
VIEWPOINT

Failing in Fellowship?

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Most of us are aware that ACE has two purposes: scholarship and fellowship. I'm not sure we're doing the second very well, and I know that several of you agree. But I haven't carefully polled the membership.

So the first question is factual: Has ACE "interaction and communication" languished? I think so, based on sparsely attended annual meetings, awkward and hesitant conversations, scarce collaborative papers, and individual lack of acquaintance with other ACE members. I'm also aware of a few countertrends: the Wednesday meeting of Washington, D.C. Christian economists, and the several of you who have called me this year to catch up and to encourage. So perhaps I am wrong.

Yet if our fellowship is feeble, then my second question is why. Priorities? Fear? Inertia? Indifference? I recall thinking like Elijah during graduate school and my early career that I must be the only professional economist with a deep personal attachment to Jesus Christ. Looking back, I hope we can all smile forgivingly at my naïveté and subtle pride. But why did it

take me so long to find out how wrong I was? And why do I now feel isolated for the opposite reason? Now I know how many of us there are. But now I can't figure out why so few seem to share my curiosity, relief, and even exhilaration to meet kindred believer/economists and find out how they're thinking, teaching, writing, witnessing, ministering . . . ! Am I being naïve or proud again?

If you're still with me, then the final question is what to do about this practically. Exhort? Pray? Plan regional fellowship times as in Washington? Engage in cross-campus seminar barter (you come here to speak in exchange for me going there, "that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" and economics)? Open our home to visiting believer/economists instead of leaving them in hotels ("because he was a tentmaker as they were, he *stayed* and worked with them")? Look around for such hospitality instead of hotels?

What are your reactions? We all should feel free to contribute to these "viewpoints."

REVIEW ARTICLE

"Denys Munby (1919-1976) On Economics And Christianity"

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I

When 'Political OEconomy' emerged as a recognizable discipline at the end of the eighteenth century most of its practitioners were Christian and many clerical. Paley and Malthus were priests of the Church of England. B. Summer, Copleston and Whately became prelates. Chalmers was a Scotch Presbyterian minister and Moderator (1832) of the General Assembly. All were deeply concerned to relate the method

and findings of the new science to the traditional account of human society supplied by Christian theology (Waterman 1983, 1986). But in the second half of the nineteenth century 'Christian dogma fell away from the serious philosophical world . . .' (Keynes 1972, p. 168) and scientists of all kinds ceased to regard the task of reconciling scientific with theological knowledge as part of their ordinary business. Those who remained Christian have generally kept their science and their religion in separate intellectual

boxes. Few economists of any note have tried to bring the two together.¹ The late Denys Lawrence Munby (1919-1976) was a luminous exception.

Perhaps this is because he became an economist precisely in order to understand the social implications of his Christian faith. Like William Temple and R. H. Tawney he was educated at Rugby, then a fertile source of 'Christian social' thinkers. He went up to Oxford in 1937 to read Classics, but his studies were interrupted by the war, during which he did social work in the East End of London. An Anglo-Catholic and a socialist, Munby was much influenced at that time by the so-called 'Christian sociology' of the Christendom Group as propagated in the writings of Maurice Reckitt, V. A. Demant and T. S. Eliot. It is now well-known that these much-admired authors were totally ignorant of economics and frequently committed to egregious nonsense. Fortunately Munby was persuaded by his friend Ronald Preston to learn some economics before presuming to prescribe for social ills (Preston 1988, p. 29 and note 14).

Upon returning to Oxford in 1946 therefore, he forsook Classics for Economics, which he pursued to such good effect that he was invited to deputize for Roy Harrod while the latter was on leave in 1948-49. In 1949 he became Lecturer in Economics at King's College, Aberdeen, and in 1958 he returned to Oxford as Professorial Fellow of Nuffield College and University Reader in transport economics. His academic career was distinguished but not eminent; chiefly based on an expert knowledge of transport, fuel and power in the United Kingdom, and including a World Bank mission to Yugoslavia in 1959 and various work for the Department of Economic Affairs in the mid-1960s and 1975. In 1976 he was killed whilst on vacation.

As an economist Munby soon became involved in advisory work for the churches. From 1954 he was Vice-Chairman of the World Council of Churches committee on Church and Society, and in the same year was invited to lecture at Union Theological Seminary on Christianity and economic problems. Whilst in the United States Munby was greatly impressed by the massive series of expert studies on Ethics and Economic Life (1953, 1954) commissioned by the National Council of Churches. Upon returning to Britain he reworked his New York lectures with explicit recognition of these studies and published the result as *Christianity and Economic Problems* (1956), his first major contribution in this field.

The lamentable failure of recent Anglican social thought in general and the Christendom Group in

particular, resulting as Munby thought from a combination of sound theology with unsound economics, was an important subsidiary theme of this book. An appendix exposed the 'major errors' in Demant's *Religion and the Decline of Capitalism* (1952). Munby followed up his attack on the irresponsible amateurishness of the church's social witness in two further essays. 'The Disordered Economic Thinking of the National Church' (1957) reviewed P. Mairet's *The National Church and the Social Order* (1957); 'The Importance of Technical Competence' was a contribution to *Essays in Anglican Self-Criticism* (1958). These animadversions seem to have been coolly, not to say frigidly, received by his fellow Anglicans.²

In 1960 Munby was invited to deliver the Cadbury Lectures at Birmingham University, published the following year as *God and the Rich Society* (1961) with obvious allusion to the theme of Galbraith's recent book (1958). And in 1962 he was chosen as Riddell Memorial Lecturer in the University of Durham resulting in *The Idea of a Secular Society* (1963). The Riddell lectures, which may eventually be regarded as Munby's most important contribution to Christian social theory, criticized the romantic escapism of T. S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), and celebrated the evangelically liberating character of 'secular' (or pluralistic) attitudes and institutions some years before theologians (e.g., Cox 1965) climbed on to that particular bandwagon.

Aside from these, Munby's other published writing in this field consists of an early essay on 'Leninism and Stalinism' (Mackinnon, 1953), three other essays reprinted as appendices to *God and the Rich Society*, and a preparatory essay to his edition of *Economic Growth in a World Perspective* (1966) prepared for the 1966 World Conference on Church and Society. It must be emphasized that Munby was first and foremost a very busy and productive applied economist. Most of his time and most of his published output was taken up with transport economics and public policy. His excursions into Christian social theory, brilliant and provocative as they were, were invariably a response to the requests of others, and made at the expense of his leisure.

II

The two principal themes in all of Munby's work in Christian social theory are logically (and for Munby, I think, psychologically) related. First is the lesson he learned so well from Ronald Preston: the importance of technical competence. But this implies a 'scientific' knowledge of human society which is independent of Christian faith and autonomous with respect to

theology. The way is open to an explicitly non-religious, or 'secular' view of human life. The faithful may welcome the secular as part of 'God's attack on religion' (1963, p. 67). Hence Munby's second theme was an exploration and a Christian appreciation of some aspects of the secular. I shall examine each in turn.

Munby began with the disillusioning recognition that the 'Christian social thought' he had accepted in his youth was fatally flawed. 'Christian theology and Christian moral principles were formulated in days when most social relations were of a face-to-face nature' and 'do not apply to a civilization including masses of people bound together by complex and inevitably impersonal relations' (1956, p. 102). Theologians have failed to grasp this point in part because of their education. 'Few . . . have been trained in the rigorous discipline of economics. Many, perhaps most, have had the background of a classical education, which . . . is entirely unsuitable to deal with the problems of the modern world' (ibid.)³

Accordingly, certain characteristic errors have plagued the social witness of the churches in recent times. Business enterprise and the profit motive is feared. Cooperation is preferred to competition. The price mechanism is distrusted. A naïve confidence is displayed in the power (and goodness) of the State to order economic affairs. And absurd monetary nostrums are or were proposed as remedies for social disorders.⁴

But it is simply not possible in the modern world to supersede the businessman and the profit motive by cooperative production (1956, p. 94; 1961, pp. 83-85 and Appendix C). The price mechanism is 'the only way in which a large-scale economic system can satisfy the needs of a large population' (1956, p. 245). And 'To call in the state to clear up the wastes of competition . . . is likely to result in the same disasters as would result from calling in a chimney sweep to dust a room' (1956, p. 209). For Munby believed, as E. F. Schumacher (1973) was later to argue, that ' . . . social health depends far more upon reducing the complexities of modern life to a human scale than on widening the field of . . . action such as the state provides' (1956, p. 234).

It must not be supposed from any of this either that Munby was an uncritical apologist for the capitalist order or that he exaggerated the heuristic power of modern economics. Large portions of his first two books describe the many failures of capitalism and the price mechanism to work as well as they might. And he was scrupulous not to overstate the 'scientific'

claims of economic theory (1956, chaps IV, V). Yet there is never any doubt as to his fundamental epistemological assumption.

The empirical world is not such that we can derive general principles . . . from theological truths. The theological truths of the Christian faith provide insights as to the dimensions of human nature . . . but they have to be interpreted in terms of a particular social reality . . . (1956, p. 252).

By its very nature, theology has nothing to say about 'particular social reality' in 'the empirical world.' Hence there can be no 'specifically Christian answers to social problems'; and it is 'not possible to have a synthesis of Christian social thought that will be universally valid, or even valid for any given period' (1961, pp. 3, 5).

The question must therefore arise for the Christian of the intellectual relation between the Christian faith and a relentlessly 'secular' approach to social science. Munby's second and third books may be seen as a discursive and non-rigorous exploration of this matter.

Munby took for granted 'the hackneyed theme that the Bible is the story of God's attack on religion' (1963, p. 67). For the true believer the sovereignty of God is absolute, and his presence to be seen in every conceivable aspect of human experience. The proper way to begin is thus to pose the question: 'What is God doing in the economic order in the middle of the twentieth century?' (1961, p. 13). Munby was led thereby to conclude that 'there are positive achievements in our world'; and to reject the view that 'the achievements of our world are so negative and unconstructive . . . that there is no way in which they can be redeemed into some sort of Christian pattern' (1961, p. 18).

Genuine social and economic progress has occurred as a direct result of industrialization. The wealth that capitalism has created and continues to create is in itself a good thing, and the resulting 'enlargement of human choice' is 'all part of God's design for men' (1961, p. 43). Urbanization, so destructive of traditional religion, is not 'of itself inhuman'; indeed 'a man is essentially a city dweller' (1961, p. 49). The profit-seeking activity of business enterprise is a powerful agent of social change which has equalized income and wealth and undermined the ancient hegemony of the upper classes (1961, pp. 63-69). The conflict which takes place between classes and sectional interests in modern society is preferable to the

outward tranquility of traditional societies, for the latter is an invariable sign of oppression. The churches' current obsession with conflict-resolution 'misses some of the more difficult and important issues' and implies the 'damnable' assumption that 'the Church has the answer' (1961, pp. 117-18 and chpt. 6 passim). It is confused and mythopoeic to suppose that 'technology' is a 'daemonic' force with 'a dynamic of its own.' Like every other human activity it is subject to rational human control (1961, pp. 137-46, 153-56). Munby never lets his readers forget that each of the 'positive achievements' he identifies has a cost. Humans therefore have a responsibility, in obedience to God, to minimize these costs by appropriate social rearrangements. It is by their (technically competent) and necessarily humble contributions to the latter, rather than in grandiose and presumptuous 'Social Teaching,' that any 'social witness' of Christians may be discovered.

Costs can be minimized but not eliminated in this fallen world. Not only are there no specifically Christian solutions to social problems. Natural scarcity and human sin together ensure that some are simply not 'soluble in principle' (1963, pp. 54-6). Nothing is served by ill-informed protest against ineluctable. Here again, of course, 'technical competence' is essential in recognizing what can and what can not be improved. And in all of this Christians must expect to work alongside of non-Christians and even of anti-Christians.

Now the 'secular' science of economics is more than simply a technique for analyzing problems of production and exchange. It is founded upon an insight of considerable relevance to the Christian theological approach to social problems.

Economising only arises in a world where things are scarce, and choice has to be made. In heaven no problem of scarcity arises, and in hell no possibility of choice exists; economics is a science dealing with the conditions of life in this world (1956, pp. 44-5).

Part of what is meant by the redemption of this world must therefore include the enlargement of human choice towards that heavenly asymptote where 'no problem of scarcity arises.' This theme, which is apparent in Munby's first two books, is the subject of his third.

A secular society enlarges the area of men's choices, and calls men to greater maturity, as Bonhoeffer has made clear to us. Do men really want it? Can they bear it? It is surely the

business of the organized Church and of all its members to help men bear it, and not to call them back to childhood (1963, p. 77).

A secular society is 'one which explicitly refuses to commit itself as a whole to any particular view of the universe and the place of man in it' (1963, p. 14). It is pluralistic, tolerant, and its common aims are limited, so far as possible, to that of increasing the goods and services available to people, 'which is to provide them with ever-widening choices . . .' (1963, pp. 17, 20, 23-4). It is without official images and without coherent culture (1963, p. 30).

Such a society is framed more nearly in accordance with the Will of God as we can see it in Scripture, in the Incarnation, and in the way God actually treats men, than those societies which have attempted to impose on the mass of man what a small Christian group have believed to be in accordance with God's Will (1963, p. 34).

III

Appraisal of Munby's Christian social theory must begin with the recognition that some of it is inevitably dated.

An unsympathetic (or at any rate unperceptive) review of his first book remarked that 'nothing he says about economic affairs appears to differ materially from what a number of non-Christian leftist economists have been saying for some time' (*Theology* 1957, p. 338). It is true that Munby's view of public policy was founded upon two pieces of current orthodoxy then widely accepted among British economists of every kind, Christian and non-Christian, 'leftish' and non-'leftish.' First was the belief that Keynesian macro-economic theory had explained unemployment and the business cycle and so afforded a rationale for stabilization policy. Second was the assumption that failures of the market to allocate goods and services either efficiently or equitably could be remedied at a relatively small cost by government intervention.

Though a few economists still cling to modified versions of these views they are now rejected by the profession at large. Keynesian macro-economics has been subsumed under a far more complex and subtle analysis capable of explaining the prolonged co-existence of unemployment and inflation which afflicted capitalism in the 1970s. Specifically 'Keynesian' theorems constitute, at best, a special case unlikely ever again to be relevant. As for micro-

economic intervention—redistributive taxation, social welfare programmes, subsidies and public enterprise—experience of the past forty years has created widespread disillusionment. Public choice theory and the ‘theory of bureaux’ make it appear unlikely that government will act with the disinterested benevolence assumed by upper-class socialists of Munby’s generation.

Though theology is far less of a ‘progressive’⁵ inquiry than economics, there are, at least, changing fashions. Munby’s development of Bonhoeffer’s theme of the ‘coming of age’ of mankind takes one back to the optimistic excitement of the 1960s. However, because of his failure to come to grips (as others such as van Buren (1963) attempted to do) with the intellectual problem for theology of a rigorously secular way of thinking, Munby’s Christian social theory is incomplete. It was essential to recognize as he did that ‘the realities with which the economist deals are very different from the realities with which the theologian is primarily concerned’; essential to affirm as he did that ‘Nevertheless, it all remains God’s world.’ But his various attempts ‘to reconcile the two areas of experience’ (1956, p. 252) were never pushed to the point at which the epistemological relation between the two ‘realities’ is laid bare.

It is nonetheless of high importance that we should not ‘loosely through silence’ permit Munby’s work ‘to pass away as in a dream.’ It is hardly too much to say that he is the only Christian thinker since Richard Whately, the only one in England at any rate, to examine the implications for theology of economic science.⁶ At the very least he should be given a place of equal honour as a social thinker with his fellow-Rugbeians, R. H. Tawney and William Temple. Neither possessed his ‘technical competence’ and their reputations have been unduly inflated by those who share their ignorance of modern economics. And aside from his interest as a rare exhibit in the *History of Ideas*, there are other excellent reasons for reading his work today.

The first is for the sheer enjoyment of it. Munby belonged to the last generation of British academics whose literacy could be taken for granted. Nowadays when it is unusual to read a theologian—still less an economist—without pain, it is a joy to turn to Munby’s lucid and elegant prose.

In the second place, it is by no means the case that all he said about economics and the economy is now obsolete. The most important part of what Munby had to say on that score—his exposition of the virtues and vices of a market economy—is as true now as

when he wrote it, and his account of the method of economics is still worth reading. Even his discussions of economic policy are often preserved from obsolescence by his judicious balance, common sense and far-seeing understanding of economic behaviour.

There are still many signs among the Christian churches, both in Britain and in North America, that the painful lesson of ‘technical competence’ has still to be learned.⁷ All too often—as it seems to economists—theologians, bishops, synod delegates and organizers of local ‘action groups’ ought to be made to re-read Munby in sackcloth and ashes. At the very least the churches ought not to ignore, as they so often do, the presence in their ranks of many well-qualified economists who would gladly assist in weeding out the more obvious nonsense from their public utterances.

And Christian economists should themselves read Munby: not in order to learn anything of their craft (though many of us could learn from his mastery of the ‘art’ as distinct from the ‘science’ of our discipline) but for guidance and inspiration in the difficult intellectual and spiritual enterprise of relating economics to the faith. Simply because there are far more economists now than in Munby’s day, there are far more *Christian* economists, especially in North America. Many of these in the last decade or so have begun to investigate the relation between Christian faith and economic science, and it is important not to re-invent the wheel. Munby’s three books are an essential starting point in my opinion.

Finally, and most importantly, the very failure and incompleteness of Munby’s Christian social theory should constitute a standing invitation to theologians, economists and philosophers of science and religion to take up the question he addressed but left unanswered. What is the relation between the ‘knowledge’ (if any) afforded by economics of social reality to the ‘knowledge’ (if any) afforded by Christian theology? The ‘social witness’ of the churches will continue to be stuck in a pre-industrial and pre-scientific worldview until some progress is made on that front.

Notes

¹ Wicksteed was a theologian as well as an economist, and contributed as much to the one discipline as to the other. But he maintained an impermeable barrier between the two. Tawney and Stamp wrote much on Christianity and economic matters but one was an historian and the other a statistician. Three American economists of great eminence, Frank Knight, Jacob Viner and Kenneth Boulding, devoted

considerable attention to the relation between economics and Christian faith. But Knight concluded that Christianity has nothing to say about social ethics, and Viner's interest was purely historical and scholarly.

² Mairret answered Munby in a long letter which evaded the issues in contention (*Theology* 60 (1957), pp. 199-202). Munby's contribution to *Essays in Anglican Self-Criticism* was dismissed in a single, slighting sentence (*Theology* 62 (1959), p. 334).

³ In his next book Munby analyzed the education of the English episcopate. Of 111 prelates a large majority had proceeded from a great public school to Oxford or Cambridge where they read Classics or History. Only two had studied economics 'and neither of the two . . . obtained more than a third class' (1961, pp. 162-3).

⁴ The Christendom Group was converted to 'social credit' in the 1930s.

⁵ 'Progressive' in Lakatos' sense; in that unsatisfactory theories are replaced by provisionally satisfactory ones which explain all that the old theory explained, avoid the anomalies presented by the old theory, and predict new 'facts.'

⁶ Mention should be made of Lord Stamp and Ronald Preston in England, and of Frank Knight and Kenneth Boulding in the USA. Only Knight probed as deeply as Munby: many of his observations about the inadequacy of traditional theology to afford 'Christian social thought' of any relevance to the modern world are similar to Munby's, but unlike Munby he concluded that 'Christian social thought' is impossible in principle.

⁷ See Ronald Preston's (very properly) unflattering account of "Christian Socialism Becalmed" (1988).

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