

USING GENESIS TO TEACH RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF ECONOMICS

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This paper explores some of the pedagogical aspects of introducing the Christian perspective into an economics curriculum. It suggests a format for seamlessly bringing together religion and economic thought into the introductory economics classroom. Three narratives from the Book of Genesis can provide a rigorous superstructure for evaluating many different topics covered in the traditional economics curricula. Among such topics are the assumptions of the neoclassical model, the distinction between normative and positive economics, production possibilities, poverty, the living wage, population issues, labor economics, private property rights, and the foundations of the capitalist economic system.

This approach is ecumenical as it draws upon statements from a wide variety of denominations. For example, the American Baptist, Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and United Methodist Churches have issued documents linking the Genesis accounts of creation with contemporary ecological and economic issues.¹ In addition, relevant aspects of the postdiluvian covenant² and Pauline Christology³ are discussed. Using the readings from Genesis as a foundation provides a framework that students can easily remember and understand.

Background to the Methodology

This paper outlines a methodology (“the Genesis approach”) used at Friends University to integrate Christian thought with the introductory economics curriculum. Friends University is a nondenominational Christian university in Wichita, Kansas. As its name implies, it was affiliated with the Society of Friends (Quakers) but became independent in the 1930s.

It is in the spirit of the University’s Christian mission that the Genesis approach to economic instruction has been developed. The overall goal is to stimulate critical thinking

about economics and economic issues within a Christian framework. There were several specific objectives in mind when the curriculum was being developed. The first is that the assigned readings be intelligible to a wide diversity of students. The students at Friends University come from different religious backgrounds and possess various levels of familiarity with the Bible. Approximately 25 percent of the students identify themselves as Catholic, 18 percent Baptist, 10 percent Methodist, 6 percent Lutheran, and 3 percent Episcopalians. About 15 percent report that they do not practice any religion at all and a very small minority practices a non-Christian faith.⁴ Many students have not completed any religion courses prior to taking economics. By using Biblical narratives familiar to the general population the main points of the stories become more accessible to students. Most students are familiar with the Biblical stories so, in a sense, the methodology merely draws attention to what they already know.

A second objective has been to keep classroom time on the Biblical accounts relatively short so as to not take away from teaching economics. The narratives, although only a few chapters long, compactly contain a treasury of ideas. Many students have Bibles at home and those who don’t have one can easily gain access to one on-line or at a library. Therefore, the reading assignments are not burdensome on the students and do not consume much classroom time otherwise spent on more traditional economic topics.

The material used to create the “Genesis approach” is eclectic, borrowing from creation theology, social doctrine, and Biblical studies. The structure is based on creation theology, and its derivatives, environmental theology and the theology of work. The production process is a reflection of God’s creativity, thereby creating a natural affinity between economics and creation theology. The theology of work and Christian social thought provide a vehicle for exploring the economic implications of creation theology for production, markets, and policies.

The curriculum presents the traditional economics paradigm. Christian thought is introduced as an alternative way to evaluate economic outcomes. For example, neoclassical

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theory speaks of “utility maximization” and “efficient outcomes” while Christianity speaks of “just outcomes.” This approach parallels the thought of Pope Pius XI when he wrote:

For though economic science and moral discipline are guided each by its own principles in its own sphere, it is false that the two orders are so distinct and alien that the former in no way depends on the latter. The so-called laws of economics, derived from the nature of earthly goods and from the qualities of the human body and soul, determine what aims are unattainable or attainable in economic matters, and what means are thereby necessary, while reason itself clearly deduces from the nature of things and from the individual and social character of man, what is the end and object of the whole economic order assigned by God the Creator.

For it is the moral law alone which commands us to seek in all our conduct our supreme and final end, and to strive directly in our specific actions for those ends which nature, or rather, the Author of Nature has established for them, duly subordinating the particular to the general. If this law be faithfully obeyed, the result will be that particular economic aims, whether of society as a body or of individuals, will be intimately linked with the universal teleological order, and as a consequence we shall be led by progressive stages to the final end of all, God Himself, our highest and lasting good.⁵

Every society must answer three basic economic ques-

tions: what to produce, how to produce, and for whom to produce. The discipline of economics examines the process of taking inputs and transforming them into outputs for the benefit of humankind. Scripture does not offer much discussion of how modern markets work but it does provide insights as to which market outcomes (the “what,” “how,” and “for whom”) are consistent with Judeo-Christian ethics. Scripture places this market process in a particular context when it speaks of God the potter, Adam the cultivator, or Noah the ship-builder.

The Pedagogy

The Genesis approach revolves around a discussion of three accounts—the first story of creation, the second story of creation, and the story of Noah. Students are asked to read these accounts in the Book of Genesis for homework and come to class prepared to enumerate specific points in the narratives which they believe touch upon economic themes. The reflection questions assigned to the students are listed in Table 1. Through this exercise students are encouraged to consider the Biblical portrayals of the relationship between God, humanity, and the rest of creation. Tables 2 through 5 summarize the most important features of the narratives that are discussed in class.

The portrayal of God as creator of all economic resources has important implications for the ownership and distribution of wealth. Since God is the source of all economic assets no society has the authority to confer absolute property rights. In the Biblical view resources are

Table 1. Reflection Questions

Read the first three chapters of the Bible (the Book of Genesis, chapters 1:1–3:24). How many economic themes do you find?

In particular, answer the following questions:

- What is the source of economic resources?
- What is the purpose of economic resources?
- What is the underlying attitude toward work in the passages?
- What are living creatures to do in God’s plan?
- What is the dual nature of work?
- Does God work?
- What is the relationship between nature and humanity?
- What is the nature and purpose of the family?

Now, read chapter 8, verses 19–23 of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans. How do his writings build upon the narratives you read in the Book of Genesis?

Table 2. The First Creation Story (Genesis 1:1–2:4a)

| <u>Action</u> | <u>Verses</u> | <u>Implications</u> |
|---|---------------|--|
| God creates heaven, earth and light (Day 1). | 1:3–5 | God is the ultimate source (owner) of material goods. |
| God creates the sky (Day 2). | 1:6–8 | God provides life-giving weather. |
| God creates dry land and vegetation (Day 3). | 1:9–13 | Earth brings forth vegetation, which is declared “good.” |
| God creates celestial objects (Day 4). | 1:14–19 | God creates cycles in nature. |
| God creates birds and sea creatures (Day 5). | 1:20–23 | Creatures declared “good” and told to “multiply.” |
| God creates land animals and first parents (Day 6). | 1:24–31 | Land animals declared “good”; humans made in the image of God; humans given dominion over the earth; God finds creation “very good.” |
| God rests (Day 7). | 2:1–4a | Cycles of creation tied to God. |

Key points of the first creation story:

1. God is owner of all, so property rights stem from him and we are stewards.
2. Human beings are part of creation.
3. Creation is intended to be good.
4. Living things have a command to continue God’s work of creation (“fill the earth and multiply”).
5. Human dominion over earth is an extension of the creative process begun by God.
6. Because human work is a continuation of God’s creation, work is subject to God’s laws (such as the Sabbath).

Table 3. The Second Creation Story (Genesis 2:4b–3:24)

| <u>Action</u> | <u>Verses</u> | <u>Implications</u> |
|--------------------------------|---------------|---|
| God forms man out of clay. | 2:4b–7 | God is like a potter. |
| God plants the Garden of Eden. | 2:8–9 | God is like a gardener. |
| God places man in the Garden. | 2:15–17 | Man is to “care and cultivate” to complete creation in imitation of God. |
| God creates woman. | 2:18–25 | The family is the primary social unit. |
| The Fall and the curse. | 3:1–24 | Effects of sin are: fruitful work turned into labor; relationship between people and material resources changed; creativity (whether growing food or giving birth) becomes painful. |

Key points of the second creation story:

1. Work is a continuation of God’s ongoing creativity.
2. Work is holy because God works.
3. Work is done in the context of the family.
4. Sin turns creative work into hard labor.

given to people in order to continue the creation process. Therefore, property rights and how they are allocated are meant to support the stewardship of the earth.

Human work as an imitative action also points to some conclusions relevant to economics. The first is that eco-

nomics activity is an extension of God’s creativity. Indeed, in the first creation account God’s expectation is that man “dominate” the world. This vocation is explained in the second account as a command to bring creation to a fulfillment. Thus, Genesis provides a justification for applying a

Table 4. The Deluge Account (Genesis 6:5–10:32)

| <u>Action</u> | <u>Verses</u> | <u>Implications</u> |
|--|---------------|---|
| Humans sin and God regrets. Noah is instructed to build the Ark and a new covenant is promised. | 6:5–11 | All of creation is judged by human sin. |
| The waters go back over the land. | 6:14-7:5 | God uses human labor to save the remnant of creation. |
| God makes Covenant with Noah. | 7:6–8:1 | Sin results in a partial negation of God’s creative work. |
| Noah and his sons re-people the earth. | 9:1–9:17 | The original command to living creatures to be fruitful reiterated. Sin leaves a fractured relationship between humans and other creatures. |
| | 9:18–29 | Noah plants a vineyard but abuses nature’s gift. All of humanity is related to each other. |

Key points of the deluge account:

1. The entire creation (including infra-human life) suffers because of sin.
2. Human work has salvific value in God’s plan and is to be done in conjunction with God’s will.
3. The well-being of nature depends on humans. Our stewardship of nature is affected by sin.

Table 5. Pauline Theology of Creation (Romans 8:19–23, NAB)

“Indeed, the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God. Creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but by him who once subjected it; yet not without hope, because the world itself will be freed from its slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. Yes, we know that all creation groans and is in agony even until now.”

Key points of Romans 8:19–23:

1. The entire creation suffers because of sin.
2. Christ came to save the world, including nonhuman creation.

Christian critique to the use and fruits of human labor. In the Christian worldview, people have an obligation to work. By extension, this obligation implies people have a right to work.

Human work as an imitative action also points to some conclusions relevant to economics. The first is that economic activity is an extension of God’s creativity. Indeed, in the first creation account God’s expectation is that man “dominate” the world. This vocation is explained in the second account as a command to bring creation to a fulfillment. Thus, Genesis provides a justification for applying a Christian critique to the use and fruits of human labor. In the Christian worldview, people have an obligation to work. By extension, this obligation implies people have a right to work.

Second, the idea that human work is a teleological activity that moves the world toward a completion of God’s

plan implies that work is originally meant to be a fulfillment of who we are as humans. It is an activity that designed in human nature and reflects the fact that people are made in God’s image. Sin does not abrogate the original call to work but it transforms work into labor.

Both creation accounts present the family as a divinely ordained institution. Just as work is meant to fulfill, the accounts show the family as God’s means of expressing in humanity his image and likeness. This social institution is respected in the Deluge account as God ensures that Noah’s family remains intact through the ordeal. Work, therefore, should support family life and not disrupt it.

Integrating the Genesis Approach in the Introductory Economics Course

There are many topics raised in the first weeks of the typical economics course on which the Genesis accounts

have direct bearing. Each of these can be explored in great detail but, instead, a synopsis will be offered here. The first topic is the definition of economics. McConnell and Brue (2002), for example, define economics as “the social science concerned with the efficient use of scarce resources to achieve the maximum satisfaction of economic wants.”⁶ This well-accepted definition places economics at the service of people in society. In other words, it includes a belief that economic resources are to be used for meeting people’s needs and wants. In the parlance of economics, an economy should maximize people’s utilities. The Genesis accounts essentially agree with the proposition that economic resources should serve humanity but they add the important proviso that the economy’s service to humanity is to be done in the context of stewardship.

A second concept broached in the first weeks of class is the distinction between normative and positive economics. Again, using McConnell and Brue as an example, positive economics “focuses on facts and cause-and-effect relationships” while normative economics “incorporates value judgments about what the economy should be like or what particular policy actions should be recommended to achieve a desirable goal.”⁷ While the taxonomy of positive and normative is undoubtedly useful, such a distinction becomes blurred if one takes the position that the ultimate goal of positive economic theory is to support good Biblical stewardship. The Genesis accounts place bookends on the economic process; they look at the ultimate source of productive resources and at the final goal of consumption. They answer the question “toward what ends should the economy be moving?”

A third topic raised in the first weeks of the introductory economics class concerns the underpinnings of the capitalist system. Central to the capitalist ideology is Adam Smith’s invisible hand concept, whereby individuals in an economy act in their own self-interest and unwittingly improve the standard of living of the community. The profit motive, together with competition, lead entrepreneurs to “build the better mousetrap.” Success in such an endeavor leaves the producer with greater profits and buyers with an improved product. The themes of creativity and of sin that run throughout Genesis can be used to explore the difference between self-love and selfishness. The former can be understood as using the economic process to develop oneself in a manner consistent with one’s vocation and the latter includes the use of the economic process solely for one’s benefit without regard to God or community.

Another cornerstone of the free market system is enforceable private property rights. Property rights are a part of the Christian heritage and are held sacred in the Decalogue. The Genesis narratives imply that property rights cannot be separated from stewardship. Using modern terminology, we can say that property rights are subject to the common

good. The freedoms to own and dispose of property (freedom of enterprise and freedom of choice) must support the divine vision of creativity. The way a society decides what, how and for whom to produce is connected with the moral use of property rights.

A pedagogical device often used in the economics class is the production possibilities frontier, or PPF. It is a graph of the combinations of outputs that can be produced when available resources are fully used and is a visual presentation of the economic choices societies face. Since making choices often involves ethics these output decisions cannot be made on purely economic grounds. Typically, textbooks present a combination of outputs on the frontier as efficient and, therefore, desirable. Of course, few economists would argue for a low standard of living (i.e., low PPF) or that the economy should be at some point inside the interior of the frontier (i.e., in a recession). However, the graph provides an excellent springboard for discussing the Genesis view of economic outcomes. In particular, it can help explore the questions of why we believe economic growth is good, of materialism (producing and consuming for its own sake), and of how economic growth is (or is not) consistent with stewardship of the environment.

Selected Issues Relevant to the Genesis Approach

Poverty, the Living Wage, and the Income Distribution

The first Genesis account shows a progression in the assemblage of the material world from the primeval chaos. Human beings are the apogee; creation is ordered toward human life and habitation. The right to life (enshrined in the Commandment “You shall not kill”) likewise states that all people have a right to a certain level of consumption that meets basic human needs for life. This universal destination of goods implies that all people have some minimal claim to God-given resources. The way a society answers the “for whom” question should address the needs of the poorest segment of the population.

One can also approach the issues of poverty and the income distribution from the perspective of the family. Genesis presents the family as a divinely instituted social unit. Hence, parents must have the means to provide a suitable standard of living for their children. One possible definition of a living wage rate would be the compensation level at which a worker can reasonably support self and family. On a global scale, Scripture emphasizes that the descendants of Noah populate the post-diluvian world. The obligation to care for the needs of family extends to all people since all of humanity has a familial bond.

Labor Economics

There are several places where the Biblical accounts touch upon labor economics. Many of these points, such as the holiness of work, the family wage, the teleological

nature of work, and the relationship between work and labor, have already been discussed above. Two more points have to do with the assumptions of the mainstream model. The contemporary theory of labor supply posits that work brings disutility. This view, while useful in modeling labor behavior, is one-sided. It addresses the disutility but not the human fulfillment properties of work. The mainstream model also looks at the worker as an agent of production and not as performing a holy activity that brings about a completion of personhood. The Biblical understanding of humanity as the apogee of creation conflicts with the neoclassical presentation of the firm using labor as a tool for profit maximization.

Environmental Issues and Externalities

According to the Biblical accounts, sin is the ultimate externality. In Eden, God plants the Garden and Adam oversees the earth's fertility by caring and cultivating it. The lost harmony between humanity and divinity in Eden directly leads to the suffering of all creation. The three accounts form a unified depiction of the triad of broken relationships between God, humanity, and nature. In the Garden, sin directly impairs the earth's ability to feed its inhabitants. In the deluge account the fate of creation flows from the relationship between God and humankind as God vows to wipe out all living creatures. This vow begins an unraveling of the First Week. The primeval waters flowed from the abyss and the sky where God placed them at Creation. However, God chooses to work through Noah's labor to build the Ark and save the remnant from the encroaching chaos.⁸

After the Flood ends a wind sweeps over the water and dry land appears, just as in the First Week. God then "restarts" creation by establishing a covenant with Noah, his descendants, and "every living creature." The original

call to all living things to be fruitful and multiply is reiterated. However, the disharmony caused by sin still exists. Under the covenant, animals become food and fear of humans overtakes them. More evidence of disharmony appears when Noah plants a vineyard and becomes drunk.

The Biblical vision is that the health of the environment directly depends upon peoples' moral actions. This is where Christians can offer hope. As Paul points out in his letter to the Romans, Christians believe that the split in creation between God, humanity and nature is reconciled through the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁹

Sustainable Economic Growth

There is much debate today about population pressures and whether the earth can sustain economic development at present rates. The Biblical account does not offer a specific solution but it carries within it a paradigm of the characteristics of the solution. Above all, it presents the view that the earth is created for the benefit of humanity. Population policies that disrespect the call to be fruitful (in the Biblical sense of the word) are inconsistent with Christian ethics. Likewise, the Genesis accounts reject economic development policies that see the earth and workers as merely as a source of exploitable resources. People are expected to "care and cultivate" the earth and increase its fruitfulness. Any solution to these issues must respect both the earth and humanity.

Discussion of the Genesis Approach

Table 6 provides an overview of the major economic themes in the Genesis accounts. There are many benefits to this approach. The most obvious one is that it connects faith and academics for the student. Economics textbooks often give scant treatment to the normative aspects of economics and often leave the impression that religious values do not

Table 6. A Summary of the "Genesis Approach"

1. Economic decisions are a response to God's call to stewardship. Economic theory cannot be purely "positive."
2. Since production involves taking resources from the earth and returning them to the earth (matter is not created or destroyed) economic decisions involve a relationship with the environment. This relationship with the environment is affected by sin.
3. The family is divinely instituted. Production and family life are interconnected, implying that a living wage is necessary. Work relationships support the family.
4. Property rights are subject to the requirements of stewardship.
5. Productive work is a right as well as a calling. It is a means of fulfillment.
6. Resources are freely given for the benefit of humans. Therefore, all people must have some degree of access to the earth's riches.
7. Human decisions and God's saving work are the ultimate "externality" for humanity and the environment.

matter much. Integrating Christian thought into the economics classroom confronts students with the reality that one's belief system (whether theistic, atheistic, or agnostic) is an important source of values and has a tremendous influence on economic actions. This inquiry helps students better understand their own value systems. This approach also contributes to the social and spiritual development of the student as it fosters a deeper awareness of spirituality and encourages students to be more participatory in social and economic issues.

There are, however, some caveats to this approach. The Genesis approach is far from giving a complete picture of Christian thought on economics. It provides an attitude, or a reference point, in evaluating economic theory, institutions, and policies. Students should be made aware that it does not exhaust the richness that the rest of Scripture, the church fathers, theologians and other Christian writers bring to economics. Students should also be encouraged to explore their own denominational traditions. However, as the Pentateuch is a foundational set of writings, the narratives help clarify values for students and it is a compact vehicle for exposing students to the Christian critique of contemporary economics.

Endnotes

- 1 The Acton Institute maintains these statements on its website. The Institute's site is a very good resource for those interested in the role of religion in the contemporary world.
- 2 Genesis 9:1–17.
- 3 Romans 8:18–25, Colossians 1:19–20.
- 4 Personal correspondence with Jim Smith (chaplain at Friends University), September 11, 2002.
- 5 Pope Pius XI (1931).
- 6 McConnell and Brue (2002), p. 3.
- 7 Ibid, p. 10.
- 8 See 1 Peter 3:20–21 for an interesting commentary on the salvific message of this episode.
- 9 A popular Christmas carol, "Joy to the World," has the refrain "And heav'n and nature sing" at the coming of Christ.

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