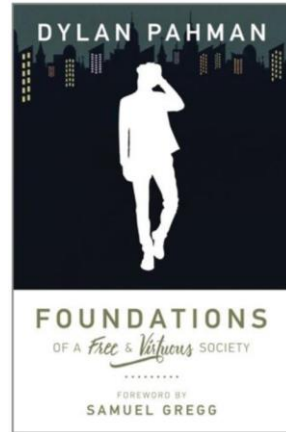


**Dylan Pahman. *Foundations of a Free and Virtuous Society*. Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2017. Pp. xiii + 145. ISBN 978-1942503545. Paperback \$14.95.**

The Acton Institute is an organization that explores the connection between Judeo-Christian faith and liberty. Research fellow for the Acton Institute, Dylan Pahman, unpacks this connection in his winsome work *Foundations of a Free and Virtuous Society*. This “introductory work of Christian social thought” (p. xi) challenges the often-encountered view that loving thy neighbor in pursuit of economic justice requires, or is best accomplished through, interventionist or even socialist policies. Beginning with a forward by Samuel Gregg, Director of Research at the Acton Institute, *Foundations* goes back to the foundation of creation to ultimately clarify why free markets best enable humankind to reflect the creator God as those made in His image (Gen 1:27) and how free markets best enable humanity to live out the calling to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28 NRSV).



The forward clearly sets forth the central thesis of this work, “How we understand God, the human person, and human society...will determine much of how we think about everything” (p. vii). From this thesis, this short book (something the author mentions multiple times throughout the work) seeks to “elucidate one common starting point that aims to promote a free and virtuous society” (p. xi). To accomplish this, Pahman divides the work into two parts. Part one consists of three chapters all titled after questions which serve to unpack the central thesis. In part two, the author provides an intellectual exercise asking the reader to imagine a world in which basic economic principles are rejected. Through this exercise

Pahman explores the effects on human flourishing when private property rights, free prices, and just inequality are abandoned.

The introduction plunges the reader into a real-world example that is easily grasped. The author cites the work of economist Victor Claar in examining the impact on human flourishing of the fair-trade coffee movement. Rather than provide a higher standard of living, this movement serves to keep poor farmers in poverty. Pahman grabs the reader's attention by having them reconsider their personal economic behavior and the effects it may have on others. Such thinking begins the examination of how moral motives on their own cannot be the sole basis for economic action; outcomes must be considered. The first three chapters help unpack the claim that a solid understanding of God, human nature, and society (p. xvii) must inform our thinking about economic and social matters.

Chapter one asks the question, "What Does It Mean to Be Human?" (p. 1). In what becomes characteristic fashion throughout the work, the author begins with a pop culture reference, in this instance to a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip. This comic points to what could be considered the somewhat absurd notion that humanity reflects God's image. In what way can humanity possibly reflect the omniscient, omnipotent, creator God? Ultimately, the author reveals, through an examination of Genesis 1-3, that we reflect God as rational, creative, and free beings but unlike God are corrupted by sin and death. Pahman asserts that rationality and creativity require freedom which he defines simply as "*able to make choices*" (p. 5). How then is freedom exercised in relation to others?

The following chapter looks at the question, "What Is Society?" (p. 25). As the previous chapter began with a pop culture reference, chapter two begins with humor which also characterizes the writing style of Pahman in *Foundations*. Pahman begins by noting that other people challenge our concepts and comforts which can be "a bit annoying, to be honest" (p. 25). While the previous chapter focused on Genesis 1, this chapter looks at what Genesis 2 says about how we are to live with others. Abraham

Kuypers' idea of "sphere sovereignty" comes to the fore in this chapter to reveal how human freedom should be lived out in community. This notion is reflected in Pahman's definition of society which is "*human persons in communities, within spheres, under just laws, for the common good*" (p.28). Each facet of this definition is further unpacked in the chapter.

The final chapter of part one, chapter three, seeks to "demystify and similarly destigmatize some basic economic principles and business practices that have unjustly acquired bad reputations" (p. 51). Here Pahman introduces the term "Economish" (p. 51) which he uses to refer to economic-specific terms. An example of what Pahman refers to as "Economish" is "division of labor" which he equates with "teamwork" (p. 59). Pahman therefore clarifies economic theory using layman's vocabulary. Reflecting Leonard Read's well-known work, *I, Pencil*, the author looks at what went into producing the very book the reader holds. From lumberjacks felling trees to the shipment of the final product, this example reveals all that goes into production and gives insight into the concept of division of labor. Chapter three wraps up with a clear summary of why free markets go hand-in-hand with Christian anthropology. Pahman notes, "Free markets are open markets...where people are best able to freely cultivate creation for the provision of human needs, for the good of their neighbors and themselves, and for the glory of God" (p. 71).

Part two, consisting of chapters four and five, poses the question "What If?" (p. 75). By this Pahman means, what if we did not have private property, profits, free prices, money, trade, technology, inequality, the rule of law, and free markets (p. 82)? The examples used, often with explicit reference to North Korea or Venezuela, hit home the idea that basic economic tenets are essential to living out our calling as those created in God's image made to be fruitful and multiply. The unifying theme of part two is Bastiat's notion of the "seen and unseen."<sup>1</sup> Pahman applies this concept to the Fall recorded in Genesis 3 writing, "this ...was the

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<sup>1</sup> See Frédéric Bastiat, "That Which Is Seen and That Which Is Not Seen," in Bastiat, *The Bastiat Collection*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007), 1.

mistake of the man and the woman in the garden. God, being a good economist, foresaw the long-term effect of eating from the tree: death” (p. 81). All the “what ifs” of part two are unified by this theme. Ultimately, the second part of *Foundations* conveys the truth that helping one’s neighbors, particularly the poor, requires the factoring of unseen consequences of economic actions or policies. The author notes, “Considering the poor, however, requires *seeing* [emphasis added] more than the apparent, immediate gains of policies intended to help them” (p. 96). The general welfare and the dignity of people is best advanced or upheld when basic economic tenets are appreciated and lived-out by stewards of God’s creation.

While indeed a little book, *Foundations of a Free and Virtuous Society* offers readers a powerful, applicable, humorous, and easy-to-understand introduction to “Christian social thought...without steamrolling over the prudential insights of economic science” (p. 136). Pahman accomplishes this introduction through solid exegesis, explicit definition of terms, and a winsome writing style that is able to reach an audience as diverse as Advanced Placement high school students to students in PhD programs.

This work contributes to the discussion of faith and liberty by providing a brief account of what liberty means for a healthy society, while providing clear definitions and appropriate depth of analysis when necessary. Thus, *Foundations* can edify a high school student struggling with how best to serve the poor of their city or PhD students in Systematic Theology who may understand Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* inside and out, but who through myopia have never contemplated their duty as Christians in the field of economics. Masters-level students in theology and ministry especially benefit from reading this work because of its synthesis of theological and economic truths. However, any Christian who desires to integrate God-honoring economic thinking into their life will derive value from this work.

To reach a variety of readers, the style in which Pahman wrote *Foundations* includes various literary devices including effective use of

questions. Throughout the text, Pahman uses a question–answer formula that addresses common concerns or objections as they arise in the text. Often, the very questions that come to mind are immediately addressed which helps the reader process the material. End-of-chapter discussion questions are also present. These questions either cause readers, in groups or on their own, to reconsider aspects of what was addressed. The author developed questions that challenge his definitions and assertions in what seems a desire to promote authentic engagement with the work and not simply rephrase what has been said in the best possible light.

At times, *Foundations* contained somewhat distracting or potentially misleading information. Repeatedly referencing the brevity of the book, particularly toward the beginning (pp. viii, ix, xii, xviii, 2), served to distract and even question the value of what was being communicated. This introduced some doubt about whether it was worth continuing to read the book. The length of the book is evident to the reader, so repeated mention of its brevity is unnecessary at best.

Pahman begins part two by stating that it will cover truly basic concepts in economics with which “for the most part, both the left-leaning Progressive Policy Institute and the libertarian Cato Institute would be in agreement” (p. 78). However, I question the extent to which this is truly the case. Considering the economists/philosophers cited (Frédéric Bastiat p. 81, Adam Smith pp. 92, 114, and Friedrich Hayek p. 97) and assertions made from the basic economic concepts, it is hard to see how this could be. An example is Pahman’s claim that economist Paul Krugman would agree in large part with his assertions (p. 78). In the last chapter, Pahman writes, “my inclination is to think that unfettered markets is something we need more of, not less” (p. 127). However, considering Krugman’s positions on regulations and legislation such as the Affordable Care Act, I wonder to what extent someone like Krugman would truly agree with the

basic tenet of “free markets” as unpacked by Pahman.<sup>2</sup> *Foundations* clearly approaches basic concepts from a free-market perspective. The intended audience, which is quite broad and may be unfamiliar with these people or concepts, would benefit from a more precise reference to the backgrounds of the individuals cited or positions held.

I highly recommend *Foundations of a Free and Virtuous Society* as an introductory text on the role of free markets in promoting the well-being and dignity of individuals and society. By following an exegetically-sound examination of Holy Scripture, Pahman reveals how we may more effectively love others and bring God glory, as those made in His image (Gen 1:27) and those who seek to be “fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28 NRSV). This work helps us see how we may best serve the poor and fulfill the mandate of Genesis 1.

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<sup>2</sup> Krugman’s resistance to a more open market in the area of health care is often seen in his regular *New York Times* column. See Paul Krugman, “The Plot Against Health Care,” *New York Times* (May 31, 2018; accessed December 6, 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/opinion/republicans-health-care.html> and Paul Krugman, “Get Sick, Go Bankrupt, and Die,” *New York Times* (September 3, 2018, accessed December 6, 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/03/opinion/midterms-healthcare-bankrupt.html>.

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