

ECONOMICS AND RELIGION

Paul Oslington (ed.), An Elgar Reference Collection, 2003, ISBN 1 84064 849 X (2 volume set)

Appropriately perhaps, this collection of 41 articles and extracts from books (all but one previously published) certainly merits the epithet 'a curate's egg'. Deeply scholarly writings keep company here with specimens of the 'clever-clever' and with the most mechanical examples of 'economics imperialism'. Space is wasted on a long piece of vapid Vaticanese, much of which is not even about economics; and one can sample intra-Calvinist disputation over what (Reformed) economists ought to be doing as economists (at least one of these latter contributions being very sensible, it should be said). Unsurprisingly, the contributions likely to be of greatest interest to historians of thought are amongst those of the highest quality.

Before turning to the historical pieces, however, we may draw attention to *some* of the others, to be found in *Volume II*. Kenneth Boulding considers how religious perspectives can sometimes aid economic understanding and should never obstruct the pursuit of truth. He reminds us that, 'If wealth consists in the satisfaction of wants there are two roads to riches: one is the diminution of wants, the other is the increase in the means of satisfaction' (pp.10-11) D. L Munby, in an extract from his 1956 book, complains that the churches too often pronounce on economic issues without understanding their complexity. Frank Knight gives a typically forthright exposition of the view that if Christianity is, in essence, the teaching of charity (agape) then it can have nothing central to say about the economic policy problems springing from scarcity. The one previously unpublished piece is that by Tony Cramp, providing a wide-ranging "world-view of modern economics" from a Reformed

perspective – within which, amongst many other things, Western liberal orthodoxy and Marxism are seen as having *in common* that they are forms of naturalism. Also to be noted is Timur Kuran's essay on contemporary Islamic economics. (Along with Jacob Neusner's historical piece on Judaism, this provides the only 40 pages out of some 950 in which – with minor exceptions – religion is *not* used as a synonym for Christianity!) Steve Bruce (1993) and James Montgomery (1996) offer some criticisms of economics-imperialist attempts to examine religious behaviour and institutions.

For the history of thought one must turn (Neusner's essay aside) to *Volume I* and here there is much for the historian to enjoy. Barry Gordon considers how theological views affected economic theorizing in ancient literature, while Bruce Malina insists on the heavily contextual nature of all economics statements in the Bible and points the obvious – but necessary! – lesson that modern economic policy cannot intelligently be 'lifted' from that source. The next 220 pages (!) are devoted to two works by Jacob Viner, the first a very wide-ranging piece on 'religious thought and economic society' and the second on 'the invisible hand'. Papers by Emma Rothschild (1994), Lisa Hill (2001) and Anthony Waterman (2002) consider – and disagree about – the role of theological thought and metaphor in Adam Smith's writings. The relations between theology and population theory in Malthus are discussed by J.M. Pullen and Boyd Hilton writes on Thomas Chalmers. Waterman, again, considers what he takes to be the sudden separation of economics from Christian theology in the 1820s, while Edward Norman writes on the 'Victorian Christian Socialists'. Finally, Bateman and Kapstein discuss the 'Social Gospel' background to the foundation of the American Economic Association by Ely and

others.

In brief, much in *Volume I* of these readings, supplemented by Neusner's contribution to *Volume II*, will be very useful to historians of economic thought.

Ian Steedman
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