

IN MEMORIAM

An Intellectual Odyssey Cut Short

ROBERT H. NELSON
1944–2018

BY JANE SHAW STROUP

Robert Nelson's extraordinary intellectual odyssey ended abruptly on December 15, 2018, when he passed away in Helsinki, Finland, where he was to give a paper on "Christianity in the Language of Economics." That was a quintessential topic for an economist whose writing career ranged from natural resource policy to whether God exists. He was 74 years old.

I met Bob in 1984 when he worked in the Interior Department's Office of Policy Analysis, which my husband, Richard Stroup, headed for two and a half years. Such offices existed in all cabinet departments to supply analytical counterweight to policy pressures from special interests. The unit was informally (and quite appropriately) called the "Office of Smart Guys." My husband found the group exhilarating; he often says, "I came to teach the government, but I'm the one who did the learning."

A native of Brockton, MA, Nelson attended Brandeis as an undergraduate, majoring in mathematics. He received his doctorate in economics from Princeton. While there, he attended a mixer at nearby Vassar and met his future wife, Jill Wechsler. They were married in 1971 and had two children, Fred and Martha. Jill went on to become a journalist and Bob taught economics at the City College of New York before joining the federal government in 1975. In 1993 he left the government to become a professor at the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

There is no simple way to characterize the range of Bob's thought. His University of Maryland colleague, economist Herman Daly, did a good job when he said, in a foreword to one of Bob's books, "His mind is like a huge sponge that absorbs everything, but what he wrings out of it on to the pages of his own writing is not simply what he absorbed, but rather a high-proof distillation that stimulates further thought and insight."

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Bob's son Fred suggests that his father's writing can be divided into three major fields: government policies relating to natural resources, the application of property-rights concepts to housing policy, and a multifactorial approach to religion. The last included, first, assessing the religions (or belief systems) that underlie economics and environmentalism, the effects of religion on economic growth, and finally a blockbuster on the question of God's existence, *God? Very Probably: Five Rational Ways to Think about the Question of a God* (Lutterworth Press, 2016).

Yet as his interests accumulated, Nelson never entirely gave up on his earlier topics. For example, when he died, he and Patrick O'Rourke, a research associate with the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, had been completing a book about short-term carbon emissions and the reluctance of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to consider their effect on temperature predictions. In 2017 he wrote an op-ed recommending that the federal government allow California to take over sovereignty of the federal lands within its borders, reflecting his recurring curiosity about the question of secession. In 1981 he and fellow resource economist Christopher K. Leman wrote "Ten Commandments for Policy Economists" in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. (Even then, his thinking had a religious tinge.) And he routinely built on previously acquired knowledge, so that his study of zoning informed his analysis of coal policy, which was readily applied to federal management (i.e., mismanagement) of forestlands and grazing, and so on.

Was Nelson a libertarian? Probably not. But his thinking was grounded in the value of property rights and the importance of market signals, and shaped by insight into the inner workings of institutions. Almost universally his policy recommendations, if adopted, would move policy away from centralization toward subsidiarity, greater recognition of property rights, and response to market signals.

I'm going to discuss Nelson's writing in each of the three

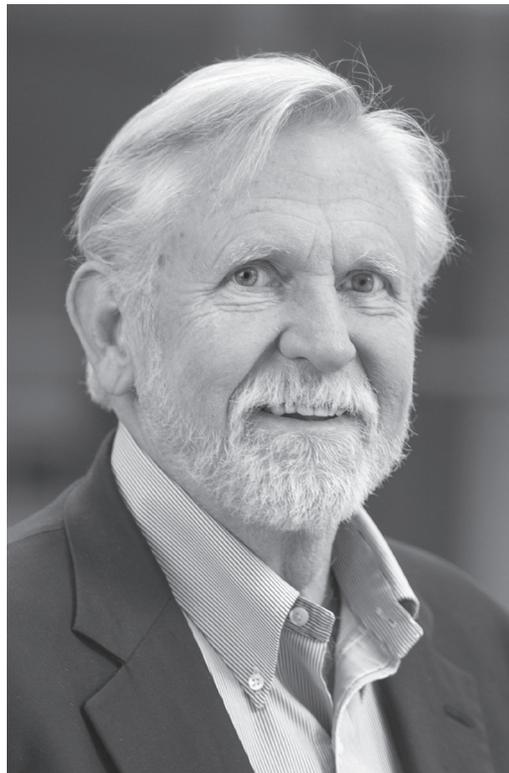
areas Fred Nelson delineated, hoping to reflect the breadth and depth of his thinking while also sharing my views about their importance. Aiding me is the fact that he often began his books with conversational introductions that described how his thinking had evolved or how he came to write about a particular subject. From early on, even in the seemingly pragmatic policy issues surrounding natural resources, one can see his interest in the role of ideology and belief.

NATURAL RESOURCES

As Nelson explains in the introduction to *The Making of Federal Coal Policy* (Duke University Press, 1984), he spent much of his first few years at the Interior Department studying coal policy. As an energy “crisis” emerged in the early 1970s, the Interior Department began to feel political pressure to lease out more coal in the West, where it owned large unexploited reserves. Since the 1920s, management of federal coal had been left largely in the hands of private leaseholders, as demand for coal had been slow and private managers posed little controversy. But that had changed.

A growing group of environmentalists opposed giving up more federal land to produce coal, which they detested. Not only did coal production cause pollution, but more mining in the federal lands of the West would interfere with the conservationist goals of making federal land a haven for nature (and for people who pursue low-impact enjoyment of nature). Environmental groups such as the National Resources Defense Council began to sue the Interior Department, leading department officials to rethink some of its policies. Nelson was selected to be the “point person” on coal policy.

In his book, he showed how the federal government’s stated coal policy reflected the views of the Progressive Era, which celebrated the adoption of “scientific management” of resources. While the ideal for Progressives was government ownership of reserves, leasing reserves to private companies could still reflect scientific management. “The government would make its own estimates of the amount of federal coal needed for near-term production and



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would then lease only this amount,” Nelson explained. “Decisions would be based on the studies of economists and other technical experts especially knowledgeable about national energy requirements.” An underlying assumption of the Progressives, wrote Nelson, was that the results would be so popular that they would be supported by a “social consensus—thereby eliminating the necessity for a political resolution.”

Nelson discovered that scientific management wasn’t working as prescribed, however. He didn’t see the coal program as either scientific management or as following the more modern view of policymaking through the pluralistic competition of interests. Rather, he saw a competition among three ideologies: conservationism, planned market liberalism, and interest-group liberalism (the last being the pluralism that political scientists tend to like).

Nearly a decade later, in 1995, Nelson addressed public land management more broadly in his book *Public Lands and Private Rights: The Failure of Scientific Management* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1995). This collection of essays applied lessons from coal to the management of other federal lands, especially forests (i.e., the U.S. Forest Service) and grazing land (the Bureau of Land Management). Both show the failure of scientific management. Essentially,

he said, the Progressives’ hope for scientific management was utopian; over the years, the agencies continued to mouth commitments to scientific planning (such as policies determining how many trees to cut and how much investment to make in grazing land improvement), but their implementation was largely a fiction.

One of these essays reviewed the nation’s public land history. A theme that emerges—and an insight that seems original but largely neglected by others—is that the federal government usually lags behind decisions made locally. The Homestead Act, for example, was not an idealistic law to populate the Midwest and West and give poor people from the cities a better option. Rather, it marked the recognition that people were already living on land

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that they had not bought and Congress (hundreds of miles away) was not going to change that. So, along with the Preemption and Taylor Grazing acts, the Homestead Act “ratified and gave further impetus to squatting and other practices that had already developed outside the law.” This was a common pattern for federal land policy, Nelson found.

PRIVATE RIGHTS AND ZONING

A second (but related) focus of Nelson’s writing was housing and zoning. His doctoral dissertation was on “The Theory of Residential Location.” Urban Institute economist Robert Lerman, a friend from Nelson’s college years, remembers that when he and Nelson went to Puerto Rico in the 1970s as policy consultants, they puzzled over the fact that San Juan, the capital, had so many people who had illegally settled on valuable land. How could the government remove them? They came up with an idea: create property rights in the land, giving stronger (more valuable) rights to those who had lived there the longest. Then, the new rights owners would be required to sell the land in bulk—but only if a supermajority agreed. The sale would compensate the squatters while also freeing the land for more highly valued development. These ideas led to Nelson’s book *Zoning and Property Rights: An Analysis of the American System of Land-Use Regulation* (MIT Press, 1977).

His work gained new attention around 2000, after neighborhood or homeowners’ associations had begun to “take off.” In 1998, for example, nearly 42 million Americans (about 15%) were living under such associations. Nelson wrote an article in the *George Mason Law Review* that was republished in the provocative libertarian book *The Voluntary City* (Independent Institute, 2002). In the paper, he observed that while some residents chafed under the controls of associations, the associations were attractive because they protected the value of people’s homes more reliably than public zoning did. (Zoning constantly changes as a result of political pressures.)

But such associations were not available to people who lived in neighborhoods that had been developed before such associations. Those were, instead, almost always “zoned.” Nelson proposed that the federal government pass a law allowing neighborhoods to become associations, replacing zoning. The decision would require a supermajority vote; if that was achieved, everyone in the neighborhood would become part of the association and would no longer be subject to the vagaries of zoning decisions.

It doesn’t appear that the idea took hold in practical policy, but it’s an idea still “on the shelf” for policymakers to adopt if the time is right.

ECONOMICS AND RELIGION

Nelson’s early discovery that coal policy could become a conflict of ideology and belief undoubtedly affected his later views. Says Lerman:

He told me that he and the environmentalists were talking

in two different languages from two different mind-sets. He focused on the costs and benefits to people overall (a straightforward economic approach, he thought in those days) while the environmentalists had a religious view about potentially corrupting nature. Subsequently, Nelson questioned his own framework, seeing it as a type of religion of economic progress and optimality.

This self-awareness led to his iconoclastic book *Reaching for Heaven on Earth* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1993) and to a new career writing about religion and public policy. In the book he claimed that economics is not a social science but a religion—a secular religion that makes economic progress the goal of human endeavor. It took time for this idea to gain a following. Most people think that faith requires enthusiastic religious fervor, and that’s not a way that people think about economists. According to a familiar joke, an economist is someone who is good with numbers but doesn’t have enough personality to be an accountant.

You don’t have to be a fervent believer to have a theology, and economists have a theology, argued Nelson. *Reaching for Heaven on Earth* discusses economic and political thought in the United States as falling into two traditions: one a Roman or Aristotelian tradition that stresses reason, the other a more emotional Protestant tradition that fears that humanity is always on the brink of falling into the hands of the Devil. The American tradition, Nelson wrote, is more Roman than Protestant (even though there are many more Protestants in the United States than Catholics, he noted). The founders, for example, reflected the rationality of the Enlightenment, which is more in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas than of Martin Luther.

Even though the Progressive movement of the late 19th century was a Protestant-like deviation,

The twentieth century architects of the welfare state have returned ... to the rationalist and utilitarian tradition of the Enlightenment, of Aquinas, and of Aristotle. The welfare state has been built on a powerful faith in the role of human reason in shaping events for human betterment, following along a continuing path of economic progress.

Nearly a decade later, Nelson came out with another book on a similar theme. *Economics as a Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (Penn State University Press, 2001) seems to have resonated with more people. The book was the subject of a symposium published by the *Case Western University Law Review* in 2006.

According to Andrew P. Morris, then a professor at Case Western Law School, the book was chosen partly for “its ability to arouse controversy,” but also because Nelson had intrigued many at the law school when he gave a talk on economics as a religion. Eleven writers—experts in economics, law, and policy—responded in the symposium, with mixed evaluations. For example, Fr. Charles H. Nalls, executive director of the Canon Law Institute, generally agreed with Nelson’s characterization of the religion-

like aspects of economics, but wasn't convinced it captured all the important elements of a religion, even a secular one. Fred L. Smith, then president of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, called Nelson's argument "interesting and intriguing," but another writer asked, "What possessed him to write this book?"

In a reply contained in the special issue, Nelson defended his argument,

Although economic religion is a "secular religion," it follows other faiths in that it provides an interpretation of history, a final destination for mankind; an understanding of the origins of sin in the world, and a basis for making moral judgments, among other common features of a religion.

Three years later, the third of Nelson's books on religion, *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America* (Penn State University Press, 2009) appeared. The concept behind it is easier to grasp because the idea that environmentalism is a religion had already received some currency. This book, however, goes far beyond that simple idea. It is a detailed working-out of a theology of environmentalism, which he sometimes calls Calvinism without God. Different parts of the movement comprise different "sects"; thus, he analyzes in theological terms the distinctive thinking of environmental heroes such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and even Dave Foreman of Earth First.

Nelson's fascination with religion ultimately led him to the fundamental question with *God? Very Probably*. As in his other books, he very carefully explains his position. In this one he begins by saying that while the existence of God cannot be answered scientifically, it can be addressed by "rational thought," which he proceeds to unfold. He offers five arguments for the existence of a god (not necessarily the Judeo-Christian God), ranging from well-documented failings of Darwinism to the precision of mathematics, which is, according to Nelson, something like a "Platonic world of mathematical truths outside any physical existence that govern the full working of the material universe"—i.e., something "supernatural."

In a spectacular *tour de force*, he concludes that his own religion is very much like that of the atheist advocate Richard Dawkins who, in Nelson's view, also has faith. They both believe that a "real truth" exists and that it can be discovered by rational human endeavors.

Daly offers insight into this complex book. "I doubted I would learn much from the collegial duty of reading [his] draft," he recalls. "It quickly became apparent that I was totally mistaken about that—Bob was the teacher and I was his student. How could

I have been so wrong?"

The "ultimate question" did not exhaust Nelson's attention to religion and economics. He became interested in the work of Max Weber, whose *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, published in 1905, linked Calvinist habits with economic progress. According to Weber, all Protestants had a concept of a "calling," but for Calvinists, its pursuit was the purpose of life. Asceticism (somewhat akin to the asceticism of monks) underlay the "spirit of capitalism" and empowered Calvinists to promote economic progress.

While largely agreeing with Weber's thesis, Nelson was interested in the question of whether the economic effects of Protestantism affected countries, not just individuals (as Weber had emphasized). Nelson wrote at least two essays probing

this question. In 2013 he noted that the effect of the recession of 2008–2009 on Europe was being viewed as a "north/south" issue (that is, the northern European countries rebounded faster and more fully than did the southern countries). But he suggested that a Protestant/Catholic divide might be more explanatory. Citing Standard and Poor's credit ratings for European countries as well as the countries' average wages, he found that there was, even now, an economic difference between Protestant and

Catholic countries in Europe. "It is thus clear that even in the twenty-first century there remain significant divisions among European countries in both political and economic outcomes along historic religious lines," he wrote.

Nelson endorsed Weber's view of the effects of Calvinism, but he began to see the broader Protestant sect, Lutheranism, differently. Unlike Calvinism, Lutheranism is more open to people helping one another achieve salvation; salvation is not limited to a select few. In a 2017 paper, he listed 10 ways in which Lutheranism underlay the social democracy of the Nordic nations. One example: "The Lutheran understanding that success in a calling means to obey the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) became in social democracy the fundamental Nordic commitment to social solidarity and to showing a basic trust in other members of society."

Had he lived longer, Bob would have addressed additional fascinating questions, I am sure (and I have had to leave out some of the questions he did address). Yet his 10 books and his scores, if not hundreds, of articles offer a rich legacy of ideas and analyses that have not yet been fully plumbed by others. His intellectual endeavors affirm the fact that a creative mind does not need to, and perhaps should not, remain fettered by narrow disciplines. The world is here for us to explore. And that includes the supernatural world. R

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