

## Best Practices

### Integrating Economics and Christianity

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I feel fortunate to teach at a college where we are required to integrate Christianity and our fields. A major portion of our evaluations includes how well we undertake this integration. For a person who did not come through a Christian college and who is an adult convert, this integration has been a pleasant challenge. I am looking forward to reading what has worked for others facing the same challenge.

Using the written work of others has worked well for me. In the principles of economics class, I use *The Clashing Works of Economics and Faith* by James Halteman. I use this as a supplemental text and work through it as the first thing we do in class. I test the students on the material covered and at the end of the semester ask them to write a short paper on various issues raised while discussing the topics in the book.

Using the Halteman book has several advantages. The text introduces important economic

ideas such as choice, scarcity, and alternative methods of allocating resources. It has a good section on biblical thinking about economics and worldviews from different historical periods. The economic assumptions of Hebrew society are presented and offer a stark contrast to our consumerist society. The assumptions are so different that students need help to see how we might incorporate some of those assumptions in our society. It also explains the setting in which capitalism works, explaining the concepts of limited government, individual freedom, and what holds a capitalistic society together. However, the major advantage of the book is that it presents a way to look at economics from a Christian perspective.

The book is written from a Mennonite background and challenges students to consider how their consumption patterns are, or should be, kingdom choices. At the end of the

semester, this is the concept that students indicate has challenged them the most. Most students say that they had never considered that purchasing patterns were something that should be different for Christians.

The text does have topics that need supplementing. For instance, there is a good section covering the relationship of unfair economic systems with street crime, but nothing is mentioned about white-collar crime. The text does not examine utility theory or other foundational assumptions of economics. It does present the concept of social welfare functions which leads into a presentation of a Christian social welfare function. However, I have found that the critique of utility theory and a presentation of social welfare functions are best done at the intermediate level. While the author presents four different worldviews at the beginning of the text, my students would be helped by a systematic presentation of what he thinks a Christian worldview should be. These criticisms are rather minor when compared to the increased student involvement that the book brings to the discussion of economics and Christianity.

Besides presenting factual information, the book is a

springboard for class discussion. I try to use the book at the beginning of the semester and use small groups to encourage class involvement with the ideas presented. Students seem to be more willing to discuss topics presented in this text than the ones covered in more mainstream economics texts. By starting with this book, the students get into the habit of participating in class discussion that sometimes carries over into discussions later in the semester.

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