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Reviews

Champions of the Poor: The Economic Consequences of Judeo-Christian Values
Barend A. de Vries
Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998, 318 pp.

Review by Mark Broski, O.S.B.
Chair, Economics Department
Benedictine College

The most intriguing thing about Barend de Vries's recent book is its subtitle, "The Economic Consequences of Judeo-Christian Values." Such a title does not call for a complete reformulation of economic science in the light of faith, a path taken by too many quickly forgotten books in the past. Rather, the focus on economic consequences appears to leave the basic modeling environment of economics intact. Judeo-Christian values do not require a new logic for economics but instead, an enriched view of the human person that widens the scope of self-interested behavior to include the well-being of others. Thus, to be a "champion of the poor" is not to give up entirely on individual maximizing behavior. Subjective preferences can accommodate Christian values. In theological terms, this means that there are no shortcuts for building of the kingdom of God that avoid the necessity of personal conversion.

Unfortunately, de Vries's book is simply not up to the challenge. He does not show us how to integrate Christian values into economic thinking. Instead, he shrouds his politically correct nostrums in a thin veil of (generally) obsolete,[1] under-documented,[2] and sometimes misleading economic statistics.[3] Judging from these references, one wonders whether the bulk of this book was written in 1988 and then slightly revised in the last year or two. Worse still, he misses entirely some of the crucial Judeo-Christian faith concepts that must be front and center in a work of this kind, such as: (1) the meaning of the biblical phrase "subdue the earth," (2) the effect of Original Sin on man as a producer and a consumer, (3) the status of property rights in the natural law, and (4) the unique role of the family in any social order.

Indeed, Christian readers will find particularly odious de Vries's frequent references to population control through contraception, as if the best way to increase G.D.P. per capita is simply to reduce the number of people. The research of the late Julian Simon has shown how wrong-headed such an approach really is. Economists, too, will wonder why any discussion of the moral status of rent-seeking, the forced redistribution of resources, regulation, and immigration controls are not mentioned somewhere in the text. De Vries presumes each of these phenomena to be good, along with the benevolent government that administers them.

Of some value is the second part of the book, which focuses on the economic teaching of various religious groups. Here, however, the breadth and depth of de Vries's discussion of various church documents is out of proportion to their relative importance. For instance, de Vries spends nine pages on the U.S. bishops' 1984 pastoral letter on the economy, but only two pages on the more recent and more authoritative encyclical *Centesimus Annus* of John Paul II. In another discussion, he de-emphasizes the Marxist roots of liberation theology (194) and derides the social teaching of modern evangelicals as mere "volunteerism" (239).

In the preface to the book, Archbishop Rembert Weakland, O.S.B. offers tepid praise for de Vries's work. Weakland recognizes the need for further research that aims to integrate theological thinking into standard economic theory. De Vries does succeed in bringing important issues forward. But it will take a more comprehensive, less biased, and much more rigorous analysis to draw out the economic consequences of Judeo-Christian values.

Notes

[1] In the course of the text, de Vries presents twelve tables on economic, demographic, military, and world debt data. The median year of these twelve tables is 1986 even though more recent data is available in each case.

[2] Out of over two hundred references in the text, only two are taken from non-survey, refereed journals in economic literature.

[3] A good example of the use of misleading statistics occurs on page 122 where de Vries discusses the burden of military spending on the U.S. economy. His Table 5.1 describes the ratio between military spending and G.D.P. over the period 1944 to 1987. In 1987, military spending took 6.3% of G.D.P. and 28.4% of federal outlays. Had de Vries extended the table to 1997 (the year before this book was published), those statistics would look considerably different. Military spending has dropped to 3.3% of G.D.P. and 16.4% of federal outlays.