

“MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS”: UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

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Editors' Note: *This article was originally delivered as a lecture at Gordon College on February 15, 2000.*

Author's Note: *I thank all who have read and criticized the first draft—especially Mary Kinnear, Ian Luke, Margaret Waterman, John Wortley, and the late Paul Heyne—and accept sole responsibility for any remaining nonsense and error.*

If I intend to come to Boston I buy an airline ticket from Winnipeg. If all goes well, I realize my intention. Other things happen because of that act. Taxi-drivers get fares. Sales of jet fuel rise: sales of natural gas fall. The profits of the airline improve. Winnipeg merchants suffer the loss of my custom. The unintended consequences ramify forever, affecting the lives of countless individuals through ever-decreasing ripples. I cannot possibly know, and I certainly cannot intend, all but a very few of these consequences. Yet the unintended consequences of my acts, and those of everyone else, fit together to make recognizable patterns in our society. Sometimes we like those patterns, sometimes we do not. Economics is the scientific study of unintended consequences in human society. I shall try to show in this lecture that unintended consequences matter for Christian faith.

Christians pray: “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Of course the Lord’s Prayer will be answered. God’s kingdom must surely come. In one sense it already has come. And His will must surely be done. God is all-powerful and all good. Christ has won the final victory over sin and death. But “God works in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.” He works in this world through men and women, and we are weak, blind and sinful. How can you and I be the means by which God’s will is done “on earth as it is in heaven”? The humble and humdrum science of economics may help us here. For most of us, I shall argue, the best course may often be simply to mind our own business.

First, I must say something about traditional Christian social doctrine. Human society, like the church, is conceived as a single body. Social order comes from conscious direction by the “head.” Next, I shall remind you of a drastically different view introduced by David Hume and Adam Smith, now fundamental to economic theory. Human society is a “habitat”: a space in which millions of individuals coexist, collaborate and compete. The social order we observe is the unintended consequence of a myriad private, self-regarding decisions, rather like “the spontaneous order of Nature” noted by John Stuart Mill (1969 [1876], p. 381). On the face of it there would seem to be a sharp conflict between Christianity and economics: what a Victorian Christian socialist once called “the bitter argument between economists and human beings” (Arnold Toynbee, quoted in Winch 1996, p. 6). Finally, therefore, I shall attempt a resolution. Economics is not in conflict with Christianity. As a way of looking at society it assumes the frailty and “fallen-ness” of human nature; and is consistent with (though it does not entail) a belief in the power and the goodness of God. It is implied by my argument that there is and ought to be no such thing as a “Christian economics.”

I

First, a few words about social theory, as it was before economics reared its ugly head.

Until the eighteenth century people thought of civil society as “the body politick”—and many still do today. Other metaphors were used, the most popular being that of the family. The chief, or the prince, or the king was “father of his people.” Some rulers tried hard to live up to that title. But the idea of the state as a single organism was most effective for social control. Every living animal is governed by a central nervous system, however simple. The foot and the hand, the ear and the eye are “many members, yet but one body,” each dependent upon all the others, and each subordinate to the “head.” Subordination of all other mem-

bers to the head is essential. Without subordination, the body dies. As an eighteenth-century bishop reminded his ordinands,

Without union there cannot be a sufficient degree either of strength or beauty: and without subordination there cannot long be union. Therefore obey, as the Apostle directs, them that have the rule over you (Watson 1785, p. 111).

Save in a few subversive enclaves such as Massachusetts, the state was conceived as a living body held together by obedience. The Elizabethan *Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion* was ordered to be read in all churches, a century later, on each anniversary of the murder of Charles I. That Homily says it all. “It is evident, that obedience is the principal vertue of all vertues, and in deede the very roote of all vertues, and the cause of all felicitie” (Bond 1987 [1570], p. 169).

Human beings are weak, blind and sinful. None of us could ever be in a position to know the common good. And even if we were, we could not be trusted to seek it.

It is obvious that a theory of the state as “body” is cognate with the Christian doctrine of the church. At baptism we become “members” of the Body of Christ. Our ritual drowning is a sign that we must share the death of Christ. But as members of the (“mystical”) body we rise with Christ. We share his victory over death and enter the new life. This life begins in time but transcends it. And so in the church we are made one body “with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven.” But that small part of the body we can now see, “Christ’s Church militant here in Earth,” is in one sense the whole body. For Christians believe that where two or three are gathered together in his name, Christ is present. And where Christ is, there is the catholic church. It follows from this that the church on earth is a single body. What holds *this* body together, St. Paul teaches, is faith, hope and love.

It is easy to see from this how the theory of the state could get mixed up with the theory of the church. The church on earth, like the state, needs order. Order would seem to require obedience to those who rule. So the “theological” virtues of faith, hope and love get subsumed under the political virtue of obedience. The “ministers” of Christ become the rulers of the church. *Servus servorum dei* becomes *pontifex maximus*. Christians usually agree, mixing their metaphors slightly, that Christ is the head of the church. But who is his deputy on earth? Who is the authorized temporal ruler, acting in the place of Christ, whom all the faithful must obey? The Roman Curia said it was the pope. The imperial court said it was the emperor. By the time of Columbus, the rulers of powerful nation-states in

Western Europe had come to think it must be the king. According to Richard Hooker, writing at the end of the Tudor period, “in this realm of England . . . one society is both Church and commonwealth;” and “our Church hath dependency upon the chief in our commonwealth . . . according to the pattern of God’s own ancient elect people” (Hooker 1888, p. VIII.i.5). The unity of church and state in one Christian body governed by a Christian “prince” was central to English political thinking down to the early decades of the nineteenth century. It still survived, strongly, in the England I grew up in a hundred years later.

When the body politic is identified with the Body of Christ, it becomes the duty of “all christian Kings, Princes and Governors,” of their “whole Council,” and of “all that are put in authority under” them, to “administer justice, to the punishment of wickedness, and vice, and to the maintenance” of “true religion and Vertue.” (Any old-fashioned Episcopalian present will recognize my source.) A Christian society is seen as a colony and outpost of heaven. Those who bear authority in such a society are obliged to use their lawful power to make God’s kingdom come, his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. They function as part of the “head,” which coordinates and controls the actions of all the other “members” of the body. It must therefore be assumed that all in authority can know what is right both for themselves and for their subjects. It must also be assumed that the ruling elite is willing and able to do right, and has the power to make all other “members” obey the “head.” To put it in slightly more modern terms, the “common good” is knowable, at least by the governing elite, and both feasible and enforceable.

One need not be an eighteenth-century Tory to think like this. The “social teaching” of the Roman church since Pope Leo XIII is permeated with what I shall call a “Christian-organicist” view of society. The encyclical *Centesimus Annus* of Pope John-Paul II (1991) was greeted by many in America as an endorsement of a market social order. Yet the pope affirmed that “the state has the duty of watching over the common good and of ensuring that every sector of social life, not excluding the economic one, contributes to achieving that good” (para. 11). Another passage, calling for the “mobilization” of world resources, was described by one commentator as “the purest expression of central planning as the solution to big problems” (para. 28; and Minogue 1991, p. S8). Christian organicism is not confined to the Church of Rome. Leaders of various protestant churches call upon government to implement economic measures: to fight inflation, to reduce unemployment, to alleviate poverty, or to forgive the debt of insolvent governments in Africa and Latin America. Even some economists with impeccably protestant credentials have done as much. We read in a recent book by a distinguished Christian economist

that there is something called a “collective ethic” that requires us to judge of such matters, for example, as “whether . . . price supports for certain grain products . . . contribute significantly to desirable welfare redistributions” (Vickers 1997, p. 150).

Christian organicism assumes that the “head” can see the “body” as a whole; can know what is best for the other members; and can act so as to bring about these optimal outcomes. It follows that all Christians who belong to the governing elite, and all can influence that elite in any significant way, bear a heavy burden. For God’s Kingdom must come, His will be done—in part at least—through their own calculated and far-seeing choices. Note that this duty has nothing to do with whether we live in a Christian society in which church and state are one, or a secular, pluralistic society in which Christians are simply one among many interest groups.

The more democratic any society, the more acute this moral and religious problem becomes. In seventeenth-century England, common people could leave public policy to the Lords of the Council with a good conscience. But in twenty-first-century America every voter has a right and a duty to decide what is best for everyone else. And every Christian—it is sometimes supposed—must therefore decide *how* God’s Kingdom should come, *how* God’s will be done, and seek to implement these measures through the political process.

If we view human society as a “body,” it can and ought to be governed by a “head.” If we accept democracy, each adult must share responsibility for the performance of the “head.” Therefore if we are Christian, our responsibility requires us to see society and its needs—so far as possible—with the eye of God. When we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we assume that we ourselves are to be active agents of God’s intentions. It must be implied that God’s intentions both can be, and actually are, known to us. Each of us must act as “Christian kings, princes and governors” were once required to act. Consciously and purposefully, we must work to bring about some social end that we believe God intends.

This is a fashionable doctrine. I think it is wrong. Just why it is wrong is a matter to which we must now turn.

II

Because I am an economist I turn instinctively to Adam Smith, and also to his great friend and compatriot, David Hume. Hume and Smith were not isolated figures. They travelled widely in France and England; and they lived and worked in Edinburgh at a time when Edinburgh was the home of a brilliant circle of powerful minds. We sometimes refer to the intellectual achievements of this circle as the “Scottish Enlightenment.” What did the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment do to social theory?

I have already mentioned the chief assumptions of what I have labelled “organicism.” Let me remind you of those assumptions in somewhat more formal terms.

- (1) For each nation state, and maybe for the world as a whole, there exists a “common good”—that is, a collectively optimal course of action.
- (2) Some individuals in each state are in a position to identify such action.
- (3) Such individuals are, or could be, in a position of political authority.
- (4) They could exert this authority with sufficient power to achieve their ends.
- (5) Those in authority would actually use their power to achieve the social optimum (the “common good”) rather than their own private ends.

Adam Smith and his colleagues took the *first* assumption and—as we might say today—“deconstructed” it. When Louis XIV said “*l’état c’est moi!*” he asserted the standard seventeenth-century doctrine that the interest of the state can be identified with that of its sovereign prince. But in the new view, social optimality can only be understood in terms of what is good for each and all of the individuals contingently associated in the state. And what that leads to, of course, is insuperable difficulty in seeing just what “social optimality” could possibly look like.

This implies that the *second* assumption must be false. Hume and Smith denied that any individual could ever be in a position to identify a social optimum. This is the crucial move. All later social theory turns on this point. If we give up the attempt to know the unknowable, Adam Smith declared,

The sovereign is completely discharged from a duty, in the attempting to perform which he must always be exposed to innumerable delusions, and for the proper performance of which no human wisdom or knowledge could ever be sufficient; the duty of superintending the industry of private people, and of directing it towards the employments most suitable to the interests of the society (Smith 1976 [1776], p. IV.ix.51).

The best we can do for the most part, according to Smith, is to follow what he called “the obvious and simple system of natural liberty” (p. IV.ix.51).

If there are no individuals in a position to identify the social optimum, then the question of their political authority is empty; and so the *third* and *fourth* assumptions become irrelevant. However, even if this were not the case—even if some could know the common good, and be in a position to do something about it—the argument for organicism would still fail. That is because the *fifth* assumption is implausible. What we can all see and know about human nature (including our own) gives us no ground to think that those in

authority would use their power to seek the common good. “In contriving any system of government,” wrote David Hume in 1741, “and in fixing the several checks and controuls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a *knave*, and to have no other end, in all his actions, but private interest” (Hume 1994 [1741], p. 24). Of course men and women are moved by many other, more altruistic, passions. Sympathy, benevolence and love for others may be found in almost all of us. But self-love—which is not in itself morally obnoxious—is dominant. “Each person loves himself more than any other person,” Hume declared in his earliest work (1988 [1739–40], p. 487). And as for “avarice, or the desire of gain,” it is “an universal passion, which operates at all times, in all places, and upon all persons” (Hume 1994, p. 59). It is naive and dangerous to assume that our statesmen, politicians and civil servants—and still less, those who elect them in a democratic state—are like Plato’s “philosopher kings.” They are human beings like the rest of us. Human beings are weak, blind and sinful. None of us could ever be in a position to know the common good. And even if we were, we could not be trusted to seek it.

The Holy Spirit presides over the unintended consequences of our self-regarding acts to create all that is good in the “spontaneous order” of human society. Whether they knew it, whether they intended it, David Hume and Adam Smith got it right.

What then must we do? According to Adam Smith and his colleagues, the best course may often be simply to mind our own business. Why should that be? Because, in the words of the historian Adam Ferguson (1966 [1767], p. 122), “every step and every movement of the multitude . . . are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.” Constitutions, laws, manners, language, even religion and morals, gradually evolve over the ages. By and large these social arrangements work well enough—which is, of course, why they have survived. They come about as the unintended consequence of an immense series of private, self-regarding human acts reaching all the way back to our expulsion from Eden. Somehow or other, it would seem, the unforeseen patterns we make in society when we all mind our own business and seek only our own interest turn out to be satisfactory. And even when rulers carry out what they think of as grand strategy, the unintended consequences are often a lot better than their original plan. It was not, Adam Smith reminds us, “the wisdom and policy, but the disorder and injustice of the European governments, which peopled and cultivated America” (1976, p. IV.vii.b.61).

What is true of the grand sweep of human history is also true on the smaller scale of our own time and place. Above

all is this so in the production and distribution of scarce goods and services. Out of millions of individual plans and decisions, an unintended “spontaneous order” appears in the markets for food, clothing, shelter, transport, and for all the other things we need to sustain our unknowably complex social fabric. We get what we want because it pays someone else to provide it. “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner,” says Adam Smith (1976, p. I.ii), “but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.”

This is what economics is all about. For more than two hundred years, economists have studied the ways in which markets coordinate the private plans of large numbers of individuals who are assumed to act only “from their regard to their own interest.” When the rules of the market game allow free competition among all buyers and sellers—and when most players obey all the rules most of the time, even when the referee is not looking—the unintended consequences of self-interest are socially beneficent in three different ways. In the first place, the pattern of goods and services produced matches what customers want. Secondly—when competition has done its work and profits, wages and interest are cut to the bone—no one gets paid more than the full social cost of the goods and services he or she produces. This purely ethical point was specially important for Adam Smith, who saw monopoly profits as a private tax levied by the producer on customers, and therefore as a form of theft. Finally, a competitive market economy creates more wealth than any other possible arrangement, and is more favorable to its continued growth.

Economics begins with this pleasing story but it does not end there. Adam Smith warned us that market outcomes are only beneficent when “the laws of justice” (1976, p. IV.ix.51; see also p. V.iii.7) are obeyed. But market players, being sinful men and women, do not always obey the rules when the referee is not looking. And they try continually to bend those rules through the political process, so as to benefit themselves at the expense of their neighbors. Moreover, there are numerous technical complications, such as increasing returns to scale, externalities, market failure, public goods, radical uncertainty, free riders, merit goods, incomplete information, and a whole lot more. Much of this is only suitable, Paul Samuelson once said, “for a captive audience in search of a degree—and even then not after dark.” And of course, there is the large question posed by Robert Malthus, later addressed by Keynesian macroeconomics. An unregulated market economy may not settle down at full employment. Deliberate action by government may be called for, to steer it between the rocks of inflation on the one hand and stagnation on the other.

But when all is said and done, the broad outline of the

story remains. The patterns we observe in large-scale economic activity take place as the unintended consequence of vast numbers of private acts, normally driven by self-interest. Despite many blemishes, these patterns seem preferable to those which appear when any group of “planners” or commissars tells us what to do. All experiments in socialism have ended in disastrous failure. Even Keynes (1936, p. 379) allowed that if only we can maintain full employment, “the classical theory comes into its own again . . . private interest will determine what . . . is produced, . . . the factors of production . . . [required] to produce it, and how the . . . final product will be distributed.” This does not mean that there is no work for government to do. The rules of the game may sometimes be improved. And there must be constant vigilance to prevent cheating. But there is no place in this story for a wise, good and powerful “head,” governing all members of the “body” to achieve the common good. There is no place, therefore, for Christian organicism of any kind, whether Reformation Tudor, eighteenth-century Tory, papal-encyclical or modern American democratic. What difference does all this make to Christian faith and theology?

III

It makes no difference whatsoever to the Christian understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ. If we would rise with Christ we must be joined with him in faith and baptism. Only the Body of Christ rises from the dead. “*Salus extra ecclesiam non est,*” as St. Cyprian put it, somewhat polemically (*Epist.* 73, 11, cited in Quasten 1950–60, II, p. 373).

Where it makes the greatest difference, it seems to me, is in our prayer and thinking about the “Kingdom of God.” If we allow the possibility that the unintended consequences of our own very un-godlike, all too human acts may turn out to be beneficent, this will affect what we mean when we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.” We shall be very cautious about thinking of the Kingdom of God in human, political terms. We shall resist the temptation to put ourselves in the place of God, pretending to know His will, pretending to foresee just what has to be done, by whom, in order to bring it about. And we shall admit, in all humility, that we may serve unintentionally as the instruments of God’s will despite our own weakness, blindness and sin.

The modern, pluralistic nation state is no longer the Church—if it ever was. And even if it were the Church, that part of the Church we see on earth contains an unknowable mixture of saints and sinners, and cannot be identified with the Kingdom. Nor can the state ever become the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom is more like St. Augustine’s *City of God*: an ideal society of saints based on *justitia* or

“righteousness,” in which every human soul is bound to God in love and obedience.

What then is the state? Not Augustine’s *terrena civitas* (or “city of this earth”), which is an equally abstract conception of a society of sinners, created by “self-love to the contempt of God” and is simply all the unrighteous now on earth. The state, like the Church on earth, is a mixture of saints and sinners. It has a kind of *justitia* of its own without which, Augustine says, it would be nothing but a gang of thieves (Augustine 1945, pp. xii–xxii). Bad as the state always is and always must be, life without it would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Hobbes’s *Leviathan* is a consequence of human sin, and in some senses a punishment for sin. Romantics tell us truly that pure anarchy would be better. But the state is not only a punishment for sin, Augustine explains; it is also God’s remedy for sin. God uses the sinful propensities of human beings, including “self-love” that by itself cuts us off from God, and harnesses them to create a social structure that shelters all of us from the worst effects of the Fall. The Holy Spirit presides over the unintended consequences of our self-regarding acts to create all that is good in the “spontaneous order” of human society. Whether they knew it, whether they intended it, David Hume and Adam Smith got it right.

It follows from this, I believe, that we ought to resist the temptation to put ourselves in the place of God. It is hard for us to know our own good. It is harder still to know the good of our children, employees and other dependents. It is impossible to know the good of society as a whole. Instead of meddling in the affairs of our fellow-citizens, using political power to stop them doing things we disapprove or to give them goods we think they ought to have, we shall do our best to obey our Lord’s second great commandment: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” That means our actual, living, intractable, obtuse neighbor next door or at work or at church, in all his or her unique but flawed humanity. We must not pretend to be GOD THE FATHER, Creator of Heaven and Earth. But we may and ought to imitate GOD THE SON in the great humility of his earthly life. Jesus worked at a humble and useful trade, and turned his back on those who wanted to make him a political boss. If we mind our own business, doing our own work as well as we can for the glory of God, in love and charity with our neighbors, GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT may use the unintended consequences of our short-sighted acts. When we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,” we shall understand that our own part in that process may well be obscure, unintelligible and largely passive.

It is important to understand that the modesty I recommend allows no pietistic escape from political duty. As Christians we are bound to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. That includes a willingness to be chosen for public office—if that seems good to our fellow-citizens.

It is surely part of our business to know and to say just which things belong to Caesar and which do not. It also includes a willingness to stand up and be counted. If we lived in Germany during the 1930s and our actual next-door neighbor happened to be a Jew, then obeying the second Great Commandment might cost us our lives. All I wish to insist is that when we do engage in public life we do so with continual awareness of our own weakness, blindness and sin. We should then be more restrained in promoting grandiose schemes for the reform of “society,” or the “improvement” of our fellow men and women.

What of our life in the society of the church here on earth? The church is indeed a Body and we are all members one of another. Obedience to Christ our Head may often mean obedience to his Apostles and their successors on earth, our bishops and other chief pastors. I am far from suggesting any change to this venerable tradition of faith and order. But even here, it seems to me, an awareness of unintended consequences can make a difference. We shall be less anxious about who our next bishop or parish priest will be. Indeed, we shall be less anxious in general. We shall be less discouraged by the many signs of wickedness and folly we see in the governance of the churches. We shall be more relaxed about the embarrassing nonsense and evident heresy that now passes for Christian teaching in many circles. I do not mean that we should be cynical. Of course such things are of the highest importance. Precisely for that reason, they are too big for us—weak, blind and sinful as we are—to manage on our own. Here too perhaps, we ought to mind our own Christian business. We can safely trust that the Holy Spirit will use the unintended consequences of our narrow and defective deeds to build up the Body of Christ.

IV

Where does all this leave the relation between economics and Christian belief? Economics is the scientific study of unintended consequences. It explains, as no other science has ever been able to do, how miracles of cooperation continually occur without the superintendence of any human agency. Christian economists in the past have found theological significance in those miracles. Thomas Chalmers, Richard Whately, and Frédéric Bastiat saw the self-regulating market economy as evidence for the Argument from Design. We can know God the Creator, they supposed, from the many signs of His work all around us. But Charles Darwin knocked the bottom out of the Argument from Design in the 1860s. The theological importance of economics is better understood, I think, in connection with what philosophers call “theodicy.” How can a God who is said to be perfectly good, wise, all-knowing and all-powerful allow terrible evil to pollute and deface His creation? This is by far the most serious intellectual problem posed by

Christianity, and by all other monotheistic beliefs. Many have given up the faith in face of murder, cancer, genocide and mass starvation.

St. Augustine taught in answer to this question that God brings good out of sin and evil. Economics affords one, not unimportant, example of that in human affairs. We can regard our humdrum discipline, if we care, as a technical appendix to Augustine’s great work on *The City of God*. The state was instituted *propter remedium peccatorum* (Augustine 1945, p. xix). Economics shows how a well-functioning market economy can serve, likewise, as a remedy for sin. (A “well-functioning” market economy, like the state, must have its own *justitia*). And our discipline suggests that the unintended consequences of human action over a far wider field than the merely economic may, in similar fashion, conduce to higher ends. There must, of course, be a great deal more to theodicy than that. But we can be grateful for truth wherever we find it. And at any rate we can see that there is no conflict between economics and Christian belief. We may not use economics to prove the existence of God, as Whately seems to have hoped. But if we already believe in God, we can use economics to help us wrestle with some of the hardest problems created by our belief.

I think it is obvious that we can only use economics for that purpose if it is an entirely separate inquiry from Christian theology, generating knowledge in its own, quite different way. Science can only be of service to theology if it is genuine science, uncontaminated by any religious prejudice or dogma. If the truths of economics are public and ecumenical, accessible to all who will submit to its discipline regardless of race, color, class or creed, they may be used by Christian believers as independent evidence of the goodness of God. For if God is sovereign, the truth will always appear. It is both instructive and edifying to see Augustine’s theodicy so fruitfully amplified by the atheist David Hume as an unintended consequence of his own, quite different program.

What all this means, I suggest, is that there is not, can not, and ought not to be any such thing as a “Christian economics.” Quite apart from its possible use in theodicy, economics is only worth the candle if it gives us public knowledge. If there actually were a program of economic inquiry uniquely “Christian” in method and assumptions, its explanations and predictions would either be worse (or no better) than those of ordinary economics, or they would be better. Unless they were clearly better, there would be no point in the enterprise. And if they really were better, the whole world would jump on the bandwagon. The redundant adjective “Christian” would disappear, and we should be left once again with “economics” *tout court*.

So where does that leave Christian economists? I hope

enough has now been said for the answer to be obvious. Christian economists should do what Christian plumbers, Christian dentists, Christian truck-drivers and Christian bank-clerks ought to do. They should mind their own business.

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