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Thinking about Economics as Religion

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Recommended Citation

Andrew P. Morriss, *Thinking about Economics as Religion*, 56 Case W. Res. L. Rev. 547 (2006).

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SYMPOSIUM

UNDERSTANDING ECONOMICS
THROUGH THEOLOGY:
REFLECTIONS ON ROBERT
NELSON'S *ECONOMICS AS RELIGION*

INTRODUCTION: THINKING ABOUT
ECONOMICS AS RELIGION

Andrew P. Morriss[†]

Four years ago, the *Case Western Reserve Law Review* conducted a paper-only symposium on Bjorn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist*.¹ That symposium was so successful that the editors decided to repeat the experience. Seeking a book that could approximate Lomborg's in its ability to inspire controversy, I suggested Robert H. Nelson's *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* after Professor Nelson gave a well-received lecture here on environmentalism as a religion.² The editors agreed. As before, the *Review* has assembled an impressive group to comment on Nelson's book. The group includes economists who take a wide range of views on appropriate methods and on economics' role in society and in the study of law, ranging from some

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¹ Symposium on Bjorn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, 53 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 249 (2002); BJORN LOMBERG, *THE SKEPTICAL ENVIRONMENTALIST: MEASURING THE REAL STATE OF THE WORLD* (Cambridge Univ. Press 2001) (1998).

² Robert H. Nelson, *Environmental Religion: A Theological Critique*, 55 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 51 (2004).

of the leading law and economics scholars writing today, Professors Eagle³, McChesney,⁴ and Ulen,⁵ to important figures in more heterodox approaches to economics such as Professor Boettke and his collaborators,⁶ who are influential Austrian economists, and Professor Hill,⁷ who is a key contributor to the development of “free market environmentalism.” Professor Tarlock,⁸ an important environmental law scholar, adds a parallel consideration of environmentalism as religion to the mix. Importantly, the contributors also include some who approach the theological analysis with some confidence. Professor Hill is an important participant in current attempts to reconcile economics and faith and Fr. Nalls⁹ brings a unique combination of perspectives of having been both a practitioner of economics as an international trade lawyer and a practitioner of theology in his current job as an Anglican priest.

This book is a bit different from Lomborg’s. *The Skeptical Environmentalist* provoked readers (to rage, in some cases) by testing hypotheses about the state of the world against a wide range of data.¹⁰ It was controversial because Lomborg, a committed environmentalist, offered data that contradicted many factual claims of the modern environmental movement.¹¹ Nelson’s claims are different from Lomborg’s in two important respects. First, Nelson is raising important questions about the role of economic analysis through a creative analogy between theology and economics. (Such creative analogies are at the heart of legal reasoning, making the consideration of these issues in a legal journal particularly appropriate.) Second, the debate over whether economics is a science or a theology is not a debate over facts about the world but over the appropriate characterization of a manner of examining the world.

This brings us to the reason why lawyers and law professors ought to be thinking about Nelson’s analysis. Economics, through law and economics, is central to many developments in the law. As Robert

³ Steven J. Eagle, *Economic Salvation in a Restive Age: The Demand for Secular Salvation Has Not Abated*, 56 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 569 (2006).

⁴ Fred S. McChesney, *When Bad Books Happen to Good People: Robert Nelson’s Economics as Religion*, 56 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 601 (2006).

⁵ Thomas S. Ulen, *Economics as a Science: Robert H. Nelson’s Economics as Religion*, 56 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 649 (2006).

⁶ Peter J. Boettke, Christopher J. Coyne & Peter T. Leeson, *High Priests and Lowly Philosophers: The Battle for the Soul of Economics*, 56 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 551 (2006).

⁷ Peter J. Hill, *Beyond Economics as Religion*, 56 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 587 (2006).

⁸ Dan Tarlock, *Environmentalism: Postmodern Evangelism or Unitarianism?*, 56 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 643 (2006).

⁹ Fr. Charles H. Nalls, *A Theology of the Market: Robert Nelson’s Economics as Religion*, 56 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 613 (2006).

¹⁰ LOMBORG, *supra* note 1.

¹¹ *Id.*

Cooter and Thomas Ulen (one of the contributors to this Symposium) summarized in their textbook, “economics found a vacant niche in the ‘intellectual ecology’ of the law and rapidly filled it” much as the rabbit colonized Australia after its introduction there.¹² There are many possible explanations for economics’ success in expanding into (or invading, depending on one’s view of the desirability of the outcome) the law,¹³ but there is no doubt about its impact. Both those who welcome economic analysis and those who fear it need to think carefully about the implications of economics’ colonization of legal scholarship.

Why think about economics as religion? One reason is that many people equate the two. I recently participated in a symposium on water policy where, as an economist, I shared a panel with another economist, a Protestant theologian, and a lawyer and Native American activist. The general thrust of many of the comments following our panel was that many in the audience, which included lawyers, social scientists, and water activists, wanted to “take the best” from “all the perspectives.” For quite a few at the conference, economic analysis was no different from the Hopi creation story examined by the activist or the analysis of Genesis offered by the theologian.

Nelson takes the analogy of economics as religion seriously and derives some interesting ideas from it. Not content to simply score points off some easy targets, and economists often present surprisingly easy targets, he delves into the subject, moving with admirable ease between theology and economics and treating both as serious endeavors. The participants in this Symposium differ in their assessments of Nelson’s success; despite these disagreements, the conversation in these pages about the value of the analogy offers some useful insights of its own.

The Articles in this Symposium are (intentionally) short enough to render the usual introductory summaries redundant. The best way to approach this collection is to read Nelson’s book (and his earlier book, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth*¹⁴) and then read the articles. Those pressed for time, however, will get the flavor of Nelson’s analysis from the articles and Nelson’s Reply. While this conversation will not end with this Symposium, the contributions here materi-

¹² ROBERT COOTER & THOMAS ULEN, *LAW AND ECONOMICS* 3 (3d ed. 2000).

¹³ See Kenneth G. Dau-Schmidt & Carmen L. Brun, *Lost in Translation: The Economic Analysis of Law in the United States and Europe*, 44 COLUM. J. TRANSNAT’L L. 602, 605-10 (2006) (giving a survey of the reasons for law and economics’ success in the United States); Thomas S. Ulen, *The Unexpected Guest: Law and Economics, Law and Other Cognate Disciplines, and the Future of Legal Scholarship*, 79 CHI-KENT L. REV. 403 (2004) (same).

¹⁴ ROBERT H. NELSON, *REACHING FOR HEAVEN ON EARTH* (1991).

ally advance the discussion of the appropriate role of economic analysis in law and in society more generally.