

Discussant Essays

Adding Context to Text and Theory

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Historians might be bemused at A. M. C. Waterman's perplexity upon a hypothetical first reading of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. Why all its alarms and excursions about the economic system, he wonders, when things were going so well? Our data show that per capita income was rising over time and income distribution was becoming more equal; all in all the situation was so much better than it had been a century or three before. Yet, at the time, in the early 1890s, the pope's rhetoric of extremity had plenty of company. Not just Marxists and anarchists but also hundreds of "bourgeois reformers" were putting out a flood of books, tracts, sermons, and lectures that sounded anxious and urgent about the "social question" of the day, the relationship of labor and capital. A fair number of them worried that the question would not have a happy answer.

Our two other subject authors joined Leo in his concern. Alfred Marshall had his heart so "touched by the plight of the poor" (Elzinga, p. 5)—and, we might surmise, saw the poor in such number and of such strategic importance—that he was moved to change careers from mathematician to economist. Abraham Kuyper was prompted by the Netherlands's severe depression in the late 1880s to move on from his recent crusade for church and educational reform to take up the social question in earnest. He published a series of articles on "Manual Labor" in his daily newspaper and collected them in a book of the same title in 1889 (Kuyper, 1889). Two years later, shortly after the appearance of *Rerum Novarum*, Kuyper gave a stem-winding address on "The Social Question and the Christian Religion" at a congress of Calvinist church and civic leaders which he convened both to post a Protestant entry on the terrain that Leo had opened up and to quell farm and labor dissent in his own movement (Kuyper, 1891). Food shortages and epidemic disease had re-

appeared in the Netherlands as they had not since the worst years of the 1840s, and his blue-collar followers were chafing at the condescension and resistance they had long encountered at the hands of their “aristocratic” fellow believers (Bratt, 2013, pp. 221–25). Neither they nor the poor whom Marshall observed realized that they should be feeling so much better than the people who had *really* suffered in the 16th and 17th centuries, nor would the data that Professor Waterman cites have calmed their agitated souls.

Our three authors and their audiences had plenty to point to beyond their own circumstances. In the United States, violent strikes on the railroads in 1877 and again in 1894 shut down major sections of the nation’s transportation system, and ceased only under forceful suppression by state and federal troops. It was first a private army that tried, unsuccessfully, to quell steelworkers’ 1892 seizure of the Homestead works in the Western Pennsylvania capital of that industry; the state militia had to come in to finish the job. In all these instances the striking workers lost, but the more direct middle-class beneficiaries of the system had good cause to wonder whether next time the result would be different; further, whether the system was sustainable; and, finally, whether it was just. They provided the audience for the stream of utopian, anti-utopian, and apocalyptic novels that reached its greatest volume ever in the North Atlantic world in the generation around the turn into the 20th century (Jaher, 1964).

Thus, whatever our statistical retrospect might say, things did *not* seem so good at the time. How to explain the discrepancy? Besides the contrast between perceived and measurable deprivation, the holistic concern of Leo and Kuyper and of so many of their contemporary commentators puts economic data and economic thinking, strictly defined, into a broader context where meaning is more ambiguous—and at the time, much more worrisome. Leo and Kuyper were concerned with stability as well as prosperity, the spiritual as well as the material, the community and not just an aggregate of individuals. The radical redefinition of work and worth, of the new industrial city vis-à-vis the old agrarian estate, of time and space per the effects of railroad and telegraph, seemed to unmoor the present from the past and the future from both. What would be the quality of human life going forward? What would make for justice and security, the dignity of the one and the harmony of the many?

That helps explain why the 1890s—in fact, the first two years of that

decade—inspired three great works that Christians concerned with economics still need to grapple with today. To me the most intriguing case of the three is Alfred Marshall's *Principles of Economics* (1890), particularly the biography behind it. Marshall's text, Kenneth Elzinga tells us, laid out so many definitive concepts and questions for economics that author and book alike have disappeared into the very support structure of the edifice, so assumed that they need not be cited. For Christian consideration Marshall's career is haunting in two respects. The first involves the moral passion that launched his career. That passion was rooted in Marshall's nurture within a devoutly Christian home and, even after his quick loss of faith at university, carried over into his yearning to serve the poor via the study of economics. Marshall thus stands in a long line of erstwhile believers who hope to preserve the ethical shade of Christianity without its theological tree. The results were predictable. He himself never spoke a negative word about religion, but his brilliant work helped make it possible to practice economics without reference to faith, another instance of Christianity generating the seeds of its own supersession.

Even more interesting is the question of what was lost for economics as a secular field in the process, on the testimony of Marshall himself. Late in life he mourned the disconnect of economics from "ideals"—mourned it so greatly that, he said, had he the chance to start over, he would devote his life to psychology instead (p. 7). Marshall had unwittingly made a way for a motivating "compassion for the poor" to be transferred to "a passion for the discipline" of economics instead (p. 5). This outcome was in part a product of his genius; Marshall was so creative in theorizing, and he so invited mathematical modeling into the field, that economics became abstracted from "the realm of real, messy and evolving facts" (p. 13). Worse yet, in his eyes, it became too easily elevated to a universalizing set of dogma instead of a more humble, and useful, set of analytic tools that open up the economic dimension of everyday life.

Here we must pause and ask how things might have turned out differently had Marshall remained a committed Christian. Were there points of theology that might have changed his work? None immediately spring to mind. But what if it was not the theological but the ecclesiological tree whose loss diminished the shade of faith? What if Marshall had continued as a regular congregant worshipping with ordinary Christians? What if the reference group to which he doggedly tried to translate his work included not just business people but Christian laity from all walks of life,

including lower as well as higher clergy? Would he have found a way to keep his first love—for the poor—from dissipating into the elevation of an academic field in its own right, abstracted as well from the “ordinary business of life” (quoted in Smith, 2009, p. 17; see also Smith, 2013)?

Abraham Kuyper’s best-remembered work in English is the *Lectures on Calvinism* that he delivered later in the decade, in 1898 (Kuyper, 1898/1931). This was holistic construction with a vengeance, proclaiming that Calvinism as a “world- and life-view” had a distinctive contribution to make in every domain of life, and a healing tonic to offer for the ills of modernity. The seminal concept of sphere sovereignty which Dylan Pahman analyzes Kuyper had introduced already in 1880, in a speech delivered at the founding of his Free University of Amsterdam (Kuyper, 1880/1998). Pahman very helpfully digs into the sizeable literature by which later scholars have tried to tie the concept to economic issues. The problem is that Kuyper’s sketch of the sovereign spheres was so spare that such analysis can proceed in any number of directions; it has gotten caught up in a welter of definitional challenges besides. Is it economics that’s a “sphere,” or are business and labor such, to which economic analysis as a *method* may be applied? Is ethics a “sphere,” as Pahman wonders? I think Kuyper would say absolutely not; ethics is a compelling mandate to be applied across all of life’s activities.

We can turn to the early 1890s, again, halfway between “Sphere Sovereignty” and *Lectures on Calvinism*, to catch Kuyper’s own policy pronouncements about economic issues. Adding to these his proposals as prime minister of the Netherlands (1901–05), we see how he worked from “sphere sovereignty” to “the social question.” Another crucial theme shows up as well: his example of taking power seriously at every point of theory and practice, not least with respect to economics. Hence Kuyper’s proposal that labor councils be formed in every shop and all the way up the pyramid of corporate organization to balance off the concerted power that management had gathered at every level. Arrangements as to hours, pay, and conditions of work would be much more efficiently and justly negotiated this way—by the parties directly concerned and expert in local knowledge—than under state intervention and regulation. Not that Kuyper opposed the latter across the board. He endorsed the social safety-net that Progressive Liberal cabinets had instituted in the Netherlands in the 1890s. In fact, he wanted it to be more extensive: universal compulsory health insurance with a public option, for instance, not just

for industrial workers. His fears of expansive government were matched by warnings about the workings of corporate power within a putatively free market. Government was to prescribe standards, protections, and balances of power; private parties and local authorities should then meet these by their own initiatives. In sum, the same mandates are evident in Kuyper's policy prescriptions as in his theory of sphere sovereignty: the protection and the flourishing of distinctive competencies and interests across all domains of human life and at every level of social organization (Bratt, 2013, pp. 225–28, 298–301, 309–11).

Kuyper's socio-economic thinking was spurred by Bishop Wilhelm von Ketteler, whose *Die Arbeitfrage und das Christenthum* (1864) he introduced in a Dutch translation in 1871. Professor Waterman cites that work as a crucial precedent for *Rerum Novarum* as well. The coincidence is telling in light of the British lineage that Professor Waterman's paper traces. By contrast, Leo and Kuyper were working out of a Continental intellectual tradition. If that put them "behind" the progress of the dominant school, it also gave them some critical distance from the assumptions and accommodations by which the latter proceeded. Kuyper later, and Jonathan Edwards at the time, did not think that the English Enlightenment enabled "a renewal of the Christian faith" (Waterman, p. 3) but compromised its very essence (May, 1976, pp. 37–51). Edwards and others thought that if God was forced to pass the bar of human reason, sooner or later some thinkers would find that He had failed the test (think Scots philosopher David Hume or English historian Edward Gibbon), or that the God that was left was not worth the bother. All that was interesting and worthwhile about Him would have been edited out, and all that survived would be common sense given a divine title. Mainstream British Protestantism may have concluded that the operations of industrial capitalism were "consistent with traditional Christianity," but others might question whether the "theological work" behind that judgment was really quite so "decisive" (p. 19). *Rerum Novarum's* demands might seem painfully obvious, but some which are taken as a matter "of course" (p. 21) do not, in fact, consistently obtain in today's United States, for instance. Parents working at minimum wage fall below the poverty line, and a vast number of children with them. Having to work multiple part-time jobs without benefits does indeed "tax [workers] beyond their strength" (quoted p. 21). Affordable health insurance for poor people in the USA has only recently become viable in some states, and that against

ferocious and undying political opposition. Notably, the first national antidotes to such outcomes, put in place by the New Deal in the 1930s, drew off the work of Monsignor John Ryan at the Catholic University of America and Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, a devout Episcopalian who regularly took retreats at the All Saints convent in Maryland. The first was directly, the second indirectly, inspired by *Rerum Novarum* (O'Brien, 1968; Downey, 2009).

Great books launch great works. They were, and our understanding of them needs to be, informed as well by their immediate context. In that combination these three remain worthy of consideration by Christians today, both for what they accomplished and what remains to be done.

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