The Silent Shapers of our Thoughts: The Relevance of the Concept of "Vision" in the Aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis

PAUL R. KOCH
Olivet Nazarene University
pkoch@olivet.edu

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ABSTRACT: This essay is an exploration of the meaning and significance of the concept of "vision" in economic analysis. It includes a definition of the term and its use by previous economists, its importance for the form and structure of economic inquiry, its relevance to an understanding of the debate over the future of the global economy in the wake of the financial crisis, and an examination of the nature of Christian reflection on this topic, particularly with respect to its significance for instructional design and the ongoing conversation about these issues within the church.

INTRODUCTION

The word "vision" is a familiar one within the context of the biblical revelation, as well as in the history and tradition of the Christian church. In Acts 26:19, the Apostle Paul tells King Agrippa that he "was not disobedient to the vision from heaven" that he received from the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. Robin Griffith-Jones in his book on the life of the Apostle Paul has observed that "any conversation about society, politics, or ethics will want to have words for a world in which justness dwells . . . We need to believe that our fragmentary world offers more than just willful or fantastical grounds for hope" (2004, p. 111). Robert Benne has written that "vision" is one of the "three components of the Christian tradition that must be publicly relevant" (2001, p. 6). Benne proceeded to assert that "the vision is Christianity's articulated account of reality. It is a comprehensive account encompassing all of life; it provides the umbrella of meaning under which all facets of life and learning are gathered and interpreted" (2001, p. 6).

Within the realms of modern economics, especially those conversations that take place in the pages of most academic journals and the sessions of many professional meetings, however, the use of this term will probably result in a) an offer to provide directions to the sociology department, or b) a question as to how this concept can be quantified in such a way that it could be included as an explanatory variable in a properly specified regression equation. If we widen the scope of our inquiry from "economics" to "political economy," the proposition that the concept of vision is relevant to an examination of economic issues and controversies is more likely to receive a favorable hearing. Such a conclusion is supported by the observation that the debate over the financial crisis, with respect to both its cause(s) and the relative merits of alternative institutional and policy responses, has been couched in moral terms from the very beginning.

This essay seeks to explore the following questions:

1) What is an economic vision?
2) Why are economic visions important?
3) How is this concept relevant to an understanding of the global economy in the wake of the financial crisis?
4) What might Christians think about the concept of "vision" in economics?

WHAT IS AN ECONOMIC VISION?

Almost 30 years ago, Robert Heilbroner posed the question of why economists often come to different conclusions about matters of mutual interest, especially when the issue at hand is what he termed "the cosmological problem of economics, namely, the social configurations of production and consumption" (1984, p. 682). Referring collectively to the scholarly work of Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes, and Joseph Schumpeter, Heilbroner concluded that these economists "seem to have resolved the cosmological problem not by looking into their telescopes but into their hearts, projecting into the skies the constellations they wished to see there" (1984, p. 683). Drawing upon Schumpeter's analysis, Heilbroner used the term "vision" in order to describe these alternative projections, employing Schumpeter's definition of a vision as a "pre-analytic cognitive act" (Heilbroner, 1990, p. 1109; Schumpeter, 1954, p. 41). He maintained that these visions were "acts that not only fulfill the essential task of reducing raw perceptions to ordered concepts but that also imbue these concepts with qualities of inevitability and rightness" (1990, p. 1110) and that "what is important is to see all visions as expressions of the inescapable need to infuse 'meaning' — to discover a comprehensible framework in the world" (1990, p. 1112). Heilbroner asserted that "Marx's vision of human emancipation, realized through class struggle, is the starting point and the end point of the analysis contained within *Capital*," and "(Adam) Smith's visionary deistic order precedes and guides the processes of self-ordering growth described in the *Wealth of Nations*" (1990, p. 1110).

How can we explain the existence of alternative visions among a community of individuals who are committed, in Heilbroner's words, to "a shared analytic method?" (1984, p. 685). One hypothesis that was put forth by Heilbroner consisted of "differing specifications of the *empirical* (emphasis in the original) elements from which economic models are constructed — that is, of different real-world attributes that appear, in stylized form, as part of the scenario" (p. 685). He argued, "The introduction of new empirical elements . . . is clearly capable of altering the conclusions of which analytical processes drive the argument, as well as suggesting different likelihoods of political outcomes" (1984, p. 686). Heilbroner presented "David Ricardo's insertion of the empirical assumption of limited land resources into Smith's (initial) model," which had "immense consequences for political economy as well as economics," as an example (p. 686). The economic implications of the revolution in information and communications technology might very well constitute a more contemporary application of this argument. A second explanation, which was presented by Heilbroner, consisted of "the divergent effects that follow from different perceptions" of the competitive process in a capitalist system, maintaining that "competition for Marx is very different from competition for Schumpeter or Keynes" (1984, p. 687). In our present age, there is a tremendous difference among the public at large between those who view the market process, both domestically and internationally, as a zero-sum affair that redistributes a given quantity of wealth and those who see trade and exchange as a cooperative means of expanding the supply of resources that can be devoted to both public and private endeavors. Fundamental differences in vision can also help to explain the wide variation in grand narratives — "big stories" — that have unfolded in the aftermath of the financial crisis, both with respect to the cause of these developments and the efficacy of alternative policy and institutional responses.

Aside from these previous elements, Heilbroner placed considerable emphasis on what Mark Blaug has defined as "appraising value judgments" as a source for visionary economic thought. Blaug states that judgments of this type "refer to evaluative assertions about states of the world, including the desirability of certain kinds of human behavior and the social outcomes that are produced by that behavior" (1980, p. 132). In Heilbroner's view, judgments of this type are intertwined with the "pre-analytic cognitive acts," which constituted Schumpeter's definition of a vision (1984, p. 688). Andrea Maneschi (2000, p.21) has commented that "the collection of economists that Schumpeter judged to be endowed with vision (capitalization in the original) is highly heterogeneous," including Karl Marx and John Maynard Keynes, but excluding Adam Smith and David Ricardo. By contrast, Hans Jensen (1976, p. 260; 1984, pp. 76-77) has contended that the work of both Smith and Keynes began with a "visionary preamble" that led to a "conceptualized reality," defined as "a mental picture of the world that is devised by an innovating economist . . . for the specific purpose of serving him as a substitute for the socio-economic actual-

ity in which he lives." Maneschi has also observed that Schumpeter drew a connection between the concepts of vision and ideology in the following manner:

> Now it should be perfectly clear that there is a wide gate for ideology to enter into this process (of developing scientific propositions). In fact, it enters on the very ground floor, into the pre-analytic cognitive act of which we have been speaking. Analytic work begins with material provided by our vision of things, and this vision is ideological almost by definition. It embodies the picture of things as we see them, and wherever there is any possible motive for wishing to see them in a given rather than another light, the way in which we see things can hardly be distinguished from the way in which we wish to see them (Schumpeter, 1954, p. 42).

Thomas Sowell (1987, p. 8), who provided the main title of this essay with his observation that "we all have visions" that serve as "the silent shapers of our thoughts," has also made use of Schumpeter's descriptions. His own definition of a vision, in an economic context, is "our sense of how the world works" (1987, p. 14) and a sense of *causation* (emphasis in the original) that is "more like a hunch or a 'gut feeling' than it is like an exercise in logic or factual verification. These things come later, and feed on the raw material provided by the vision" (1987, p. 16). Sowell has also concluded that visions represent "the foundations on which theories are built" (1987, p. 14) and may be "religious, tribal, or ideological in nature" (Sowell, 1980, p. 8).

Drawing upon all of these previously cited sources, the operating definition of an economic vision, for the purposes of this essay, is as follows: *an initial outlook on economic affairs that not only provides the basic foundation for future assumptions and theories, but that also furnishes all of these constructs with an over-arching sense of meaning and purpose*.

WHY ARE ECONOMIC VISIONS IMPORTANT?

Sowell's comments with respect to visions are not limited to their definition, but extend to their significance and meaning as well. As a case in point, he has asserted that "visions are like maps that guide us through a tangle of bewildering complexities" (1987, p. 13), and he elaborated on the importance of what he termed "social visions" in the following statement:

> Social visions are important in a number of ways. The most obvious is that policies based on a certain vision of the world have consequences that spread through society and reverberate across the years, or even across generations or centuries. Visions set the agenda for both thought and action. Visions fill in the necessarily large gaps in individual knowledge (1987, p. 16).

Economic visions, especially when they are communicated in the language of metaphor and analogy, also represent an attempt to provide a broader set of moral justifications for particular economic institutions and policies. W. Fred Graham has concluded "that social, political, and economic change — secular change, to sum up in one catchword all that we persist in seeing as nonreligious — needs religious meaning and zeal to provide the dynamic to bring it about," and visions are designed to furnish that sense of meaning (1978, p. 24). In more contemporary language, they constitute what post-modern scholars, such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, have described as a "great narrative," concluding that both the Enlightenment and Marxist narratives "deploy the same historicity as Christianity, because they conserve the eschatological principle," even though the first two visions are secular in nature (1997, p. 97). William Milberg has referred to explanations of this type as a "metanarrative," defining them as a "narrative that purports to capture the totality of a given field and thus that serves to structure its knowledge" (2001, p. 409). The importance of these narratives was supported by Heilbroner when he maintained that "*there is no manner of describing a social universe without these valuational elements*" (emphasis in the original) and that the "very humanness (of what we call 'society') brings wish, hope, purpose, and understanding into the elemental stuff of the social universe itself" (1984, p. 689). A central theme of this line of thought is that alternative visions of political economy, as opposed to competing theories or discrepancies in empirical analysis, are largely responsible for situations in which people who share an equal degree of concern about a particular problem (e.g., global poverty) arrive at very different evaluations with respect to whether or not certain processes, such as an increased degree of economic integration between nation-states, make a net contribution to the alleviation or the exacerbation of the problem at hand. The distinction between visions, paradigms, and theories, both in sequence and substance, is an important one. Drawing upon the work of Thomas Kuhn (1970, p. 10), Sowell has written that "whether in science or in social thought, visions or inspirations come first and are

subsequently systematized into paradigms, which embrace specific theories, and their narrowly focused hypotheses, which can be tested against evidence" (1987, p. 10). Heinz Kohler has added that "a model is a logical derivative of a vision, a simplified representation of what reality must be like if the vision is true" (1997, p. 102). This process, however, does not necessarily lead to an end result where particular visions are vindicated or invalidated, on the whole, by the available evidence at hand. Sowell has analyzed this situation as follows:

> Definitive evidence cannot be expected on the grand general sweep of a vision. A great deal of partial evidence may be accumulated on each side, but the evidence for and against one's own vision can be weighed differently, and being convinced is ultimately a subjective process. Even in those cases where a clear confrontation in empirical terms can be arranged and evidence produced, every lost battle on one front does not signal the end of the war, much less unconditional surrender. When hypotheses deriving from a particular vision are contradicted by evidence in the form in which they were first asserted, they may nevertheless be salvageable in a less extreme or more complex form (1997, p. 206).

If we take "globalization" as a case in point, a number of its proponents, both in previous eras as well as in our present time, have constructed their arguments on the foundation of what might be termed the "liberal vision": the free movement of goods, services, financial capital, information and people across national boundaries. Adherents to this vision believe that this movement will not only promote prosperity for all who participate in the market process but will also bring about a greater degree of cultural understanding, weaken the appeal of nationalist or xenophobic sentiments, and further the cause of peace. Richard Cobden's campaign for a liberal trading regime in 19th century Britain provides an excellent historical example. In an essay marking the 100th anniversary of free trade in the United Kingdom, Wilhelm Ropke recalled that "Cobden's battle cry was 'free trade, goodwill, and peace among nations'" (1969, p. 103). Bernard Semmel concluded that "Cobden saw free trade as inexorable truth, proceeding as it did, logically, from the principles of the science of political economy, and as so universally beneficial that to oppose it was the devil's work. For Cobden, free trade was virtually a scriptural principle, and much of English non-conformity shared his view" (Semmel, 1970, p. 159). More recently, Alan Ebenstein has written, in his biography of Nobel Laureate Friedrich von Hayek, that Hayek "rejected economic nationalism" — a philosophy which is opposed to a liberal international economic order — because "it hinders the dream of one human race" (2001, p. 52). Similar sentiments were expressed, during the time period between the two World Wars, by Edwin Cannan:

> It is conceivable that in some far future the apostles of separatist nationalism may realize their ideal of cutting up mankind into a few score or hundred economically independent units which will exchange nothing except perhaps shells and poison gas. But if that is ever to be, it certainly is not yet, and it is not likely that the youngest of us will live to see it. For my own part I have sufficient faith in mankind to think that a gradual breaking down of national barriers is more probable (1929, p. 391-392).

It has been argued by scholars such as John Gray (1998), Paul Dembinski (2004), and Ernesto Screpanti and Stefano Zamagni (2005), that the liberal vision is inherently utopian in nature, and that this is a characteristic which it shares, ironically, with the particular visions of socialism that inspired the attempts at economic planning in the 20th century. As an example, Screpanti and Zamagni (2005, p. 463) observed that neoclassical economic thought and Marxism share "four basic philosophical bearings," the last of which is "an optimistic metanarrative of the fates of humankind . . . that accounts for the subject's capacity to mold the world to satisfy a universal purpose conceived as the product of reason." Let us suppose, nevertheless, that one finds this liberal vision of international economic integration, perhaps in a restrained version that has abandoned any utopian inclinations, to be both persuasive and appealing. If this is the case, then how does one respond to the critics of globalization who argue that this is a false vision, the pursuit of which leads to an increase in the degree of inequality in the global distribution of income and wealth (both between and within countries), a weakening in the authority of sovereign governments and democratic institutions, and the dilution of cultural identities? At this point, perhaps it would be appropriate to remember Thomas Sowell's previously cited admonition: "When hypotheses deriving from a particular vision are contradicted by evidence in the form in which they were first asserted, they may nevertheless be salvageable in a less extreme or more complex form." If the expansion of "the extent of the market," to use Adam Smith's phrase (1981, p. 31), across the globe has pro-

duced an asymmetric distribution of benefits and costs, why is this the case? Is the liberal vision fundamentally flawed and incapable of repair, or is there the possibility for revision and amendment?

HOW IS THIS CONCEPT RELEVANT TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY IN THE WAKE OF THE FINANCIAL CRISIS?

The international political economy of the twentieth century was dominated by an intellectual competition between alternative capitalist and socialist visions of the appropriate economic order. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of almost all attempts to administratively plan an entire economy, it would seem that what Graham has characterized as the "eschatological religious visions of Marx" faded as well (1978, p. 25). Even if this is the case, however, recent historical experience, especially in the wake of the recent financial crisis and global recession, would strongly suggest that the global debate, at the level of vision, is far from over. Critics of the liberal vision were quick to suggest, beginning with the first rumblings in stock markets around the world as the housing "bubble" began to deflate in 2007, that these events were a logical consequence of giving free rain to the "unfettered" forces of the marketplace, especially in an age of international financial integration and increasingly complicated avenues for investment. With the passage of time, supporters of the free market launched an "intellectual counter-attack," maintaining that the source of our economic difficulties was more likely to be found in political (counter-productive policies and regulations) and/or cultural (a lack of personal discipline with respect to matters of credit and debt) sources. This contrast in perspectives was summarized by Christopher Caldwell (2008, p. 7) in the following manner:

> Is our present financial crisis the result of a mistake or a crime? Is it evidence of incompetence or of corruption? Is its remedy to be sought in committee rooms or in individual consciences? . . . The public has no settled idea about whether the global finance system seized up last summer because it was mismanaged or because it was, in a moral and metaphysical sense, wrong.

Could it be that the alternative answers to Caldwell's questions that are provided by different analysts of our economic problems stem, to a greater degree, from their "pre-analytic cognitive acts" than from their reading and interpretation of the available evidence? If someone's fundamental thoughts about economic matters have been shaped by an outlook that is characterized by a relative lack of trust in, or suspicion about, the market process of voluntary exchange between willing parties, they are more likely to embrace a point of view which attributes the financial crisis to criminal, corrupt, or at least unethical behavior. At the present time, the "Occupy Wall Street" protests would seem to qualify as an example of this phenomenon. By contrast, those who are predisposed to be skeptical about the efficacy of various forms of public economic intervention are more likely to conclude that the crisis was largely due to the incompetence or poor management of policymakers. In the context of current affairs, the "Tea Party" movement might very well serve as a case in point. Finally, observers who emphasize the importance of cultural factors, as opposed to economic or political forces, are more likely to stress the failure of individual consciences with respect to "living within one's means" in *both* the public and the private sector. Authors and commentators within the Christian community who cast a critical eye on *all* forms of debt provide a relevant and timely example of this perspective.

Discerning the influence of alternative visions in constructing a grand narrative of recent events may also be complicated by the ongoing presence of what David Henderson has categorized as "do-it-yourself economics," or DIYE (2001, p. 14). Henderson claims that the following list represents some of the "characteristic doctrines" of DIYE:

1) Industries or activities can be classed as either 'essential' or 'non-essential,' or ranked in order of priority.
2) Governments should ensure self-sufficiency in essentials, and provide systematic support to products, industries, and sectors which have high priority.
3) International competition is primarily between states.
4) Exports represent a gain to each country and imports a loss.
5) Tariffs, import restrictions and export subsidies serve to increase total employment.
6) Administrative actions to reduce or constrain the size of the labor force will ease the problem of unemployment.
7) Actions undertaken for profit, or more broadly from self-interest, are open to question as such (pp. 14-15).

In the wake of recent events, perhaps a motion could be made, and seconded, to add two more "doctrines" to this list that are peculiar to the financial crisis. The former tends to be emphasized by adherents of the political "left,"

while the latter finds support primarily among supporters of the political "right":

8) The financial crisis was almost entirely the result of "unrestrained self-interest" and "greed," which by necessity led to decisions that were unethical at best and criminal at their worst.
9) The financial crisis was almost entirely the result of excessive levels of private and public debt, which proves that all forms of debt are undesirable and are to be avoided, regardless of the purpose or function.

Do these "doctrines," to use Henderson's phrase, constitute the elements of an economic vision that is consistent with the definitions provided by Schumpeter, Heilbroner, and Sowell? Given that these propositions represent, for the most part, reactive judgments about economic events that have been articulated on a case-by-case basis, without any kind of overarching rationale or justification, it would be difficult to categorize them as the type of "pre-analytic cognitive act" that was described by Schumpeter. John Kay (2005, pp. 176-177) has also indirectly supported this position through his observation that "the most common weakness in (DIYE) is the failure to understand general equilibrium issues . . . The advocates (of DIYE) 'know' the truth of what they say from their own experience." Kay's argument is highly relevant to an examination of the question of why so many commentators on the events of the last several years are fragmentary in nature, focusing on only *one* explanatory variable, whether it be private sector greed, public sector incompetence, debt in *both* sectors, or some other causal factor. Even though one might have a preliminary deposition toward a primary catalyst, a fully developed vision should include *all* plausible contributions to the situation at hand, including the insight from the biblical revelation and Christian tradition that we all "see through a glass darkly," and make decisions on the basis of imperfect or inaccurate information. This emphasis is reflected in the following conclusion, by Tim Besley, Peter Hennessy, and additional economists at the London School of Economics and other institutions, in response to an inquiry by Queen Elizabeth II:

> The failure to foresee the timing, extent, and severity of the crisis and to head it off, while it had many causes, was principally a failure of the collective imagination of many bright people, both in this country and internationally, to understand the risks to the system as a whole (2009, p. 3).

WHAT MIGHT CHRISTIANS THINK ABOUT ECONOMIC VISIONS IN GENERAL?

Given the teachings of Scripture concerning the fall and the nature of man, Christians have a long history of healthy skepticism about any projects for the reform of social institutions that appear to be based on utopian premises of creating a "heaven on earth," or some approximation thereof. A case in point would be the traditional (in some evangelical Protestant circles, at least) interpretation of the biblical account of the Tower of Babel, as recorded in Genesis 11:1-7:

> Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar, and settled there.
>
> They said to each other, 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They used brick instead of stone and tar instead of mortar. Then they said, 'Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, *so that we may make a name for ourselves* (emphasis added) and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'
>
> But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, 'If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, *then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them* (emphasis added). Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.'

Jacob Viner referred to the preceding text as one "which has been an obstacle to acceptance on religious grounds of a universalistic or cosmopolitan approach to international relations" (1972, p. 48). Given this background, it is understandable, at first glance, that some Christians might be inclined to reject *any* vision of economic life if it appears to be based entirely on utopian premises (Gray, 1998, p. 20). But are economic visions *inherently* utopian in nature? Writing almost 70 years ago, Karl Mannheim maintained that "a state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs," but that "we should not regard as utopian every state of mind which is incongruous with and transcends the immediate situation" (1936, p. 192). Instead, he limited his definition of utopian visions to those outlooks "which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of

things prevailing at the time" (1936, p. 192).

While we certainly face our share of global economic challenges at the present time, just as we have in the past and will continue to do in the future, to argue that an economic order that is derived from a particular vision, even with appropriate legal and cultural constraints, has led to a situation in which "the prevailing order of things has been shattered" would be engaging in rhetoric that is excessively apocalyptic in nature. As Deirdre McCloskey (2010, p. 42-43) has pointed out, democratic capitalist economies have been assailed by "doomsday critics" from both the political left and right for an extended period of time. There is no guarantee that the future will not produce "a crisis of capitalism" that is analogous to the collapse of the socialist experiment in recent decades, and that would be even more extensive than the financial crisis and global recession of recent years. Such a development, however, like previous calamities such as the Great Depression, would probably be due to a number of causes that are not directly economic in nature — political decisions, cultural conflicts, and environmental factors, to name just three. As a case in point, Jean-Francois Rischard, former vice president for Europe of the World Bank, has grouped 20 global problems, all of which have economic implications, into the following three categories: issues involving the global commons, issues whose size and urgency require a global response, and issues needing a global regulatory approach (2002, p. 66; cited in Held, 2004, p. 12). Therefore, one of the conclusions of this inquiry is that economic visions are not intrinsically utopian in nature, although our faith should keep us alert to the fact that the potential for such hubris among fallen human beings should never be underestimated, a lesson that is likely to be readily understood in the light of recent history.

Perhaps a greater challenge to the willingness of some in the Christian community to embrace the concept of vision in economics stems from the influence of post-modern thinking and its rejection of meta-narratives, or "big stories." As an example of this skepticism, John Kay, who is a defender of a liberal market economy, has argued that Marxism was "the most extensive 'grand narrative'" (2005, p. 312) and that "the true lesson of (its) failure is not that (it) was the wrong grand narrative," but instead "that no such theories are valid" (2005, p. 17). In spite of Kay's conclusion that "there is no grand narrative, only little stories," he conceded that the search for such explanations (visions?) will continue because "the need for grand narrative is so firmly ingrained in human thinking that the fruitless search for it will never end" (2005, p. 355). By contrast, Iain Wallace (1998, pp. 42-43), whose work directs a significantly higher degree of criticism toward market processes than Kay's, has observed that "this post-modern critique of universalizing metanarratives has profound implications for Christians" because "we are a people of the 'big story' and are accustomed to proclaiming it as God's way for the whole earth." Wallace expanded upon this line of reasoning by maintaining that since Christians "have been embraced by the love of God and incorporated into the community of the church, we know that there is a foundational 'big story,' linking God redemptively to creation and the human race" (1998, pp. 44-45.) At the same time, Wallace asserted that "we need to acknowledge that our particular cultural (and dare we add, intellectual?) tradition shapes and selectively filters the story," to the point where "there is no single definitive recounting of it" (1998, p.45). The points that Wallace has raised would seem to support the argument that Christians should not be adverse to the discussion of economic "visions" as an entire conceptual category, even though we might have reservations about the foundations or proposals associated with any one particular outlook.

CONCLUSION

John Stackhouse, Jr., has observed, "Some have said that North American evangelicals have generally tended to treat economic systems as if they were part of the climate or topography: realities simply to be dealt with as given, not as human constructs thus amenable to human revision" (2002, p. 78). What if we were to assume that the preceding statement is correct? Even if we take into consideration the observation that self-identified evangelicals do not represent the entire Christian community, this assumption would have profound implications for the possible contribution of believers (or lack of same) to the debate over economic institutions, processes, and policies. It could be the case that many Christians have decided to focus on specific economic problems in a piece-meal fashion that may not be all that different from the approach that was previously described as "do-it-yourself economics." This tendency may also have an influence on the design of instructional programs within Christian educational institutions, particularly for upper-division students, as well as within congregations and para-church organizations. Many of these bodies have a long-standing emphasis on initiatives which are seen as being "practical" and "relevant" in nature, which means that they might find broader themes, such as "vision" in the manner in which it has been defined, to be too abstract and theoretical. If so, it is

worth considering whether this is taking place not only out of a desire to be of practical service to others in concrete situations, but also because of a concern about becoming tainted by the elements of secular economic visions that seem to be utopian in nature and which do not require the intervention of God in human affairs. It may also be the case that some believers might wonder whether or not acceptance of the biblical meta-narrative — the ongoing work of God in human history as revealed in Scripture and through the person of Jesus Christ — precludes endorsement, even in a limited and partial manner, of any economic visions. If this is the case, is there not a risk that this perspective unnecessarily limits the potential witness of the church in economic life and the possible contribution to human welfare that we might make in Christ's name? Consideration of this possibility reinforces the most important point of this essay: the recognition and understanding of the central role that alternative visions play in shaping our interpretation of, and response to, the "signs of the economic times" as a key element of our individual and collective ministry in this area of life.

As a final observation, perhaps it would serve us well to consider the words of Pope Benedict XVI (2009, para. 21; cited in Griffiths, 2010, p. 116):

> The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences, and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future.

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