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BOOK REVIEWS

Economics and Religion

Paul Oslington, ed. 2003. Cheltenham, UK and Northhampton, MA: Edward Elgar. International Library of Critical Writings in Economics. ISBN: 1–84064–849–X (2 volumes).

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Economics and Religion is a pioneering work aimed at collecting important contributions to the analysis of the interaction between religion, Christianity, and economics. Though this is a vast field of study, Oslington's volume is the first and only one of the 190 published and 50 planned volumes in Elgar's "International Library of Critical Writings in Economics" series to touch on this area. This says a lot about the state of the art and the intellectual attraction of a field which is of paramount interest to Christian economists. We can only hope that Oslington's work will be followed by others.

Oslington's approach is revealed in the headings he gives to the various groupings of selected texts and in his discussion in the introduction. My review is structured into two parts. First, the various concepts in the field are identified and Oslington's approach is analyzed. Second, I discuss several of the contributions in the volumes that appear particularly noteworthy.

A first difficulty in selecting texts dealing with "religion" and "economics" consists in defining the concepts used. On the one hand we have religion, a notion which social scientists link closely to culture and ideology, and Christianity, which many theologians increasingly contrast with, or oppose to, religion. On the other, we have economics, where the dominant neoclassical paradigm must be distinguished from those underpinning classical, Marxian or Austrian economics. A second difficulty lies in clarifying how these various concepts evolved in history and determining the present status of the relationships between different bodies of theories. This enormous task reminds me of the *Methodenstreit*.

Paul Oslington has done a brilliant job cutting through these complex analytic questions in grouping the texts he selected into two volumes of more than 500 pages each. Volume I includes a single part, "Historical Relationships," while Volume II includes a Part I, "Religious Economics and its Critics" with sections on Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and a Part II, "Economics of Religion." Two comments here: First, the headings suggest that the investigation of analytic relationships has led to the formation of specific corpuses of work. Actually most of the texts collected under "Christianity" investigate unsettled relationships. Only the much shorter sections on Islam and Judaism are expositions of systems. Second, a revealing quirk may be signaled: while the title of

Volume II Part I is "Religious Economics and its Critics," texts critical of the "Economics of Religion" are included in part II but not signaled in the heading. The presence and absence of "critics" in these headings reveals which "religion" may be criticized and which may not, to use Nelson's brilliant insights in "Economics as Religion" (2001), and it is regrettable that Nelson's exposure of economics as the major "religion" of our times has not been included in Volume II.[1] I will not comment on the contributions grouped under "Economics of Religion," which mainly investigate economic techniques applied to religious life, because I am interested in the foundational relationships of Christianity and economics, to which the major part of the work is devoted.

Oslington explains his analytic approach in the introduction, stating: "If Christian theology has influenced modern economic theory, then historical study is our best chance of identifying any residues…(and) history teaches us about…the positions of economists and theologians…" Oslington thus makes it clear that he no longer talks about "religion"—the general sociological concept—but concentrates on Christianity and in particular Christian theology, i.e. the analytic structure of faith rather than Christian practices as embodied in a given culture.

The emphasis on Christian theology does not, however, apply to an important grouping of texts in Volume I (texts 6–13) devoted to the emergence of the concept of the invisible hand in Great Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries. This is the story of the birth of the liberal belief in progress, which is well known but which is detailed in Volume I by brilliant and interesting contributions. Contrary to Oslington's assertion, this is not the story of the emergence of economics from Christian theology but of the market economy out of a new European religion and its "neopagan" theology, centered on the Newtonian god, as many of the selected texts point out. Christian theology is indeed radically different from that of the "invisible hand" as it tells us how Christ, acting through the Christian's readiness to follow His paradoxical path, "restores" creation so that, at the end of times and in ways no one knows, humans will be able to achieve what the "pagans" believe to be automatically at work.

Before moving to the discussion of individual contributions I will mention two sets of methodological issues Oslington has not raised. The first is that of the economics discipline's study of resource allocation and active market coordination. Oslington defines economics, *de facto* exclusively, in terms of the functioning of the market. The other aspect of economics—the economic calculus, the pursuit of the minimization of the effects of scarcity and maximization of objectives—is not mentioned and is represented by no text. Does this mean that it is as irrelevant to Christianity and/or religion as the movements of the stars? Historically, after the emergence in Britain of the ideas of the market system and the invisible hand, Western intelligentsia was faced with marginalism and Austrian methodological questions, which are not unrelated to Christian theology. The rational(istic) minimization of scarcity raises deep human-religious questions, such as its link to alienation, and crucial Christian questions, such as the central place of the body in creation and the role of the faithful in co-creating this finite world of scarcities. Economics is the instrument for becoming fully human by overcoming the inefficiencies of sin. This aspect of economics should have been mentioned, especially if it had been estimated that no study deserved to be included in the collection. Furthermore, the economics literature has also paid much attention to "market failures" and Christians and religious people (including Marxists, humanists) have frequently focussed on the critique of the notion of the invisible hand—e.g. social injustice and misguided globalization—and on the ways and means to remedy it. Although much of this literature may not meet the standards of inclusion in this book, these methodological issues deserved to be noted.

With so little place in his world for economics as rational coping with scarcity, Oslington cannot do justice to Boulding's contributions. He states that Boulding exemplifies a "soft form of religious economics…where economists see religion as a source of ethical guidance" (Volume I, p. xiii). In my view, Boulding's text should have been given a place in Volume I (rather than simply in Volume II) as it clearly spells out most issues that link Christianity and economics in a language very different from that of today's textbooks, as the following quote from Boulding demonstrates: "In his 'Common Sense of Political Economy' Wicksteed established economics…as a general theory of choice…and the student who has read his illustration...[about] how much one should shorten family prayers in order to speed a parting guest to train...will have little doubt…that economics cannot be accused of being materialistic" (Volume II, p. 19).

The second methodological issue neglected by Oslington is that of the Christian motors of long term growth. There is no specific text in Volume I devoted to Max Weber; there is no place in the outline, and only a cursory mention in the introduction, of the Weberian thesis that faith lies at the origin of fundamental economic change. Does Weber really not deserve more than the partial discussion by Viner in the 1950s? (I return to this point when discussing Viner.) The link between entrepreneurship and Christian calling and prophetism should also have been mentioned. A consideration of Weber and of innovative entrepreneurship would have enabled the survey to note Marxian views of economics and religion, which philosophically may be seen as the opposite.

All this leads to the conclusion that Oslington has, in fact, concentrated on the "Religion and Economics" of market equilibrium (the invisible hand and religious morality). Disequilibrium and human initiative—factors of "disorder"—have been short-shrifted. The prophetic spirit has no place in this world ruled by the gods of rationality. I feel strengthened in drawing these conclusions by Vickers' remarks that Christian economists should concentrate on disequilibrium analysis.[2] This brings me to wonder whether the spirit of Christian economics does not lie in the approach and in the selection of issues, as much as in the nature of the systems we build. And we all know that the systems we build reflect the questions we ask.

I turn now to the individual contributions. The first volume opens with two quite recent and "brash" texts. The one by Gordon, "Theological Positions and Economic Perspectives," recalls different "economic stories" of the Bible and ends up opposing Augustine's and Chrysostomus' visions of human nature. Gordon's presentation is unfortunately marred by errors. First, it is not (as he states) that "some" Christian traditions include the Wisdom of Solomon, which supports involvement in the world, in the Canon, but the entire body of Catholic, Orthodox, and Eastern Churches who do so. Second, he argues that Augustine's pessimistic anthropology "became dogma in the West." Augustine's view was challenged by many, including Thomas Aquinas, and became "dogma" only for (some) Protestants. Finally, Gordon extols the Divinity of Jesus to the point of neglecting the common belief of most Christians that Jesus is also man, as emphasized by the Council of Chalcedon. This theological point is crucial, as it is indeed His *incarn*ation into humanity that ultimately underpins Christian involvement in the world of economics and politics. It is important to note that Oslington praises Gordon's text in the introduction and places it at the head of the relevant selection. It is therefore necessary to underline its lack of objectivity. This apparent analytic preference needs to be signaled as many believe that such a unilateral view of Christianity blocks Christian research into economics and, *a contrario*, strengthens the ideological monopoly of the pagan invisible hand, which is left without a Christian corrective.

The second piece, Bruce Malina's "Embedded Economics: the Irrelevance of Christian Fictive Economics," is in my opinion even more excessive and non-factual. As the title suggests, the author argues that the first Christians lived in a domestic, closed, and embedded economy, and that it is this pattern that biases Christian thinking on economics. His discussion completely neglects the well-known fact that Christianity developed in the very globalized Hellenistic world and that Paul wrote several foundational letters from Corinth which was one of the most cosmopolitan cities. We can only be sorry that Malina never read Boulding, who noted "It is not surprising therefore that it was Macedonia…that gave the call to the apostle Paul, and that Christianity became the religion of the West, for Jesus gave Christianity a stamp of this worldliness which it can never quite escape" (quoted by Oslington, Volume II, p. 11). We are far from the embedded domestic world of Malina's reading of the New Testament.

The remainder of the first part of Volume I is essentially descriptive. It consists mainly of a single text, the entire opus of Viner's notes of the late 1950s, unpublished in his lifetime, but published by Melitz and Winch in 1978 and presently out of print. This text takes up 50 percent of the space of Volume I. I am not an economic historian, but it seems to me that Viner's draft discussion distinguishes insufficiently between Christian economic theology (the core of what we are interested in today) and cultural-societal practices advocated over centuries by priests and spiritual advisers in societies dominated, first, by the persecuting paganism of antiquity (Viner's enumeration of the socio-economic guidance given by the church fathers) and later by the need to rule medieval and Spanish Christendoms (the scholastics).

I learned more from the second part of Viner's contribution, which in fact turns around the discussion of Weber's thesis. First, I realized that Viner's critique insisted on the letter of Weber's thesis rather on its spirit (if I may use these terms!). Second, the many examples Viner gave (to show that Weber's intuitions had been anticipated by a very interesting literature in the 19th century) strengthened the basic thesis of the unique link between Christianity and economics. *Quod* actually *erat demonstrandum*. All this made me regret even more that Oslington had found no texts in the English-speaking world on the contemporary developments of the Weberian thesis. In France, in a discussion of Marcel Gauchet's contributions, Weber's theses have been generalized into a view of the role played by Christianity in the emergence of modernity.[3]

The second volume's section on "Religious Economics" comprises two kinds of texts: First there are presentations of comprehensive views of coherent "economic systems" by Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and Jews. However, as the authors frequently recognize, they do not deal in "economics" but in social doctrine or practical economic management. Thus Jacob Neusner notes at the end of his long study of the economics of Judaism (p. 311): "I said earlier that the Mishnah's economics is economics only in the classic sense….On economics as the science has evolved from its 18th century origins, the Judaism studied here has nothing whatsoever to say." And Michael Novak similarly points out in "A Theology of Democratic Capitalism" that "It is not economics that is our proper subject here" (p. 215). Second, there is a sharp discussion, mainly by Protestants, of the limitations of various contemporary economics. Two positions emerge: an intense critique of economics (Vickers) and of our means to appropriate theory (Cramp), and a more positive view of some approaches to contemporary economics coupled with the interrogation "What should Christian economists do?" (Tiemstra, Richardson).

For me, the most important lesson to be drawn from the latter on the limitations of economics is that none distinguishes corpuses of analytic construction and its instruments ("economics") from their wider and deeper foundations. In this respect, the comment by Richardson tells it all: "Not that some of us shouldn't try to be professional synthesizers….But my question is about us together, not about *some of us* called to synthesis…" (emphasis added). It is indeed worthwhile to emphasize the derogatory tone with which the "professional synthesizers" and their academic status are mentioned. This leads of course to query why "*some of us*" should engage in such a Christian *calling*….)

In conclusion, this book strengthens my belief that Christian economists should do economics, as Tiemstra emphasized. But this means we should not only apply various economics but should also re-found economic paradigms on sounder premises and above all raise new questions about the coherence and meaning of economics.

Endnotes

1 The text placed in Volume I goes back to 1993, when Nelson just began publishing on this subject.
2 Douglas Vickers, from Volume II, "…if we *understand* (emphasis supplied) the meaning of…disharmonies that sin has introduced…we might prefer to be…alert to…the disharmonies that abound in the world of economic and social affairs" (p. 88).
3 See Gauchet (1997); the French original was published in 1985. See also Gauchet (2003) and Rollet (2001) for a recent discussion of the literature.

References

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