



# To What Ends for Theology-Oriented Economic Policymaking?

Robert C. Tatum

*University of North Carolina Asheville*<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract.* This paper explores the need for theology-oriented economic policymaking, as well as its possible sacred and secular ends. To facilitate this exploration, America's Social Gospel movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is examined as a historical case of theology-oriented economic policymaking. True to form, its policies were oriented by theology and supported by economic analysis, while seeking to reform the economic system, rather than replace it. Arguably, a driving force in the Social Gospel movement's policy successes was the postmillennial eschatological views held by many of its adherents. As postmillennialism is not widely shared and unlikely to sustain a movement, this paper considers eschatological concepts of proleptic anticipation and *memento mori* to exemplify ways in which theology can presently inform and sustain economic policymaking toward worthwhile ends.

*Keywords:* theological economics, policymaking, eschatology, Social Gospel

## 1. Introduction

According to Tatum (2017), theology can inform both the means and ends of economics. In particular, theological considerations can help generate methodological advancements in economics, better understanding of economic systems, and better economic analysis and policymaking within a given economic system (66). Regarding the latter, biblical scriptures give rise to a new approach of theology-oriented economic policymaking. With this approach, the policy's orientation and motivations are grounded in theology, the policy is geared toward reform of the economic and political system rather than to its replacement, and the policy is informed by economic analysis. Here, too, theology's value in helping set policy goals does not preclude its value in helping determine the means of analysis. Theological considerations can alter the questions asked and how those questions are approached in economic analysis and policymaking.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Aubrey Emmett and Becky Todd for research assistance, as well as to Michael Pollitt and three anonymous reviewers for valuable comments.

The value in exploring theology-oriented economic policymaking can accrue directly to economists, policymakers, communities of faith and society as a whole.

The present study follows Hay (1989) and Tiemstra (1990) in directly using biblical scripture to develop socio-economic principles to guide economic analysis and policymaking. One difference here, though, is a specific focus on eschatology. This area of theology concerns the end of the present world and what comes next, including the possibility of a better world. As this study will examine, eschatology may be particularly well-suited for contemplating the possible ends of economic analysis and policymaking. This is done with the understanding that eschatological ideals cannot be achieved in this world; they can at best be approximated. As Hay (1989, 63) writes:

There is little point in advocating for a secular society economic structures which presuppose the existence of a close-knit community of love, as in the early church in Jerusalem. That would be foolish utopianism. Instead we have to look for a second best, which approximates to what God requires, and which is credible, given the motivation and incentives which are present in a particular situation. The search for second-best solutions should not, however, be allowed to erode our perception that they are only second best and not fully consistent with what God requires. In pursuing the possible, we must not forget the ideal, and there should be an element of sadness and repentance that our solutions must fall so short of the ideal.

Consequently, eschatology can provide some understanding of both the end and end goals, but economics can also help determine how we best reach or approximate those goals. Policymaking by its very nature is a practical endeavor. Thus, the ends of theology-oriented economic policymaking must be this-worldly, even if they may also be sacred. Policy analysis and policymaking are without full meaning and purpose if they are not applicable or are overly utopian concerning this world. The sacred and secular ends of policymaking can be intertwined, though, without tinges of theocracy.

Nonetheless, the very act of theology-oriented economic policymaking may be a sacred end unto itself. For instance, believers may derive value in seeking God's will.<sup>2</sup> They may also see theology-oriented economic policymaking as an act of worship of the Creator, rather than of the

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

created.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as theologian Lesslie Newbigin notes, “the public political act has its real meaning simply as a kind of acted prayer for the coming of God’s reign” (1986, 137).

One way sacred and secular ends intertwine concerns the countercultural nature of biblical scripture and its tendency to speak truth to power. Examples abound from the Old Testament prophets’ focus on the injustices of their day, to Jesus’s reproach of Pharisee and Sadducee religious leaders, to the Bible’s general concern for the vulnerable in society. Consequently, sacred ends may help us consider and achieve secular ends. In the United States, such religious precepts fueled the abolition of slavery, the Civil Rights movement and the Social Gospel movement, the last of which we will discuss as a case study in this paper.

Theocracy is avoided because of the rights inherent in liberal democracy and the duties inherent in Christian theology. As theologian Miraslov Volf writes, “in a polity that calls itself liberal, each ... should have a right to speak in the public square in a voice of its own” (2011, 125). Not only is the right to participate fundamental to a liberal democracy, but also authentic pluralism helps the polity thrive (136).

In terms of a Christian’s duty to the polity, Newbigin (1986, 126) points to the example of Jesus: He “did not set out to destroy the rule exercised by the Roman and Jewish establishment. By manifesting and exercising the true kingship of God, he exposed the corruption and thereby, as Paul says, disarmed them, robbed them of the pretensions to absolute authority. He exercised his kingship by bearing witness to the truth.” Thus, “the place of the Christian must always be outside the citadel of the establishment and on the side of its victims,” and “a church that sees the cross of Jesus as the central event of history can never identify any political order with the reign of God. ... It is only possible to entertain that idea if one denies the biblical account of radical sinfulness of human nature, a sinfulness that no social order will remove” (125).

Because of the “radical sinfulness of human nature,” one might worry that a purported theology-oriented economic policymaking would do more harm than good. However, such an outcome results not from faith, but from what Volf (2011) calls a malfunction of faith. Two relevant malfunctions should be noted here. If “Christian communities withdraw from the world and turn inward, the result will be the idleness of the Christian faith as a prophetic religion. ... On the other hand, if such Christian communities enter the world and attempt to remake it in their own image, ... the Christian faith will become coercive” (88). The path of faith is between idleness and coercion, which is clearly consistent with Jesus’s call for his followers to be both “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-4).

The Social Gospel Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provides answers as to how theology-oriented economic policymaking can be done without idleness or

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Colossians 3:17: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

coercion of faith. As many of their adherents espoused a postmillennial eschatological view, a study of the movement prompts consideration of how eschatological thinking could drive theology-oriented economic policymaking. As will be argued below, however, eschatological concepts of proleptic anticipation and *memento mori* may be better at informing and sustaining economic policymaking than pre- or postmillennialist views alone would.

## 2. The case of the Social Gospel movement

The Social Gospel movement was an American Protestant movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and is considered to be the religious wing of the American Progressive movement of the same time period. Early Social Gospel figures included economists Richard T. Ely, the principal co-founder and first secretary of the American Economic Association, and his noteworthy doctoral student, John R. Commons. For Ely, “the role of economics was to contribute to the requisite base of knowledge in order to succeed in ‘a never ceasing attack on every wrong institution, until the earth becomes a new earth, and all its cities, cities of God’” (quoted in Nelson 2001, 41). Many other founding members of the American Economic Association were also Social Gospelers, including Washington Gladden, a minister who was considered to be a founding father of the Social Gospel movement and an advocate for the rights of African-Americans and of workers to form labor unions (Bateman 2008).

A complete theology of the Social Gospel movement is hard to pin down; attempts to formalize it came late in the movement with Walter Rauschenbusch’s 1917 book, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. Its biblical foundations can be found in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount and more specifically in a passage from the Lord’s Prayer: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Adherents of the Social Gospel movement understood that by working to approximate the kingdom of God on earth, they could help bring forth the prophesied second coming of Christ, thereby fully establishing the kingdom of God on earth. With industrialization as they were experiencing it, Social Gospelers saw great injustices, inequality, poverty and exploitation of the working class. They saw what they perceived as social sins — sins of society — and sought political, economic and social reforms as society’s means to salvation from those sins. Surely the perceived opportunity to bring forth the kingdom of God gave even greater impetus to enact reforms than what economic conditions or general biblical calls to help the poor and vulnerable could have done alone.

The 1908 Social Creed, which was widely adopted by mainline United States Protestant churches, illustrates some of the policies of the Social Gospel movement. “The creed consisted of eleven principles that formed a manifesto for action as well as a statement of faith”, namely:

1. For equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life,
2. For the principle of conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions,
3. For the protection of the worker from dangerous machinery, occupational diseases, injuries and mortality,
4. For the abolition of child labor,
5. For such regulation of the conditions of labor for women as shall safeguard the physical and moral health of the community,
6. For the suppression of the “sweating system,”
7. For the gradual and reasonable reduction of the hours of labor to the lowest practical point, with work for all; and for that degree of leisure for all which is the condition of the highest human life,
8. For a release from employment one day in seven.
9. For a living wage in every industry,
10. For the highest wage that each industry can afford, and for the most equitable division of the products of industry that can ultimately be devised,
11. For the recognition of the Golden Rule and the mind of Christ as the supreme law of society and the sure remedy for all social ills (quoted in Bateman 1998, 40-1).

The Social Gospel movement heavily influenced such political leaders as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, as it would later do for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his work in the Civil Rights movement. Its policy proposals were overwhelmingly enacted. Moreover, as a result of the Social Gospel movement, government intervention in the economy became more widely accepted, as did the role of social scientists in designing appropriate policy. With these successes in mind, Bateman (1998) rhetorically asks “why this movement, if it was so central to American culture, is virtually unknown to us today” (42). The Social Gospel movement was not only a victim of its success, as its call for policy changes were heeded and broadly accepted, but also as Bateman notes, it was appropriated by more nationalistic and less social-reform-minded Protestant ministers during World War I (42-3). Furthermore, and despite the Social Gospel movement’s policy successes, Fogel (2000) reports that its ultimate goal “to reform human nature, to crush evil, and to create God’s kingdom on earth ... [had thus far] failed.” This is a reminder that the ends of theological economics may be varied, and theology-oriented economic policymaking may succeed by some measures yet fail by others.

The Social Gospel movement, the broader Progressive movement, and progressive economists of the era such as Richard Ely are certainly not without additional critiques. One very serious charge is articulated by Thomas Leonard in his 2016 book, *Illiberal Reformers*. He argues that the intellectual legacy of that era’s progressives, including Richard Ely, is tainted by

exclusionary views on eugenics, race and immigration. Economist Marshall Steinbaum and historian Bernard Weisberger (2017, 1064) counter that “those [retrograde] views were common to a broad swath of the intellectual elite of that era, including the progressives’ staunchest opponents.” Nonetheless, this does not excuse what some progressives of the era wrote and said. Richard Ely, among others, clearly did not rise to the standards of his profession or faith.

Attention is brought to this controversy because it ought to give pause as one considers the potential use and misuse of theology-oriented economic policymaking. Certainly, the possibility exists for what Volf (2011, 10) considers to be a malfunction of faith where “speaking and acting in the name of God is employed to promote preset desirable ends.” Tatum (2017) lays out a code of conduct for scholars of theological economics, but suffice it here to say that keys to avoiding this trap include humility and repentance. Consistent with Ephesians 4:2, humility directs not going beyond what theology supports. Repentance is necessary when mistakes are made. There should be acknowledgement of and remorse for not only our own mistakes, but also those that have preceded us.

Even from a purely secular perspective, though, the Social Gospel movement and the related policies researched and advocated by progressive economists of the era highlight the value of pluralism that an interdisciplinary field of theological economics can help facilitate. Beyond the long list of policy achievements Leonard acknowledges, Steinbaum and Weisberger (2017) note that these scholars were conducting and advocating for research methods the field has only recently come to fully embrace; it “[analyzes] new sources of data using methods that cast doubt on the received wisdom of old models, which had themselves been accepted largely in the absence of evidence” (1078, 1081). Recent studies of wage setting are also consistent with what these progressive economists understood; they “find a substantial and increasing role for firm-specific bargaining that cannot be explained by worker-side characteristics,” unlike John Bates Clark’s neoclassical theory of labor and its more contemporary derivations (1073). The point here is not to examine this literature, but to illustrate how theological economics could alter not only the questions asked but also how to approach those questions in economic analysis and policymaking. Accordingly, it is worth examining the Social Gospel movement further to see what lessons may be learned and whether those lessons could be more widely applied.

### **3. A generalizable model?**

The Social Gospel movement certainly fits reasonable criteria for theology-oriented economic policymaking. First, the policies’ orientation (e.g. improving labor conditions) and their motivation (i.e. bringing forth the kingdom of God) are both grounded in theology. Second, the Social Gospel policies were geared toward reform of the economic and political system rather

than its replacement. Third, the policy proposals of the Social Gospel movement were informed by some of the most notable economic and sociological analysis of the time. Not only did “economics, political science, and sociology all [emerge] in American universities as the result of the influence of the Social Gospel,” but Social Gospelers were also early and active users of social surveys (Bateman 2008). In short, while utilizing the skills of social scientists in policy formulation and analysis, the Social Gospel movement’s theology encouraged both engagement in the public sphere and application of theology and economics to policymaking. Questions remain as to whether the Social Gospel movement represents a generalizable and sustainable model of theology-oriented economic policymaking. A key to answering these can be found with regard to eschatology.

Eschatology is useful because focusing on the end changes one’s understanding of present circumstances. According to theologian Hans Schwarz (2000, 26), “eschatology includes all concepts of life beyond death and everything connected to it,” and it “is determined by and determines our understanding of humanity, of body and soul, and of value systems and worldviews.” He goes on to write that “most religions envision a final end of all history when our present world will come to a close and a new world will appear” (365). Eschatological concepts are central to the New Testament. The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes (3:11) goes as far as declaring that God “has put eternity into man’s heart.” In terms of its influence, historian Paul Boyer’s 1992 study, *When Time Shall Be No More*, found prophecy belief has particularly and significantly affected American thought and culture.

Postmillennial theology, shared by many in the Social Gospel movement, was an impetus for their advocacy for policy reforms. This theology interprets Revelation chapter 20’s reference to a thousand years as a period of righteous rule before the second coming of Jesus Christ, rather than the period after his second coming, as premillennialists believe. On the one hand, such a view of eschatology would draw its followers to develop and support policies that are consistent with what they thought would bring forth the kingdom of God. On the other hand, if the kingdom of God does not materialize as they perceived it would in terms of timeline or expected outcomes, they would either abandon policy reform or support it through other rationale. George Herron, a leading figure of the Social Gospel movement, is a great example of one who prophesied about bringing an approximation of the kingdom of God to earth, but was mournful when it did not occur (Marty 1986, 157). Thus, absent the arrival of the kingdom of God in some reasoned amount of time, postmillennial-theology-influenced movements like the Social Gospel have not been sustainable over the long term — despite their natural affinity for policy action. At first glance, this would suggest that eschatology is of no value to theology-oriented economic policymaking, but that ignores the concept of proleptic anticipation, which could be consistent with a variety of millennial views.

Proleptic anticipation is acting in the present with knowledge and understanding of the new world to come, a hope that is recognized by the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:18-24 (NIV):

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?

Schwarz (2000, 407) contends that proleptic anticipation is the most “viable” response of Christians to the future:

Knowing that the future has already begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it dares to anticipate proleptically this future along the avenue which the Christ event provides. This process of active anticipation strives for a better humanity, a more just society, and a more worldly world to live in. But since it is only anticipation, Christian faith is realistic enough to take into account our intrinsic alienation from God.

This response stands in contrast to possible responses of “despairing resignation” and “futuristic activism.” With despairing resignation, believers understand their future in the kingdom of God, but any human attempts to approximate that end are expected to utterly fail. With futuristic activism, believers are confident they can bring forth the kingdom of God through their own powers. Between these two responses, proleptic anticipation recognizes limitations, but also provides vision and hope that the present world can be improved (Schwartz 2000, 405-7). Arguably then, reform movements are more likely to be initiated and sustained when advocates act out of proleptic anticipation than through pre- or postmillennial views alone.

Reformers of faith may be wary that proleptic anticipation and any reforms advocated therefrom could succumb to being treated as ends unto themselves, like idols, rather than in acknowledgement of and response to a loving God. In such a case, for believers, these reforms

too will not have lasting impact.<sup>4</sup> This also suggests that the path for the reformer of faith is narrow, but eschatological thinking is still essential to it. If “the present and the future are perceived as so radically disjunctive, ... either otherworldly retreat or this-worldly activism results” (Schwarz 2000, 381).

Even though proleptic anticipation is, by its very character, forward looking, it is biblically consistent in that it is not a call to worry or be anxious. Echoing numerous other scriptures, Matthew (6:34) writes: “Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious about itself. Proleptic anticipation, then, is looking to the good that will come, acting now in accordance with that, and with the peace of which Jesus speaks in John 14:27 (NIV): “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

A proleptic anticipation response is consistent not only with scripture, but also with what some Social Gospel leaders such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Shailer Mathews advocated. Rauschenbusch (1913, 126) writes that “we shall demand perfection and never expect to get it. But by demanding it we shall get more than we now have.” In eschatological context, the Apostle Paul calls for believers to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus seems to admonish his followers to utilize the time before his second coming for the benefit of the kingdom (Matthew 25:14-30). Scriptures such as the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) are reminders, however, that utopia will not be reached and that not all wrongs will be righted in the present world (Lowery 2005, 437).

Through proleptic anticipation, eschatology provides not only a case for policy reforms, but also a basis for them. According to Mary Doak (2002, 126), “an eschatological (or utopian) ideal may inspire efforts for radical and systemic change (which Rauschenbusch espoused), but it can also be invoked in support of moderate reform (as in Mathews’ work). Yet another option is the [Reinhold] Niebuhrian ‘realism’ that acknowledges the need for radical change while pursuing those policies likely to be of real benefit given the situation.” Whether radical change, moderate reform or second-best policies — each would benefit from the expertise of economics and other social sciences in addition to the guidance of theology.

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the Apostle Paul’s writing in 1 Corinthians 3:10-5: “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”

#### 4. Potential influence on policymaking

Why focus on eschatology in particular? In short, eschatology provides hope and proleptic anticipation acts on that hope. Moreover, eschatological thinking can influence how economic analysis and policymaking are pursued.

First, eschatology puts the end in sharp relief; it leads to *memento mori*, keeping in mind the inevitability of death. Accordingly, eschatological thinking could prompt policymakers to not delay difficult decisions and actions until a future time. Just as the prophet Isaiah told Hezekiah to “set his house in order for [he] shall die,” and Hezekiah listened, acted and was thereby granted longer life (Isaiah 38:1-5), *memento mori* has a way of setting people to action. The purpose of *memento mori*, though, is not only to provide certainty of the end, but also to serve as a reminder of the uncertainty leading up to the end and to encourage preparation for that as well. “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2), but as the parables of Matthew 25 teach, preparation for and amid uncertainty is essential. However, economists and policymakers are only recently coming to terms with how to prevent and mitigate against the effects of low-probability, high-impact events such as those resulting from financial crises, climate change and pandemics. They are also only recently recognizing the economic and psychological costs of living in uncertainty, especially for the poor. Preemptive eschatological thought by economists could have prepared them for surprise events, allowing them to better soften the blows and to help untangle known environmental issues and poverty considerations.

Second, eschatological thinking can provide the requisite vision of human flourishing to orient policymaking, as well as provoke new ideas in policymaking more generally. However, economists and policymakers have hereto mostly used history — what has worked and not worked — to dictate how they proceed. Such “evolution allows for nothing genuinely new. ... The vision of a new world, however, goes beyond these possibilities and opts for something radically new” (Schwarz 2000, 387). Ideas matter; vision matters. In fact, the writer of Proverbs (29:18) notes, “where there is no vision, the people perish.” Consequently, eschatological considerations would allow for a radical rethinking of policymaking, its goals, and the overall vision for society.

Once a vision has been developed, eschatological ideals may not change, but the areas that are furthest from those ideals do change. Consider by analogy the Old Testament prophets. The standard of justice might not have changed in the Old Testament, but the particular injustices perpetrated at given times and places did vary. Likewise, different policies will be needed now and in the future than were needed in the past to properly orient ourselves toward our eschatological goals. For instance, Tatum (2020) notes that economic growth has slowed in high-income countries without reason to expect a reversal in this trend. Yet, no effective replacement has emerged to the mid to late 20th-century secular vision of a rising tide of

economic growth lifting all boats. With low growth rates as well as low expected returns to growth, a wider range of policies needs to be embraced in order to better facilitate human flourishing. Eschatological thinking would help economists and policymakers widen the scope and consider anew such biblical insights as those concerning work, rest, debt, stewardship, poverty, integrity and our relationship to others — just as the eschatological thinking of the Social Gospel movement led the United States to much-needed labor policies in the early 20th century.

To the degree the vision for humanity is accepted in society, the demand for scientific and social scientific research would rise as policymakers consider how to move closer to that vision, in the same way that demand rose in the era of the Social Gospel. Arguably, economists are well positioned to determine efficient ways to reach goals and for finding second-best solutions when ideals are unattainable. These and other efforts in policymaking may take on transcendental qualities in as much as God uses humans to realize His transformative work in this world. While human instrumentality in God's transformative work is recognized, eschatological thinking also enables acceptance of the limits of human power for lasting change.

Furthermore, eschatological thinking counters assumptions of continual progress evident in Enlightenment and mainstream economic thinking, as well as assumptions of pending doom evident in some premillennial and secular apocalyptic thinking. This could also reduce the pervasiveness and impact of the self-defeating prophecies of the former and the self-fulfilling prophecies of the latter. More generally, eschatological thinking could limit how much faith is placed in technology, progress, human goodness and other potential sources of wishful thinking for humanity's salvation, so that issues can be faced in more sober ways. Even if eschatological thinking replaces one set of hopes with another, this is not necessarily bad; well-placed hope can be transformative.

Hope is at the heart of eschatological thinking. As can be seen with Old Testament prophets, final judgment may even be postponed with repentance and change, again suggesting human instrumentality in God's transformative work in the world. However, eschatological thinking could also help one to not fear the end. The early Church did not seem to fear it. At the very end of the Book of Revelation, after foretelling a series of apocalyptic events, the author declares without any apparent fear: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20 NKJV).

Nonetheless, what may be the most significant implication for eschatology-influenced policymaking is that eschatological thinking can help provide "hope for the victims of history, for those aspects of all of us not yet developed in this life, and, ultimately, for humanity itself" (Doak 2002, 117). "As [theologian] Jurgen Moltmann points out, this complacent refusal to imagine alternatives ignores the often-voiceless victims produced by our [political and economic systems]" (109). Theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Rauschenbusch would also have contended that "an entirely this-worldly or historical hope [accepts] an unjust triumph of the

victors of history at the expense of their victims” (122). Economics trains one to examine the general welfare, but eschatology pushes consideration beyond this to what remains to be done to reach the eschatological ideal. For example, Rauschenbusch and Mathews both saw that “historical struggles and achievements have value insofar as they partially attain the ideal, yet are critiqued in light of their distance from it” (120). To this end, theological economists could and should consider the differential impact economic policies can have. As is evident in the current political climate, failure to consider these differential impacts results in outcomes that negatively affect the general welfare anyway.

To be clear, the above argument is not that theology-oriented economic policymaking can solve every injustice or inequity, or that it will bring utopia to this world — as it certainly won't. Rather, it realigns and refocuses eschatological hope as a primary motivation. It also does not preclude hope through a personal afterlife. In fact, one could see these two hopes — the communal and the personal — as complements rather than substitutes. If the poor, hungry, weeping and hated are not blessed with the kingdom of God, satisfaction, laughter and inclusion, respectively, in this life, then hope can remain that these blessings enumerated in Luke 6:20-2 can be claimed in the afterlife. With proleptic anticipation, those ends can be acted on now. If the societal reforms fail to materialize or to accomplish their goals, eschatological hope remains — which in and of itself can support the functioning of society.

Sacred eschatologies are fundamentally different from secular notions of utopian design or apocalyptic avoidance if only because the former's understanding of God gives time its specific “origin and destination” and humanity its specific purpose (Schwarz 2000, 369). In proleptic anticipation, Christians “do not attempt to fulfill a dream or a utopian vision but live according to the presence of God through his Spirit” (378). However, that does not mean eschatology-influenced economic policymaking is only the purview of economists and policymakers of faith. Concepts such as *memento mori* are just as relevant for such secular apocalyptic concerns as climate change or economic collapse. The sacred can also have synergies with the secular. For instance, work on environmental stewardship, peace among people and people groups, and protection for the vulnerable can be both acts of proleptic anticipation by believers and movement toward secular goals by wider sets of collaborators. Thus, in these respects, the two need not be at odds.

## **5. To whose end and when?**

It has been this author's conviction, expressed here and elsewhere, that theology is useful not only to economists and policymakers of religious faith, but also to the fields of economics and public policy more generally, just as psychology is to behavioral economics and feminist theory

is to feminist economics. An interdisciplinary field of theological economics can alter the questions we ask and how we approach those questions in our economic analysis and policymaking. However, as the present study suggests, theological economics would likely be of greater value to those of religious faith. For example, proleptic anticipation may be divinely important for the religious faithful, both as a response to God and as a basis for their interactions with the wider world. With regard to the latter, Schwarz (2000, 374) argues that “if the church wants to be the reminder of the future, it dare not leave humanity as it is, in its dispersion, antagonism, and self-destruction.”

Even if the nature and relevance of proleptic anticipation and other theological concepts are different for those who hold sacred eschatological views than for those who hold secular or no eschatological views, eschatological thinking can nonetheless add value more broadly. Consider again the ways sacred eschatological thinking can influence economic analysis and policymaking as discussed in the previous section, namely by:

- discouraging procrastination on difficult decisions and actions,
- emphasizing the need for appropriate preparations in a world of uncertainty,
- providing a requisite vision of human flourishing,
- going beyond history and evolutionary processes to a wider set of possibilities,
- allowing for dynamic policy responses to changing circumstances,
- raising demand for scientific and social scientific research as to how humanity can more efficiently move closer to the ideal,
- recognizing the possibility of human instrumentality in God’s transformative work,
- accepting the limits of human power for lasting change,
- countering assumptions of continual progress or pending doom and their potential to paralyze policy efforts,
- limiting the faith placed in technology, progress, human goodness, and so forth,
- leaving the door open for repentance and change, and
- providing a sense of hope and purpose especially for the victims of history and those aspects of everyone not yet developed in history, all while
- complementing the hope one may have of a personal afterlife.

Perhaps slightly restated, many of these are also relevant for secular eschatologies. To the extent that proleptic anticipation is a sacred eschatological concept rather than a secular one, *memento mori* could be the minimally sufficient condition for some aspects of eschatological thinking to affect economic analysis and policymaking. Proleptic anticipation may be necessary for all of them, however.

The case of the Social Gospel movement provides at least four lessons as to how a theological economist, particularly one of faith, should proceed. First, it is worth considering one's eschatological views and how they implicitly affect one's perceptions of the role and efficacy of policies. For instance, without proleptic anticipation, premillennial views would lead to different approaches to and goals for policymaking than postmillennial views would. Second, remember that policy reform is not an end unto itself. Also "no matter how much we emphasize the emancipatory character of eschatology, it is only proleptic anticipation and [it too is] not the end itself" (Schwarz 2000, 382). Third, great care and humility need to be taken to avoid overreach, "blind spots, and biases" (Bateman 2016). This may avoid unfulfilled expectations such as those of George Herron and ill-considered and counterproductive messages such as ones by Richard Ely. Finally, for sustainability and greatest impact, the process of theology-oriented economic policymaking should be considered to be at least as important as any particular policy outcome. Unfortunately, in the case of the Social Gospel movement, once the championed policy goals were enacted, momentum was lost, and no meaningful efforts were taken to institutionalize an approach to theology-oriented economic analysis and policymaking.

Is now an appropriate time for theology-oriented economic policymaking? Has the opportunity passed for an interdisciplinary field of theological economics to grow and flourish, given the greater societal secularization of the present era, as well as the politicization of religion? Parallels can be found in the past. Just as American economics experienced greater plurality in the Social Gospel era with the coexistence of institutional and neoclassical schools of thought than it did in the decades that followed, contemporary economics may be presently more open to critique and diversity in methodological approaches than it was ten or twenty years ago. Modest goals of introducing new questions, approaches and objectives into economic analysis and policymaking are achievable, regardless of whether theological economists are inside or "outside the citadel of the establishment" (Newbiggin 1986, 125). Outside of divine providence, though, appropriate timing might not be fully understood or predicted anyway. For example, in looking back, Walter Rauschenbusch referred to the 1890s as a "dark time" for advocates of the Social Gospel movement (Bateman 2008). Still, in this dark period, Richard Ely continued to organize summer seminars and Washington Gladden continued to preach on social problems. If anything can be drawn from eschatological thinking, as well as from such scriptures as Esther 4:14, Mark 1:15, John 9:4 and 2 Corinthians 6:2, it is that there is no time like the present to prepare for the future.

## References

- Bateman, Bradley W. 1998. "Clearing the Ground: The Demise of the Social Gospel Movement and the Rise of Neoclassicism in American Economics." *History of Political Economy* 30 (Supplement): 29-52.
- Bateman, Bradley W. 2008. "The Social Gospel and the Progressive Era." In *Divining America: Religion in American History*. Accessed December 10, 2020. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/socgospel.htm>.
- Bateman, Bradley W. 2016. "The Evangelical Roots of American Economics." *The Atlantic*, February 8.
- Boyer, Paul S. 1992. *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Doak, Mary. 2002. "Hope, Eschatology, and Public Life: The Contributions of Rauschenbusch, Mathews, and Niebuhr to Reopening the American Imagination." *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 23, no. 2: 108-28.
- Fogel, Robert. 2000. *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hay, Donald A. 1989. *Economics Today: A Christian Critique*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Lowery, Mark. 2005. "The 'Eschatological Principle' in Catholic Social Thought." *Journal of Markets and Morality* 8, no. 2: 435-53.
- Marty, Martin E. 1986. "Comment." In *Religion, Economics, and Social Thought*, edited by W. Block and I. Hexham, 153-9. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute.
- Nelson, Robert H. 2001. *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. 1986. *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Rauschenbusch, Walter. 1913. *Christianizing the Social Order*. New York: Macmillan.
- Schwarz, Hans. 2000. *Eschatology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Steinbaum, Marshall I., and Bernard A. Weisberger. 2017. "The Intellectual Legacy of Progressive Economics: A Review Essay of Thomas C. Leonard's *Illiberal Reformers*." *Journal of Economic Literature* 55, no. 3: 1064-83.
- Tatum, Robert C. 2017. "A Theology of Economic Reform." *Faith and Economics* 69: 63-83.
- Tatum, Robert C. 2020. "Move Beyond the One-Hit Wonder of Economic Growth and Use the Whole Hymnal." *KLICE Nuances in Public Theology*, no. 2.
- Tiemstra, John P., ed. 1990. *Reforming Economics: Calvinist Studies on Methods and Institutions*. Lewiston: Mellen.

Volf, Miroslav. 2011. *A Public Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos.