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# On the Conversation Between Theologians and Economists: A Contribution to Public Theology

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## Abstract

This article seeks to contribute to the development of a conversation between public theology and economics. A major problem for this conversation is the dichotomy between normative and positive judgements about our social reality. This translates into the use of distinctive concepts of value rationality and instrumental rationality. This article proposes an alternative conception of rationality that offers a way out of the positive–normative dichotomy and embeds our approach in the framework of public theology.

## Keywords

public theology, economics, rationality

## Introduction

In recent decades, several theologians have ventured into conversation with the world of economics.<sup>1</sup> While both theologians and economists stress the importance of a dialogue regarding topics such as globalization and social justice, the relation between theology and economics remains uneasy, if not

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<sup>1</sup> John Atherton, *Transfiguring Capitalism* (London: SCM Press, 2008); Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London: Routledge, 2000); D. Stephen Long and Nancy Ruth Fox with Tripp York, *Calculated Futures: Theology, Ethics, and Economics* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007); Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); James M. Dean and A. M. C. Waterman, eds, *Religion and Economics: Normative Social Theory* (Boston, Dordrecht and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999) and Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

troublesome.<sup>2</sup> In a reflection on this impasse, Heyne argues that the ‘pontifical mode’—the self-righteous attitude and commanding voice of theologians criticizing economic theory—is a significant hindrance to a genuine conversation.<sup>3</sup> Economists are likely to respond with indifference or indignation to such an attitude. Although this might seem to be a matter of conversational etiquette, the real problem lies at a deeper level. Economists often view their discipline as a ‘positive science’, geared at value-neutral explanations and predictions of economic behaviour. Theologians, in contrast, consider their discipline ‘normative’, offering an evaluative framework for all human behaviour and developments in society. If economics and theology are conceived of in this way, there is an obvious mismatch between the two conversation partners. As Brennan and Waterman put it: ‘the experience of conversation between theologians and economists is that of people talking past one another; and this is partly because basic attitudes towards epistemic and methodological issues are so different’.<sup>4</sup> In this article we aim to further the dialogue between public theology and economics, by analysing methodological and epistemological questions that complicate the conversation, and by proposing a solution to these.

To this end, in the second section we analyse the questions involved in the conversation between economics and theology and set out an inventory of the methodological issues that make it impossible to address these questions in a satisfactory way. To be able to address these issues, in the third section we then focus on the epistemological level, and propose an interpretation of rationality which goes beyond the traditional distinction between instrumental and value rationality. In the fourth section, we locate our approach to the conversation between theology and economics as a contribution to public theology.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Deirdre McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 195–200 and Robert Nelson, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), pp. 10–23.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Heyne, ‘If the Trumpet Does Not Sound a Clear Call’, in Dean and Waterman, eds, *Religion and Economics*, pp. 141–52 at p. 142.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Brennan and Anthony M. C. Waterman, ‘Christian Theology and Economics: Convergences and Clashes’, in Ian R. Harper and Samuel Gregg, eds, *Christian Theology and Market Economics* (Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2008), pp. 77–93 at p. 89.

## The Conversation Between Theology and Economics: A Diagnosis

### *The Type of Questions to be Addressed*

We need to consider which topics are of interest to both economists and theologians. As the work by, for example, John Atherton, Joerg Rieger, Kathryn Tanner and Max Stackhouse indicates, real-world developments such as globalization and economization call for a conversation between economists and theologians.<sup>5</sup> The cultural, social and economic impacts of globalization have been, and continue to be, enormous. Prominent economists argue that economic development creates both benefits and problems for our societies. As, for example, Stiglitz, expresses it:

I believe that globalization—the removal of barriers to free trade and the closer integration of national economies—can be a force for good and that it has the *potential* to enrich everyone in the world, particularly the poor. But I also believe that if this is to be the case, the way globalization has been managed, including the international trade agreements that have played such a large role in removing those barriers and the policies that have been imposed on developing countries in the process of globalization, need[s] to be radically rethought.<sup>6</sup>

While the overall standard of living has increased through the availability of new and more advanced means of production and distribution since the industrialization of our economies, new social and ecological problems threaten the stability and sustainability of our societies.<sup>7</sup> As Tieleman argues, economic development suffers from a ‘paradox of progress’: although progress is geared to raise living standards (at least on average), as more people make use of the greater economic possibilities open to them, the pressure on the

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<sup>5</sup> See Max L. Stackhouse, *God and Globalization*, vol. 4: *Globalization and Grace* (New York: Continuum, 2007); Atherton, *Transfiguring Capitalism*; Rieger, *No Rising Tide* and Tanner, *Economy of Grace*. John Atherton distinguishes economic globalization (increasing and accelerating trade, exports and investments while barriers erode) and political globalization (the increased international interaction between nation-states, including through multilateral agencies); see Atherton, *Transfiguring Capitalism*, p. 57. Long characterizes economization as follows: ‘we are invited to construe our lives, primarily our lives as family members, in terms of the activities of producers and consumers, in which everything has a price’ (Long, *Divine Economy*, p. 4).

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002), pp. ix–x (original italics).

<sup>7</sup> See Jagdish Bhagwati, *In Defense of Globalization* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues*.

social and ecological sustainability of the system as a whole increases as well.<sup>8</sup> The impact of globalization, in both positive and negative terms, is compounded by the choices people make, based on their enhanced possibilities.

Thus, globalization is clearly interconnected with the way human beings behave in making choices regarding the ends of their conduct and the means they have at their disposal to achieve these ends. These choices lead to tensions in our societies, because of the conflicting relation between enhanced possibilities for the individual and greater environmental and social pressures on society as a whole. The sometimes even violent clashes between the advocates and opponents of globalization clearly show that they have different perspectives on what is meant by economic progress. It might seem that the disagreement reflects the incommensurability of their perspectives: the one strives for progress in terms of higher levels of wealth, measured by Gross National Product (GNP); the other champions the protection of the natural environment and equal distribution of wealth. The issue appears to go beyond any kind of compromise.

In Tillich's famous phrase, the clash of one 'ultimate concern' with another can be seen in the intense debates on globalization.<sup>9</sup> Questions about the ends of economic development are directly related to questions about the means, since the concept of 'progress' is not universally agreed upon, and the route to achieving one idea of progress has implications and side-effects that are harmful for progress from other perspectives. As Crespo puts it: 'means and ends mutually interact and determine each other'.<sup>10</sup> An exclusive focus on either means or ends is inadequate, since it obfuscates their interrelatedness.

#### *Positive and Normative Approaches: A 'Division of Labour'*

In discussions of globalization, questions about an ultimately 'good' and 'true' way of human existence and social interaction are directly related to questions about the production, consumption and distribution of goods. When economists and theologians deal with these questions, a common distinction made is that between 'positive' and 'normative' approaches.

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<sup>8</sup> Henk Tieleman, 'The Social Ambivalence of Religion and the *Pax Economica*', in Vincent Brümmer and Marcel Sarot, eds, *Happiness, Well-Being and the Meaning of Life* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), pp. 122–43.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–63).

<sup>10</sup> Ricardo F. Crespo, 'Practical Comparability' and Ends in Economics', *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 14:3 (2007), 371–93 at 374.

In economics especially, the separation of positive and normative approaches is an important topic, and is addressed in nearly all introductory volumes to the different economic subdisciplines.<sup>11</sup> Many ‘orthodox’ neoclassical economists consider their discipline to be strictly positive; that is, taking an ethically neutral approach, and studying facts alone. A notable exception is welfare economics, in which insights from neoclassical theory are used to take up policy questions directly.<sup>12</sup> This illustrates the importance of the dichotomy; that is, in welfare economics, economists are allowed to take a normative position, something that is not ‘economics as usual’.

Theologians, on the other hand, conceive their discipline as predominantly normative, since they try to explicate, interpret and evaluate a frame of ultimate values and its highest goals. Tanner states that: ‘As a constructive theologian I want to promote a way of telling the Christian story and its vision of economy that will bring out its great contrast with the economic principles that rule the world of our experience’.<sup>13</sup> She continues: ‘The Christian story, after all, is a story about God as the highest good . . . Fundamentally at stake in this story are principles for the production and circulation of the good and what they are to mean for human life in God’s service’.<sup>14</sup>

An example of an approach to the conversation between theology and economics in which positive and normative dimensions are separated is offered by Dean and Waterman, who propose a co-operative dialogue between theology and economics in order to construct a ‘normative social theory’.<sup>15</sup> Normative social theory is defined as: ‘any set of related doctrines that prescribes what human societies ought to be or how they ought to be governed, and that affords a standard for the critical appraisal of existing arrangements’.<sup>16</sup> Normative social theory is to be distinguished from ‘positive social theory’, which focuses on describing and explaining the actual functioning of human societies. However, Dean and Waterman argue that positive social theory is always

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<sup>11</sup> The idea of a ‘handbook’ that reflects the status quo of a subdiscipline is far more common in economics than it is in theology. For introductory discussions of the positive–normative distinction in economic theory, see, for example, Jeffrey Perloff, *Microeconomics* (Boston: Pearson Education International, 2008), p. 6; Joseph Stiglitz, *Economics of the Public Sector*, third edn (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2000), pp. 20–22 and Harry Landreth and David Colander, *History of Economic Thought*, fourth edn (Boston and Toronto: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), pp. 1–17.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, p. x.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>15</sup> Dean and Waterman, eds, *Religion and Economics*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

a necessary component of normative social theory, since ‘there can be no prescription without knowledge’.<sup>17</sup>

The way Dean and Waterman present their goal of normative social theory suggests that they want to do something additional to mainstream positive social theory; normative social theory is not ‘economics as usual’. This appears to be the reason for involving theologians in social theory: as experts on constructing normative frameworks, theologians can help in the elaboration of positive social theory toward normative social theory. Long, arguing from the perspective of a radical orthodoxy, concurs with the necessity to include a normative approach from theology, since:

the market tempts us to view the world in terms of *values*. It produces a ‘critical frame of mind’ that reduces everything which is good, true and beautiful to a formal value based on usefulness and substitutability, flattening all hierarchies to formal equivalences. In contrast to this, the church holds forth the possibility of an infallibly true, good and beautiful presentation of human action, incapable of reduction to the usefulness of its formal value. A good theological performance of the relationship between theology and economy will give the church and the market their appropriate roles.<sup>18</sup>

Economists are thus to supply positive descriptions and explanations, while theologians provide normative guiding perspectives, and a division of labour is thereby created.

*Diagnosis: Methodological and Epistemological Issues in the Conversation*

If the division of labour in the study of globalization, for example, is framed using the positive–normative distinction, then we have to consider what impact this will have on the conversation. As the above quote by Brennan and Waterman indicates, the experience of a conversation between economists and theologians is one of people talking past one another, because of their different attitudes towards methodological and epistemic matters. The strict split between a positive approach and a normative approach is likely to lead to a situation where the conversation partners do not meet on an equal footing.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, a division of labour cannot adequately deal with the inherent interrelatedness of questions of means and ends in issues like globalization. In

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Long, *Divine Economy*, p. 262 (original italics).

<sup>19</sup> See Andrew Yuengert, *The Boundaries of Technique* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004).

the positive arena of economics, the structures and mechanisms of markets are analysed as complex institutions in which agents only have ‘system-immanent’ reasons to make decisions and to deal with the unforeseen and imperfect rules of behaviour. The economic agent’s behaviour is generalized to a set of preferences that is confronted with a budget constraint. In the most advanced economic models of this kind, moral rules and public laws are added in as further limitations. From the normative theological perspective, questions about ‘ultimate concern’ are related to existential analyses of faith and metaphysical reflections on God as the horizon and *telos* of faith, even when these analyses are embedded in a historically oriented or political theology. As such, theology is likely to add a perspective on ends that has no intrinsic relation to the reality of the market that is studied by economists.

In sum, economists and theologians use either a positive or normative methodology, which makes a connection between their approaches impossible. This division of labour thus disables a true conversation that can address the interrelated questions of means and ends in topics like globalization.

If we take a closer look at the division of labour from a methodological point of view, the different questions that are addressed by economics and theology reflect the use of two different conceptions of rationality. Economics is concerned with questions of means, while the ends are presumed to be given. An insightful comment in this regard is made by Lerner, when he states: ‘An economic transaction is a solved political problem. Economics has gained the title of queen of the social sciences by choosing *solved* political problems as its domain’.<sup>20</sup> The conception of rationality that underlies this approach is instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality is described by Davis as: ‘the choice of actions that best satisfy an individual’s ends or objectives *however* those ends or objectives may happen to be characterized. Instrumental rationality is a rationality of efficient means, and per se is completely agnostic regarding the nature of the ends those means serve’.<sup>21</sup> Theology, on the other hand, focuses on questions of ends, while the questions about how these ends can be feasibly achieved often receive insufficient attention. Tanner, for example, having elaborated an impressive ‘theological economy’, comments in her reflection that the most important way of achieving this alternative economic

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<sup>20</sup>) Abba P. Lerner, ‘The Economics and Politics of Consumer Sovereignty’, *The American Economic Review*, 62:1–2 (1972), 258–66 at 259 (my italics).

<sup>21</sup>) John Davis, *The Theory of the Individual in Economics* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 27 (original italics).

order is by critical voting, and thus changing the government.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, many economic studies clearly indicate that the government is by no means the ideal institution to achieve changes like these.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, Long and York plead for the Christian Eucharist as the inspiration and principle for economic exchange and interaction.<sup>24</sup> Yet the question of how the Eucharist is to be translated into practice is left unanswered.<sup>25</sup> That is, while Long and York pay elaborate attention to the evaluative question of what the fundamental guiding principle should be in all our economic interactions, they do not address the practical questions of how this could be implemented, and what the results of such a shift might be. This approach corresponds to a value rationality, defined as a reflection on, and elaboration of, the ultimate values by which people locate the space from which they understand the world and their meaningful place in it.<sup>26</sup>

The use of two different conceptions of rationality gives a more profound explanation as to why economists and theologians have been unable to connect their work, and why an integrated perspective on the resolution of questions of ends and means has been impossible. Since the two conceptions of rationality form the foundation of how theology and economics shape their inquiries (either normative or positive), it is necessary to address the question of rationality directly; that is, at the epistemological level.

## **An Integrative Approach to Rationality**

### *Rationality*

If we want to achieve a conversation between economics and theology that is equipped to address these interrelated questions of means and ends, we will need one conception of rationality that can account for both instrumental and evaluative deliberations. In this vein, Rescher defines rationality as the ‘intelligent pursuit of appropriate ends’.<sup>27</sup> In his definition, rationality is not

<sup>22</sup> Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, pp. 141–2.

<sup>23</sup> Stiglitz, *Economics of the Public Sector*, pp. 128–49.

<sup>24</sup> D. Stephen Long and Tripp York, ‘Offering our Gifts: The Politics of Remembrance’, in Long and Fox with York, *Calculated Futures*, pp. 185–205.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203–5.

<sup>26</sup> See Thomas Ekstrand, *Max Weber in Theological Perspective* (Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Rationality: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature and the Rationale of Reason* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 149.

confined to practical or instrumental affairs (the intelligent pursuit: ‘how can I do action X in the best way?’), but also concerns the validity of ends (the pursuit of appropriate ends: ‘what are the goals I should strive for?’). Rescher’s approach to rationality stems from an evolutionary perspective; in his view, rationality—the use of our intelligence to find and give cogent reasons for our behaviour—is the ‘survival instrument’ of human beings.<sup>28</sup> Rescher even considers the use of our rationality as an ‘ontological obligation’,<sup>29</sup> since it demarcates who we are in relation to other living creatures, and enables us to develop our capabilities and possibilities for ensuring our survival and flourishing.

Rational deliberation can be applied to three distinct domains.<sup>30</sup> The first domain is the cognitive or theoretical domain. The goal of cognitive rationality is to acquire reliable and relevant information; that is, facts. If we are to engage in successful action, we need accurate information about our surroundings on which to base our beliefs. The second domain is the evaluative domain. The goal of evaluative rationality is to select appropriate values, ends, priorities and preferences. Once we have mapped the interests and values that are relevant, we need to decide which of them outweigh the others. The third domain is the practical domain. The goal of practical rationality is to outline a course of action that will achieve the ends we have selected (based on evaluative rationality) given the information available (based on cognitive rationality).

While these domains can be distinguished, they are interrelated, interdependent and intermingled in everyday life. Before a course of action is decided upon, trustworthy beliefs and proper evaluations are needed. Yet the only way to acquire adequate (or at least workable) beliefs and evaluations is by engaging in actions that will lead to the necessary cognitive and evaluative input. Likewise, the satisfactoriness of beliefs is based on evaluative norms, and the validity of evaluations cannot be defended without the necessary beliefs, based on adequate information. In other words, while facts (cognitive appraisals of reality) and values (evaluative appraisals of reality) can be clearly distinguished from the perspective of rationality, in everyday action they are interdependent.

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<sup>28</sup> Rescher argues that the distinctive feature of human beings that enables them to survive is their capacity for rational reflection; rather than, for example, a relatively high physical strength (as compared to a bear), speed (as compared to a cheetah) or fertility or reproduction rate (as compared to a frog); see *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *The Validity of Values: Human Values in Pragmatic Perspective* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1991), p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Rescher, *Rationality*, p. 3; see also Rescher, *The Validity of Values*, p. 6.

*The Framework of Rationality Applied to the Conversation*

Rational behaviour can be seen as purposeful behaviour; that is, behaviour geared to achieving certain premeditated goals. The ends of our behaviour are the results of a continuous process of evaluation, in which we try to align feasible modes of action with the values to which they adhere. In pursuing purposeful behaviour, we attempt to achieve our evaluated goals, and in so doing, seek to contribute to the realization of our values. As Rescher argues, this pursuit of the realization of values gives meaning to human life.<sup>31</sup> A link can thus be discerned between the evaluative aspect of rationality (selecting ends and means in line with one's values) and the constitution of meaning by the pursuit of values. Furthermore, if we link Rescher's thoughts on rationality to the constitution of meaning, a connection between theology and economics can be discerned.

When deciding which course of action (with dimensions of both rationality and striving for meaning) to pursue, we are guided by a frame of values indicating what we consider to be the highest goal for human life: the ultimate dimension of this specific frame of values. This ultimate perspective, in Aquinas' words the '*ratio Dei*', can be seen as a form of evaluative rationality, since it involves an ordering of values in light of the highest goal. So, given that theology tries to map, explicate and explain the highest goal under which people pursue their rational behaviour, theology and economics can start a conversation about the importance and impact of the dimensions of ultimacy in rational economic behaviour. As such, the material object of the conversation will be all practices in which the economic is directly linked to questions of ultimate meaning; such as, for example, globalization, business spirituality, Islamic banking, Buddhist economics and the social teaching of the Christian churches. The formal object of the conversation will be the evaluative domain of economic deliberation in relation to both rationality and the constitution of meaning.

For economics, the conversation is valuable and important, since it helps expand the view beyond questions of means only, a change that is deemed necessary by an increasing number of economists, especially in light of the disastrous economic developments of recent years.<sup>32</sup> For theology, too, the

<sup>31</sup> Rescher, *The Validity of Values*, pp. 140–54. See also Niklas Karlsson, George Loewenstein and Jane McCafferty, 'The Economics of Meaning', *Nordic Journal of Political Economy*, 30:1 (2004), 61–75.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, George Loewenstein, 'Because it is There: The Challenge of Mountaineering... for Utility Theory', *Kyklos*, 52:3 (1999), 315–43 and Esther-Mirjam Sent, 'Pleas for

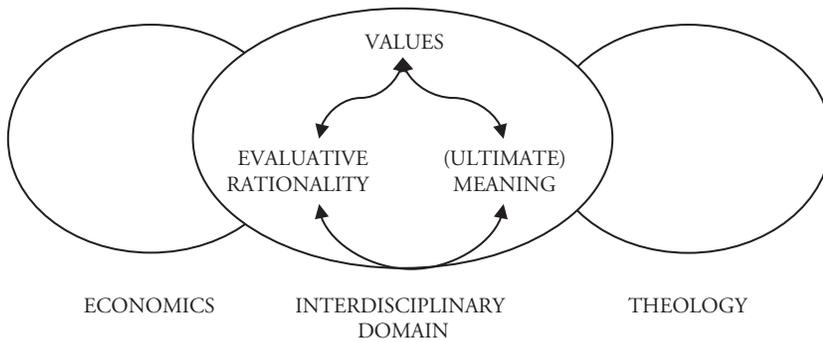


Figure 1

conversation is valuable and important, since it furthers the conceptualization of *theos* incarnated in market relationships. In the figure above, a diagrammatic illustration of the conversation is displayed.

### Theology's Contribution: The Requirements for an Open Conversation

Since we want to free the conversation from the hindrance of the dichotomy between normative and positive approaches, the main epistemological question, as far as theology's contribution to the conversation is concerned, is whether theology is as normative as it predominantly seems to be. In the previous section we have argued that the conversation between theology and economics is a conversation about purposeful behaviour. The conversation is directed by questions about values, giving meaning to human life. In this section we argue that the conversation between theology and economics must be embedded in a framework of public theology, and we elaborate what kind of public theology we have in mind.

#### *A New Public Theology*

If theologians and economists really want to enter into an open conversation with each other, they have to let go of the idea that an independent economic sphere can be rigorously separated from all other social dimensions of human existence or that an independent theological sphere can be similarly separated. These ideas create serious difficulties in both understanding human behaviour

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Pluralism', *Post-Autistic Economics Review*, 18 (2003), article 1, <<http://www.paecon.net/PAERReview/issue18/Sent18.htm>> [accessed 26 August 2010].

and formulating adequate policies. In a conversation, both theologians and economists need to accept the interrelatedness of economic conduct and other aspects of human behaviour.

This interconnectedness requires that theologians and economists acknowledge the capacity of the other discipline to analyse elements of a globalizing society, economy and culture important to their own discipline. Stackhouse is right in stating that the context of globalization calls for a new model of public theology that transcends both the ‘hierarchical–subsidiary’ model to be found in modern Roman Catholic social encyclicals, and the ‘federal–covenantal’ model developed by Jewish and modified by Reformed traditions.<sup>33</sup> Since globalization is the actual social and political context of a theological research programme, what is required, according to Stackhouse, is a theology that is ‘a . . . universal, genuinely ecumenical and authentically catholic way of speaking theologically and ethically about the increasingly common life’.<sup>34</sup> The cultural, social and economic dimensions of globalization offer a new context within which ‘theology has the duty to provide a reasonable proposal with regard to the moral and spiritual architecture and the inner guidance system of civilizations’.<sup>35</sup> Theologians and economists must therefore enter into an open conversation with each other, and this requires a renewed public theology.

#### *A Renewed Public Theology that is Non-Foundationalist*

We have argued above that a conversation between economics and theology requires an integrative approach to rationality. This implies that theology has to leave the ontotheological language to God. Kim makes this clear by analysing the theological career of David Tracy.<sup>36</sup> In her analysis, she argues that the conceptualization of the publicness of theology has to abandon the revisionist pursuit of truth. Within a revisionist model of public theology, the pursuit of truth implies that religious truth can only be understood with relative adequacy. The manifestation of God can only be approached by theological concepts that are interpretative, concepts that both disclose and conceal it. Kim explains how a theological approach that stresses the public dimension of

<sup>33</sup> Stackhouse, *God and Globalization*, vol. 4: *Globalization and Grace*, p. 115.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>36</sup> Younhee Kim, *The Quest for Plausible Christian Discourse in a World of Pluralities: The Evolution of David Tracy's Understanding of 'Public Theology'*, *Religions and Discourse*, vol. 35 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).

theology develops from being a monolithic transcendental reflection to being a hermeneutical transcendental pragmatic reflection.<sup>37</sup> Truth reveals itself only in dialogue, not in the objectivist quest for unequivocal certainty. Conversation is a game that reaches its actualization through the interpretative contributions of the game-players. It is in this way that a public theological approach must leave the ontotheological language to God. According to Kim, Tracy claims that: ‘to acknowledge the claim to attention of the other *as* other, the different *as* different, is also to acknowledge that other world of meaning as in some manner a genuine possibility for myself’.<sup>38</sup> A theology that abandons foundationalism and becomes public has to be based in an analogical imagination that stresses this ‘similarity-in-difference’. Such a theology gives room for a conversation with economics that furthers the conceptualization of *theos* incarnated in market relationships. An open conversation between theologians and economists would be predicated on a new public theology that is non-foundationalist.

#### *A Renewed Public Theology that is Pragmatist*

We argue above that the conversation between theology and economics should be fostered by an integrative concept of rationality. The conception we present is based on the pragmatist philosophy of Rescher. Since we also want to base theology’s contribution to the conversation on an integrative concept of rationality, the question arises as to whether public theology is commensurable with Rescher’s pragmatic philosophical perspective.

West argues that the pragmatist tradition is concerned with a political mode of cultural criticism.<sup>39</sup> In the work of prominent pragmatists there is a strong consciousness of questions of political power, a utopian conception of creative democracy, an analysis of the limits of capitalism and a candid confrontation with the tragic dimensions of human life. As West notes, quoting Barber: ‘Politics . . . is the forging of common actuality in the absence of abstract independent standards. It entails dynamic, ongoing, common deliberation and action and it is feasible only when individuals are transformed by social interaction into citizens’.<sup>40</sup> Hence, this raises the question, in relation to theology’s

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 298–304.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 304 (original italics).

<sup>39</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin Barber, *The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 209, as cited in West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 213.

contribution to the conversation with economics, as to whether a public theology is commensurable with a ‘common actuality in the absence of abstract independent standards’.

The answer given by Murray is affirmative.<sup>41</sup> According to Murray, Rescher’s philosophy offers a possibility for a constructive theological analysis of questions of common actuality. Murray argues that the content of Christian faith is the living relationship with God in Christ and the Spirit: this faith is ‘not a blind dogmatism... but a relation with the abundantly rich mystery of God which permanently eludes adequate understanding’.<sup>42</sup> The scriptural paradigm of this content is phrased as ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’ (RSV, Heb. 11:1). According to Kierkegaard, this assurance and conviction have to be described as an ‘*objective uncertainty... held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness*’,<sup>43</sup> and therefore embody the truth of a personal response that, to oneself, has the force of an objective impact.

Therefore, the character of Christian faith is relational. Newman, speaking of the ‘certitude of faith’—echoing Bonaventura—suggests that supposedly watertight certainties are quite different from this concept, since it has a strictly personal character and refers to situations where one has to act properly without having a set of rigorous criteria.<sup>44</sup> As Murray argues, ‘Christian faith is most appropriately viewed as a venture lived in the face of abiding risk as the person of faith is continually exposed to the potentially disconfirming challenge of fresh situations’.<sup>45</sup>

Further, Murray maintains that it is in the interest of Christian faith to be explicitly God-focused, but that this implies an intrinsic relation between relatedness to God and human flourishing, since the God-focus has an axiological (value-based) character. Murray distinguishes three elements of this axiological character of Christian faith, as follows:

<sup>41</sup> Paul D. Murray, ‘Fallibilism, Faith and Theology: Putting Nicholas Rescher to Theological Work’, *Modern Theology*, 20:3 (2004), 339–62.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>43</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1: *Text*, trans. and ed. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992 [1846]), p. 203, as cited by Murray, ‘Fallibilism, Faith and Theology’, 344 (original italics).

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, James W. Lyons, *Newman’s Dialogues on Certitude* (Roma: Catholic Book Agency, 1978).

<sup>45</sup> Murray, ‘Fallibilism, Faith and Theology’, 344 (original italics).

*faithful* attendance to the reality of things as held in being by God the sustaining source of all that is, . . . *hopeful* discerning of creative possibilities in the light of the ever fresh yet constant patterning of God's self-revealing truth and . . . *loving* enactment of certain of these possibilities inspired by the generative and transformative Spirit of God.<sup>46</sup>

This public theology is therefore open to a conversation with economics within which theology refers to its core in a way that is not normative in a foundationalist way, but in its publicness reveals its God-focus.

### *A New Theocentric Pragmatist Public Theology*

An open conversation between theology and economics demands a new praxis-led theology. We agree with Tracy that a public theology has to be public while being theocentric, or, as Martinez expresses it: 'the radically theocentric character of theology makes it public'.<sup>47</sup> Tracy argues that theologians are not involved in public theological discourse unless they reflect deliberately and critically upon God, since their public reflections about the affirmation of God are their main task. Therefore a public theology has to deal with all sorts of secular traditions of thought and their truth-claims. According to Martinez: 'Theology can be said to be public insofar as it conveys a meaningful and true disclosure of something that is most relevant for human life in the current circumstances of society'.<sup>48</sup> A public theology needs to relate critically the specific, particular traditions of Christianity and 'the Whirlpool of Postmodernity'.<sup>49</sup>

We might wonder, therefore, how this affects the character of the publicness of theology. Tracy stresses the importance of Benjamin's interest in fragments of infinity and sacred hope and those people who are forgotten in modernity's historical developments.<sup>50</sup> The people who do not participate in the *Logos* as the process of rationalization in the actual world are bearers of the plain sense of the passion narrative, which is the focal point of all adequate Christian

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 341 (original italics).

<sup>47</sup> Gaspar Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God: Political, Liberation, and Public Theologies* (New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 199.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>50</sup> Scott Holland, 'This Side of God: A Conversation with David Tracy—Theologian—Interview', *Cross Currents*, 52:1, (2002), 54–9. See also David Tracy, 'Western Hermeneutics and Interreligious Dialogues' in Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway, eds, *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, Interreligious Dialogue Series, vol. 2 (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), pp. 1–43.

understanding of God. According to Martinez, in Tracy's view, the lives of these people are signifiers of the hidden presence of God.<sup>51</sup>

Hence, it seems that, for Tracy, the publicness of theology is no longer related to a sense of full presence in conscious thought. Neither is the publicness of theology related to a concept of pure identity (in theisms, egoism or other -isms), nor to a concept of clear and distinct self-presence. The publicness of theology is related to and founded in the people who do not represent presence at all. This is the core of Christian God-talk.<sup>52</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Thus, we conclude that a public theology can be developed without assuming an ontotheological point of departure. There is a path for a theocentric public theology that leaves behind foundationalism and is critical of theological truth-claims that assert immunity to challenge. This public theology is open to a dynamically expansive, recursively critical view of human rationality.<sup>53</sup> Hence, this conception of theology is able to engage in a conversation with economics about purposeful behaviour, directed by questions of value, giving meaning to human life. Such a non-foundationalist theology acknowledges the fragments of infinity and sacred hope embedded in the values represented by the marginalized and forgotten.

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<sup>51</sup> In this respect he draws upon the work of Hans Frei, see Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God*, pp. 260–64.

<sup>52</sup> See David Tracy's introductory chapter 'On Longing: The Void, the Open, God' in Stephan van Erp and Lea Verstricht, eds, *Longing in a Culture of Cynicism* (Zurich and Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2008), pp. 15–32.

<sup>53</sup> Murray, 'Fallibilism, Faith and Theology', 340.