

Book Reviews

The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics

Paul Oslington, ed. 2014. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780199729715. \$150.00.

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In recent years there has been a marked increase in interactions between Christianity and economics, both in quantity and quality. Such interactions are not new: one of the many contributions of this extremely useful *Handbook* is to offer a rich historical perspective (focused in Part I) on relationships between economics and Christian theology. But the quantitative and qualitative expansion in these engagements in the last few decades is evident throughout this volume. And this *Handbook*, in bringing together in one place a wide range of papers by some of the most significant participants in these engagements, will itself be a most useful resource, especially to Christian economists, in making these exchanges more fruitful in the years to come. Paul Oslington—one of the most active participants in such interactions (not least in the pages of *Faith & Economics*)—is therefore greatly to be thanked and congratulated for his achievement in editing this volume (33 chapters, 640 pages).

In a review of this (or indeed any feasible) length, it is of course impossible to do justice to the book's contents. What can be done is to give a sense of the contributions, and identify some of the key themes and issues which emerge. As already noted, Part I provides a historical overview, starting with M. Douglas Meeks on "Economics in the Christian Scriptures." Meeks had a near-impossible task to give an adequate overview of the biblical view of economy and economics in only 17 pages, and inevitably his chapter is problematic in some respects: for example, he never mentions one of the standard definitions of economics as the study of the allocation of scarce resources, let alone assess how that definition might be viewed in the light of the Scriptural material. Further I did not find him persuasive here (despite his own book on the topic [Meeks, 1989]) in making a meaningful link from the term "the economy of God" to "economy" as typically understood in the modern world and contemporary academia. Hennie Stander faced a similarly tall order to survey in 18 pages a period of 600 years for a chapter on "Economics in the Church Fathers."

Chapters in this Part I which are more successful include Odd Langholm's outstanding analysis of "Voluntary Exchange and Coercion in

Scholastic Economics.” This chapter contains very important and profound reflections on the relationship between exchange, freedom, coercion, and justice: these relationships are of course of great relevance in today’s world, and we will do well to take time to learn from the deep thought and analysis of those who have gone before us. Readers will also find much helpful material in Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni’s chapter on Italy, and A.M.C. Waterman’s assessment of political economy in Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Ross Emmett, in a key chapter, focuses specifically on Christian *theology* in relationship to economics. (One should note in passing that in the *Handbook*, the relationship between those two disciplines is only one of the forms of interaction between Christianity and economics: “Christianity” evidently embraces—amongst other things—theology, church teaching, the work done by Christian economists, other social scientists and philosophers, and the lives of Christians and Christian communities in their engagement with the wider world.) Emmett presents the argument that approximately two hundred years ago, economic theorists separated their work from the task of theological inquiry and that after that separation, “the claims of Christian theology (or any other moral or philosophical system, for that matter) had no more jurisdiction over the discipline of economics than they did over the disciplines of chemistry and physics” (p. 135). This is an important historical perspective, and the wide range of interactions—especially those of the last few decades—which this *Handbook* describes are viewed helpfully in this light. The separation analyzed by Emmett was clearly a methodological and institutional separation: many of the issues discussed in the *Handbook* can surely be seen as part of an attempt to build more effective bridges. But that is not an easy task.

Inevitably Part I could not cover everything. In his introduction Oslington reports, somewhat delphically, that a chapter on the important *American* story “could not be included” (p. xiv).

Part II of the *Handbook* (“Contemporary Theological Economics”) discusses approaches to economics in the different Christian traditions. There is invaluable survey material here. Andrew Yuengert helpfully reviews Roman Catholic teaching on economics: “Catholic Social Teaching” (CST). He also argues “that economists who wish to engage with the project of CST must modify their analysis to truly serve it—they must make a place in their models for personal agency, for the social nature of the person, and for sin” (p. 172). (Those points could well apply outside CST, of course.) He also argues that economists who participate in this

project should have an effect on the way it is conceived.

Kim Hawtrej (now based back in his home country of Australia, after several years in the United States) provides a very illuminating and thoughtful account of “Anglicanism.” As an Anglican myself, I was initially—before reading this chapter—dubious about whether “Anglicanism” is simply “too broad a church” to be of any use here as a focus for analysis. (Oslington’s almost throwaway line in the introduction [p. xiv] only fuelled my initial doubts: “Anglicans as usual stand in the middle” [!].) In fact, however, Hawtrej is able to argue that Anglicans—and particularly Anglicans who have an evangelical commitment, theologically—tend to combine broadly pro-capitalistic principles with a vigorous concern for the poor. He points out that the Thirty-nine Articles endorse both. And in his conclusion he writes: “If there is an Anglican paradigm for theological economy, this is probably its major characteristic, an Augustinian mindset that wants to see the market as a countervailing force to sin (and the government) *and* government as a countervailing force to sin (and the market)” (p. 191). Oslington was thus correct—but only, I would argue, because of the profundity of the “balance” that is offered here.

Part II also contains useful surveys of the approaches taken by Eastern Orthodoxy (Daniel Payne), Reformed Christianity (Bob Goudzwaard and Roel Jongerel), Theonomy (Edd Noell) and Anabaptists (James Halteman). In addition, Shane Clifton contributes a very insightful contemporary analysis of global Pentecostalism, highlighting along the way the “Multinational Church” (MNC!) features of the Hillsong movement based in Australia. Clifton argues strongly that “the Pentecostal embrace of the emerging systems of global trade are not mere capitulations to oppressive consumerism but, rather, participate in the *redemptive transformation* of the market” (p. 262, emphasis added). If true, this is of great significance. It is also worth noting that this particular form of engagement with economic life is very much from the “bottom up,” as is the theologizing that accompanies it.

The final chapter in Part II is a very thoughtful piece by J. David Richardson, who notes various different forms of engagement between Christianity and economics. His differentiation between “interface” and “integration” seems helpful. He asks whether Christian *integrative* scholarship in economics is any harder than in other disciplines and, if so, why. He comes up with no firm answer, but is nevertheless encouraged (as we should all be, I suggest) by his “non-answer.” In Richardson’s words: “However hard it [Christian integrative scholarship] is, it seems to be becoming easier over the past generation” (p. 294).

Part III focuses more on intensely debated questions at the boundary of religion (more generally) and economics, but of course (given the title of this *Handbook*) with a focus on Christian contributions: particular issues addressed here include the Weber thesis (discussed in at least three of the chapters—Weber is “alive and well,” it is argued), and the links between environmentalism and traditional Christian and economic ways of thinking (with a chapter on this by Robert Nelson, who argues, strikingly, that the “large public impact of American environmentalism in recent decades reflects the fact that it has resonated so well and so deeply with the nation’s long-standing Puritan habits of thought” (p. 356). In the context of development issues, Peter Heslam argues a similar case to that of Clifton (above) about the major role being played by Pentecostal Christians and churches, as part of the broader “Evangelical-Pentecostal-Charismatic-Movement.” Paul Williams seeks to show the intellectual relevance of Christianity to the global economic order, and “to argue that the intellectual marginalization of Christian theology to public discourse on these matters cannot last” (p. 415). For this to be so, however, we Christians must surely be pro-active in engaging intelligently and confidently, as Christians, in this public discourse. That is a major challenge.

Another, quite distinct, form of interaction between Christianity and economics is the literature on economics of religion, and Part IV is devoted to this. The emphasis in Part IV, says Oslington, “is on the intellectual issues and the place of economics of religion in the wider trade that is going on between the disciplines” (p. xv). As a member of the UK’s Association of Christian Economists, I note that three of the six chapters here are written by members of the UK group; has any particular “trade” been occurring here? (!). Robert Mochrie considers economic models of churches, and another Scotland-based economist, Ian Smith, looks at religious labor markets. The third member of this trio—Jonathan Tan—assesses the behavioral economics of religion. A more forward-looking chapter by Ted Malloch (recently imported to my side of the Atlantic) explores the emerging concept of spiritual capital, and how this might add to the understanding already gained through analysis of human and social capital.

For Part V—the final Part of the *Handbook*—Oslington invited chapters on particular topics “where there is potential for particularly fruitful exchanges” (p. xv). These are economic justice; happiness; usury; human nature, identity and motivation (the title of the chapter by Donald Hay and Gordon Menzies); gender; and poverty. It may seem a churlish comment, but only two of these chapters are jointly authored; and in my

view this is not incidental to the rather variable extent to which these chapters exhibit *exchanges* between theologians and economists. The piece by Hay and Menzies (neither claiming to be an academic theologian) argues for the relevance of Christian anthropology (human nature, identity and motivation) to a set of economic models. Notable as well as the only chapter which includes an economic model in algebraic form, this piece is a very thoughtful contribution, which also offers promise for further application of this broad approach.

One weakness in at least two of the chapters in Part V is that they pay insufficient attention to matters of definition, and to enquiring how the Bible might assist us with matters of definition. In the chapter on economic justice, Albino Barrera *assumes* an understanding (conception) of what economic justice is, and reads that *into* the Scriptural material (p. 534f). (There is not, in reality, common agreement about what “economic justice” is: is it for production only, or for distribution only, or both? Does the state have any role in enforcing “economic justice”? There is no common agreement on answers to these and related fundamental questions.) Barrera then looks at three “challenges” in the contemporary world: whether human beings will make *quality* choices as their income rises; whether it is possible to avoid the commodification of the human person as a factor of production; and whether we can formulate and agree on rules for a global market. It is striking (but not, in my view, accidental) that nowhere in his discussion of these challenges does he actually refer to “economic justice.” It would seem, then, that the notion of “economic justice” is not actually doing any work here for Barrera, and this is arguably a consequence of not attempting to define it in the first place.

In a somewhat similar way, Ben Cooper, in the chapter on happiness, launches straight in as follows: “There has been a revolution in how economists treat the subject of happiness” (p. 549). But two fundamental questions should surely be asked at the start: What is “happiness”? Who is to say? The question of whether we *should* pursue happiness (why not pursue *love*, for example?) also requires fundamental assessment. Only on the last page of the chapter, however, is there any attention to the fundamental questions.

Overall, this *Handbook* offers a wealth of information, insights, understanding and reflection. Every reader of this journal will profit from large portions of the volume.

Reference

Meeks, M. D. (1989). *God the economist: The doctrine of God and political economy*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. ■