FOREWORD

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When Robert H. Nelson wrote *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics* nearly a decade ago, he helped initiate a fresh self-consciousness among social scientists about the deeper value constellations that stand behind much of what they do. That volume sparked discussion not only among economists and among theologians but sometimes between them—a discussion that has had sporadic episodes since.

That study was indicative of a modest reversal of the tendency of those economists who wanted their work to be seen as purely value-free. Some had come to use the term “theology” to skewer speculative and value-laden theories for which there was no evidence. But his insightful historical analysis showed that many of the classic founders of the field of economics not only were guided by theological assumptions but also viewed the field in messianic terms. That is, they presumed that the primary reason for human pain, suffering, and death (what theologians identify as a consequence of sin in a fallen world) is that we are in a state of scarcity. Moreover, we can only be delivered from this perilous existence by the overcoming of material deprivation—a prospect that can only come from rightly formulated, rightly believed, and rightly lived principles and policies. Economics can deliver us, bring about a redeemed state of affairs on earth, and lead us to abundant living—the materially incarnate form of salvation.

His argument was not that all economists act like those priests who would read the signs of the times (looking for auspicious moments to invest in new adventures) and the entrails of animals (tracing the effects of consumption) in order to advise rulers and wealthy patrons, although many seem willing, even eager, to do just that. Nor was his argument quite the sort of thing that Marx argued in *On the Jewish Question*, or that Weber argued in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and today is under discussion in still a third form in regard to “Confucian values” and the East Asian industrial successes and financial crises, namely, that certain kinds of religious orientations have profound, if unintended, material effects, although none of these are entirely ruled out.

Rather, his argument was that the major theories of economics as they developed in the intellectual history of the West can best be understood in terms of one or another of the great contrasting traditions of theology—especially Roman Catholic and Protestant, each with its philosophical antecedents and dispositional corollaries. In distinctive ways, each deals with the most profound issues of existence. One view involves a developmental, rational optimism about human abilities—morally, spiritually, and socially—to improve the common condition, and offers an institutionalized set of mediating procedures to make that possible. We find this view not only in Aristotle and Aquinas and much of Anglicanism, but in more secular forms in Claude Saint-Simon and John Maynard Keynes.

The second tradition is more pessimistic and radical, sometimes even apocalyptic, for it presumes that a dramatic intervention must occur within persons or in the society as a whole and bring about an alleviation of pervasive evil. Otherwise, very little can be changed; improvements are modest and marginal, and real life often involves only a choice for the lesser of evils. One can find philosophical parallels in Plato, in Augustine, and in such Reformers as Luther, Calvin, and the Puritans. This stream splits in the modern age, Nelson argued, into several branches, and it can go toward Marxism, toward the Social Darwinists, or toward modern theories of economic alienation.

Nelson, then a research economist for the Department of the Interior, traced these themes from the earlier directly religious theories of economic life through the development of the field in the early days of this century, and shows how motifs from these theories have appeared in our time, especially in popular advocacy movements that influence public policy in the name of liberation, ecological, communitarian, or libertarian sectarian doctrines. It may be, of course, that as the discipline of economics—and popular responses to economic complexity—developed, they discovered what theologians had previously found out—that there are only a few basic alternative approaches to the ultimate questions, that the approach chosen has great consequences for every effort to seek a remedy to what ails humanity, and that every basic theory when it is adopted on faith among the people takes on unforeseen forms with unforeseen consequences.

It is equally if not more likely, however, that the profound religious traditions that shaped Western culture framed, inevitably, the intellectual contours of economics more than most leaders in the discipline have admitted, and that they operate still as the deep background beliefs of those who have largely forgotten whence they came. After all, scholarship in other fields has found out that “modernization” did not bring about the secularization of

life, as expected, but a host of new developments that go under the name of “globalization” wherein we now face a nearly universal resurgence of religion.¹ Moreover, scholars in many fields may remain personally, even adamantly secular, in their methods and arguments, but are not only discovering that they must study religious matters when they seek to understand cultures other than those of the West but are forced by deeper historical studies to recognize anew the rootage of their presumed “secular outlooks” in religious and theological developments.² Nelson has, in fact, himself explored a number of such themes in a series of articles over the last several years—articles that can now be seen as the preliminary probings that have led to this fresh work.

In this new study of *Economics as Religion*, Nelson, himself an accomplished economist within the profession and now Professor in the School of Public Affairs at the University of Maryland, extends his research by examining the basic presuppositions among the most influential contemporary economists. Taking up the story as the redemptive schemes of Marx and Keynes fade, he discerns, quite accurately, I think, the faith presuppositions that are behind the work of Paul Samuelson and other Harvard and MIT economists who represent the “Cambridge School,” on the one hand, and Milton Friedman, Gary Becker, and other leading figures of the “Chicago School,” including the younger thinkers who are poised to shape the immediate future. If the previous study demonstrated by more classic historiographic methods that theology influenced the deep history of the discipline, this study shows by an acute analysis of contemporary writings that unacknowledged religious assumptions pervade the commitments of currently distinguished and influential figures.

This study is not postmodern in its methods, but it is postfoundational in its results. That is, it shows that the foundations of the discipline are not self-evident, entirely based on fixed rational or empirical foundations, or proven

1. See Peter Berger, Tu Wei Ming, and Abdullhi An-Na'im et al., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

2. See, for examples, on law, Harold Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); on science and education, Toby Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); on technology, David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York: Knopf, 1998); on political science, Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of Nations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Ralph Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); and, on comparative social development, Lawrence E. Harrison and S. P. Huntington, eds., *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York: Norton, 1998), and Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

by analysis or theorem. In fact, many are rooted in unexamined presuppositions that are more like faith commitments than in “pure” scientific hypotheses, and that they are often obscure to and obscured by the advocates of the field itself. As such, they can be, and in a certain sense must be, treated in terms that echo classic theological themes and categories. They are, in short, morally and spiritually laden—a fact that does not necessarily make them less truthful or less accurate, unless their own bases are denied.

This is not done, as I read it, to discredit any thinker or the field as a whole. The values that are exposed, as held by the economists under examination, are sometimes better than the arguments for them made by their proponents—precisely because they are more deeply rooted in time-tested and critically examined presuppositions than their current advocates acknowledge or perhaps even know. There are, however, disadvantages to the lack of awareness of and attentiveness to them. If and when they become distorted, there is very little philosophical, historical, or theological self-awareness in place to correct them. For instance, an enormous amount of economic theory ends up being focused on nationalistic policies, a tendency that makes certain culturally particular patterns of economic life appear to be more universal natural laws than they actually are, and that simultaneously blinds us to certain global and/or local patterns of belief and morality that have economic consequences. It also means both at home and abroad that relationships between facts and values, between descriptive and normative modes of discourse, or between analyses of marginal gains and the social, moral, and spiritual effects of policies based on calculations of these gains are not examined by those who advance them.

This new volume extends Nelson’s previous work in subject matter, method, and pertinence to current issues. The distinctive contribution is that it takes up a neglected question—one largely ignored both by many economists and by practitioners of the sister social sciences, and often only ideologically treated by social critics of our current economic and social system (including no small number of religious leaders). That question is: What are the values that are built into the dominant, contemporary economic theories that specialists generate, managers and policymakers use, popular movements turn into slogans, and ethicists try to investigate and philosophers and theologians seek to understand and subject to normative criticism? These theories cannot be summarized or dismissed by saying that they are “a function of late-capitalism” that is “only interested in profits” and dedicated to “materialism” and “the commodification of the world.”

To be sure, it is difficult to exhume the values that are built into these theories when the theories are designed to be as “value-neutral” as possible.

But, as this volume shows, the authors and key interpreters of these theories, those who have defined this or that aspect of the discipline, sometimes have treated the value questions more overtly than their science says they should. More often they reveal, quite unconsciously, even contrary to their intentions, more about the clusters of values that are operating in the back of their minds as they argue for or refine a theory than they intend, even as the foregrounds of their minds focus on what seems to be purely evidential or logical or analytical arguments. By drawing the connections between the overt statements and the half-concealed commitments, Nelson draws our attention to the fundamental presuppositions behind these value clusters and shows why it is proper to identify them as religiously held doctrines.

It has, as everyone who has been paying attention knows, become fashionable to see every theory as a social construct, as a weapon of the winners in life to justify their own dominance and to keep the losers in a situation of subordination or marginalization. Much postmodern literature is eager to deconstruct the work of theorists in every field and to show the latent colonial or imperial (or racist, sexist, classist, or gender) interests behind purportedly “objective” theory. Professor Nelson is not among these debunkers of modern academia who know only how to argue from a “hermeneutics of suspicion” and see every claim as another power play. He does, however, want economists, plus ethically alert citizens and socially active believers in religious traditions, to recognize that very profound assumptions about the ultimate issues of life are inevitably built into the apparently arid economic theories that shape how we live. He does not want us all to come to this recognition because that would discredit the scientific character of the field, but because it could improve it. He wants economists (and those of us who are not professional economists but who fuss a good deal with economic matters from the perspectives of other disciplines) to come clean about the fact that Economics, no less than other social and historical sciences, however much they use what appear to be morally and spiritually sanitized formulas and complex econometric models, bear within them values in a subtle mix with facts, moral presumptions in a complex blend with argument, matters of faith interwoven with matters of analysis. In fact, ethical, religious, and specifically theological assumptions are not foreign to economic life or economic thought, but pervade them.

In sum, this volume, more than any other published study I have seen, allows us to see in the writings of the major economists of contemporary life which clusters of value assumptions are in play—in them and often in us. That recognition could allow the critical examination of the values that are present from a more discerning point of view and allow the discipline to take

its honored place at the crossroads of the sciences and the humanities. Indeed, it could also then articulate, and critically refine, the ethical and theological presumptions hiding in it more clearly and more honestly than it presently allows. Even if the reader is inclined to argue with this or that point as the argument unfolds, it is a striking contribution to our understanding of motifs driving both our intellectual orientations and much of the common life.