

Geoffrey Brennan, 1944–2022: Christian Economist

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I

A‘Christian economist’ may simply be a professional economist who happens to be Christian. But a strong sense of that term signifies a professional economist whose work is informed by Christian faith, and which would be different if that were not the case. Though never a member of this Association, the eminent Australian economist Geoffrey Brennan, who was suddenly afflicted with acute leukemia last March and died at home in Canberra on the 28th of July 2022, was a ‘Christian economist’ in the strong sense.

For 55 years he was one of my dearest friends. From our first meeting in August 1967 until his last communication on 1 July we were in continual contact—in Australia, Britain, Canada or the USA: through correspondence, social visits, seminars and conferences, in music-making, golf and bridge, and in the services of the Anglican Church.

How did we meet? I had just arrived in Canberra to begin doctoral studies as a Research Scholar at the Australian National University. The university chamber singers, arcaneously called SCUNA and which Geoffrey had founded, rehearsed on Sunday afternoons very near our flat. I looked in. It was an all-undergraduate, unaccompanied choir of about 20, singing English madrigals; directed by a Methodist ordinand who was a graduate student in philosophy. I had had my own madrigal group in Winnipeg, could sing tenor, and was immediately invited to join. Geoffrey had a well-developed bass voice even then. He was a sensitive musician and a natural leader, and saw eye-to eye with our director. Most of the sopranos were in love with him. In later years he had a distinguished career as a bass soloist in oratorio, sang in the semi-professional Oriana Chorale of Canberra, and served for a while as director.

In 1967 Geoffrey was an honours undergraduate in economics, and when he knew that I was an economist he suggested we get together. I was a recently ordained priest and an honorary assistant at St Paul’s Church Manuka, at which Geoffrey worshipped. So he had to hear my

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sermons on those Sundays when I preached. He got his own back on weekdays, when we would walk round the beautiful campus of the ANU in lunch-hour. He would then explain to me that Australian macroeconomic policy—which then engaged the attention of every leading economist in Australia and to which my own research was committed—was without theoretical justification. He was right.

Geoffrey remained at the ANU as a lecturer after he graduated, and he began research in public finance. His early publications in that field earned him his doctorate and led to public choice theory, his move to the USA, his influential collaborations with James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, and his increasing attention to political theory and philosophy—in each of which he has earned an international reputation. When he ‘retired’ two or three years ago he was simultaneously Professor of Economic Theory at the ANU, Professor of Philosophy at UNC Chapel Hill, and Professor of Political Science at Duke. Only Harry Johnson has had such a peripatetic career. No other social scientist of such distinction has ever worked in so wide a range of disciplines.

Meanwhile, whether in Australia or the USA, Geoffrey continued and developed his early commitment to the Christian faith in which he had been raised. As an undergraduate and graduate student in Canberra he was a faithful parishioner of St Paul’s Church where his musical talents were put to good use. Though the regular liturgical choir consisted of untrained boys, Geoffrey and a few others performed more demanding music on special occasions, singing the Tallis 5-part litany in procession in Lent, and Byrd’s 3-part setting of the *St John Passion* on Good Friday. Geoffrey’s superb bass voice was already well developed, and his singing of Christus in the *Passion* was exactly right. Fifty-two years later, when visiting him in North Carolina, I went with him and his wife to the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill, where they sang in the choir. It was Palm Sunday, and the *St Mathew Passion* was sung. Geoffrey was Christus; and I was astonished to hear exactly the same voice after so long.

In Canberra, Geoffrey served in his parish church, All Saints Ainslie, as church warden, 1988–1990 and 1992–2000; and as parish councillor 2001–2002. He also trained and conducted the gallery choir for many years. From 1991 to 1995 he was a member of the Canberra–Goulburn Diocesan Synod. He was active in an organization that grew out of the Marriage Guidance Council: ‘Relationships Australia’, of which he was

vice-president from 1998 to 2001. And from 1999 he served on the board of St Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra.

How was his intellectual and professional life connected with all this?

In one obvious sense by his willingness to address specifically theological matters in a tiny subset of his hundreds of research publications, mostly in collaboration with me (Brennan and Waterman, 1994, 2008a, 2008b, 2020, 2021).

A more ambitious and revealing collaboration between us had to do with the late Paul Heyne, who like me but not Geoffrey had been a charter member of the Association of Christian Economists.

II

At its first meeting, in December 1982, Heyne and I, with the support of a leading Roman Catholic economist, succeeded in preventing the adoption of a sectarian doctrinal statement that would have excluded some economists—including ourselves—who regarded themselves as Christian.

Geoffrey had known Paul Heyne since coming to America, probably through a Liberty Fund colloquium. I met Paul in August 1982 at a conference in Vancouver on 'Religion, Economics and Social Thought', organized by the Fraser Institute for the Liberty Fund (Block, Brennan and Elzinga, 1985). Geoffrey had told Paul about my work on economics and religion, and he co-opted me to help (Waterman, 1985). The three of us soon came to realize that we had much in common that distinguished us from most other economists who were not Christian, and indeed from many who were. We were made vividly aware of this at a disastrous conference, which has gone down in the collective memory of the Liberty Fund as the worst ever.

An eminent monetarist economist of the 1980s, Karl Brunner, believed that Roman Catholic social doctrine (CST)—which maintains that the state has a responsibility to regulate the economy in the interest of social justice—was based on a misunderstanding of economics, and that this ought to be corrected. He proposed to the Liberty Fund a conference at which well-known exponents of CST should be confronted by leading economists of the free-market variety and undeceived of their errors. Armen Alchian and James Buchanan—one of Geoffrey's collaborators and a colleague, though an implacable enemy of religion—were

the biggest of the free-market guns to be deployed in this operation. Two well-known Roman Catholic theologians were to be the victims. Perhaps because it was already known that Heyne, Brennan and Waterman, though economists were Christian, we were invited; possibly to demonstrate that free markets are not always incompatible with Christianity.

There was no meeting of minds. The free-market economists proved to their own satisfaction that any attempt to control or regulate the economy was doomed to failure and could only make matters worse. The theologians were blissfully ignorant of free-market doctrine, and could only talk of the Common Good. Buchanan and one or two others were provoked into bullying and insolence. Voices were raised in anger; and I rebuked Buchanan for his intemperate courtesy, and for ignoring the spirit of amicable disagreement supposed to characterize all Liberty Fund events (Brennan and Munger, 2014, p. 333 note 4).

We were saved by lunch at midday. Heyne, Brennan and I walked round the gardens, our heads reeling. We could understand both the strengths and the weaknesses of each side, but were dismayed by the inability or unwillingness of either to appreciate that of the other. The economists were not interested in Christianity, which they perceived as irrelevant to public policy. The theologians were not interested in economics, which they supposed had nothing to tell us about the Common Good. Perhaps that was the moment at which the three of us realized that we were ‘Christian economists’ in the strong sense. But I think that Heyne had understood this for some time.

Paul Heyne had been an ordinand of the intransigently (Protestant) orthodox Missouri Synod Lutherans (LCMS) in St Louis, who still believe that homosexuality is sinful, that women cannot be ordained, and that the Pope is Antichrist. Though the doctrines taught at Concordia seminary were archaic and relentlessly unfashionable, deep scholarship, scrupulous honesty, and intellectual rigor—within the prevailing LCMS assumptions—were required of all. Heyne was almost certainly better trained in theological thinking than he would have been at many a more liberal seminary. But, while in seminary, he became interested in public policy and affected an ‘anti-capitalist rhetoric,’ which led him to study economics at Washington University in St Louis. He then moved to Chicago, entered the Divinity School, and supported himself by lecturing in economics at Valparaiso University. Though he never engaged in research, and had no interest whatsoever in academic publication, he

soon came to see that his vocation as an economist was to teach. And he had clearly identified the central intellectual concern of his life before he left St Louis.

Christian scripture and church doctrine would seem to require all individuals to take moral responsibility for the human consequences of their 'economic' transactions: producing and consuming, buying and selling, hiring and firing, saving and investing. But economists have inherited from Adam Smith the presumption that many (perhaps most) consequences of these activities are unintended and can never be known in advance; and that, by acting purposefully *and seeking only to further their own interest*, individuals may do more good to their neighbors than they would have if motivated entirely by extraneously moral considerations. Christians who find economic theory convincing are therefore forced to confront Heyne's question: 'Are economists basically immoral?' (Brennan and Waterman, 2008a).

How do economists construct their immoral theories? Heyne envisaged an 'economic way of thinking' informed by a 'basic assumption': "*All social phenomena emerge from the choices of individuals in response to expected benefits and costs to themselves*" (Brennan and Waterman, 2008a, p. 311). His introductory textbook, *The Economic Way of Thinking* (1973), which expounded these doctrines, made him internationally famous as an outstanding and innovative teacher of economics. It went through nine editions in his lifetime, was especially popular in formerly Communist countries, and was translated into Russian, Czech, Romanian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Albanian, Korean, and Spanish.

Paul Heyne once described himself as 'a Lutheran by training, an Episcopalian by choice, and a Mennonite by instinct.' He "joined the Episcopal Church in 1976, finding a spiritual home in the Anglican emphasis on reason, tradition, and liturgy, and its relative lack of interest in doctrine" (Brennan and Waterman, 2008a, p. xx). Christian faith and economic science remained in creative tension for the whole of Paul Heyne's professional life. However, there was at least one fundamental respect in which he viewed the two through exactly the same lens, and this similarity may be a key to unlock his deliberately unsystematic and heterogeneous thought.

Economics is a *way of thinking*. Too much sophisticated technique (upon which both Brennan and I, in different ways, were dependent) may become an end in itself, and divert our attention from the real

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world. Christianity is a *way of life*. Too much ‘interest in doctrine’ can divide us from one another and divert our attention from faith, hope, and charity. To engage in either ‘way’ is to join with others who are already embarked on a journey of exploration that no one expects to end during his or her own life.

Both Geoffrey and I learned much from Paul. We soon became a tight-knit *troika*: three Anglican economists with similar views on economics and Christianity and their relation: more than the sum of our parts. When Paul died suddenly in 2000 we felt diminished.

III

Geoffrey Brennan was a professional economist of wide-ranging interests and superb technical proficiency. How was his work informed by the Christian faith, and what difference did that make? Partly, perhaps, by the subjects he chose to address; partly by the way he constructed his arguments.

Only a very small part of his published output dealt with explicitly theological or ecclesiastical matters, such as a few in collaboration with me (Brennan and Waterman 1994, 2008a, 2008b, 2020, 2021) and Brennan (2016). And there can be no doubt that his early work with James Buchanan on public choice theory (Brennan and Buchanan, 1980, 1985), which established his international reputation, left little room for implicit theologizing.

But though most of his work was rigorously analytical, he often addressed topics somewhat removed from the usual repertoire of the professional economist.

His collaboration with the German sociologist Michael Baurmann together with Goodin and Southwood, on ‘Norms and values’ (Baurmann *et al.*, 2010), indicates the direction of much of his research interests. In particular, he was willing to learn ‘Lessons for ethics from economics’ (Brennan, 2008; see also Brennan and Pettit, 2002).

A larger and more far-reaching collaboration with the philosopher Philip Pettit on ‘The economy of esteem’ (Brennan and Pettit, 2004) opened up an entirely new field of research in economic theory: *rational individuals are motivated by more than material benefits and costs*. For the way in which they are, and might wish to be, esteemed by others, can be and often are potent incentives to good behaviour.

These novel insights found further fruit in Geoffrey's work with Loren Lomasky (Lomasky and Brennan, 2000) on 'expressive' voting, and with Alan Hamlin (Brennan and Hamlin, 1995) on modeling virtue.

The importance of these ideas in understanding civil and political society is obvious; and their relation to traditional religious conceptions of virtue is at least suggestive. The 'cardinal virtues' recognized by Christian moral theology—Prudence, Fortitude, Temperance and Justice—must be taught and learned: for they are the means by which rational, self-regarding humans discipline their natural concern with private material costs and benefits and learn to cooperate with others in collective enterprise for the good of all (Brennan and Munger, 2014, p. 333). Since they may be led on by this to value the 'theological virtues' of faith, hope and charity which are at the heart of Christian belief (Augustine, 1958, I: p. xxxix), the esteem of others—and of one's own conscience—can be powerful in reinforcing virtue. Geoffrey's work with Michael Baurmann, on 'Virtue economics' (Baurmann and Brennan, 2016), was an important contribution to this growing field of research.

'Beliefs' are by no means a purely religious conception, but nor are they—except as data—a social-scientific idea. What one believes about one's self and one's place in the universe may be purely rational and scientific. But it may often be influenced—if not determined—by casual empiricism, unacknowledged self-interest, bias, prejudice, and superstition. A person's beliefs may therefore be, and often are, a manifestation of one's personality to be guarded against unfriendly criticism of others. And to the extent that they commit one to certain ethical, political, and legal positions, this implies that they may sometimes be a matter of bargaining (Goodin and Brennan, 2001). Brennan's willingness to take beliefs seriously in his social theory is an indication, I think, of the way in which his work was informed by his religious understanding.

In a somewhat different way, not so much in the topics he addressed as in his style, Geoffrey evinced what appears to have been a Christian sensibility; or at any rate a sympathetic understanding of the difficulties in combining religious belief with scientific objectivity. This was most clearly displayed, perhaps, in his obituary article for James Buchanan (Brennan and Munger, 2014).

Geoffrey's international reputation as a public choice theorist had been built on two important collaborations with James Buchanan after he moved to the USA in 1978 (Brennan and Buchanan, 1980,

1985). Though he and Buchanan remained colleagues and friends, their friendship was often marked by strong disagreement about religion. Buchanan's opinions on religion had been formed by his great mentor, Frank Knight. Therefore he was a 'resolute atheist' and at best puzzled, at worst angered, by his colleague's unashamed commitment to Christianity; and, in particular, by his willing participation in such Catholic observances as the imposition of ashes at the beginning of Lent. In his obituary article on 'The soul of James Buchanan?' (Brennan and Munger, 2014) Geoffrey records a vivid confrontation:

Buchanan: 'What's that on your face?'

Brennan: (somewhat absentmindedly) 'Oh, that must be my ashes. It's Ash Wednesday, and we get marked with the cross from the ashes of last year's palms from Palm Sunday.'

Buchanan (instantly furious): 'That's g*d d**ned gross! That's the grossest thing I've ever seen! You going around displaying your religion like that! I might as well go round indulging in indecent exposure!' (Brennan and Munger, 2014, p. 333)

But the obituary made full allowance for Buchanan's sincerity and good faith. After the scene reported above there was reconciliation, and 'an uneasy truce' was thereafter observed. "We learned not to talk of religion to each other. It was one of the things that separated us. Something that meant a great deal to me was plainly anathema to him" (Brennan and Munger, 2014, p. 333).

Buchanan was by no means untypical among leading economists of his generation in despising and rejecting religion; or at best ignoring it and treating it as a harmless minor fad for a few addicts (Waterman, 2014, p. 234). The great Paul Samuelson once told me that his wife used to say, 'Whenever anyone mentions religion you reach for your gun.' However, like all true scientists—and quite unlike Buchanan in this respect—Samuelson had a genuinely open mind. "I never bother to talk to anybody who agrees with me. I learn nothing from them," he said. We were arguing over whether Adam Smith had been Christian (Waterman, 2014, p. 234).

But though the majority of economists, like the majority of other scientists, are probably without any commitment to Christianity or Judaism, the default position now appears to be one of tolerant agnosticism. The significant minority of professional economists who are practicing Christians are respected and recognized for their scientific achievements;

and their religious beliefs are regarded at worst as excusable eccentricities, and at best as matters of personal taste: like bridge, golf and Anglican church music, each of which engaged a lot of Geoffrey's energy and ability for much of his life.

At any rate there can be no doubt about the respect and recognition received by Geoffrey for his many contributions, not only to economics but also to political theory and philosophy.

He was a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, a distinguished fellow of the Economics Society of Australia, and the first non-American president of the Public Choice Society. Geoffrey was awarded an honorary doctorate of economic sciences of the University of St Gallen, Switzerland, and in 2014 won the Hayek medal for his work on the nature of a free society—for although he himself had little professional interest in Hayek's work in either economics or politics, he had been a member of the Mont Pelerin Society, which Hayek had been instrumental in founding since 1987. That medal came with an honorarium of €10,000.

With his collaborator Loren Lomasky, he was awarded the Kavka Prize in political philosophy. He was a visiting fellow of All Souls College, Oxford in 1997; invited to deliver the Brian Barry memorial lecture at the London School of Economics in 2016; and in 2018 he received the Gutenberg Teaching Award from the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz.

At Duke University, Durham NC, where Geoffrey had been Keohane Distinguished Visiting Professor of Political Science and where he had inaugurated the Duke-UNC program of PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics), all flags were lowered to half mast in his honour on Monday, August 1, 2022.

IV

Like charity, Christianity begins at home.

Geoffrey and his wife of more than 50 years, Margaret—his favourite soprano in SCUNA—were at the center of a large Brennan-Youngman family connexion.

In their hospitable home in Isaacs ACT, Geoffrey, Margaret and their four children Susan, Michael, Robyn. and Phillip, formed the nucleus. The Youngmans had been faithful parishioners of St Paul's

Church, Canberra in the days when Geoffrey and I were new arrivals, and Margaret was one of four sisters. But, before long, Geoffrey became the central figure of the Brennan–Youngman clan, when all gathered at ‘the Milton Hilton,’ his spacious summer vacation property on the New South Wales coast.

There is no better school of Christian charity than the extended family. And there could have been no better exemplar of that virtue than Geoffrey. In our lifetime of intimate friendship, I never saw him angered, or even impatient, at the most egregious cases of opposition, resentment or hostility.

Geoffrey suffered others long, was kind, envied no one, never vaunted himself, was not puffed up. He never behaved himself unseemly, nor sought his own. He was not easily provoked and, as far as I was able to observe, thought no evil.

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