

“Faith and the teaching of economics”

How does being Christian enter into the day-to-day practice of economics and economic history?

How does faith play a role as I try to convince my students of the virtues of supply and demand analysis or of learning obscure details about the history of British industrialization?

It is the question I posed to Judith Dean, an economist at the International Trade Commission, after her presentation to a conference on integrating Christianity and economics held in Waco last November. She had argued that Christian scholars have certain essential ethical obligations – to be honest; to be empirical; to pay attention to the “who cares?” question. That they are ethical obligations for the economist, I said to her, I don’t deny; but are they particularly “Christian” obligations? What is it that Christian faith in particular offers to the practice of honest, empirical, careful scholarship and teaching?

During the conversation that ensued I came to realize that, for me, faith itself had to provide the key. I do not believe, nor does Dean, that being a Christian is a necessary condition for being an ethical teacher. We know too many non-Christians, and know of even more, whose profound ethical practice belies such a notion. I do believe, however, that God is responsible for whatever good exists in my own practice, that my most important task in the ethical realization of my career comes from putting myself in His hands and having faith that he will steer me correctly.

Faith helps ensure that I practice my craft as I ought. The intellectual techniques of modern economics are good ones, but without the leavening of the constraints of faith – of the virtues which my Christian faith encourages me to practice – the bread I make with those techniques will nourishes neither me nor those I seek to help travel the route toward economic understanding. I will emphasize “efficiency” when I should not, and I will fail to emphasize it when I should.

William Everson, the Beat poet known as “the Brother” because he spent years in a Dominican novitiate and witnessed his Catholicism during his entire post-monastic life, spoke of how daily practice is one’s witness. My faith keeps me honest and reminds me to insist on empirical evidence to back up my economic claims. Above all, it reminds me to stay clear on when my understanding is uncertain.

My faith shapes the questions I ask. I study and talk about the benefits of markets not because doing so helps my students or me figure out how to get rich in the manner of Enron; I talk about markets because I believe with Adam Smith that markets improve the general good and because Christ tells me I should work toward the general good. I spend less time than most economists manipulating the theory of cost curves and more time talking about how markets might (or might not) encourage the virtues of sympathy, temperance, prudence, and courage. As an economist I believe that learning can be looked at as a series of individual acts; as a Christian economist, I believe learning must be considered and evaluated as a community process.

Most importantly, I believe my faith shapes how I ask the questions, how I weigh evidence, and how I ask my students to weigh the evidence on the questions asked, how I balance the scholarly tension between faith and skepticism. When I manage the tension well, *we* succeed. When I help a student manage the tension well, *we* succeed.

The student learns more. I learn more. *We* improve the general good.

To me learning is not merely accumulation of the truth of human knowledge but also a search for the Truth-as-Divine. And I seek, even knowing that He who I seek passes all human understanding (Philippians 4:7) because I believe God calls me to seek and to help others in their seeking.

Maintaining the daily tension between faith and skepticism thus to me is much more than dealing with the articles of disciplinary faith that separate the economist in me from the historian in me from the lawyer in me; it is a matter of coming to terms with the grace of an ineffable God.

Many teachers and many students treat higher education as “initiation into the mysteries.” Getting a degree is getting the union card punched. It is being invited to don priestly robes (the baccalaureate gown, the Ph.D hood), to duck behind the draperies and find out how the Wizard of Oz works. One dies (finishes general education requirements and a “good” major) and lives again (gets a good job). For me, however, no human initiation can solve the Mystery that is God’s desire for us. Not the initiations I have been through, and not the initiations my students are going through. I hope to help them develop better economic judgment than they had when they entered my classroom, but their judgment (and my own) will remain uncertain and imperfect.

To me, one of the greatest of sins we who teach commit is the sin of that high priest. Too often we claim the certainty of expert “knowledge” about the subject matter we “profess.” Too often we claim to know the Truth of what we only believe to be true.

In the end, however, we can only listen to our God for guidance, and trust that He will help us hear correctly.

This, I believe.

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