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# **“NO ONE CAN SERVE TWO MASTERS”: IS THERE A CONFLICT BETWEEN ECONOMICS AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE MINDS OF YOUNG CHRISTIAN ECONOMISTS?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Work plays an important role in life of every adult. As a value creating activity, it is also important from the point of view of the social order. It is, therefore, no surprise that attitudes towards work are a subject of various value systems, including religion, that approve or disapprove certain practices. Religious people thus can face an internal conflict when their work-related attitudes and their religious beliefs are not easily reconcilable. This paper looks at the case of economists and Christianity. Economists, compared to the general population, seem to possess certain characteristics that can be in contradiction with Christian teaching (they seem to be more selfish, less cooperative and less interested in the welfare of others, among other things). Moreover, economics is by many seen as containing certain “theological structures” that can attempt to provide a complex world-view and thus crowd-out religious beliefs of economists. In search for the presence of the conflict and strategies of its possible reconciliation, six individual, in-depth interviews with Czech Ph. D. students of economics that labeled themselves as Christians were conducted. The results of this probe support the idea that the “economic way of thinking” does not easily mix with Christianity in some cases, but they also offer insight into various ways the respondents overcome this contradiction.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The life of an average adult consists of two basic kinds of activities: work and leisure. If we suppose that the average length of a working time is eight hours a day, then work fills up about a third of the life of each adult.<sup>1</sup> If we add the fact that work as a value creating activity is “central to social order, ... it is not surprising that it should also become the focus of various ideologies, ethics and value systems seeking to define for it a meaningful framework, both cognitive and evaluative” (*Giorgi and Marsh 1990: 499*). One of these “value systems” is religion<sup>2</sup> and the relation between vocation (in the sense of employment, work, occupation or profession) and faith is the focus of this paper. Specifically, I deal with the relation between the vocation of Ph. D. students of economics at the Faculty of Economics and Public Administration of the University of Economics in Prague and the Christian faith.

The rest of the text is structured in the following way: The second part deals with the relation between productive activities and motivations of people at a general level and also in a relation to religion (Christianity in particular). The third part reflects some specifics related to economists, again first in general and in relation to Christianity. The fourth, empirical part contains results of six in-depth interviews with Ph. D. students that labeled themselves as Christians. The final part concludes.

## 2. GENERAL THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

At a theoretical level, we can view the relation between an individual and his or her occupation from two perspectives – psychological or sociological, but often it is not easy to define the dividing line clearly. For example *Eccles and Wigfield (2002: 110)* distinguish between “expectancies” that one has in relation to a certain activity, i.e. how he or she expects to perform and values that provide motivations or reasons for doing this activity. Although it would seem that the primary orientation of these theories is psychological, i.e. that they focus mainly on the inner world of an individual, this is perhaps too simplifying. The main reason for this claim is that the structure of expectations and motivations of an individual (or, in economic jargon, the probability of success and the amount of payoffs) is from a large part influenced by his or her social environment, which is studied by sociology (though one could argue that the individual must first internalize these values, or again in

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1 I omit the unemployed and the fact that in many cases, such as the academic work, the border line between work and leisure is not so easily distinguishable.

2 In this text, I understand faith as a personal relation of an individual to a transcendent entity, and by religion a system of social institutions ensuring performance of faith in social groups.

economic terms, they have to enter the individual's utility function, before they can effectively influence the individual's actions).<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, when we take into account also this broader context, the influence of religion on actions of an individual can be seen as both direct and indirect. His or her faith can affect the self-valuation of an individual and his or her values. Faith can, for example, command to undertake certain kind of activities (in the case of Christianity, for example, helping a neighbor), or forbid them (for example, not to eat much during the Lent). Religious rules (internalized through faith) here work *per se*, the believer wants to obey them not because of the threat of an external punishment, but simply because he or she considers them good and worth following. An indirect influence of religion can be imposed on an individual from his social environment through formal or informal social institutions – if a community of puritans, for example, assumes that eating marmalade is a mortal sin, they can pass a law forbidding this kind of activity. The individual is then by an external rule motivated not to undertake this action, in our case eat marmalade, no matter what his opinion on this matter or the degree of his faith are.

One of the key texts dealing with the importance of religious beliefs on work-related motivations of individuals is Max Weber's 1904 article "The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism" (Weber 1998). His main thesis can be simply stated as follows: there is a two-way relation between Protestantism and capitalism – Protestantism, due to its ascetic character and unostentatious character of consumption, can create high level of savings and capital; capitalism then, due to its high productivity, provides Protestants with material proof that they are the chosen ones (esp. in relation to the Calvinist thesis about predestination).

Weber's contribution set off a wave of reactions that are trying to reckon with him in one way or another.<sup>4</sup> For example, Giorgi and Marsh (1990) tried to test Weber's thesis about Protestant work ethics and economic performance on data from West European countries from the 1980's and they came to a conclusion that there is some relation between work ethics and religious denominations at the national level (at the individual level they discovered that most persons identifying themselves as having "Protestant work ethics" label themselves as atheists), but they also say that there are other important influences, such as level of education. Another attempt to find a correlation between religious denominations and work attitudes did not find any significant relation and according to the authors of the study, it seems that this relation is loosening over time (Chusmir and Koberg 1988: 258).

Critics of Weber's argument point mainly to its superficiality – Weber does not reflect certain historical contradictions, for example, the fact that essentially capitalistic institutions such as banks or insurance companies had existed in pre-reformation times in Catholic countries (such as city states of Venice, Genoa or Florence, as even the word "bank" – of Italian origin – still reminds us today), and they despise the "almost sacred status" that

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3 For the problem of internalization of social norms see Coleman (1987) or Becker (1974).

4 See for example the bibliography in Giorgi and Marsh (1990).

Weber's text enjoys among sociologists (Stark 2005). Although there seems to be a positive correlation between the level of religiosity and economic performance at the macroeconomic level,<sup>5</sup> the explanation between Protestantism and growth may be more complicated than Weber thought – it can, for example, be autocorrelated through the quality of institutional environment and stability of ownership rights, as some authors suggest.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. THE SPECIFICS OF ECONOMISTS

Given the body of literature published about the specifics of economists it might seem that economists are at least a special sub-species of *Homo sapiens*. The texts usually share a common concern – here are three titles as an illustration: “Why are economics students more selfish than the rest?” (Bauman and Rose 2009)<sup>7</sup>, “Do Economists Make Bad Citizens?” (Frank et al. 1996), or “Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation?” (Frank et al. 1993). These texts (and many others) obviously look for an answer to the question whether studying economics makes people selfish, individualistic, unable to cooperate and uninterested in the well being of others.

We can find several reasons why economists could be considered “strange” compared to other social scientists or to the general population. The list might include (but probably would not be limited to):

- 1) One of the central concepts of economics is the proverbial “invisible hand” of Adam Smith. Even if Smith “used the phrase ‘invisible hand’ on three dissimilar occasions in his writings and in each case it was employed, not to exemplify the Panglossian conclusion that markets always convert private ‘vices’ like selfishness into public ‘virtues’ like income and employment for all” (Blaug, 2001: 153), it is precisely this meaning, criticized by Blaug, that has become generally familiar. Economic mechanism is today by many (perhaps most?) economists seen as a tool of such a conversion, allowing smooth functioning of the market mechanism, which can also serve as an excuse for selfishness.<sup>8</sup>
- 2) Economics (esp. mainstream, i.e. neoclassical economics) is built solely on methodological individualism. This, until recently, exclusive focus on an individual, the *Homo oeconomicus*, disregarding any social ties he or she might have, led some authors to criticize the “undersocialized” character of economics (Granovetter 1985).

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5 See for example Noland (2005) or Barro and McCleary (2003).

6 See Pipes (2000) or De Soto (2000).

7 I thank Petr Houdek for drawing my attention to this paper.

8 The problem is, as usual, more complicated, because Adam Smith was carefully distinguishing between selfishness and self-interest, while today these two terms are often treated as equal. See, for example, Chalupnick (2009) for more details.

- 3) Economics was born in the environment of the moral philosophy of the Enlightenment. Until today it carries with it some traces of its ethical background – especially many “liberal” (in the classical meaning of the word) streams of economics are under the influence of ethics of John Locke or David Hume. Even if modern economics insists on its value neutrality, it cannot avoid certain kind of value judgments in which this heritage can be clearly seen.<sup>9</sup>
- 4) Economists are well known for their methodological conservatism. While other social sciences have discovered and embraced various kinds of postmodernity decades ago, mainstream economics seems to be well immunized against various postmodern or “heterodox” approaches and seems to be unshakably resting on the foundations laid at the end of the 19th century.<sup>10</sup>

A combination of these (and perhaps also others) factors gives to economists their specific character that has been analyzed and empirically verified by a series of studies, comparing data about attitudes of economists to the rest of the population, or observing their behavior in various experiments. As for the causes of these specific attitudes of economists, the main dispute discussed in the literature lies in the question whether studying economics really leads to “indoctrination” of students, or whether the specific results of economists are more likely caused by a certain “preselection”, in which case economics would be especially attractive to a certain kind of people.

Bauman and Rose (2009) summarize results of a number of studies which support the thesis that economists are more selfish than the rest of the population (for example: they behave as free riders in public good experiments; they offer lower amounts in ultimatum games; they will more probably defect in prisoner’s dilemma situations and in solidarity games; they accept bribes with higher probability; as employers, they prefer maximization of profit before the welfare of their employees; and they consider allocation based on price mechanism as just). To answer the indoctrination/preselection dispute, they used a dataset of voluntary contribution (presumably motivated by altruism) of almost 9000 students of University of Washington and looked for correlations between changes in the level of contributions and passing a microeconomics course. Their results suggest that students who study economics as a non-major tend to decrease their contributions after the microeconomics course (“loss of innocence” effect), probably because they are exposed to certain ideas or certain people (economics majors). In the case of students who have economics as major no such effect was observed, which is explained by the fact they had lost their “in-

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9 For the – often unadmitted – value background of economics see, for example, Waterman (2002: 907): “Yet what Heyne calls ‘the economic way of thinking’ is more than just a science. It is a way of looking at society that rests on certain assumptions about the human condition. Those assumptions are neither innocent nor uncontroversial, for they stir up baffling moral and theological questions. Is there a higher good than economic welfare? ... If individuals actually are as rational and self-interested as we assume, ought they to be?”

10 See Hausman (1994) for description and critique regarding this point.

nocence” at high school or they were “born guilty”. In their case, pre-selection seems to be the mechanism in operation.

Frank et al. (1996) summarize a series of experiments with students of economics in the U.S. They dispute the fact that they would be “bad citizens” (they, for example, participate in a presidential election in proportions comparable to the rest of the population), but they do admit that students of economics are less likely to contribute to charitable causes and if they do, they give smaller amounts than others. They identify three robust conclusions about economists: (a) studying economics supports the opinion that people are mainly motivated by their self-interest, (b) this view leads to higher expectations that other people will be more likely to defect in various social situations and dilemmas, (c) if they expect others to defect, they will defect as well (Frank et al. 1996: 192).

Caplan (2001) compared sociological data about opinions of economists and non-economists on various economic issues and he tries to identify factors that will cause a non-economist to “think as economists”. A person from the general population thinks as an economist if he (a) has a higher level of education, (b) is a man, (c) his income has increased recently, (d) expects increase of his income in the future, and (e) has a stable job (Caplan 2001: 423).

Although none of the research available dealt explicitly with the relation between economists and their religious beliefs, we can derive some indirect conclusions from them. If I follow the structure of the specific features of economics from the beginning of this chapter, I can summarize:

- 1) All big world religions (including Christianity) place a strong emphasis on altruism and love towards others (Neusner and Chilton 2005), which can be – in the case of economists – in contradiction with the (superficially but commonly understood) concept of the “invisible hand”. This contradiction gets even deeper if we realize that economics has a quasi-theological (or quasi-religious) structure and that it to some extent also tries to formulate a comprehensive world view<sup>11</sup> that can be in many important respects in contradiction with various religious teachings. In some cases, this attitude can lead to deification of the market mechanism, when “efficient” becomes synonymous for “just” or “fair”, crowding-out other alternative ethical systems from the mind of an economist.
- 2) Methodological individualism of economics stresses an individual; the Christian tradition on the contrary places a strong emphasis on community. If we suppose that creating and maintaining such a community is connected with various social dilemmas, then we can (according to previously quoted authors) expect lower participation of economists

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11 See, for example, above quoted Waterman (2002); or Cox (1999). Oslington (2000) argues for the presence of various theological structures in the works of “founding fathers” of economics: Smith, Malthus, Marshall or Walras. He also notes that “economists are less able to recognize the theological content of the currently dominant variety of economic theory” (Oslington 2000: Part 4(a)). The attempt of economics to provide a complex explanation of the world can, in my opinion, be seen, for example, in the so-called “economic imperialism”, i.e. economic analysis penetrating into fields outside economics in the narrow sense, such as family, law, religion, politics and others (Lazear 2000).

in such communities, or at least a higher probability that economists will be more passive members, enjoying advantages from membership, but refusing to contribute to the “common good” (free-riding).

- 3) Even if economics has no ambition to speak directly about the (non)existence of God, given the underlying values of the Enlightenment, the economic approach might be perhaps most compatible with agnosticism or even atheism.<sup>12</sup> This can, among others, lead to different views on certain normative issues between economists and Christians (two such topics will be mentioned in the interviews below – trade with human organs and the problem of abortions).
- 4) Positivist approach of (mainstream) economics and its emphasis on rationality can be in contradiction with a religious stance, which operates with such “irrational” concepts as religious experience, revelation, miracle, mystery etc.

Stark et al. (1996) deal with a relation between religion and science at a general level, and they try to disprove certain deep-rooted clichés about the supposedly hostile relation between these two fields – they show data for the U. S. population that there exists not negative, but rather a positive correlation between religious activity and education. Furthermore, they document with data from 1969 sociological research among American academics that economists are approximately as religious as sociologists or political scientists (the least religious are psychologists and anthropologists); only 10 % of economists were explicitly anti-religious (a value comparable with other social scientists, again with the exception of psychologists and anthropologists who are two times more likely to be anti-religious (Stark et al. 1996: 436)). Similar ideas about the compatibility of science and religion are presented by Iannaccone (1998), although in his case he pays more attention to the possibilities of economic study of religion.

Certain, though indirect, proof of the problematic coexistence between economics and religion, is, on the other hand, presented by Ahmed and Salas (2009) who based on data from cooperation experiments between students of economics in India, Mexico and Sweden find support for the conclusion that religious orientation of these students has no significant impact on the willingness to cooperate. This seems to be in the contradiction with theory (predicting a positive correlation between religiousness and willingness to cooperate) and one of the authors’ explanations is that “economic motivations” of the students crowded-out their “religious motivations” (Ahmed and Salas 2009: 77). This would support the thesis about indoctrination and the competitive nature between the worldviews of religion and economics; however, they list this explanation among several others, and it is impossible to find out from this single experiment how big its weight and relevance are.

If we summarize the previous considerations, we can conclude the theoretical part of this paper by stating that at a general level, economists seem to differ from a general popu-

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12 On the uneasy relation between modern economics and religion/theology see texts quoted in the previous footnote, and also Bruce (1993) who disputes the suitability of the “rational choice” approach to the study of religion.

lation in relatively lower levels of altruistic motivations and lower willingness to cooperate in social dilemmas. Because this is in contradiction with attitudes endorsed by various religious traditions (in our case especially by Christianity), we could expect that there is a conflict between religious preferences of an economist and his or her economic education and profession. We could call it a conflict between religious and altruistic Dr. Jekyll and selfish, rationalist economist Mr. Hyde. This expected Jekyll/Hyde conflict can have two clear-cut solutions, as it is impossible to live permanently in an internal conflict: either the person will leave the economic profession and keeps his or her faith (Dr. Jekyll wins), or stops being religious and accepts the world view of economics (Mr. Hyde wins). Both situations would lead to a lower proportion of religious people among economists.

But our discussion above suggests that neither of these two solutions seems to take place in reality – there is no data available that would prove this Jekyll/Hyde hypothesis. Quite the opposite might be true: the sparse data on relation of economists to religion quoted by Stark et al. (1996) show that the religiousness of economists is not significantly lower compared to other social scientists or to the general population. If we omit methodological issues related to these data,<sup>13</sup> there seems to be also a third solution to our Jekyll/Hyde dichotomy: this conflict is rather imaginary and most economists are somehow able to reconcile these two enemies within themselves. It is precisely the presence of this conflict and the strategies of its reconciliation that we look at in the second, empirical part of this paper.

## 4. INTERVIEWS WITH ECONOMISTS

We can postulate a theory about a reciprocal relation between occupation (profession) and faith. Religious preferences of an individual (especially of those who are brought up in a religious tradition since childhood) can determine areas of his or her interests and thus influence the selection of occupation (faith → occupation). But at the same time having and performing a certain occupation can to a large extent influence the world-view of the individual and therefore, also its religious preferences (occupation → faith). The following chapter, therefore, looks at these two directions in two separate parts.

### 4.1 METHOD AND RESPONDENTS

The survey was conducted in the form of individual in-depth interviews<sup>14</sup> that took place in February 2010 and took approximately 45–90 minutes each. The respondents were 5 cur-

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13 For example, the problem of measuring “religiousness” and its unclear relation to personal faith. Another problem could be related to the fact that most of the data comes from the USA, while the situation in Europe can be substantially different (Davie 2009).

14 For a list of general questions see the Appendix. In some cases not all the questions were used (if they were, based on the responses, considered irrelevant for that particular respondent or if the respondent answered

rent Ph.D. students and one recent Ph. D. graduate, all from the Faculty of Economics and Public Administration (“the Faculty”) of the University of Economics in Prague (“UEP”). All six were men, their ages ranged between 24 and 35 years (the average age was 28 years). All of them described themselves as Christians: four said they were Roman Catholics (respondents A, B, C, D), one Lutheran (respondent E) and one without denominational affiliation (respondent F). Four of them were Slovaks (A, B, C, E); two Czechs. Ph.D. students were selected in the first round by addressing them directly, and in the second round through an e-mail message about the survey that was sent to all Ph.D. students at the Faculty (about 100 people), stating two conditions to qualify (being Christian; and a Ph.D. student at the Faculty or a recent graduate). Ph.D. students were chosen because they should have a greater insight into economics and certain interest in it (Ph.D. studies could be seen as an equivalent to a regular job), and at the same time they could have a fresh experience with the conflicts described above (if any such conflicts existed). Half of the respondents (respondents A, C, and E) also studied some of the BA and MA programs at the Faculty, while others came to the Faculty for their Ph.D. studies only.

A note should be made regarding the background of the Faculty. It is one of several faculties in the Czech Republic (and the only one at the UEP) that provides economic education in theoretical economics (while other faculties of the UEP are more business-oriented). Besides general economic theory it also offers more applied programs focusing on economic policy and public administration. While all sorts of economic theories are taught there, the predominant ideological climate could be described as liberal (in the classical sense); the Faculty has some personal connections with two Czech libertarian/conservative think-tanks (Liberal Institute and Center for Economics and Politics) and, as one of the respondents who studied economics at MA level at a different economic faculty noted, “*liberal approaches are given more space here than somewhere else*”<sup>15</sup>. These approaches (from my personal experience) include mainly Chicago School of Economics, Austrian School of Economics or Public Choice Theory.

#### 4.2 RELATION FAITH → OCCUPATION

The question in this part of the interview focused on the presence of a conflict between faith and economics at the time of choosing economics as the field of study.

**Respondent A** graduated from a grammar school<sup>16</sup>, started studying a non-economic program at another Prague university and since he considered himself “*not very occupied*”, he decided to apply for the MA program in economics at the Faculty. Because it was his second university program, his choice was motivated mainly by his interest and not any

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them before they were asked). Before the beginning of the interview, the respondents were told the general structure of the interview and the focus of the research. In one case the interview was conducted via Skype (as the respondent was currently abroad for an extended period of time).

15 Words or sentences in parentheses and italics are direct quotes from the interviews.

16 A general high school, preparing mainly for further studies at a university.

external pressure (parents were supportive, but left the choice to him). However, his idea of economics at that time was very vague; he knew economics mainly as it was presented in the media. He was brought up as a Roman Catholic, and describes his faith at that time as “*more than just going to the church*”.

**Respondent B** graduated from a business academy<sup>17</sup>, so his choice of a university was determined by the type of high school (when he started it, he had had no ambitions to go to a university). The choice of the high school was a pragmatic one – a better chance to find a job than in the case of graduation from a more general grammar school. When he was considering university, he saw economists as those who “*have a lot of money, work in an office and are generally well-off*”. He was also brought up as a Roman Catholic, but he describes his faith at that time as “*rather superficial, pubertal*”.

**Respondent C**, also brought up as a Roman Catholic, graduated from a grammar school, after which he “*did not really know what to do with myself*”, and he saw economics “*as a good choice for those who don’t know what they want to do*” because of its universality. His idea of economics at that time was that an economist is “*the one who sits in a bank behind the counter*”, but he was hoping it was not the case, “*because I could not stand something like that*”. He was partly persuaded by his parents, “*their approach was pragmatic*”. One of the impulses for starting with economics was discovering a book about Christianity and economics by Michael Novak<sup>18</sup>.

**Respondent D**, also a graduate from a grammar school and a Roman Catholic, chose physics (at a different university) as the field of his MA studies. It was an unambiguous choice. He was not considering any other alternatives at that time. Then he started working as an IT specialist for a company providing solutions for public administration and after several years of this work, he decided to apply for a Ph.D. program at the Faculty. His first encounter with economics thus happened at a Ph.D. level. His notion of economics before that was perhaps influenced to some extent by his studies of physics, so he saw economics mainly as microeconomics, about single firms and individuals.

**Respondent E** also graduated from a grammar school. When applying for a university, he was considering only economic faculties for his MA studies. He explains that this was perhaps because also both his parents are economists; but it was his decision; parents were not interfering. At that time he thought he had quite a good idea of what economics is about (he had read Samuelson’s well known textbook already at high school). However, he did not see any relation between his faith and economics, because he was “*somewhere on the boundary between faith and non-faith*” at that time, as he got baptized (in the Lutheran church) only later, when he had been already a student of economics.

Finally, **respondent F** graduated from a grammar school. His relation to Christianity from an external point of view is perhaps the loosest among all the respondents – he has not been baptized and does not feel to belong to any specific denomination (“*I dislike*

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17 A high school focusing mainly on business-related fields (business administration, accounting etc.).

18 Michael Novak (born 1933), American economists and philosopher.

organized religion.”), though he mentioned “*I sort of like protestant ethics*”. He described his religious status (current as well as at the time of choosing his field of study): “*I am a Christian, because one has no other choice*” and added: “*I could try to be a Buddhist, but it wouldn’t work in our environment*”; he also admits there has been some “*new age influence*” in what he believes in. He graduated from a grammar school and already there he read a textbook on economics, describing ideas of Adam Smith, “*how the invisible hand arranges things*”. He found these ideas appealing, as he explicitly said, “*because they corresponded to how I saw the world*”.

### 4.3 RELATION OCCUPATION → FAITH

Questions in this part were focusing on the influence of studying economics on the views of the respondents. After asking about a general influence, the questions were centered on the influence of studying economics on faith and possible a conflict arising from this combination. Finally, three potentially conflicting areas were mentioned: (a) involvement in voluntary activities, (b) perception of the church hierarchy, and (c) perception of charitable activities and non-profit organizations.

Regarding the general influence that their studies of economics had on their world views, the impact ranges from zero to some, but none of the respondents said that economics turned his view of the world upside down. **Respondent A** admits, that he was “*certainly influenced, for example, I look at most social problems as an economist*”. But he also said that this influence was “*rather marginal, compared to other influences related to coming to Prague, meeting new people and so on*”. **Respondent B** said: “*Studying economics made me think more analytically. My view of politics also changed, thanks to the public choice theory - now I think that politics is not based on some general, public interest, but on the self-interest of politicians.*” **Respondent C** also sees the change in his world view as “*not so radical*”, but he admits, that when studying economics, “*I have to reflect its influence [on me], because as Smith<sup>19</sup> or Mandeville<sup>20</sup> tell us that vices can be converted into virtues, one can easily become indifferent to selfishness*” He also stated: “*When I talk to some of my friends, they are often surprised by some my opinions, for example when talking about how economic growth can help the poor.*” **Respondent D** (a former student of physics) claimed: “*At first, I was terrified by some approaches of macroeconomics, mainly when they were treating people as a mass, for example looking at correlations between health or level of education and GDP. Although we do the same in physics with particles, atoms, it is not the same - these are living people! I was also surprised by the attempt of economics to manipulate all these things, a sort of social engineering. But I have got used to it.*” He also acknowledged that thanks to economics, “*I can now better understand some political decisions; it also allowed me to see things in their complexity.*” **Respondent E** claimed: “*Studying economics did not teach me many practical things, but it taught me how to think, so the influence is more at the methodological level.*” **Respondent F** said

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19 Adam Smith (1723-1790), Scottish moral philosopher and political economists.

20 Bernard de Mandeville (1670-1733), Dutch and English philosopher and political economist.

he liked the theoretical framework of economics that helped him to shape his world-views. He also appreciated those teachers who were able to “cast doubts upon what one hears in other classes” and was a big fan of interdisciplinary approaches; he enthusiastically recalled lectures where the teacher “was talking about art and was able to connect it with philosophy and economics”. He repeatedly claimed that economics in many ways confirmed what he thought was true before he started his studies: “theories of spontaneous order”, “that things have a certain purpose”, “that there are some invisible things that cannot be seen at first sight and that could be even more important than visible things, as Bastiat<sup>21</sup> said”, or “that people do what they can do best”.

The next set of questions was about the specific influence of studying economics on the respondents’ faith and about the presence of any resulting conflicts.

**Respondent A** mentioned, that it is not always clear what one means by economics “because there is heterogeneity of approaches in economics and different economists think different things”, but when he focused on conflicts, he mentioned: “For example when some economists argue for abortions, because they – according to them – decrease crime rates. No unwanted children are born and as a result, the crime rates will be lower in fifteen, twenty years. ... My counterargument could be on moral grounds in a Christian environment, but I can also argue in an economic way among economists; they probably wouldn’t buy moral arguments. In this particular case I could look if there is any autocorrelation, some other factors influencing the crime rate.” Besides that he also talked in a similar manner about trade with human organs. Finally, he continued with a general contemplation of the role of values in economics: “Economics pretends that it is value free, but in fact this is not true – it is deeply rooted in the ideas of the Enlightenment. ... But this [moral dimension of economics] does not constitute economics for me; one can be an economist without identifying with it.” He concluded by pointing to what he sees as a hierarchy of values: “Economics deals with what is efficient, what leads to growth. Growth is also a value, and for some it can be even the ultimate value, but for me it is rather a mediating value that points to values above it. In the case of growth – people were created in the image of God, to create good, cultivate land, increase material welfare. But this cannot be without limits – one cannot, for example, kill all old and sick people who are not productive, although it would lead to greater material welfare for everyone else. He cannot do it because of some other, higher values.”

**Respondent B** said that “the influence of my education on my faith is not substantial. To think as an economist and as a Christian are two different things. I would rather put it in the opposite direction – thanks to my faith I can see thing in economics that I wouldn’t realize otherwise. For example, how reputation and trust pay off in economics – that is a confirmation of what one believes in.” When discussing potentially controversial fields, we got to the problem of abortions and he noted: “I know that when one looks at them [abortions] economically, he can come to a conclusion they shouldn’t be prohibited. But that, from my perspective, is not a complex perspective, because it looks only at the results, not the beginning of the problem. If

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21 Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850), French political economist.

*I use the ethics of economists, the body belongs to the mother, she has a right to choose. The problem is that she had chosen already in the time of the intercourse - we are not talking about rape - and now she must accept the consequences. Economics describes some consequences, but they are not arguments for me; they perhaps only let me understand better those who argue for choice.”*

**Respondent C**, when talking about the relation between economics and his faith, returned to Michael Novak and he said: *“My initial enthusiasm for Novak is from a greater part gone today. It was explained by one of my acquaintances to me, he [the acquaintance] is quite conservative, but not a priest, that Novak’s ideas are theologically on the margin.”* When talking about controversial topics, such as abortions, he said: *“In the discussion, I usually give the economic argument. But then I feel that it describes just a part of reality and I feel I need to add also a moral perspective. But in some cases, in the relation between faith and economics “there is no contradiction for me, for example, in the case of catallactic<sup>22</sup> rules, adhering to contracts, respecting private property. That is in accordance with what the church says. If I see any contradiction, I always console myself with this example, that conciliation between the two is possible. ... But I haven’t solved all the questions; I feel I need to become a good economist first, to understand things better. I am still trying to reconcile economics and theology, but I probably leave it more for the future.”*

**Respondent D** replied: *“I see no relation between my studies of economics and my faith. People have free will and can decide and that is what economics and other social sciences look at.”* Because he mentioned several times parallels between economics and physics, he was asked whether he sees any problem in relation of physics and religion, for example in the case of miracles. He replied: *“I don’t think there is any contradiction. Physics can explain, according to some, only four percent of things around us, there is hidden matter and energies that contemporary physics knows nothing about. It describes causes and consequences, but does not ask why things are as they are. I would even say that thanks to physics I was able to fully appreciate the miracle of the creation - I gained deeper understanding how miraculous the world is.”*

**Respondent E** also was not aware of any influence of studying economics on his faith, partly, as was mentioned above, that in his case growing understanding of these two things was happening simultaneously. When asked about a specific area where he feels some tension, he mentioned: *“It is probably the sphere of social policy, what the state does there, for example, intergenerational solidarity, and what are Christian values, for example, strong emphasis on family, that children should take care of their parents and so on. I think the church should play a greater role in this field than today.”* But he also listed some fields where he sees these two views as harmonious: *“For example in the case of private property protection, there the approaches of religion and economics are similar, or private charity and similar things, but I have never really thought about it in a greater depth.”*

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22 Catallactis, or the theory of exchange, concept developed especially by two Austrian economists F. A. von Hayek and L. von Mises.

In the case of respondent F, his economic education and his faith seem to be quite harmonically intertwined and when discussing potentially conflicting fields, none such came to his mind. When asked directly about the impact of economics on his faith, he replied: *“I can better formulate things. Perhaps a sort of formalization of what I believe in. It [economics] helps me define terms, experiences that are hard to be expressed in words. It can easier create coherent concepts out of what is in my mind.”*

Several respondents came to the problem of supervising a student’s thesis on some of the controversial topics, or using arguments they do not agree with because of their faith. The responses were unanimous in this case: **Respondent A:** *“I would try to differentiate between my valuation of the student’s way of argumentation – that is what we are supposed to teach them –, and the opinions of the student, or in other words, the difference between a method and values. ... The case is different if I were asked to write such a text, for example, to defend abortions. Then I would refuse.”* **Respondent B:** *“I probably wouldn’t refuse to supervise a work on such topics, but I would try to act as the devil’s advocate, I would try to argue with such a student. Behaving as an economist does not necessarily imply how one would behave in private life. I take it as a job, I respect their opinions, I would help them in what I can do. I would try to do my job as best as I can.”* When asked if he himself would mind to be an author of such a text, respondent B replied: *“That is something different. In that case I would try to explain to my boss it would contradict my conscience if I had to write something like that.”* **Respondent E:** *“I would accept to supervise such a thesis. In the past, I supervised a thesis on alcohol regulation or gambling. I don’t mind when students have different opinions. The goal of their studies here is to teach them how to think, not to have them memorize some doctrines.”*

Leaving the general sphere, the rest of the interviews dealt with more applied fields, first of them being the involvement of the respondents in some voluntary activities, either in their religious community or anywhere else. One of the aims of this section was to find out if their involvement (if any) has changed in any way since they started their studies of economics. **Respondent A** was active in his parish community, and he still is after coming to Prague, as he says, *“perhaps as much as in the past, just at a different place”*. When asked about motivations, he responded: *“I do it because of what it brings to me – human benefits, social capital from belonging to some community, for example in the past a friend of mine, who is in the same parish and also teaches at our university, helped me with preparation for the class that I was teaching. But there are also some spiritual benefits, a good feeling from doing something good.”* **Respondent B** said: *“I used to spend a lot of time with my friends from the parish, we organized programs for children, sport and so on – my faith was a strong motivation. I took it as a service. I don’t continue with this particular activity anymore. I am older, perhaps more indolent. But I do organize activities in one parish in Prague, although I do not feel to be a stable part of any parish anymore. ... This might be the impact of economics. Perhaps my world-view is today more individualistic.”* **Respondent C** also came to Prague for his studies. He was a member of a parish in his home town and he still is. He returns home often, about once every two weeks. *“I sometimes serve as a ministrant; I sing in the choir, organize meetings, theater performances, or donate money, but still I feel I mainly consume the benefits rather than contribute to them. I was never overly altruistic, and perhaps the school is supporting me*

in this [non-altruistic behavior]. *I don't have much time now, but that is probably a common excuse.* **Respondent D** goes sometimes to his local church and describes his position as being *"on the borderline between those who are active in the parish and those who only benefit"*. He continues: *"My faith is more individualistic. I don't like being a member of large groups. I like to discuss things with my fellow parishioners, but rather in private, not in some organized manner. I do not participate in any parish activities, perhaps with the exception of activities for our children, carnival or so. ... Sometimes I donate some money."* **Respondent E** also does not see participating in a religious community as important: *"Perhaps it is the difference between Catholics and Lutherans - we [Lutherans] don't need to go to church to confess; you can do it in your living room. I have nothing against such communities. Whoever wants to join them should join them. It might have sense for some people."* Finally, **respondent F** does not have any religious affiliation and does not feel to belong in any kind of religious community. When asked if he would contribute in any way to some voluntary activity if somebody asked him to do so, he replied: *"I was taught some kind of business ethics, that when one is good, it pays back somehow. I don't believe this is true. I would personally always look at the costs and benefits for me. For example, I could have a chance to learn something from it. Just giving or helping wouldn't be a sufficient motivation for me."*

The second "applied" set of questions was related to the respondents' perception of church hierarchy and specifically if they see any tension between self-interested motivations of church representatives/hierarchy members and the religious view that the Christian church should also consider other perspectives (or in theological terms, that it should be inspired or led by the Holy Spirit). **Respondent A** does not see these two perspectives in contradiction: *"Economics does not necessarily imply egoistic motivations; it can also work with altruism. I don't think that the representatives of the Church would be worse than the general population. There is an analogy with politicians - they are not worse, just more exposed to temptation. ... People are fallible, but thanks to God's grace, there is a chance in the case of the Church that it will work better and longer than any kind of human community. And I think the long history of the Church proves it."* **Respondent B** admitted, that *"motivations to, for example, become a priest can be also material; one does not burden his family. I used to think that when one decides to become a priest from these material reasons, it is a way to hell, because this priest does not take it seriously, does not have vocation. Then somebody told me that we don't know all the paths of the Spirit - maybe material poverty that brought him to church, is such a path. Even he can become a good priest. It is difficult to judge motivations when we don't know how the Holy Spirit wants it... You cannot really talk in public-choice-theory-terms about the Holy Spirit... God knows people's motivations, not me. I don't know them, I don't judge them."* **Respondent C** goes somehow further: *"I don't see any contradiction in that. I don't think that the Church should be democratic, I think it shouldn't act according to how some majority of people votes... Priests also do have material motivation;, they are also children of our modern age. I have no problem with a priest having a car; he can easier reach his parishioners."* **Respondent D** also has no problem with merging these two perspectives: *"Faith is for me a personal relation, and only after that a matter of a church... I believe everyone should find his way, individual motivations are not so important for me. If you take an example from physics - when you deal with*

large numbers of particles, individual characteristics of these particles become less important. A similar thing applies in any community.” **Respondent E** said: “An economic perspective of a church is no problem for me. Similarly, as any kind of firm, also the Church is considering what it will do and what it will leave to others. Hayek<sup>23</sup> would, for example, say that everything should be only at the level of individuals, while Coase<sup>24</sup> would say that a certain degree of organization is necessary. The latter is probably true for the Church...I see its importance also in keeping the values for the last two thousand years. This long history is what distinguishes us, for example, from the Muslims.” A similar perspective was applied by **respondent F**: “For me, a church is a club. It is a mechanism of enforcing certain rules, lowering transaction costs, a mechanism of keeping certain a system. It creates centers of homogeneity in an otherwise heterogeneous environment.”

The final set of questions was trying to reveal the attitude of the respondents towards charitable activities and the non-profit sector in general (leaving aside involvement in their churches). To make the answers more specific, some questions were related to helping homeless people. **Respondent A** said he contributed (besides his church involvement) with money to charitable causes, not regularly, but, for example, in case of some natural disaster. He was asked if he sees any contradiction between market allocation of resources and the need for nonprofit activities. He said: “Market does not solve all problems. It is just one of the ways. There are also other allocation mechanisms - state, and private nonprofits...I don't give money to people on the streets, I have no guarantee they will not use it to buy alcohol, for example...I think there should be some redistribution in the society; if we have enough, we should share. But we should not allow people on social welfare too high of a living standard.” **Respondent B** provided a similar answer - he gives money to charitable causes, but rather on an irregular basis. He also sees space for nonprofits: “They should have greater room than today, I am for subsidiarity. I like, for example, de Tocqueville's<sup>25</sup> Democracy in America, where he describes how private voluntary organizations were flourishing in the U. S.” As for the beggars in the streets, he noted: “A beggar is where it should be. He should be rewarded by his marginal product. Why should we help him? I think that anyone can contribute to the society, everyone has some comparative advantage. If someone decides to throw it away, let him stay in the ditch.” **Respondent C** said: “I do not condemn nonprofit organizations, but I prefer giving money in my church, even if some say that churches are less efficient. Efficiency is not my main concern when giving. I do sympathize with nonprofits, but I don't give them anything...I used to give money to the homeless sometimes, but I felt it is not right, because I don't know if I am not in fact harming the person, for example if he goes and buys some alcohol for the money. I think that the number of homeless people is greater than it could be, because they rely on getting money from people....” **Respondent D** claims he sometimes supports official fund-raising campaigns or nonprofit activities in the street, but not anonymous individuals. He also said:

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23 Friedrich A. von Hayek (1899-1992), Austrian economist and political philosopher.

24 Ronald H. Coase (born 1910), British economist.

25 Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), French political philosopher.

*"I don't agree with the view that nonprofit organizations must be less efficient than private firms. It depends on the people there. I believe that when they are really trying to do something good, the nonprofits do carefully look in what they put their money, while companies in many cases don't...Nonprofits also have a big advantage over the state, because they know local conditions, but I don't refuse the idea they could be supported from tax money."* **Respondent E** said that besides giving money in the Church "my need for being altruistic is satisfied by paying taxes. If I was asked by some private nonprofit organization, I would consider giving them money. It depends on how much I would have at that time. If I have enough money or time, I would share, if not, then not. I usually don't look how the money I give is spent. I trust the institution; they must know how to spend them. I believe they do it in an efficient way." As for the homeless people, he thinks "it is their decision to live on the street. They should be taken care of by the community that they belong to and that pays taxes on them." **Respondent F** said he had "flashes of altruism sometimes", and he added: "I believe one can help others in the best way by helping himself. For example, a businessman by creating jobs. Or I can help people in Africa if I study, like Easterly<sup>26</sup> did, whether international aid is really helping them or rather causing harm. One of my friends saw on TV something about Africa and wanted to adopt a black baby there. I told her she could do more good by going to the Central Train Station and help several homeless guys there. She was not very pleased with this suggestion. I try not to lie to myself as she did. I am realistic. But I see that this concept of helping others by helping myself does not work in the case of those who are really unable to help themselves. In this respect I am kind of inhuman."

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The set of respondents proved to be quite varied, regarding both the respondents' relation to economics and also to faith. Despite the diversity, some conclusions can be made.

Summarizing the first part of the interviews, it seems that none of the respondents was aware of any serious conflicts resulting from his religious beliefs and his interest in economics. The reasons they provided, of course, differ: in some cases the reason was they simply did not know precisely what economics was about (respondents A and B). Respondent E on the other hand knew economics, but was only discovering the content of Christianity. The two persons mentioned their views of economics and religion were more or less in harmony (C and F); however, in the case of respondent F, it seems that his relation to Christianity is the loosest (he is also the only one among the respondents who has not been baptized). The case of respondent D is quite unique, because he got to economics through physics, but even in his case no conflict was present (as he was able to reconcile his faith with physics and his view of economics seemed to be partly influenced by it).

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26 William R. Easterly (born 1957), American economist.

As for the second part, the answer is more complicated. There seems to be a certain influence of economics on the general views of the respondents - they all more or less talk about a specific economic way of thinking or looking at the world. Some respondents felt this “indoctrination” – to borrow a term used by Bauman and Rose (2009) – was not smooth: respondent C felt to be tempted by the way it might provide excuses for selfishness, respondent D used quite a strong word, “terrified”, when he was confronted with certain methods of macroeconomics. Others did not talk about any such problems, or they even felt (perhaps most clearly in the case of respondent E) that economics added a deeper sense to what they had thought about the world.

Probably the most interesting (and also most diversified) answers were provided when talking about the core of this part, that is, the influence of economics on faith and possible conflicts. Some areas were seen clearly as problematic, some as complementary. Those who are aware of a certain conflict practice quite strict differentiation between the method of economics and its normative contents. They place emphasis on the method of analysis, while the underlying values are not so important to them, and/or, as explicitly stated in the case of respondent A, they can to some extent integrate them in their hierarchy of values. It seems that the contradiction has been solved at least in the case of the respondents A and B. Respondents D and E probably never felt such conflict (in the case of D given his previous experience with physics; in the case of E thanks to gradual “growing-into” both economics and Christianity, simultaneously). In the case of respondent C, his previous reconciliation has lost its credibility (probably, as he indicated, by being exposed to a more “conservative” interpretation of Catholicism), and today he considers his state as partly unresolved, but even he can see some areas of harmony.

It is also obvious that there is some common ground that economists and Christians share: respondent B mentioned questions regarding trust and reputation, respondents C, E and F talked about general market (or catallactic) rules and spontaneous order, E also about attitude to private property.

As for the first “applied” question about their involvement in voluntary activities, several respondents felt some influence of economics: B mentioned a certain decrease of his activities, but still remains active in some way; two others said explicitly that their faith is individualistic (D, E) and one that he had problems with remaining altruistic under the influence of economics (C). On the other hand, the responses to the second “applied” question about their perception of church hierarchy were unanimous: no conflict in their views as Christians and as economists – partly perhaps because of a relatively loose relation to churches (D, E, F), partly because of allowing for some divine inspiration (A, B, C). The final “applied” question revealed in the case of all respondents certain distrust towards individuals asking for money on the street (in most cases motivated by their inability to control what is done with the money, they give, and partly also because of moral hazard issues). They believe more in private, non-profit organizations. Some of them support them materially (though on an irregular basis – respondents A, B, D, potentially also E), one only verbally and he gives money only to his church (respondent C). Respondent F provided

a negative answer, based on a certain formulation of self-interested ethics, which was not without inconsistencies as he partly admitted in the interview.

Summarizing the responses in the second part it can be said no respondent saw his faith and his economic education as radically irreconcilable at a general level. For one of them the case remains partly open (C), for the rest there are some fields where solution is difficult to be found (while they also see others, where these two views are explicitly in harmony), but still they have been able to find a way by distinguishing between an “economic way of thinking” and a “Christian way of thinking”.

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Given the qualitative nature of the survey, it is impossible to answer quantitative questions - for example, it is not possible to say to what extent the respondents are a representative sample. It might be the case they more likely represent a pre-selected group - for example, because those who are coping with problems in their minds were not willing to go through a personal interview; or they could be more-than-average altruistic, because they had to give up a substantial amount of their time for the interview (without receiving any material reward in return). Further research with greater samples of respondents would be necessary in this respect.

Still I believe this brief survey reveals something interesting both about Christianity and about economics: It can show to Christians that their faith does not exist in a vacuum, but is rather a result of a never ending process of dialogue between them and the world, a dialogue, that can be both uncomfortably puzzling and intellectually enriching. To economists it can show the limits of their science in what they believe to be a “value free” explanation of reality and shed some light on the importance of social institutions shaping human behavior that go beyond the excessively restrictive concept of *Homo oeconomicus*.

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## **APPENDIX – SETS OF GENERAL QUESTIONS USED DURING THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS**

### **PART 0 – PRESCREENING – FINDING CHRISTIANS**

- Are you a Christian?

### **PART 1 – RELATION "FAITH → OCCUPATION"**

- **selection of field of study and future occupation**
  - What high school did you go to?
  - When did you decide to study economics?
  - What did you understand under terms "economist" or "economics" at that time?
  - Why did you decide to study economics?
- **religious status in the time of choosing**
  - How important was your faith for you at that time?
  - Did you belong to any Christian denomination?
  - How did you become a Christian?

- **importance of faith in the selection process**
  - How did your faith influence your selection?
  - Did you consider any other alternatives?
  - Did you see these two fields as conflicting?
  - If so, how were you solving this conflict at that time?

**PART 2 - RELATION "OCCUPATION → FAITH"**

- **the influence of studying economics on general values**
  - How was your world-view changed by studying economics?
  - Can you provide any specific field (an example) where your opinions changed most?
- **the influence of studying economics on faith**
  - How did your faith change during your studies?
  - What caused this change?
  - Are there any fields where your faith gets into conflict with what economics says?
  - If so, how do you solve this conflict?

**PART 3 - POTENTIALLY PROBLEMATIC AREAS (BASED ON THE LITERATURE AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE)**

- **joining voluntary activities**
  - Had you been active in any voluntary activities before you started your studies of economics?
  - Are you today?
  - How did your activities change?
  - What caused this change (if any)?
  - Can you identify any influence of your studies (other than for example lack of free time)?
  - If you are active in any kind of voluntary activity, what does it bring to you?
- **perception of the church hierarchy**
  - One of the theses of economics (and specifically, public choice theory) is that people are motivated by their self-interest. Did this view change your perception of the church and its representatives?
  - If the church should be inspired or led by the Holy Spirit and not by worldly motivations, as the Christians believe, how are these two views compatible?
- **perception of altruism and related areas**
  - What kind of charitable activities do you contribute to?
  - Why are such activities necessary, if the market is believed to allocate resources in an efficient way?
  - Do you think your money is used efficiently by that particular organization?
  - Are non-profit organizations efficient (in general)?
  - If somebody asks you for money on a street, what is your usual reaction?
  - What do you think about homeless people?
  - Who should take care of them?