

INTRODUCTION

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Readers who may not be familiar with the troubled relationship between theology and economics will find much in the essays that follow to narrate and nuance various aspects of the conversation that has been underway between the two disciplines. However, it is important to note at the outset that in this particular conversation, cynicism is a constant danger and often, lamentably, serves as a starting point. In recent decades, the relationship between theologians and economists has ranged from frosty to indifferent. Economists can tend to relegate theological reasoning to the realm of private spirituality, seeing it as having little relevance for their analysis of markets and economic activity (there are many examples of this in the essays that follow). Simultaneously, theologians often make lofty and idealized pronouncements about economics with very little understanding of the economic realities they critique. A sad consequence of this disciplinary estrangement has been a lack of resources for a Christian public hoping to find concurrence between their theological convictions and their daily (and sometimes uneasy) participation in market economies. This is especially troubling given the broad consensus, among both religious and non-religious scholars that the profusion of crises in the last decade with prominent businesses and economies is in many ways a *moral* crisis. Analyses of these problems have been fragmentary and incomplete, and perhaps more importantly, theologians have not often come together with economists to envision a synthetic positive Christian vision of the common good that deploys robust theological reasoning and can be brought to bear in a focused way on the actual mechanics of these crises.

In seeking to address these lacunae, scholars from the Tyndale Fellowship, Ethics and Social Theology study group, and UK Association of Christian Economists, in association with the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, met together on several occasions from 2011 to 2013 in order to make some attempt at a deliberately collaborative engagement. We met under the conviction that, by coming together for an interactive and lively conversation about our two disciplines, we might begin to repair this estrangement and surmount some of these seemingly insurmountable conflicts.

Yet, it is important to note that this collaboration was not formulated for exclusively pragmatic reasons. In Isaiah's vision of the coming kingdom, he describes a situation where, in response to God's righteous judgment, people "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Isaiah 2:4, NRSV). While this statement is usually applied to the ethics of war and peace (which is indeed the literal object of Isaiah's description as connoted by the end of verse 4, "neither shall they learn war any more"), we wondered if this vision might also apply to an engagement between Christian economists and theologians. Thus, we sought to conduct a conversation which might provide the basis for a better understanding of how we might make use of the tools of economic and theological reasoning—which are too often wielded as swords of blame and recrimination against one another—into plowshares: tools that can be used jointly by Christian economists and theologians to cultivate more just and moral economies in the twenty-first century.

CONCEIVING INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Before we discuss our specific approach to interdisciplinary in this book, it may be helpful to briefly summarize some of the broader research that has been underway on the mechanics of talking across disciplinary boundaries. An influential Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conference in 1970 that focused on interdisciplinarity provided three classifying terms that have proven enduring: "multidisciplinary," "interdisciplinary," and "transdisciplinary." The first of these, multidisciplinary (MD) work, is the most limited. Here, "disciplines remain separate, disciplinary elements retain their original identity, and the existing structure of knowledge is not questioned."¹ In contrast, interdisciplinary (ID) work involves a deliberate transgression of disciplinary boundaries either in a strong sense by promoting "integration" or in a weak sense by promoting "interaction" between those disciplines that are being brought into conversation.² The most radical of these three approaches is the transdisciplinary (TD) approach. In this third case, the OECD defined "[t]ransdisciplinarity (TD) . . . as a common system of axioms that transcends the narrow scope of disciplinary worldviews through an overarching synthesis"³ The boundaries between ID and TD work are blurry, and some scholars have questioned whether a strong sense of ID work is actually the same as TD. Along these lines, we may also note that interdisciplinarity may also be pursued in a way that is "narrow" or "wide," with the former bringing together disciplines "with compatible methods, paradigms, and epistemologies."⁴ Another way of categorizing ID work is as "bridge building" or "restructuring": as Klein notes, "Bridge building occurs between complete and firm disciplines. Restructuring detaches parts of several disciplines to form a new coherent whole."⁵

BARRIERS TO CONVERSATION

Keeping this framework in mind, and turning now to our two disciplines— theology and economics—we observed in our discussion that neither theology nor economics tend to think of themselves as porous disciplines. The mutual focus in both on “orthodoxy” is just one indicator among many that both have a solid individual identity and set of rules, and so it seems unlikely that the two qualify for “narrow” interdisciplinarity (without resorting to pre-modern conceptions of economics), as they do not share overlapping methods, paradigms, or epistemologies. It is important to note that this characterization assumes that we are speaking of the *contemporary* theology and economic discourses. There are a number of studies that identify “the existence of theological structures within economic theory.”⁶ Yet, as Oslington observes, “the theological elements become less explicit as we move into the twentieth century.”⁷ While it may be possible to demonstrate that even late-modern economics is a pseudo-theological affair and that there exist commensurable epistemological structures between the two disciplines at that point in history, many of the Christian economists who have contributed recent scholarship on the relationship between theology and economics seem to hold at least a tacit assumption that these structures fade dramatically such that, by the twentieth century, neo-classical economics has a significant methodological distance from Christian theology. As Donald Hay argues, summarizing the work of AMC Waterman:

Prior to this period [in the last part of the 18th century and the early 19th], economics was seen as part of theological ethics and analysed in those terms: after this period, the divorce between the disciplines was complete, and economics gradually reconstituted its analysis in terms of secularised utilitarian ethics . . . Most scholars conclude that it was inevitable, and that it contributed positively to the development of the discipline. Christian economists who would like to return to an avowedly Christian ethic as the basis for economic analysis would do well to ponder the lessons to be learned from this period in the development of economic thought.⁸

It is important to note that, in the modern academy, “Economics” and “Political Economy” often exist as separate sister-disciplines, with the latter bearing more relation to the late-modern discipline of “economics” (seen as a subset of moral philosophy), being located in political science departments, and having its own separate avenues for academic dissemination. We would also note, however, that although the solid coherence of both disciplines could lead to their independence from one another, this does not indicate that theologians and economists have to go about their business in separate discrete spheres. Though it is surprisingly popular, this “autonomy” model (as Welch and Mueller call it) has been largely discredited by Christian theologians and economists alike.⁹

The second problem that impairs interdisciplinary conversations between theologians and economists lies in the self-conception of both communities. We do not presume that, because the discipline of economics is no longer constituted in explicitly theological ways, it is incompatible with theological reasoning and thus only suitable for prophetic chastening. But we disagree with this presumption because we note how, in spite of a self-understanding as self-contained, theology and economics are actually in practice highly porous disciplines that, particularly in recent decades, are constantly redefining core commitments (i.e., orthodoxy) and methodology. In fact, the obsession with prolegomena and qualification for intellectual exchange on the part of theologians is itself a modern commitment (perhaps borne of the scientific “systematic” study of theology) and laden with irony. Just as the modern era has seen a transition in the discipline of economics as it has become less philosophical and more “scientific,” theology has begun to question its modern dalliance with science in the form of systematic theology and return to the domain of “practical reason.” It is no longer possible to assume that the study of “theology” is an enterprise focused exclusively on abstractly conceived doctrine. The emergence of the disciplines of “practical theology,” “theological ethics,” and “religious studies” in the study of Divinity in the last half-century have provided a number of avenues to study theology in a contextual way, with current research often reckoning in very concrete ways with data, social scientific research, and public policy. It is no longer productive for theologians to assume (or assert) that economic study is its intellectual “child” (though there are a number of contemporary scholars working in political economy who veer closely toward such an overlap). Nor is it safe for anyone to assume that theologians deal only in “doctrine” (though there are many “cultured despisers” of “theological ethics” within schools of Divinity). Stereotypes of economic and theological study will not serve our undertaking. Instead, as many of the contributors to this volume assume, we want to suggest that we might forego the mutual sizing-up and presume the possibility of a joint exercise in practical reasoning. Presuming this might be possible, the theme under which we “reason together” becomes quite crucial, and this brings our discussion to the “common good.”

IMAGINING “COMMON GOOD”

A brisk and superficial appraisal of the term *common good* reveals the potential for shared conceptual space: “common” brings the modern neo-classical economist’s pursuit of measurement and aggregation into contact with a host of crucial theological concepts that emphasize commonality (i.e., “body of Christ,” the shared imago Dei, the Triune being of God). The shared reasoning here—at least with the specification that we are speaking of the work of Christian economists and theologians—is that we are all beings created in the image of God, made for social interaction, and thus it is sensible to

attempt to measure and assess our common activity. Though “good” may be more contentious, here we might insist that both Christian theologians and Christian economists are engaged in a seeking after the “good.” Even though one may pursue neutrality in data collection, modeling, and analysis, the outcome of even the most rigidly “scientific” undertaking by a Christian economist ought to be construed with reference to a conception of the “good.” The difficult work comes in the final aggregation, when we must (1) assess together how best to coordinate our pursuit of minor goods (such as “Pareto efficiency,” minimization of opportunity cost, etc.); (2) identify what minor goods have been omitted from consideration (i.e., “externalities”); and (3) agree upon a working definition of the ultimate good against which these can be adjudicated. Construed as such, there is no reason to think that theologians and economists cannot be equal stakeholders in such an undertaking or why abstract mathematical science (whether economic models or theological ontologies) and concrete practical science (whether economic measurements or practical theology) should not both be brought to bear on the subject.

Having explained what we mean to aim towards (i.e., “the common good”), it remains for us to explain a bit of how we structured the conversation represented in this book to go about seeking it. The essays in this volume have been organized under three different headings, based in part on our reference to Isaiah 2. As we have conceived of it, this task of seeking the common good involves three different but overlapping and related undertakings. Even though we are involved in grasping at something beyond mere conflict, the *first* task as we envisage it is nonetheless a critical one. This task is brought to the fore with the critical engagements presented in Part I. We have conceived this first task as a brush-clearing exercise. By seeking to highlight common misunderstandings and disciplinary tendencies that tend to promote a clash of the disciplines, we hope to prepare the way for a more robust conversation. To this end, in our first essay, Andy Hartropp makes a start at examining previous efforts at theological/economic interdisciplinarity, and he provides some analysis as to why the engagement may have been difficult. Michael Pollitt takes up a similar question but focuses in his essay more specifically on common misunderstandings by theologians that have impaired attempts to look at economics from a theological perspective. Eve Poole brings some more high-level analysis of theological engagements with economics, particularly those that have been undertaken in the context of statements by the Anglican church in Britain on capitalism and markets in recent decades. Mark Chapman concludes the section with a more focused critique of Red Toryism and some reflections on what it might look like to for Christian theologians to envisage the common good in modern pluralistic societies. This task of critique is messy, as our respondent Malcolm Brown notes, and so one should expect that the effort on display here will also nonetheless exhibit both positive and negative aspects of this critical task.

In Part II, our essayists turn to focused exposition of specific “plowshares” that we might bring to this conversation about the common good. Our first “tool” is the Christian tradition and digging around here allows us to excavate other tools that have been cast aside and buried in the midst of modern academic specialization: thus, the essays by Jeremy Kidwell and Matthew Arbo illuminate several features of the pre-twentieth-century approach by Christians to political economy. Arbo notes how an attempt to understand Adam Smith’s economic theory and its impact requires a reconstruction of his other, less well-studied, theoretical aspects of his thought, particularly his account of providence. Kidwell’s study of John of Chrysostom provides the basis for a consideration of how we might draw on patristic voices to find new resources. The chapters by Andy Henley and Sean Doherty look at how two specific theological components (a Christian account of virtue and hope) previously involved in economic reasoning, which might be grafted back in to the contemporary discourse in order to challenge our comfortable academic enclaves. These approaches in these four essays also form a theological arc, starting with Arbo’s critical assessment of theodicy and concluding with Doherty’s deployment of Christian hope.

We conclude the volume with a third part that presents several synthetic visions of the common good. Each author in this part provides an example of what seeking after the common good might look like in practice. Hans Ulrich provides a deep analysis of the very notion of “economics” in order to suggest that a Christian conception of the common good might be well-served by returning back to the idea of “limits.” Donald Hay and Gordon Menzies delve into an exploration of theological anthropology and ways in which conceptions of human personhood might be expanded in the present discourse, particularly by Christian economists. Nick Townsend provides an incisive analysis of “capitalism” and argues that we might be well served by returning to a broader study of market economies that is post-capitalist. Finally, Martyn Percy closes out our discussion with an assessment of the ways in which public theology might serve as a viable site for economists and theologians to reflect on the common good. While we think that each essay is engaging and useful in its own right, we also hope that readers will find that the earnest survey of the complexities of collaborative discourse presented here leads them toward a fuller appreciation of the kind of work that needs to be done toward the future of Christian mission in the midst of our businesses and economies.

NOTES

1. Julie Thompson Klein, “A Taxonomy of Interdisciplinarity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Robert Frodeman, Julie Thompson Klein, and Carl Mitcham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.
2. See Klein, “Taxonomy,” 2, and Lisa R. Lattuca, *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching Among College and University Faculty* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001).

3. Klein, "Taxonomy," 17.
4. Klein, "Taxonomy," 6, see also James S. Kelly, "Wide and Narrow Interdisciplinarity," *The Journal of General Education* 45, no. 2 (1996): 95–113.
5. Klein, "Taxonomy," 11.
6. For a survey of these, see Paul Oslington, "A Theological Economics," *International Journal of Social Economics* 27, no. 1–2 (2000): 32–44.
7. Oslington, "A Theological Economics," 37. Matthew Arbo also takes up this movement in chapter 5.
8. Michael Pollitt and others, "Whither Christian Economics? A Roundtable Discussion," *Journal of the UK Association of the Christian Economists* 36 (2006): 1–13.
9. Patrick J. Welch and J. J. Mueller, "The Relationships of Religion to Economics," *Review of Social Economy* 59, no. 2 (2001): 185–202. For commentary, see Clive Beed, "What Is the Relationship of Religion to Economics?" *Review of Social Economy* 64, no. 1 (2006): 21–45.