

A Christian Perspective on Political Thought

by Stephen C. Mott

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In this extensively-researched, scholarly (1,331 footnotes and 26 pages of bibliography accompany 228 pages of text), ambitious, disturbing, and disappointing book Stephen Mott has produced a work that will be of interest to those economists for whom their discipline is larger than its modern capitulation to technical virtuosity and empirical irrelevance. The ecumenicity of the Association of Christian Economists will no doubt imply a variety of responses to the book's style and message. For a strength of the work lies in the catholicity of its probe into areas of political, economic, and social criticism, though its message is clouded, diffuse, and tarnished by a failure to make the cutting edge of its evaluations and criticisms clear. Like Shakespeare's justice in his *As You Like It* (II: 7, 156), Mott's book is "full of wise saws and modern instances," though one reader wished frequently that the author had inverted Shakespeare's plea for "more matter, with less art" (*Hamlet*, II: 2, 95). Mott's *Christian Perspective* would have benefitted from a little less, or a more disciplined, matter and a little more art.

The strength of the book is in its range and in the manner in which it provokes a reflection on, first, the issues that should disturb the Christian economist's mind, and second, the relevance of the Christian revelation, and the historicity of the redemption it proclaims, to the human condition that is properly the Christian economist's concern. The overriding problem with the book stems from its intellectual parentage and from the author's failure to escape from the thought schemes of his mentors, or to delineate clearly and effectively the Christian theological distinctives which, the reader is at liberty to assume, should inform political and economic criticism. For by his prefatory acknowledgment, Mott here draws "heavily upon the Christian realists, especially Reinhold Niebuhr." While this is not

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the place to explain the latter's theology, it is understandable that after an examination of it the conclusion should be reached that Niebuhr's position is unacceptable when measured by Biblical-Reformation standards. In the work under review, that is, it is difficult to conclude that a distinctively evangelical or a Reformed theological perspective provides the angle of vision. The author's theological sensitivities appear to be differently located. If that is so, then the impression of the work's ecumenical alignment and its apparently accommodative stance understandably follows. If it is not so, then the author has failed to establish his critical and evaluative criteria clearly. For those reasons, readers, particularly those in the Association served by this *Bulletin*, will make, equally understandably, differing evaluations of the work.

The language and categories of the Scriptural revelation find their way into the book. It speaks of creation, sin, and the Fall, and in an important section in an early chapter on "Doing Human Nature Justice" a discussion of "The Lesson of Eden" addresses the issue of sin. The fallenness of man and society should be paramount, it would appear, in the Christian economist's interpretative scheme of things. But to employ the Biblical words is not necessarily to make clear the Biblical meaning. The Scriptures, for example, provide not only a statement of the fact of the atonement. They also make clear the meaning of the atonement. Similarly, the facts of creation, sin, and the Fall all attain their facticity by reason of the place they occupy and the meaning they assume in the scheme of explanation of which they are a part. It is the meaning of the fact that establishes its facticity. But it is at precisely such a point that the work under review is damagingly unclear and disappointing.

The "source of evil," for the author, "lies in the very factors that makes (sic) us human/creatures, our freedom and our finiteness" (p. 29). To clarify the author's intention he refers approvingly at that point to Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny*

of Man. His argument in that section, that potentially determines his larger vision, deserves the closest scrutiny. Much is made there of Niebuhr's concepts of finiteness and freedom. And though it is possible to conclude that Mott has avoided the fallacy of identifying finitude and sin, it is not clear that he has avoided completely the theological fallacy of interpreting sin and the Fall as having primarily metaphysical meaning and significance. For he speaks repeatedly of the danger that "because of our finiteness" we may "come to meaninglessness" (p. 30). The problematic in human existence, as Mott sees it, is that of surviving "the threat of meaninglessness and nonbeing" (p. 31). It appears that throughout the work the dialectical tensions, the apparent contradictions, and the paradoxical relations that are characteristic of Niebuhr's anthropology and theology come repeatedly to expression. For Niebuhr, sin is to be understood in connection with the paradoxical relation between the finite and the infinite, and for him, as a more extensive review of his theology appears to confirm, original sin is not an inherited corruption, but an unavoidable fact in human existence. What is recounted in Genesis is true of each person at each moment of his existence, but the Genesis Fall is not historical. For Niebuhr the Fall, rather than being a historical fact, and rather than being constituted by actual human action, is something that necessarily and constantly lies at the foundation of man and human nature as such. It appears necessary to conclude, similarly, that for Niebuhr creation and redemption are to be understood as Biblical myths. Niebuhr speaks of the "atonement of Christ," but he warns against understanding this "atoning death of the Son of God on the Cross" as "a substitutionary satisfaction" (see G.B. Wurth, *Niebuhr*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973).

Our objective here is not to evaluate Niebuhr's work at more length, but to provide a minimal background on the source material for Mott's *Christian Perspective*. In this work Mott appears not

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to have freed himself from the implicit existentialism of his mentors. He quotes in support of his position John Wesley's "fear...not of falling into hell but of falling into nothing," and Tillich's claim that we are "threatened by nonbeing" (p. 30). That motif, that comes to expression again in what we noted as Mott's "threat of meaninglessness and nonbeing," imports a metaphysical dimension to the explanation of sin. It enables him to speak at a later point of the fact, as he sees it, that "our cultural enterprise slides toward meaninglessness" (p. 98). But such a metaphysical concept of nonbeing, and of the possibility of the devolution of the human self into nonbeing, is alien to the Scriptural revelation. The Fall, that is, did not effect a change in man's metaphysical status. Sin, it is important to understand, is ethical. The Fall, as Cornelius Van Til put it, was an ethical lapse. The implications of that reality need to be worked out in the economist's critique of the social condition.

The work under review, it will already be clear, deserves a longer review than can be accorded it at present. Though, as has been said, the Christian perspectives in Mott's *Christian Perspective* are not always clearly delineated, very helpful and challenging argument is presented at many points. An early chapter on "The Goodness and Corruption of Power" contains an analysis that should be of interest to economists wrestling with the meaning of the social and cultural condition. Centers of power are discussed, along with issues of exploitation, poverty, and the importance of what is referred to as intervening power, exemplified in both Scriptural instances and in contemporary governmental responsibilities. The issue of social justice, the purpose of the state, and the scope and functions of government are explored, frequently with high insight and wisdom.

Part II of the book, under the general heading of "Observing the Visions," presents a critical review of traditional conservatism, liberalism, democracy, laissez-faire conservatism, Marxism, and

socialism. Economists will be specially interested in the heavily-footnoted chapter on "Prosperity through unfettered competition" in which the argument for laissez-faire conservatism is evaluated. Mott's economic perceptions had emerged in the early chapter on the corruption of power where he insists on "the pervasiveness of exploitive power as portrayed so forcefully in Scripture" (p. 20). The failure to see that reality, Mott argues, "contributes to the advocacy of merely individualistic solutions or reliance upon natural harmonies" (p. 20). Casting doubt on the validity and effectiveness of "trickle-down theories and supply-side economic approaches," Mott observes that "relying on strengthening the economic hand of the wealthy to help the needy appears to be opposite to the biblical realism about power" (p. 20).

Touching lightly on the historical background of laissez-faire capitalism, Mott balances his exposition by observing that "the favor that the Calvinists gave to economic activity was in the context of responsibility to the community" (p. 164). That notion of responsibility informs Mott's critique at several points and he laments the fact that "capitalism and liberal society have suffered from the loss of the Puritan moral and social framework" (p. 164). Economists who comb the laissez-faire chapter for economic analytical insight will recognize that while Adam Smith's invisible hand is accorded its place, other highly important concepts, many of which are necessary to the interpretation of the present-day relevance of economic argument, are absent from this interdisciplinary work. Though Mott does observe Gilder's claim that "supply creates its own demand" (p. 281), he does not provide any indication of the pervasive significance for the nineteenth century classicists of Say's Law and its analytical implications. In fact, he argues in typical classical fashion that "the act of saving...is necessary for the increase of capital," echoing Adam Smith's "parsimony...is the immediate cause of the increase of capital" (p. 182). But such a reliance on the assumption content of Say's Law has long

since been called in question. Rather than its being the case that saving is causally and temporally prior to investment, investment is prior to saving. Investment generates income, and income generates saving. Investment is subject, not to a saving constraint, but to a finance constraint. It is not the case that an automatic mechanism exists in the economy to transform saving into investment. The relevant analytics take us beyond our present assignment and objective.

But problems associated with laissez-faire capitalism are discussed. "Laissez-faire advocates [who] opposed any humanitarian legislation that could be interpreted as hampering the free operation of the market...misquoted Smith" Mott concludes. For Smith, "the government did have responsibilities for negative effects of mass production on the individual" (p. 166). Spencer's "social Darwinism" is evaluated (p. 167), and it is pointed out that Spencer, "himself an agnostic," was given theological support by members of the clergy. From the point of view of the economics informed by such assumptions, "a role of government on behalf of the poor is...both useless and destructive" (p. 168). Mott acknowledges at that point that "we live in a success-oriented culture, and success is most apparent in material

measures" (p. 169). The damaging implication of the fact that "the individualistic philosophy of society requires some rationale to do what evolution did for Spencer" is that "the weaker members must be shown to bear their own blame if there is no just reason for the community as a whole to intervene for their well being" (p. 169). The fuller argument warrants inspection and reflection. Issues of social justice are addressed, and the necessity is acknowledged of recognizing the relevance of "the radical and irrational nature of sin" (p. 172). The conclusion is offered that "because of the human propensity for evil, all of individual and social life needs to be under some form of authority" (p. 173). Economic justice, Mott concludes in a discussion of "benefit rights" as opposed to "natural rights," includes the right "to have work provided" in those instances in which members "of a community" are disadvantaged by the malfunctioning of the economic system. Stephen Mott has placed us in his debt by offering us his challenges to more strenuous theologico-economic thought. His *Christian Perspectives*, notwithstanding some uncertainties implicit in its chosen orientation, is worthy of the Christian economist's evaluation on the scholarly level that it itself commands. ■

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