

The Kuyperian Dream of Reconstructing Economics on Christian Foundations*

Paul Oslington**
Alphacrucis College

Abstract: A project to reconstruct economics on Christian foundations was begun in the 1970s by scholars connected with Calvin College (now Calvin University), Michigan, the Institute of Christian Studies in Toronto, and the Free University of Amsterdam. Inspired by Abraham Kuyper's early 20th century renewal of Calvinism, they criticized neoclassical economics, traced its problems to a faulty anthropology, and began to build a new economics based on true assumptions about human beings and the world. Such an economics, they argued, would have superior explanatory power to neoclassical economics and would be able to deal with pressing problems in a way that existing economic theory could not. Their work

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**Paul Oslington is Professor of Economics, Alphacrucis College, Sydney, Australia, Honorary Research Professor, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, CSU, Canberra, and Resident Member, Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, 2020.

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stimulated a widespread revival of Christian approaches to economics among evangelicals. I argue that this project:

(a) Finds little support in Kuyper's theology. It misreads sphere sovereignty, over-emphasizes a distorted version of his theological antithesis, and neglects common grace.

(b) Finds even less support in Calvin's thought.

(c) Has produced little in the way of useful economics, and this failure can be traced to underlying theological problems.

(d) Is best understood as a flawed sectarian response to the breakup of Christian culture in the West from the 1960s (especially in US Christian colleges), the crisis of economics in the 1970s, and the rise in social concern in the churches.

(e) The rise of Christian economics has some similarities with the rise of a distinctive Islamic economics among marginalized religious communities.

This episode is an interesting case study of relationships between theology and economics, and of connections between scholarship and wider cultural forces.

Keywords: Christian economics, Christian scholarship, Kuyper; JEL Codes: A12, B10, B20

Introduction

There have been many attempts to reintegrate economics with Christian theology since they parted ways in the mid-19th century in Britain and the early 20th in the United States¹. One of the most influential has been the attempt to create a distinctively Christian economics, begun in the 1970s by a loosely connected group of scholars at the Free University of Amsterdam, Calvin College (now Calvin University) in Michigan, and the Institute of Christian Studies in Toronto². As well as being significant for those thinking through options for Christian discipleship in economics, the Christian economics project illustrates some of the difficulties of Christian scholarship, and of the connections between scholarship and wider cultural forces.³

This article will describe Kuyperian Christian economics in its various contexts, evaluate the project in relation to Abraham Kuyper's

notions of sphere sovereignty, common grace and antithesis, and evaluate the project in relation to the theology of John Calvin. We will then turn from theological to sociological mode and consider the rise of Christian economics as a response to the changing cultural situation of Christianity in the West and draw out some similarities with the rise of a distinctively Islamic economics.

Contexts for Christian Economics

The Christian economics project has a context in Christian scholarship, reaching back into the writings of John Calvin (1509-1564)⁴ and Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)⁵ from which it drew inspiration. Kuyper was an extraordinary figure: pastor, theologian, journalist, founder of the Free University of Amsterdam and many other Christian organizations, and, for a time, prime minister of the Netherlands. He was an important inspiration for the contemporary Christian economics movement because he sought to move beyond the sectarianism and arid scholasticism of much 19th century Calvinism and transform it into a worldview to engage with the social and political challenges of the early 20th century, most notably in his famous Stone Lectures at Princeton (Kuyper, 1898). He stood firmly and unapologetically in the Calvinist tradition, but the degree of development beyond Calvin's works has meant that the work of Kuyper and his followers is often labeled neo-Calvinist.

Besides this intellectual context for Calvin and Kuyper, there is also a sociological context to the rise of Christian scholarship in the 1970s. The white Protestant dominance of the institutions of Europe and North America fell apart from the 1960s. One of the responses in the 1970s, especially among white evangelicals, was a desire to reassert Christian identity and influence. Kuyperian strands of Reformed thinking had crossed the Atlantic with Dutch immigrant communities in the mid 1800's and remained strong in institutions such as Calvin College (now Calvin University) in Michigan, and the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. The cultural marginality of these immigrant communities in North America matched the new situation of white evangelicals within Western culture, and made Kuyperian thought attractive⁶. At this time there was also a revival of social concern among North American and British evangelicals. It is no accident that the associations of Christian

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Economists in the United States, the UK and Australia were founded in the late 1970s and early 1980s⁷, as were many similar Christian organizations for other academic disciplines.

The other context for the rise of Christian economics was the ferment in the economics profession in the 1970s. Mainstream macroeconomics was seemingly falsified by the combination of rapidly rising unemployment and inflation in Western economies. There was widespread questioning of development economics, and challenges from heterodox traditions such as the post-Keynesians, Marxists of different varieties, Austrian economists, and institutional economists.

The Christian Economics Movement

One of the pioneers of the Christian economics movement was Bob Goudzwaard, an economist at the Free University of Amsterdam, who began writing in the 1970s about economics from the perspective of the Dutch neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd.⁸ His most important work grew out of a decade of thinking and writing about the new cultural situation in the West (Goudzwaard, 1979). His speaking and writing on Christian economics influenced others in the UK and North America, including a series of lectures at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto (Goudzwaard, 1972) and the lectures he was invited to give at the first meeting of the UK Association of Christian Economists (summarized in Hartropp, 1985).

Tony Cramp, a member of the Economics Faculty at Cambridge, offered a course of undergraduate lectures from 1971 exploring Christian perspectives on economics (Cramp, 1982; selections may be found in Oslington, 2003). Despite a somewhat mixed reception from his Cambridge undergraduates, this led to an invitation to teach a summer school on economics at the Institute of Christian Studies in Toronto (Cramp, 1975) explaining why “you cannot both worship God and swallow Samuelson” and he continued criticizing mainstream economic theory from the perspective of Christian faith (Cramp, 1988, 1991). Cramp, like so many evangelicals interested in social issues and in integrating their faith with scholarship, drew on the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition.

Another pioneer was Douglas Vickers, an Australian economist at the University of Pennsylvania, then at the University of Massachusetts,

who was influenced by the broader Calvinist tradition – and especially by Cornelius Van Til’s apologetics – rather than by Kuyper. He engaged deeply with economic theory from this perspective in a series of works (Vickers 1976, 1982, 1991, 1997), focusing on the problems of time and ignorance, especially in monetary economics and macroeconomics.

British evangelicals, stimulated by work in the Netherlands and the United States, took up the issues. The Oxford economist Donald Hay offered a moderate non-sectarian version of Christian economics, with particular attention paid to hermeneutical issues, in his widely used book, *Economics Today: A Christian Critique* (Hay, 1989). He was a key figure in the UK Association of Christian Economists for many years.⁹ Alan Storkey, who had been influenced particularly by Bob Goudzwaard, began writing and lecturing in similar vein to an evangelical audience in Britain (including Storkey 1979, 1986) and eventually completed a PhD thesis supervised by Goudzwaard on consumption theory from this perspective (Storkey, 1993). At Cambridge, another group pursuing a Christian economics was led by Michael Schluter, with the Jubilee Centre and Relationships Foundation as institutional expressions. They were particularly concerned with the Old Testament instructions for economic life and sought to make them relevant to modern economics (for instance, the articles gathered in Mills and Schluter, 2012).

By the late 1970s, Calvin College had become the centre of North American efforts to develop a distinctively Christian economics. The North American Christian college environment meant there was a teaching market for Christian economics that did not exist in the public universities of the UK or the Netherlands, and the colleges allowed Christians in their economics departments to explore the topic free of the demands faced by economists in research universities to win grants and publish in mainstream journals. The main participants were explicit about their debt to Kuyper and their key text was Tiemstra, Graham, Monsma, Sinke and Storkey (1990), which grew out of a 1980 study group at Calvin College. They began with methodological and ethical criticism of the neoclassical method, then set out their own Christian alternative based on a set of biblical norms for economic life. There is a brief discussion of interpretation of the Bible, “generally the scriptures interpret themselves” (p. 86), with little reference to wider hermeneutical literature. They found that the “great Biblical principle for economic life is that humans are stewards of God’s good earth” (p. 93) and

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that other principles are: “Since humans are made in the image of the creator God, human work is meant to image back to God his creativity” (p. 98); “The proper balance between wealth and work is called justice or righteousness” (p. 103); and “Doing justice for the poor and powerless is a special concern of government” (p. 106). After listing these biblical principles, they turned to various areas of neoclassical economics and offered their Christian reconstruction. Their two most thorough discussions are of consumption theory (p. 133ff) and the theory of the firm (p. 167ff). A sense of their approach can be gained from their statement about the theory of the firm:

A much more adequate theory to explain and evaluate relationships between workers and firms can be developed by basing the theory (including empirical investigations) on Christian norms and the principles derived from them, rather than on the false individualistic and materialistic norms of neoclassical economics. Chief among these norms is the fact that all people are stewards of all their resources, including labor. (Tiemstra et al., 1990, p. 191)

Despite the stated intention to build a new theory of the firm on biblical norms there is little more than further criticism of textbook neoclassical models, and suggestions of principles for a new theory. No alternative formal models are offered of consumption theory or the firm. For some of the other areas of economics little more is offered than opinions about current policy questions. They concluded the book with a plea that “our study be viewed as laying the groundwork for the development of a genuinely Christian perspective on economic theory” (p. 322).

Christian economics was subsequently developed in different directions by the Calvin College economists. John Tiemstra (1994, 1999, 2009) developed a dual methodological and ethical critique of neoclassical economics but moved away from building a new economics to baptize post-Keynesian and institutional economics as preferred Christian approaches. Roland Hoksbergen (1992, 1994) advocated a postmodern pluralism where Christian perspectives were as valid as feminist, green and other alternative perspectives on mainstream economics. George Monsma maintained the vision of a new economics constructed on Christian anthropology, and his programmatic essay in the first issue

of the *Journal of the Association of Christian Economists* (Monsma, 1985) is little different from his later essays calling for reconstruction on Christian foundations (e.g. Monsma, 1998).

Through the 1990s, there were further critiques of neoclassical economics, much setting out of the program for Christian economists, but little progress towards constructing an alternative economic theory, or empirical testing of alternatives. The Associations of Christian Economists in the UK and the United States flourished, however, as places for debate and mutual encouragement.

Christian economics was largely ignored by mainstream economists. However, it was criticized by other Christian economists, including Paul Heyne (1994, 2008), Derek Neal (2005), and David Richardson (1988, 1994, 2014). Criticisms were that it was poor economics, unimaginative, and sloppy. Few Christian college economists were working at the research frontier of the discipline, and sometimes caricatured mainstream economics on the basis of undergraduate textbooks. Very few Christian economists had qualifications in theology, and this limited the engagement with the scriptures and theological tradition.¹⁰

The Christian economics project lost momentum in the late 1990s, mainly because of the lack of progress in constructing a Christian alternative to mainstream economics. However, it remained influential in evangelical circles.

The Case for Christian Economics

The argument for Christian economics that I encountered as a young Christian undertaking PhD studies in economics at the University of Sydney in the 1990s ran something like this.¹¹ Contemporary mainstream economics has a false view of human beings and of the world, in contrast with the true biblical view. Faithful Christians must therefore reject contemporary mainstream economics, and instead build a new economics on the surer foundation of Christian anthropology. Such an economics built on true rather than false foundations would surely have greater explanatory and predictive power than current mainstream economics, and eventually overcome it. Even if Christian economics did not eventually triumph and replace contemporary mainstream economics (perhaps because of the perversity of incentive structures in secular universities and the economics profession) the Christian economist would at least have the comfort of truth, and an eternal reward for their labours.

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This was a seductive argument, which I was suspicious of on the basis of the sloppy critiques and slim economics on offer in the Christian literature encountered, and so I continued, with some doubts, working with mainstream economic models in a secular research university. Later, through theological study, and work on the history and philosophy of economics, I came to the conclusion that the Kuyperian Christian economics program was deeply flawed on philosophical and theological grounds. It was poor economics because it embodied poor theology.

For one thing, it smuggled into Christian economics several dubious methodological positions. The Christian economics project of building a new economics on the basis of biblical norms implied a commitment to methodological realism – the idea that models must in some sense be true – as opposed to methodological instrumentalism, which evaluates models on the capacity to illuminate reality. Milton Friedman’s view that models should be judged on their capacity to predict, and his suggestion that models with unrealistic assumptions were often better in this respect, is an example of methodological instrumentalism. The point here is not whether realism or instrumentalism is the appropriate methodological position for economists but, rather, that the Kuyperian Christian economists are not only giving us the pure milk of the Bible but also a contested methodological move. The same applies to their approach of deducing economic theory from axioms about human behavior derived from the Bible. Deduction from axioms is one approach to economic model building but certainly not the only approach. It is perhaps a strange approach given the strong criticisms of foundationalist epistemology by contemporary Christian philosophers in the neo-Calvinist tradition, such as Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga.

My most serious concerns about Kuyperian Christian economics are theological and these are considered in the next section, where the theology implicit in the program is compared to the writings of Abraham Kuyper and John Calvin.

Theological Assessment

(a) Is it Kuyperian?

Since the Christian economics project draws inspiration and justification from Kuyper, it would seem reasonable to require it to be faithful to Abraham Kuyper’s theology as set out in his relevant works (Kuyper 1880, 1888, 1891, 1902, 1904). The problems are:

- (i) Kuyperian Christian economics misreads sphere sovereignty.
- (ii) Kuyperian Christian economics distorts the fundamental antithesis.
- (iii) Kuyperian Christian economics neglects common grace.

(i) Kuyperian Christian economics misreads sphere sovereignty

Tiemstra opens his account of Kuyperian social theory by emphasizing how it rests on Calvin and Kuyper's strong view of the sovereignty of God, and mentions a stirring statement that has come to him through the Calvin College oral tradition that "there is not a single square inch on the whole terrain of our human existence over which Christ does not exclaim 'Mine!'" (Tiemstra, 1999, p. 85). This statement comes from Kuyper's 1880 inaugural address at the Free University of Amsterdam "Sphere Sovereignty" (now translated in James Bratt's *Kuyper Reader* – see Bratt, 1998, p. 488).

In the sphere sovereignty lecture (Kuyper, 1880), and in the chapter "Calvinism in Science" from his Princeton Stone Lectures (Kuyper, 1898), Kuyper sets out a vision of the operation of God's sovereignty through interconnected spheres of life, each with its own authority. In the sphere of personal faith, the individual conscience is sovereign; in science the community of scholars is sovereign, and so forth. The state does not have its own sphere of authority but is responsible for ordering the spheres.

This account of spheres grounded in nature, brings up the vexed issue of the relationship between nature and grace. This is discussed by Bartholomew (2017, ch. 2) who emphasizes Kuyper's concern to avoid dualism and to avoid nature being seen as external to grace. Utilizing a typology drawn from Al Wolters' writings, he characterizes Kuyper's view as grace restoring nature (by contrast, for instance, with the Roman Catholic view of grace over nature, and the liberal Protestant view that grace equals nature). This means that the spheres are both natural and an expression of grace, connecting them to Kuyper's concept of common grace as discussed below.

Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty gives no warrant to a separate sphere of Christian economics;¹² there is only one sphere for economics with one authoritative community of scholars. The state has no authority in this sphere, nor does the Church. His Free University of Amsterdam was meant to operate as an educational and research institution free from both State and Church control. It is important to recognize that a single sphere of economic science does not mean agreement among all scholars about theoretical and empirical questions or even agreement

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about methodology. Such uniformity would not be the sign of a healthy science.

The part of Kuyper's sphere sovereignty address that might give support to a separate Christian economics are the comments towards the end (Kuyper, 1880, pp. 487-488) about the subjective element of sciences, especially the human sciences.¹³ This corresponds to the comments in the Stone Lectures about the conflict between normalist and abnormalist science (Kuyper, 1898, pp. 131-134), which Tiemstra, Monsma and other proponents of Christian economics take to be a contrast between their project and mainstream economics. However, as Kuyper explains, this is not a conflict between faith and science but the inevitability of different starting points in an irreducibly subjective enterprise:

Every science in a certain degree starts from faith, and, on the contrary, faith, which does not lead to science, is mistaken faith or superstition, but real, genuine faith it is not. Every science presupposes faith in self, in our self-consciousness; presupposes faith in the accurate working of our senses; presupposes faith in the correctness of the laws of thought; presupposes faith in something universal hidden behind the special phenomena; presupposes faith in life; and especially presupposes faith in the principles, from which we proceed; which signifies that all these indispensable axioms, needed in a productive scientific investigation, do not come to us by proof, but are established in our judgment by our inner conception and given with our self-consciousness.¹⁴ (Kuyper, 1898, p. 131)

And further:

The normal and the abnormal are two absolutely differing starting points, which have nothing in common in their origin. Parallel lines never intersect. You have to choose either the one or the other. But whatever you may choose, whatever you are as a scientific man, you have to be it consistently, not only in the faculty of theology, but in all faculties; in your entire world and life-view; in the full reflection of the whole world-picture from the mirror of your human consciousness. (Kuyper, 1898, p. 131)

Kuyper is not always perfectly consistent, and in my view the comment about parallel lines never intersecting is unfortunate in that it

suggests that science from the different normalist and abnormalist starting points cannot come together through the scientific process of debate, theorizing, and evidence. Soon after this comment, Kuyper makes the point that the facts are the same for all (Kuyper, 1880, p. 139), suggesting that confronting evidence can bring those of different starting points together. Similarly unfortunate, is Kuyper's comment that "the Roman Catholic, the Calvinistic and the Evolutional principles will cause to spring up different spheres of scientific life, which will flourish in a multiformity of universities" (Kuyper, 1880, p. 141). I do not believe he is using sphere here in the technical sense. It may well be that different starting points find different institutional homes (or distinct schools of thought take shape in the one institution) but they still compete, and truth should emerge through the scientific process of debate and evidence. Thus understood, it does not contradict Kuyper's sphere sovereignty principle that there is a single sphere of economic science where the scientific community carries authority. To use an economic analogy, having two (or three or more) starting points might be scientifically fruitful, especially in the more subjective sciences like economics, but two sciences should not be a long-run equilibrium.

This interpretation of Kuyper is supported by the suspicion he expresses about isolating Christian scholars from the mainstream, and thus from mainstream criticism:

Science and scholarship is a common human endeavour and he who shuts himself up within his own circle without ever having it out with those who think otherwise leaves a refreshing stream and ends up in a stagnant bog. We have to engage with the objections of those who oppose us on principle and to attack their notions that we deem false. (Kuyper, 2014, p. 41)

Earlier in the same address to the Free University he spoke of religious belief as the "foundation of science and scholarship" yet implored his hearers to "common sense and hold fast to Man's immediate knowing of the basic elements of all being and all thought" in their scientific and scholarly endeavours (Kuyper, 2014, p. 33). This commonality of knowing, works against the persistence of multiple sciences, despite different starting points.

A different question is how a single sphere of economic science relates to Kuyper's pluralistic practice. Kuyper supported Christian

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institutions in different spheres, such as his Anti-Revolutionary political party, which while not strictly a Christian party was animated by Christian principles especially in opposition to the ideas behind the French Revolution. Another Christian institution was his Free University which, while not controlled by the Church, was animated by a Calvinist worldview articulated by Kuyper. Kuyper's support of Christian institutions was part of a struggle against uniformity in spheres, which he saw as a stultifying force, particularly where this uniformity was in tension with his Calvinist worldview (see especially Kuyper, 1869). Kuyper, however, does not want a Christian uniformity either – he was a democrat not a theocrat.

This interpretation of Kuyper on spheres and pluralism accords with much of the secondary literature. Mouw (2011) saw Kuyper as a pluralist wanting Christian perspective to be represented in each sphere. Peter Heslam (1998) and also James Bratt (in his introduction to his Kuyper reader and in his 2013 book) read him as valuing pluralism and advocating the freedom to set up alternative institutions within each sphere. Kuyper wrote mostly in relation to particular issues or for particular occasions, rather than writing systematic treatises, and other interpretations of his writings on topic like spheres and pluralism are possible.

(ii) Kuyperian Christian economics distorts the fundamental antithesis

The other fundamental principle of Kuyper's writing on science is the antithesis between regenerate and unregenerate humanity.

Antithesis flows from the doctrine of sin, which for Kuyper and most Calvinists impairs not just our status before God but also impairs our reason, including our scientific reasoning. Sin has its greatest effects in disciplines with a greater subjective element and Kuyper ranks them from mathematics, the least subjective, biology somewhere in the middle, to literature and philosophy, the most subjective. At the lower end, weighing and measuring and simple logic will yield the same results regardless of the commitments of the investigator (Kuyper, 1880, p. 487). But the sciences are more than observation and logic, so in more subjective disciplines there will be greater differences between scholars with different “principles” or “starting points” (Kuyper, 1880, pp. 486-487). This is how the doctrine of antithesis plays out in the sciences.

Sins impair all of us, and the antithesis cuts through every human heart, rather than dividing us into two groups. However, the Christian economists in my view have distorted Kuyper's antithesis so that it becomes a division between Christian economists and mainstream economists. We actually need to take more seriously Kuyper's doctrine of antithesis to overcome this sectarian distortion of his doctrine.

(iii) *Kuyperian Christian economics neglects common grace*

Kuyper's clearest accounts of common grace are in the chapter "Calvinism and Science" in his 1898 Stone Lectures, and the series of articles "Common Grace," 1902, and "Common Grace in Science," 1904 (now translated in James Bratt's *Kuyper Reader*). For Kuyper, special or saving grace is that grace which deals with our standing before God, and operates on God's elect. Common grace is that grace which restrains the effects of sin and is for all of humanity.¹⁵ It is the grace expressed in creation and providence (Kuyper, 1904, p. 442), it is the grace which is the basis of science (Kuyper, 1898, pp.120-123, and Kuyper, 1902, p. 168).¹⁶

Common grace is connected to the question of the extent of natural knowledge of God and the possibility of natural theology. In some of his writings, especially when criticizing modernist theology, Kuyper downplays natural knowledge, but he never denies it. In other writings, natural knowledge is more prominent – for instance, in a recently translated essay on the subject we find: "The natural knowledge of God is the point of departure where all the paths of piety begin" and "neglect of this doctrine has destroyed the bridge that our fathers laid between Church and world. This has resulted in enmity between faith and science, an untenable separation between education in the school and education in the home, sectarianism among believers" (Kuyper, 1879, p. 74). Furthermore, natural knowledge of God is connected to all other knowledge, as Kuyper writes:

However, one should not conclude from this that the knowledge we gain from nature and history, tradition and life experience, is separate from and merely supplementary to natural knowledge of God, without any inner connection to it, hence contingent and to a certain extent dispensable. Such a view would ignore the essence of human nature. (Kuyper, 1879, p. 78)

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The vexed issue of nature and grace lurks behind Kuyper's discussion of common grace, and it was behind his discussion of sphere sovereignty. In the common grace essay (Kuyper, 1902, p. 173) he rejects nature vs grace as a false antithesis, and suggests the real antithesis is sin vs grace. This is consistent with the view that grace restores nature for Kuyper, that there is a continuity between nature and grace. What he writes about natural knowledge could equally be expressed using the language of common grace.

The Christian economists seriously neglect this fundamental principle of Kuyper's writings on science. There can be no restriction of scientific truth to the elect; all of humanity has access to the same reality, and the grace which makes it possible for us to understand this reality. Privileging the scientific insight of one group of economists over another is against the principle of common grace, but it is precisely what the Kuyperian Christian economists try to do, arguing that they alone can clearly see the truth about humanity and can construct an economics unblemished by the errors of contemporary economic culture. Note Kuyper's warning in the above quotation: that neglect of the doctrine can lead to sectarianism.

(b) Is it Calvinist?

If the Christian economics project lacks support in Kuyper, then what if we go further back in the tradition to John Calvin? Elements of what we might now call Calvin's philosophy of science that are relevant to the Christian economics project are:

- (i) Divine sovereignty and unity of knowledge
- (ii) *Sensus divinitatus*
- (iii) Reason and natural theology
- (iv) Common grace

(i) Divine sovereignty and unity of knowledge

Divine sovereignty is one of the strongest themes in Calvin, and all knowledge comes from God who is the creator and sustainer of the world. As Bouwsma writes: for Calvin "all truth, having its source in God, is objectively given, that it is the same for all people in all times and places" (Bouwsma, 1988, p. 98).

Perhaps the most interesting passage for economists from Calvin's works illustrating divine sovereignty comes from Book 1 of the *Institutes*, which in the standard modern translation reads: "whatever changes are

discerned in the world are produced from the secret stirring of God's hand" (Calvin, 1559, Book 1, ch. 16, section ix, p. 210). Adam Smith was shaped by Scottish Calvinism (as discussed in Oslington, 2018) and Peter Harrison (2011, p. 37) discovered that the 1762 Glasgow edition of Calvin's *Institutes*, probably used by Smith, translated Calvin's Latin as "whatsoever changes of things are seen in the world, are brought about by the direction and influence of God's invisible hand." As well as illustrating Calvin's strong view of divine sovereignty, it may be the source of Smith's famous invisible hand language.

The key point is that for Calvin everything is under God's sovereignty, whether or not human actors are conscious of it, though the eye of faith is needed to discern God's activity.

(ii) *Sensus divinitatus*

For Calvin, all human beings have some knowledge of God, making them accountable before God. In the *Institutes* he wrote: "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity" (Calvin, 1559, Book 1, ch. 3, section i, p. 43) and "there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory" (Calvin, 1559, Book I, ch. 5, section i, p. 52).

This sense of divinity is further discussed by Helm (2004, pp. 218-240), who emphasizes that this knowledge makes humans accountable to God but that this does not rule out further knowledge of God, humanity and the world for other purposes. For, as Calvin wrote: "the knowledge of God and of ourselves are mutually connected" (Calvin, 1559, Book 1, ch. 1, section iii, p. 39).

(iii) *Reason and natural theology*

For Calvin, as for Kuyper, sin affects both our salvation and impairs our capacity to reason, including to reason about God in a natural theological manner. The issue is the *extent* to which it impairs our reason, and scholars differ on this.¹⁷

The key texts are Book II of the *Institutes*, and Calvin's commentaries on Romans 1 and Acts 14 and Acts 17. Calvin uses strong language about the effects of sin:

the mind of man has been so completely estranged from God's righteousness of God that it conceives, desires, and undertakes, only that which is impious, perverted, foul, impure, and infamous.

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The heart is so steeped in the poison of sin, that it can breathe out nothing but a loathsome stench. (Calvin, 1559, Book II, ch. 5, section ix, p. 340)

However, “Since reason...is a natural gift, it could not be completely wiped out” and “something of understanding and judgement remains” (Calvin, 1559, Book II, ch. 2, section xii, p. 270) and “When we so condemn human understanding for its perpetual blindness as to leave it no perception of any object whatever, we not only go against God’s Word, but also run counter to the experience of common sense.” Reason is still listed among God’s “most excellent benefits” (Calvin, 1559, Book II, ch. 2, section xvi, p. 275).

(iv) *Common grace*

Whether there is a doctrine of common grace in Calvin has divided scholars, in a similar way to the issue of reason and natural theology in Calvin.¹⁸ Calvin did not use the term common grace. His Latin is sometimes translated fairly literally as general grace in his writings, and there are passages that point towards a doctrine of common grace without using that language. Differences between the cultural contexts for Calvin and Kuyper mean that different language and emphasis are appropriate. Natural law and gift terminology fits Calvin’s context of Christian culture.¹⁹ The disintegration of this culture and the rise of secular science means that a term emphasizing how the grace of God operates, including in secular science, is what Kuyper needed. Thus Kuyper’s use of the term common grace.

Several texts which warrant a doctrine of common grace in Calvin are:

In the *Institutes*, science is among “God’s excellent gifts” (Calvin, 1559, Book II, ch. 2, section xii, p. 271). Soon after this he uses the term translated as general grace in discussing how reason is part of human nature and how a defect of reason “does not obscure the general grace of God” (Calvin, 1559, Book II, ch. 2, section xvii, p. 276). He also emphasizes how, without the gift of the Spirit, all is darkness (Calvin, 1559, Book II, ch. 2, section xxi, p. 280).

Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 4:20 reads:

Let us then know, that the sons of Cain, though deprived of the Spirit of regeneration, were yet endued with gifts of no despicable

kind; just as the experience of all ages teaches us how widely the rays of divine light have shone on unbelieving nations, for the benefit of the present life; and we see, at the present time, that the excellent gifts of the Spirit are diffused through the whole human race. Moreover, the liberal arts and sciences have descended to us from the heathen. We are, indeed, compelled to acknowledge that we have received astronomy, and the other parts of philosophy, medicines and the order of civil government, from them. (Quoted in Helm, 2008, p. 134)

Examination of Calvin's sermons and prayers further supports a doctrine of common grace (McKee, 2009a, 2009b). If we accept that the idea of common grace is in Calvin, then the contemporary Kuyperian Christian economists are as far from Calvin as they are from Kuyper when they claim Christians have special insight into economics.²⁰

The Sociology of Sectarian Movements Illuminates the Rise of Christian Economics

The classic account of sectarian movements comes from Ernst Troeltsch's work on the relationship between ideas and social structures within Christianity. He set out three types of Christianity (Troeltsch, 1912, p. 993):

1. Church, which "is an institution which has been endowed with grace and salvation as a result of the work of redemption; it is able to receive the masses, and to adjust itself to the world, because, to a certain extent, it can afford to ignore the need for subjective holiness for the sake of the objective treasures of grace and redemption."
2. Sect, which "is a voluntary society, composed of strict and definite Christian believers bound to each other by the fact that they have experienced the new birth. These believers live apart from the world, are limited to small groups, emphasise the law instead of grace, and in varying degrees within their own circle set up the Christian order, based on love; all this is done in preparation for and expectation of the coming kingdom of God."
3. Mysticism, which leads to "formation of groups on a purely personal basis."

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Sectarianism is now usually taken more broadly than in Troeltsch's work, but the essential characteristics are a group of believers, living apart from the world and perhaps the church, with boundaries policed by rigid rules. Immigrant Christian communities commonly have these sectarian characteristics, and this is certainly true of the Dutch Calvinist groups that migrated to America, often living in separate communities with their own churches and educational institutions (Bratt, 1984).

This sociological fact perhaps contributed to scholars in places like Calvin College reading Kuyper in the sectarian manner outlined in the previous sections, supporting their sectarian practice. Then, as American and other Western Christians lost cultural power in the 1960s and 1970s, this sectarian reading of Kuyper moved out of Dutch immigrant circles to become the intellectual basis of the Christian economics movement and other similar movements of Christian scholarship.

An indicator of this sectarianism is the way these Christian scholars ask what difference Christianity makes to scholarship. It is a question which makes some sense in a deeply degenerate scientific culture but in circumstances where the surrounding culture gets it right it would be strange to demand that Christians do something different. Mostly it seems to be seeking a sectarian boundary marker. As Kuyper and Calvin teach, we should receive, celebrate, and accept truth wherever it is found, including in contemporary mainstream economics.

Comparison with Islamic Economics

It is illuminating to compare the rise of Christian economics in the late 1970s and 1980s with the rise of a distinctively Islamic economics. Timur Kuran, a leading scholar of Islamic economics, characterizes its rise as a sectarian move connected with 20th century Islamic nationalism (for instance, Kuran, 1997).

The background to the rise of Islamic economics was the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century and many Islamic communities increasingly coming under Western domination. Economics was both a powerful and ubiquitous symbol of Western domination, with the contrast between the decrepit economic situation of most Islamic communities and Western wealth and power. Nationalist movements drew on Islamic identity as part of their struggle, especially in Pakistan, as Kuran describes. So, developing a distinctively Islamic

economics, with a ban on charging interest as a key boundary marker, and invoking precursors such as Ibn Khaldun and Al-Ghazali was an obvious move for those such as Abul A'la Maududi in Pakistan who sought to rebuild Islamic identity.

Islamic economists from the 1940s, in a similar way to the Christian economists from the 1980s, developed critiques of Western economics on the basis of the Qur'an and Islamic legal tradition, attempted to build a new economics based on an Islamic anthropology, and mostly worked in universities separated from the mainstream. In some ways, the Islamic economists have made more progress in developing a new economics than the Christian economists, and have perhaps made more impact on mainstream economics, especially in working through the theoretical implications of interest-free banking.

With Islamic economics we see the same sociological pattern of a marginalized group reasserting identity and making a bid for cultural power in a sectarian domain as we saw with the rise of Christian economics.

Conclusions

I have been critical of the project of building a new Christian economics, but the major participants are faithful Christian economists who have produced perceptive critiques of contemporary mainstream economics. In the Christian world only some Roman Catholic scholarship in the natural law tradition, and the modern Papal encyclicals compare with the Kuyperian project as an engagement with economics. Their ambition is admirable but the project to create a new economics on Christian foundations is theologically and thus practically flawed. Insulating themselves from the wider economics profession has been an unhelpful sectarian move, with lessons for others. However, not all those who style their work as Christian economics are pursuing the project of building a new sectarian economics, and so this article should not be taken as a rejection of the possibility of a Christian economics.

Criticizing a particular Christian economics project does not mean that economics should be insulated from theological criticism or that there cannot be fruitful dialogue between theology and economics. Views vary about how economics and theology are related (surveys include Waterman, 1987 and Oslington, 2014), and my own view is that Christian theology provides the best framework in which to undertake

economic research, teaching and policy work, using the most powerful tools that are available. These will usually be the tools of the mainstream of the discipline, though the Christian framework can offer criticism and guidance for their wise use. It works the other way, too, and Christian theologians can learn from economists. In my own work I have found history illuminating about good and bad ways of relating theology and economics – there is not a single way of relating economics and theology for all times and places – and, even in the same time and place, Christians may be called to different approaches.

Endnotes

1. This story is told in Oslington (2018), building on the pioneering work of Waterman (1991) and Viner (1978).
2. Surveys of the Christian economics movement include Elzinga (1981), Goudzwaard (1986), Goudzwaard and Jongeneel (2014), Hoksbergen (1992), Tiemstra (1999), Waterman (1987), Richardson (1988, 2014), and Pahman (2016).
3. The article is shaped by my own experience of encountering the case for Christian economics in the 1990s as a postgraduate student of economics who had come to Christian faith in Sydney, where the Anglican church is heavily influenced by Reformed thinking. I kept my distance from the Christian economics as I trained at the University of Sydney, then worked as an academic economist at Deakin University and later at the University of New South Wales. A visit to the United States in 1998 to present a paper at the US Association of Christian Economists meetings (published as Oslington, 2000) was my first contact with some of the key figures in the movement, and theological study helped me sort through the issues and come to the views expressed in this article. Some further personal reflections may be found in a contribution to a UK Association of Christian Economists symposium (Oslington, 2009).
4. Calvin's life and works are discussed by Bouwsma (1988), Helm (2004, 2008), Gordon (2009), and Biéler (1959) among many others.
5. Kuyper's life and works are discussed by Bolt (2000), Heslam (1998), Mouw (2011), Bratt (1984, 2013), and Bartholomew (2017) among others. There is a further huge literature on Kuyper in Dutch. His

contemporary theological friend, Herman Bavinck, and subsequent Dutch scholars such as Herman Dooyeweerd, are also important for the contemporary Christian economics movement.

6. The migration of Kuyperian thinking and its influence on North American evangelicalism is discussed by Marsden (1991), Bratt (1984), Bolt (2000), and Mouw (2011).
7. The US Association of Christian Economists grew out of a meeting at the American Economic Association in 1979, and the story is told in the first issue of the *Bulletin of the Association of Christian Economists* in 1983 (now *Faith & Economics*). It meets and runs scholarly sessions within the American Economic Association annual conference. The UK association was founded in 1984 and began publishing the *Journal of the Association of Christian Economists* in 1985, along with its annual conferences in Canterbury, Oxford, and Cambridge. In my own country, Australia, the Sydney Christian Economists Group, and the Zadok Institute economists group based in Canberra, were founded around the same time. The archives of the Australian groups are now housed at St Marks National Theological Centre in Canberra after being kindly donated by Kim Hawtrey and Clive Rodger respectively.
8. Goudzwaard and Jongeneel (2014) point to some Dutch precursors of Christian economics.
9. It is impossible to discuss all Christian economic writers who contributed to the movement, and my aim is to mention a few who were particularly important or representative, rather than provide a survey. A previous footnote references several surveys of Christian economics.
10. Christian economics was a largely Protestant movement, with little interaction with Roman Catholic or Orthodox writing on economic matters. A recent and excellent Catholic work that seeks to develop a “theological economics” is Hirschfeld (2018). Chapters of Oslington (2014) discuss wider Catholic and Orthodox engagements with economics.
11. The account of Christian economics I give here is obviously not the only version that exists, and while I believe the account is defensible with reference to the key texts of the authors discussed in the previous section, Alan Storkey responded to my Cambridge ACE UK lecture that it was not the version he encountered in the 1970s.

12. Kuyper is here employing the broader European conception of science. Economics is a science in this sense, being the disciplined enquiry about provision for our material needs.
13. Warfield was part of Kuyper's audience for the Princeton Stone Lectures, and while he appreciated much of what Kuyper said he was uneasy about the direction of Kuyper's comments on two kinds of science. The disagreement between Kuyper and Warfield is discussed by Marsden (1991) and Bartholomew (2017).
14. For the Calvin College Christian economists, "starting points" or "principles" have hardened into axioms that are the basis for deduction of economic theory. Kuyper himself was attracted to deductivism, especially early in his career under the influence of his teacher Scholten. Tensions between the deductive/scholastic and Calvinist sides of Kuyper are discussed by Clifford Anderson (2003) and by Bartholomew (2017). Kuyper seems to have had little contact with academic economics and we have no specific discussions of economic method in his published writings.
15. Max Stackhouse, former Director of the Kuyper Centre at Princeton Theological Seminary, discussed the implications of common grace for globalization in the final volume of his *God and Globalization* series (Stackhouse, 2007). Sadly, Max is no longer with us.
16. McGowan (2009) sees Kuyper's notion of common grace as the solution to the problem of reconciling election and God's sovereignty over all of creation.
17. Warfield (1948) argues that reason remains powerful and reads Calvin as a natural theologian. Bouwsma (1998, pp. 102-104) finds Calvin's natural theology unremarkable within his basic convictions about creation and providence and exemplified in Calvin's positive view of both pagan philosophy and the science of his day. Helm (1998, 2004) argues that Calvin's view was that natural theology was not necessary but legitimate and useful. Natural theology has an uneasy place in the reformed tradition. Steinmetz (1995) argues that both Kuyper and Barth misread Calvin on natural theology, Kuyper because he associated it with liberalism/modernism, and Barth because he associated it with Nazism.
18. This interpretation of Calvin on common grace is supported by many Calvin scholars. Bavinck finds Calvin's general grace to be a doctrine of common grace: "But of even greater significance is it

that with Calvin reprobation does not mean the withholding of all grace. Although man through sin has been rendered blind to all the spiritual realities of the kingdom of God, so that a special revelation of God's fatherly love in Christ and a *specialis illuminatio* by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the sinners here become necessary, nevertheless there exists alongside of these a *generalis gratia* which dispenses to all men various gifts. If God had not spared man, his fall would have involved the whole of nature in ruin" (Bavinck, 1909, pp. 453-454). Kuiper (1928) argues strongly for a worked-out doctrine of common grace in Calvin. Heslam is more reticent: "Although Calvin's ideas thus provided Kuyper with a solution to the problem of the value of non-Christian science, they did not do so by means of a fully-fledged doctrine of common grace, as Kuyper's appeal to Calvin implies" (Heslam, 1998, p. 259). Mouw agrees that "It is certainly possible to find comments in his writings that could encourage the development of a doctrine of common grace" (Mouw, 2001, p. 15). Mouw notes that Calvin includes science among God's excellent gifts, which are not to be despised wherever found, and suggests that Calvin's "peculiar grace" becomes common grace for Kuyper (Mouw, 2011, p. 66). According to Helm (2004) natural law rather than common grace is the appropriate category in Calvin.

19. The reformed natural law tradition is discussed by Grabill (2006), Van Drunen (2010), and Stonebraker and Irving (2015).
20. A referee summarized my argument and suggested an objection to it and a question, which may be illuminating for readers. The referee summarized my argument as follows: "You characterize the fundamental theological errors of the Kuyperians as one of under-emphasizing common grace and misusing the idea of spheres and antithesis. This leads them to an inappropriate rejection of secular science, and pushes these thinkers toward the idea that Christians have special insight into economics." The referee continued: "I think the best objection to your argument is that Kuyper and Calvin would have not expected science to proceed well if it was based on an anthropology that was at odds with Christian doctrine. You are not trying to defend, in any detail, the anthropology of the standard economic toolkit here, so you must concede that the project of an economics that takes Christian anthropology seriously is a valid one. Their mistake, then, is simply in rejecting too much, and in thinking

that we had to rebuild the whole discipline.” The referee then asked what the place of Christian anthropology should be. My response is that I’m not convinced that deducing economic theory from an anthropology is the right way (or even a feasible way) to go about doing economics. While I certainly believe that economics should be open to dialogue with, and critique from, Christian theology, deduction is not the only nor best way this can occur. Also, there has been excessive emphasis on anthropology by Christian economists and more attention to other doctrines such as providence and eschatology would be helpful.

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