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## PIETY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

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### INTRODUCTION

At the end of C.S. Lewis' Oxford and Cambridge career, those clearing his office asked Lewis what to do with his philology writings and other professional papers. Lewis's instructions were that they could go into the WPB, what today we would term the "circular file," or trash can. Thankfully, his papers were not discarded, but the incident raises questions about the relationship between one's temporal professional activities and one's eternally significant activities. Do they overlap or are they different? More precisely, How does our profession of piety impinge on our practice of profession?

#### *The Bicycle Question*

This past summer at a western Illinois campsite, my wife and I encountered a young couple in their early 30s on an around-the-world bicycle trip. Beginning in California, they cycled north to Alaska, took a plane to Siberia and then cycled west through the Siberian winter (the only cyclists ever to do this, they informed us) to Lake Baikal, then west to Europe, then by plane from France to the U.S. east coast, and then cycled west again. In our discussion with them I learned that their first major event after marriage had been a similarly long bicycle ride to Tierra del Fuego at the tip of South America. They had followed this trip by work at various jobs until they could manage their present bicycle excursion. Their conversation was salted with many references to the "lifestyle" that they

were engaged in. They were not, they made clear, just taking a trip or on an "event." When I asked them what they did, meaning what did they do for their "day jobs," they pleasantly but emphatically responded that cycling was what they did.

This couple was evidently not Christian, but the encounter prompted a deep question in me: Is it compatible with a Christian lifestyle for an individual, or a couple in this case, to live in a manner that is respectful, not a burden to anyone or harmful to anyone, but nevertheless self-indulgent or at least totally self-absorbed? If not, what is it that distinguishes a Christian-compatible life or career from a non-Christian one? The same question applies to those of us who practice economics: Is it possible for an economist to perform his duties in isolation from his Christianity, perhaps in a self-focussed or self-absorbed way that is non-harmful to others, doing competent or excellent work, but work nevertheless that is totally self-directed, while living the "Christian" part of his life in a different arena? Could such a professional style conceivably be compatible with Christianity?

These questions took a number of days to work through. During this time I discussed the issue with people I respect in other professions before reaching a conclusion. Barring a special calling from God to live a bicyclist's life, say, to act as some sort of spectacle that God uses to attract attention for his purposes (evangelism?), I concluded along with my discussants that a benign, but self-absorbed lifestyle is incompatible with Christianity. Therefore, there must be something that distinguishes one's lifestyle from that of the non-Christian. That difference must also distinguish one's professional life from that of the non-Christian. God did not call us to live pleasant self-absorbed lives doing what we choose, as long as we mind our business, pay our taxes, and pull our own weight. As Jesus might have said, even the heathen do that. How then, do we work out our Christian mandates as economists?

## THE ECONOMIST'S ADVANTAGE

I think that economists as a group are more fortunate than many because we work in a field where our Christianity frequently can express itself in ways that are directly beneficial to our fellow man. By this I mean that what we do as economists (not as teachers or mentors or some other function we perform—though those also show Christian content) can directly improve the lives of others, and, if we exercise the opportunity, improve our own character and spiritual condition. To varying degrees this is true for selected professions. For other professions, however, the professional work is far removed from activities that are directly tied to helping people, and for some professions it is nearly totally removed. As Christian economists we can be grateful for the nature of our work.

In this paper I wish to explore the motivation, attitude, and directions that underpin being a Christian economist and how this translates into professional activity. I will try to make my approach personal by supporting conclusions with my experiences as a Christian economist in the last quarter of the 20th century. The Bible teaches through personal histories coupled with commentary subject to leadings by the Holy Spirit. Hopefully my experience coupled with that of others will offer sufficient grist for discussion. I will also list some pitfalls that I believe can be avoided. I will do my best to let my input be led by the Holy Spirit.

## CAVEATES AND CALLINGS

Any late 20<sup>th</sup>-century discussion of the experience of being a Christian economist should be prefaced with a few disclaimers. Naturally we recognize that people are inherently different. It would be presumptuous to believe that because God led one person in a particular way, He must lead another in nearly the same way, even if the two are economists. Every individual is endowed with distinct roles or missions. I now believe that what one loves to do--that thing which seems most to put a song into one's heart to perform--within the context of Christian conduct, of course, is a good indicator of the specific role that God has intended for that individual. There are patterns relating to putting one's calling into practice and attitudes of mind that should apply generally, however. My suspicion is that these regularities can be distinguished sufficiently with respect to being a Christian economist

compared to being a Christian something-else to make the search worthwhile. Two examples may help.

The story of Daniel in the Old Testament has always had special attraction for me. Like Joseph, Daniel was one of the earliest economists. Highly educated, knowledgeable in commerce, trained in the professions of his day, administrator, advisor to government, scholar, believer, he worked in a secular world and integrated it with the spiritual. Though his calling sometimes led him to prominence, he did not seek prominence for its own sake, nor did he consider it his mission. Often he helped by merely giving advice, stating the truth uncompromisingly, or having the ear of the right official. I suspect that Daniel enjoyed doing the tasks he did, and that his spiritual calling coincided well with his professional and personal life. Daniel's career could certainly be distinguished from that of a comparable secular individual.

The patriarch Joseph is another case in point. Joseph teaches us that it is right for a man to be consciously aware of the way in which God uses him. From Joseph's own lips we learn that he rose to power for a particular purpose, to save a nation through economic sagacity concerning an upcoming famine. Speaking to his brothers and the members of his father's house Joseph explains, "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Gen. 45: 6-7a).

Few of us would expect to be used as Daniel and Joseph were. Indeed, the route they followed to their positions were incapable of being engineered by themselves—only God could have arranged the paths they took. But from Daniel and Joseph we learn something of their attitude toward God and their attitude toward their professions as it related to their faith. Daniel and Joseph were willing to be used in whatever way their training and circumstances allowed. They maintained their right-standing before God, executed their professional duties with high talent and dedication, served when God provided the opportunities, and monitored themselves relative to what God was doing through them. This, I posit, is the difference between the Christian economist and the non-Christian economist. However we may be used by God, I believe that our first duty is to discipline ourselves to move and excel where we are placed, while making ready to act if God opens opportunities. I am further convinced that a right attitude will lead eventually to opportunity. Opportunity, when it comes, may be for a short time only, as in the story of Esther—she came to just the right position "for such a time as this"—or it may be for extended service. Whether our Christian service as economists is public or private, visible or invisible, extended or short, our objective is that it not be self-directed but God-directed. We must remind ourselves that we are not called to be famous, or rich, or powerful. We are called to be available and to be ready.

Granting that one should be willing, it is still quite another thing to know what to do once one is available. How did Daniel and Joseph know what they should be doing for their God? As I introspect from my limited experience, I find several indicators. One is interest. Another is opportunity. In my case I tend to take pleasure in organizations, economies, households, or whatever, that run well. If they are not functioning as they should, I like to see them "fixed." In other words, I have a drive to see things "on track." Because I feel comfortable giving advice to the organizational authority, without the compensatory need to place myself in the spotlight, I suspect that one of my callings is as an adviser. That calling exhibits itself infrequently as opportunity arises. Daniel and Joseph were advisers as well as economists, which partly explains my special interest in their experiences. I suspect that each greatly enjoyed his work, and when he was being used, felt comfortable in the role. In my case, my recent work on the economics of gambling has placed me in an advisory role with respect to national and local legislators, and to many representatives of the media who have heard me publicly speak or with whom I have conferred privately. My tenure in Washington, D.C. with the Council of Economic Advisers under President Reagan also put me in an advising role for a short time. More recently, I have served on the board of a private Christian school where I found my main contribution that of advising and "setting straight" planning functions that had gone off track. In each of these cases, opportunity sought me rather than the reverse. I believe these activities to be examples of a spiritual calling. Prayer went into each, and I tried to set my conduct by principles of

Christian integrity.

So, to summarize: Each Christian economist will be used differently and each is likely to have a particular role that (a) they like to do, (b) they have the abilities and training for, and that (c) God ultimately places them in if they are open to it.

A second caveat is appropriate. In addition to recognizing different callings, the limits of professional callings should be noted. Saint Paul used his profession, tentmaking, as a way to pay the bills while he pursued his missionary calling. This is one extreme. It is significant that Paul's great academic training was not wasted, however, and that he authored much of the New Testament canon. With respect to tentmaking, of course, we must allow for the possibility that for some Christian economists, practicing economics, whether as an employee, a consultant, a teacher, or a government official, may be tentmaking. I have served on the finance committees of several organizations including the private school mentioned above. Though accounting, finance, and administration are not my training, I was tapped to be treasurer. When I arrived on the board the school was in deficit, had low enrollment, and was in great financial difficulties. When I left three years later it was in surplus and looking forward to expansion. I can take little personal credit for this other than to note that through careful counsel the school was put in a position to receive God's blessings when He chose to bestow them. In our case, by "cleaning up" the budget and putting into operation sound planning principles, we were able to take advantage of (and perhaps opened the door for God to act through this medium) the large increase in enrollment that came at the end of my time on the board. Were I to have lamented that I saw no connection between my professional work and my calling for that period of time, I would have missed the point. During that period, my professional job as an economist at the university merely paid my grocery bills while I performed the role of adviser to "fix" the operation of a Christian organization where God intended to move.

At the other pole from the tentmaking model are those Christian economists whose calling is their professional job almost entirely. I can speak only for those of us who fall somewhere in the middle. We are sometimes expressly used for selected things in our role as Christian economists and at other times, probably more of the time, our profession is tentmaking.

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHRISTIAN AND NON-CHRISTIAN ECONOMISTS**

I remember a particular conversation in graduate school with another student. As we talked about our hopes and plans, this individual revealed that his goal was to be a "great" economist. I have had to consider what he meant by that. By "great" one could mean well-known or famous in man's eyes, or one could mean noble or worthwhile in God's eyes. The difference, I think, is the first point at which the Christian economist parts company from the non-Christian economist. Christian economists should differ from non-Christian economists in why they do what they do, what they do, and in how they do it.

### *Why We Do What We Do*

*Wait until the Lord comes who will ... disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. (1 Corinthians 4: 5)*

The Bible makes clear that motives matter greatly. My original reason for becoming an economist was the realization that by giving the right advice at the right time an economist might avert one recession, thereby saving billions of dollars in lost output, thus paying for and justifying his career many times over. Albert Einstein said that he had only one idea in his career—challenging an assumption about the constancy of the speed of light. The book of Esther is devoted to a single episode in the court history of the Persian Empire. Perhaps one idea or action in a lifetime is service

enough. The point is that we work to serve.

As an undergraduate, I was honored to have worked with Dr. Walter Heller as he planned the American Economic Association meetings for that year as association president. Immensely famous, he had had his picture on several *Time* magazine covers, was the single most important economic adviser to two presidents, and was a household word among economists and economics students. My economic students today have never heard of him.

Moses was trained in the best that the Egyptian court and academies could offer. He was raised as a patrician, but God had him spend 40 years in obscurity to learn that making himself great was not part of God's call. Instead, God made him great in the eyes of Pharaoh and Pharaoh's court for the purposes of God.

I conclude that great fame does not last, and that it is not asked of us. Thus, the reason a Christian economist serves is not to achieve fame or acclaim but to give back to his God as he is asked. Service means going the extra mile, and attempting to remain an instrument. In my case I have found that whenever it seems most inconvenient—just as my family is about to begin its summer vacation, for example, or when I am in the midst of a difficult or time-consuming project—is the time that I am asked to fly to some distant location or need to prepare for meeting with some official. In such times I remind myself that I am not working for myself, but for the Lord. When He brings the opportunities, I try to be available. We do not look for our rewards here; we want our rewards to be elsewhere.

### *What We Do*

*Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:15-16)*

It is axiomatic that, as a group, Christian economists should be different in what they do. That is, the choice of topics and the professional endeavors to which they devote themselves should look different in some way than for non-Christians. I say "as a group" because I recognize that there are parts of economics—statistics or econometrics might be examples—where religious belief plays little role in the choice of topic or in the methodology of the subject. Even in such cases, however, the Christian can measure the worth of the time devoted to the subject by the standard of eternal worth. If I perform secular chores because I know they prepare a foundation for a building that will be used to teach the Word or feed the poor, it ennobles my work.

Professional economists who are also academicians recognize that their main service may sometimes consist of mentoring or tutoring. I have noticed among my Ph.D. students a disproportionate number who turn out to be Christians. At least that is the way it appears to me. We all know stories of people whose main role in life was to mentor a single individual who later became greatly used by God, though their own life is barely known apart from the instruction or example they gave to another. When a Billy Graham's or a John Wesley's or an Elisha's main inspiration derives from the crucial work of particular individual, we may safely assume that God used that mentor or individual in that role.

We may also find usefulness for what we do in other ways. An opportunity inside the university came to me unbidden in 1989 when a representative of Christian Leadership Ministries approached me. He was looking for someone to establish a Christian faculty organization on campus. This required a major time commitment to arrange for meeting times and places, to construct and carry out a campus-wide Christian speaker series, to design and run various Christian ads in the campus newspaper, and generally to act as the point man when needed. Ultimately, I decided that it was my

duty to serve and so became a founding member and the first president of what is today the Illini Christian Faculty and Staff, a registered organization of the University of Illinois. Our purpose was to act as mutual encouragement to Christian faculty and staff, to be visible on campus so that students would know that a Christian group of faculty existed, and from time to time to provide faculty support to various outreaches. At a time when we were facing opposition from the University administration over whether faculty should place phone numbers in campus ads where we offered to talk with students about Jesus and God the Father, the Lord brought a student to my office. She said she was not sure why she had come to my office, but she talked about Christianity and how much she appreciated knowing that a Christian faculty group existed. I relayed what she said to the others, some of whom had similar stories. I now believe that she came at the Holy Spirit's urging to encourage the organization.

The above examples do not exhaust the internal ways that a Christian economist will act differently than his colleagues. The Christian economist, for example, will seek to see fair, open, and just procedures followed in his department. None of us who have spent any length of time in any departmental group will underestimate the importance of this.

Finally, even when we act outside the university, our interest in policy, theory, and welfare come from a different perspective than the non-Christian. Our view of man, his individual worth, his responsibility and accountability for his actions, his stewardship obligations, and his sinful nature all inform and educate our approach. In the same way that the U.S. Constitution was created with checks and balances because our (founders were Christians) and knew of man's nature, so the economist works to use his knowledge to enlighten and improve the public debate.

*How We Do It*

*Some*

*What does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God. Micah 6:8*

A close friend of mine is a psychologist who is often called upon to testify in the courtroom. On one occasion he was seen by the opposing lawyer praying with his client outside the courtroom before the court resumed its session. Thinking that she might gain an advantage, the opposing lawyer questioned my friend on the stand about his praying. Was he, in fact, praying, and what had he been praying? My friend appealed to the judge as to whether this line of questioning was proper, infringing as it did on personal liberty, but the judge declined to stop the inquiry. Under oath my friend testified that he and his client had been praying that justice would be done, that the facts of the case would become known, that the judge and jury would have wisdom. Needless to say, further inquiry was dropped.

The courtroom scene represents to me a picture of how the Christian should distinguish himself from the non-Christian economist in the way he conducts his work. Should not the Christian economist have greater regard for truth, integrity, and honesty, for example? Should he not pray when it is appropriate?

During my service with the Council of Economic Advisers, I remember being present at a meeting when a trade dispute with Japan over that government's use of domestic contractors in a major airport project was being discussed. The direction of the talk appeared to me to be clearly leading to a decision for a major confrontation that would have involved one of the largest amounts of trade to that date. The confrontation would have been damaging and costly. Cooler heads, I felt could find better ways to deal with the issue. I began to pray silently that the group would be led to the right decision, that a choice would be made in the best interests of the United States as well as Japan, that the Holy Spirit would intervene, etc. I had little hope of success, however, because the process

seemed to have gone beyond the point of recall. To my astonishment, one of the participants began to speak and as he spoke he changed the tone of the discussion. The entire atmosphere of the room changed and a different course of action was taken. I cannot know for certain, but I believe that the different outcome was the result of prayer.

When the United States negotiated the US-Canada Free Trade Agreement in 1988 the two countries were going against the history of numerous failed attempts in the past and pressures from both sides that seemed destined to doom the agreement yet again. As one of the many players involved in the background, I felt it was my duty to pray regularly for the success of the negotiations. I certainly hoped that other Christian economists and those more ranking in the process were praying as well. As we know, the negotiations were successfully completed, and the agreement went on to become the basis for the expanded North American Free Trade Area.

Prayer is a private, less visible matter, but Christian economists should also differ in ways that are visible. It has been my experience that public policy advocates frequently engage in what I call "elastic numbers" when they seek to persuade. If the cost-benefit numbers do not convince, then in the next iteration they will be adjusted. The original estimate of the number of jobs that would be created by the proposed \$2 billion casino complex in Chicago in 1992 was 12,000. By the time it was decided not to proceed with the project, the estimate being reported by supporters was 100,000 jobs!

Noting the principle that anything not avowedly attempting to act righteously will drift to unrighteousness, Christian economists, especially those in public policy, should determine early on that they will adhere to the principle that the truth, unembellished and fully expostulated, is sufficient. Otherwise they may find themselves bending under the pressure of circumstances and from the example and urgings of others who rationalize or ignore a "slight" bending of the truth for a good cause.

### **PITFALLS**

There are many pitfalls for the Christian economist; I would like to mention just three. The first is accepting the world's view of importance. It is fair to say that the Bible pictures an individual life as containing secret history transacted between the Christian and God. One works as unto the Lord and one looks to heaven for his reward. Man's underlying motivations, however they may appear on the surface, frequently derive from the wrong things, sometimes summarized as "gold, glory, and girls." To this we might add "government" (power). Clearly, neither love of money, nor love of fame, nor love of immoral sexual gratification, or love of power accomplish the work of the Holy Spirit. The Christian economist must take care to know from where his basic motivations come. I can think of little greater waste than selfishly spending one's careers working on problems solely because they are tools to self-enhancement.

Beyond accepting the world's view of importance—spending one's time in works of commission that are neutral toward or even oppose God—one can fail to act for what is right. Rationalizing inaction and failing to speak out on a controversial issue may seem politically astute or socially clever; in reality the failure to act represents a form of cowardice or selfishness. It is an easy trap to fall into.

Today, the *economics* of sensitive issues are often the most listened to aspect in our modern culture. Moral arguments frequently carry *negative* weight as persuasive tools. Those who speak out on the economics of an issue, therefore, whether it be the economics of abortion or infanticide, the economics of the welfare state, or the economics of casino gambling, are doing good to their fellow man by providing needed facts and perspectives, to which others will listen. This is true even if those speaking out sometimes face castigation because they diverge from prevailing societal views.

It is easier to follow the crowd in silence, but that does not make it right. The Bible is clear, if we were of the world, the world would love its own. Because we are not of the world, we cannot expect

always to have its acclaim.

The last threat is the tendency to compartmentalize. Compartmentalizing one's faith has the potential to lead one to accept the world's view of importance and to fail to actively stand for what is right. When our Christianity is in one box and our profession is in another, moral laxness, dishonesties of various types, weakness in taking action for what is right, and compromise of integrity result. Perhaps the greatest threat is the failure to attempt to know what it means to be a Christian economist and to practice accordingly.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Christian economist should differ from the non-Christian economist in what he does, how he does it, and why he does it. There is not a formula that can be applied to every economist because the way in which God intends to use each Christian differs. Rather all Christian economists must inspect themselves to determine that they are being led by the Holy Spirit, not squandering their professional time in easy, self-enhancing, or careless pursuits of no lasting value.

The Christian will choose activities that are motivated from the perspective of service—from the principle of give rather than get. These activities will generally involve areas where the Christian economist feels a certain preparedness and natural enthusiasm because that is often how God leads and uses individuals. The Christian economist will conduct his work with truth and integrity as unto the Lord. He or she will engage in prayer concerning his or her work.

We live in times where the economist's perspective—if it is truthfully reported and not prostituted—is sought after, and where the Christian's wisdom and example are increasingly needed as salt and light. The combination offers many opportunities for the Christian economist who sets out to perform his or her work as a service unto the Lord and under His direction.

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### Representative Publications:

"Consequences of Debt Policy and Open Market Operations in a Stochastically Growing Monetary Economy," *International Economic Review* (forthcoming).

"Development or Dreamfield Delusions: Assessing Casino Gambling's Costs and Benefits," *Journal of Law and Commerce*, 16, 1, August 1997, 49-88.

"The Link Between Domestic Investment and Domestic Savings in Open Economies: Evidence from Balanced Stochastic Growth," *Review of International Economics*, 4, 2, June 1996, 119-140.



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