Editor’s Introduction:  
Participating in a Long Tradition 

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This issue of the journal is a good reminder that we are all participants in the long Christian intellectual tradition as much as we are also participants in the intellectual tradition of economics. We don’t always think about our work that way, but this can be a healthy way to think about our academic vocation, for economists in particular. Participants in a tradition must do two things. First, we must work to preserve the best work of those who have come before, and to communicate it in a fresh way to future thinkers. Second, we must also push our intellectual traditions forward by applying key lessons to new problems. In this process we innovate and add to the body of knowledge available to our community. We are prone to making intellectual errors when we ignore either of these goals. As such, before highlighting the good work we have in this issue, I want to spend a little bit of space reflecting upon these two traditions that the Association of Christian Economists, and Faith & Economics, hope to participate in: the intellectual tradition of Christianity and that of economics.

First is the goal of learning from those who have come before us. This includes Christians who have thought deeply about our relationship with the world and the way we are called to live. But it also includes all economists who have sought to understand human behavior and economic institutions. Scholars are called to dwell deeply in these traditions and offer charitable attention to those who have come before. When we properly attend to thinkers of the past, we inevitably find rich insights. For example, Christians who were writing about economics in the Middle Ages may have had simplistic ideas about how markets function but they were often asking very deep questions about our moral obligations to our trading partners and neighbors. By paying attention to medieval Christians, then, we can probably learn a lot about how to think about moral obligations in economic life.

There are two ways in which we have too often failed to embody this first goal and have failed to learn carefully from the past. First, too many economists have a tendency to ignore history. The history of
4 FAITH & ECONOMICS

economic thought is no longer a standard course in graduate study, and so we are now in the odd situation where most new economists might not know much of anything about the early developments of our field. The working assumption seems to be that any great ideas from the past, if they are useful, will have been incorporated into contemporary work. Sadly, I don’t think this assumption is a good one, and it too often encourages economists to ignore some the big questions facing the discipline, focusing instead on methodology. Second, among Christian scholars I see this kind of hubris take a different form. Many scholars study their own discipline deeply, and then turn to write something about Christianity and economics (or Christianity and business, psychology, or some other field) but they fail to study what the best Christian scholars have written on the topic. The result tends to be very rich in economic thinking (or business, psychology, etc.) but not very sophisticated theology. Having made this mistake myself, I have come to call this the “reinventing the wheel problem.” Every academic who ignores the best work of the past will be doomed to start with the most foundational ideas, and will never be able to make real progress for their discipline. It is admittedly difficult to really learn the history of Christian thought or economic thought, and that is the one of the big challenges of working in two traditions.

The second goal to have in mind when working within a tradition is to always be open to new ways of thinking about and revising how we do our work. If the job of an academic was only to learn from the past, then we would only be archivists or inflexible partisans, always reiterating the old texts and lessons. This is not enough: we must also build the tradition by adding to what we know, improving how we think, and changing how we live. For a Christian scholar who wants to be innovative while staying faithful to a longer tradition, this goal is always tempered. Our drive to innovate is disciplined by the best principles of our tradition. In some ways, the academy is well positioned to push people toward both goals: great scholarly writing must always demonstrate a mastery of the material and also offer something worthwhile and new.

Sometimes the best way to make this progress is to look for connections and challenges that come from outsiders to the tradition. In the Reformed tradition, we remind ourselves that sin has corrupted all our best efforts, and so we must always be open to correction and revision. We can model this to our students and colleagues by exploring all kinds of diverse ideas and perspectives, and we can explore them charitably and
without suspicion, because even those ideas that are ultimately unhelpful might contain a perspective that corrects one of our own errors.

The 80th Issue of Faith & Economics

The Christian intellectual tradition and the tradition of modern economic thinking have become quite siloed, particularly in the last century, but this was not always the case. The main feature of this issue is a symposium organized around Benjamin Friedman’s excellent book, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (2021). The symposium includes a variety of scholars well versed in this historical period and the development of economics. The conversation reveals that a nuanced understanding of Christian theology is really important for understanding the birth of modern economics.

This issue also features two essays that are both somewhat retrospective. First, Ken Elzinga looks back at the two most popular books written by American Evangelicals about Christianity and economics: Ron Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (1997) and Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert’s *When Helping Hurts* (2014), first published in 1977 and 2009 respectively. This essay is particularly timely given Sider’s death this past year. While Sider was a theologian, his work engaged economic ideas and economic thinking throughout his career, and there are few theologians who have had as big an influence on the evangelical left in the United States. This essay is followed by Anthony Waterman’s essay remembering Geoffrey Brennan, who also died a few months ago. Brennan was a wide-ranging and productive scholar, active in philosophy, politics, and public choice theory. He published a couple of articles in Faith & Economics, the most recent being an essay with Waterman on *Robinson Crusoe*, which appeared in our Fall 2020 issue.

The current issue also features six excellent book reviews. We generally give room for more extensive reviews than many other journals, and the result is that our reviewers have the time to offer some real interaction with the books they read. This is certainly true for this issue of the journal, which includes books on economic methodology, trust, profit maximization, immigration, labor issues, and historic European poor relief.

Organizing this material is a great joy for the editors of the journal, and we hope it is edifying and stimulating. As a final thought, remember that we have an upcoming ACE conference at Hope College in July
6 FAITH & ECONOMICS

2023. We would love to see all our readers there. Details about the conference are available online.

References

