, especially as he toned down the distinction between Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. The central claim was that economists “think of themselves as scientists, but as I will be arguing in this book, they are more like theologians” who “serve as the priesthood of a modern secular religion of economic progress that serves many of the same functions in contemporary society as early Christian and other religions did in their time.” (p. xv). He wrote that the book “offers a theological exegesis of the contents of modern economic thought, regarding the economic way of thinking as not only a source of technical understanding of economic events, but also for many ... a source of ultimate understanding of the world” (p. xxv). Unlike the previous book, where he had a lot of historical material on the theological background of early economists to work with, this book had to make the harder argument that there were implicit theologies in the work of Samuelson, Friedman and his Chicago colleagues, the new institutionalist economists, and others who did not have an obvious theological background. In this book the method is
borrowed from Tillich, correlating theological ideas with contemporary ideas. The shift from emphasizing the religious functions of economics in his earlier book to correlating ideas in this book is noticeable.

Eminent reviewers such as Mark Perlman, Ross Emmett, David Colander, Esther Mirjam-Sent, Robert Sirico, Jennifer Roback Morse, and Samuel Brittan welcomed the book, while criticizing details of the argument. Max Stackhouse wrote an effusive preface to the book, and while I was living next door to him on sabbatical in Princeton in 2006–2007 spoke often about the importance of Bob’s work on the religious nature of economics.

A feature of Bob’s work had been emphasizing the religious nature of the environmental movement, but his next book (Nelson, 2010b) developed that argument considerably and set up environmental religion and economic religion as competitors. It should be noted that Bob did not see the religious nature of economic progress or environmentalism as merely a way of dismissing them, but rather as a way of understanding them better and assisting their proponents and opponents in engaging in more fruitful discussions. Bob himself valued the environment greatly but was frustrated by most of the public discussion about protecting it, whether by environmentalists or economists or policy makers. The most novel aspect of the book was his description of the Calvinist tendencies of environmentalism or, as he put it, that environmentalism was Calvinism minus God. Another was his recognition of the importance of eschatology, even though I think he too readily assumes that belief in an afterlife undermines action in the world. The biblical apocalypses of Daniel and Revelation point to the eschaton but were written to motivate action in this world; for Daniel’s readers against Hellenistic rulers of second temple Israel, and for readers of the book of Revelation to resist the claims of the Roman Empire. Frank Knight has a prominent role in the book as a clear-eyed and sceptical observer of the debate. The final chapter sets out Bob’s own libertarian environmentalist position.

John Bergstrom’s (2011) review of the book in Faith & Economics suggested that “reading the book may help both economists and environmentalists (including and perhaps especially those of the Christian faith) to better understand each other and perhaps reach common ground and complementary solutions to our pressing economic and environmental problems.” If the book contributed to such better understanding, then it would have pleased Bob greatly, but I’m not sure that
many on either side of the debate saw beyond the characterization of the other side’s position as religious and therefore worthy of contempt. Like his other books, it was widely and mostly positively reviewed (including by Christian theologian Jordan Ballor and economist Ian Harper), and by this time Bob was in great demand as a conference speaker and popular writer on the religious nature of economics.

In his earlier work, Bob had dealt with religious and theological questions as an observer, but in his next book (Nelson, 2015b) he became a participant in the debate about God. He had been working on his God book for years and had discussed it at length with many friends. I remember Bob’s eagerness for comments on parts of the manuscript back in 2011 and his pride in his evolving arguments against the “new” atheists and for belief in God.

As a mark of how much Bob had picked up from his reading and conversation, consider what distinguished philosopher of religion Charles Taliaferro wrote in the *Independent Review* (2017): “Robert Nelson offers us a brilliant, refreshingly written, well-informed case for theism.” “It is elegantly written and refreshingly free of academic jargon.” Later he also referenced “Nelson’s style of blending philosophical arguments with observations about the cultural status of the questions he is addressing.” High praise, indeed, although Taliaferro added “there are occasions when I think Nelson goes a little further than his arguments permit.” This book, though very important to Bob, has attracted little attention from philosophers or the general public.

For a long-time atheist to write “I have now concluded that there is a strong (a very probable) case that a god – in the sense of some supernatural, superhuman power overseeing the world – does in fact exist” (Nelson, 2015b, p. xiv) is a testament to Bob’s curiosity and academic honesty. I was never clear what this conclusion meant, however, for Bob personally – and I think he would have been horrified at the thought of being in company with the budding Baylor evangelists.

His final book (Nelson, 2017) was a return to his family roots, exploring connections between the Nordic welfare state and Lutheran theology. He argued that “a Lutheran ethic provided a powerful normative foundation that underlay the political and economic rise of Nordic social democracy” (p. 23) and that the welfare state was a kind of secular Lutheranism. Always alert to a new spin on an old idea, and having written on Max Weber’s Protestant ethic, he saw this argument...
as following up the consequences of Lutheran theology in the way that Weber had followed up the consequences of Calvinist theology for the birth of capitalism.

What are we to make of Bob’s work as a whole? His books on the religious nature of economics and environmentalism sold well and were widely reviewed, and Bob had a much higher profile in the last twenty years of his life writing on these topics than he ever had in the twenty years in which he wrote on environmental policy. This is not to minimize the creativity or the influence of his work on environmental policy; it is partly that religion is a much sexier topic, especially in America. Perhaps there is an analogy with my Australian colleague, Roland Boer, whose separate work on Marxism and on biblical studies was decidedly unfashionable in the 1990s but, putting them together, led to a series of Australian Research Council research grants and minor superstar status in the 2000s.

Bob cared a great deal about what others thought of his work, and one enduring memory I have is of him at conferences armed with photocopies of the latest reviews of his work to distribute to friends, and emailing collations of reviews.

Despite the many admirers of his work I always had the sense that Bob was an outsider. Even that he quite enjoyed sitting outside the academic mainstream. Bob liked to provoke in conference and seminar discussions, and would defend his position beyond where most others would give in to the weight of numbers or authorities opposing him. I remember him at a conference on economics and theology at Heidelberg not long before he died, where his eminent German academic discussants had no idea what to make of someone who did not play by the rules of deferring to his betters and politely conceding points made by his discussants. In conference settings he could be overly repetitive, and when challenged assert things again more loudly rather than offering supportive evidence and arguments.

Bob prided himself on his keen sense of what the important questions were, and his sense of the general drift of the right answers, more than having all the details in order. Details were for the specialists to work out in the many fields his work touched. My own view is that Bob’s major contribution was to see the important questions and stimulate new conversations. A great example from his shorter writings is the survey (Nelson, 2009) where he hits one after another of the deepest questions in the dialogue between economists and scholars of religion.
In terms of substantive contributions, I think his work on the religious nature of environmentalism could be his most lasting contribution, which makes sense because this was what originally motivated his foray into religion. As well as documenting correlations between environmentalism and traditional religious movements (most fully in Nelson, 2010b) he explored the policy significance of the correlation. For instance, his wonderfully provocative essay on how the teaching of environmentalism violates the American separation of church and state (Nelson, 2011) and his little read but brilliant essay on how seeing economics as theology can improve policy debates, with several case studies (Nelson, 2014a).

Bob was not, of course, the first to write on the religious nature of markets and economics, and I would now like to briefly situate his work in relation to others who have written on the topic. Arguments about the religious nature of capitalism go back to Marx and Weber. Marx emphasized economic forces rather than cultural or religious forces in his account of the development of capitalism, although he did controversially note the special affinity the Jews seemed to have for capitalism (Marx, 1844), and commented on the ideological support that religion offered to capitalism (for instance, his comment that religion is the opium of the people, in the introduction to Marx, 1843), and the religious ideological nature of the emerging discipline of political economy (Marx, 1859). Religion famously took centre stage in Weber’s (1905) argument that uncertainty over election to salvation and the worldly asceticism of certain Calvinist sects were crucial to the birth of capitalism. Contemporary sociologists (such as Smelser, 1995) have carried on this discussion of the religious elements of economics, considering religion either substantively (e.g. reference to the supernatural), psychologically (e.g. special mental or emotional states), or functionally (what religion does for individuals or society, such as creating identity, meaning, etc).

Suggesting that economics is in some sense religious has been a favourite ploy of economists outside the mainstream, especially since economists began defending the discipline as a science. Examples are Cliffe Leslie’s (1870) exploration of Adam Smith’s legacy, Thorsten Veblen’s (1899–1900) articles on preconceptions of economic science, and Joan Robinson’s (1962) discussion of the religious overtones of economic philosophy and her observation that mainstream economists are
a priesthood. This way of reading economic texts religiously has to be distinguished from historical work on the influence of Christian theology on the development of economic thought or economics as a discipline, conducted by scholars such as Jacob Viner, Anthony Waterman and Benjamin Friedman. As the historian of economics, Esther-Miriam Sent, complained in her (2003) review of *Economics as Religion*, "the book appears largely disconnected from the historical context as well as the historical literature"; but Bob’s project was reading economics religiously not offering a history of economics.

In more recent times philosophers and theologians have joined economists in the business of reading economics theologically. John Milbank (1990) famously read economics as a heretical theodicy, as part of his larger argument that the modern social sciences are deformed and heretical alternatives to orthodox Christianity. Others associated with him, such as Graham Ward (2003) and Philip Goodchild (2002), have explored similar themes. Even Roman pontiffs are now in the business of reading economics theologically. Pope Francis I’s 2015 Encyclical *Laudato Si* (especially Chapter 5, paras 189–221) suggests that economics has usurped its proper role and offers a theological critique of what he understands to be certain doctrines of contemporary economics.

There has been a rush of recent work inspired by Michel Foucault (1991) and Giorgio Agamben (2011) on the religious nature of contemporary capitalism – usually termed neo-liberalism. This includes books by Dotan Leshem (2016), Devin Singh (2018), Katherine Tanner (2018), and several books I am aware of that are in progress. All comment negatively on economic theory and the economics profession, and discuss the religious nature of economics, although their primary focus is the economic system. The Marxist account of economics as part of the ideological superstructure is alive in the work of Roland Boer (see Boer and Petterson, 2014, and his earlier five volumes on Marxism and theology, 2005–2014).

Bob’s account has none of the historical documentation and theoretical sophistication of these writers but what distinguishes his work is that the religious nature of economics is an invitation to discussion rather than a label which ends discussion. And in my view, he gets much more right than he does wrong – in contrast to some of the elaborately documented specialist works that nevertheless seem to get almost everything
wrong about economics. It is notable that little of this recent work by historians, philosophers, and theologians engages deeply with Bob’s work, although economists such as Anthony Waterman, Ross Emmett, and Deirdre McCloskey continue to cite his work. Scholars across several disciplines could do worse than pursue the questions that Bob raised about the implicit religious and theological nature of economics, and follow up some of the suggestions that he made.

References and Bibliography of Nelson’s Work


