

## *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*

**Paul Oslington, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 656 pp. \$142.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780199729715.**

This multi-author handbook is divided into five major sections, each consisting of several essays. Each essay concludes with a reference list, and authorship is evenly distributed between theologians and economists.

Part I, “Historical Relationships between Economics and Christian Theology,” provides historical background. The reader should know, however, that this section is “historical” primarily in the chronological, rather than the methodological, sense. The essays provide an overview of seminal thinkers and ideas, but do not do as much as one might wish to situate those thinkers in their larger social milieus.

Part II, “Contemporary Theological Economics,” explores economic concerns primarily through denominational lenses. The first five essays exemplify systemic, top-down responses to the project of theological-economic integration, while the essays on Anabaptism and Pentecostalism remind the reader of an alternative strategy: seeking change from the margins through the agency of individual and ecclesial witness.

Part III, “Christianity, Capitalism, and Development,” explores the history and possible future contributions of Christian theology to global economic development — particularly in the context of historically impoverished countries. The section opens with a qualified endorsement of the Weberian Protestantism-capitalism connection, and a consequent challenge to the assertion that economics can truly be an autonomous discipline. Picking up this theme, Paul S. Williams, in the essay “Christianity and the Global Economic Order,” contends that the economy has an essential religious nature (utilitarianism) and that failure to acknowledge this has led to the uncritical acceptance of a set of utilitarian value judgments (e.g., the ultimate purpose of an economic system is to promote economic growth; hence, the economic system is whichever one maximizes that growth by whatever means necessary).

While the first three sections tend to analyze economic phenomena through theological lenses, Part IV, “Economic Analysis of Religion,” reverses that flow as religious phenomena are examined using economic methodologies. This leads to essays that paradoxically are dry reading, but intellectually refreshing. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the study by T. Randolph Beard, Robert B. Ekelund, Jr., George S. Ford, and Robert D. Tollison of the processes by which believers move among existing churches and/or form new ones.

The final section, “Interdisciplinary Exchanges,” explicates areas of interdisciplinary conversation and suggests avenues for future work. Particularly engaging essays in Part V include Ian Harper and Lachlan Smirl’s survey of definitions and doctrines regarding usury or interest among the three great monotheistic faiths; Gordon Menzies and Donald Hay’s answer to the call for more robust anthropologies in economic analysis (they propose one rooted in the New Testament notion of “natural” and “spiritual” persons); and Carrie A. Miles’s thought-provoking argument that gender (defined as “the social and psychological difference associated with physical attributes”) was not part of God’s original Creation, but rather a consequence of the economic scarcity introduced by the Fall.

This book will likely prove most useful for upper-level undergraduates in history, theology, economics, or political science. While the essays vary in quality, as a whole the handbook performs admirably in giving the reader an introduction to both the historic relationship between Christian theology and economics and the current state of the interdisciplinary conversation.

As with any work, this volume has shortcomings. Some essays (e.g., “Spiritual capital”) seem to do little more than introduce alternative nomenclature without making a precise case for either what the proffered jargon means or even why the quest for an alternative model is worthwhile. Additionally, at barely over three pages, the index struck this

reviewer as woefully insufficient for a work of this type. Finally, the most frustratingly weak point was the diffusion of grammatical errors, many quite basic, throughout the book. One hopes this will be corrected in future editions, as their continuing presence only blunts the impact of an important introduction to an exciting field.

It is a bit difficult to pin down the editor's intended audience, but perhaps that is simply in the nature of early interdisciplinary works. Theologians will easily digest the early sections of the book, but are likely to struggle through the jargon of economic formulae in Part IV. Naturally, the reverse would be expected for economists. In the end, the usefulness of this book will largely be determined on an essay-by-essay level. Certain chapters could be read with profit by general readers. Others will require some basic introduction to theological and/or economic thought. A few may be useful only to specialists. In summation, the *Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics* is a commendable entry point to an interdisciplinary field that is sure to grow in importance in the coming years. It would be a wise acquisition for any seminary or faith-based academic library.

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