

Political Economy and Christian Theology since the Enlightenment: Essays in Intellectual History

A. M. C. Waterman. 2005. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 333 pages. ISBN: 1-4039-3913-6, \$90.00.

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Jonathan Clark, the eminent British historian and editor of this series, encouraged Waterman to publish these essays with the belief that “a certain vague coherence may be found lurking behind their bewildering heterogeneity.” The editor knows his author. Waterman confesses that he wants to write a real book without overlaps on “the greatest of all mutations in political thought: the gradual replacement of the rhetoric of Christian theology by that of political economy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” In most books the overlaps and repetitions would be a vice, but in this case the vice becomes a virtue. Almost every chapter has a brief restatement of what he has shown in a previous chapter.

The bulk of the essays (chapters 1–9) deal with British thought and political economy; three of them (chapters 10–12) deal explicitly with Catholic economic thought as expressed in the Encyclicals; chapter 13 returns to British concerns of the Established Church; and chapter 14 gives a rather technical mini-history of economic analysis. The overall structure is given in chapter 1. In the eighteenth century political economy and theology coexisted happily. In the nineteenth century, they were seen as incompatible, even mutually hostile. In the twentieth century they went their separate ways and no longer were even on speaking terms.

Waterman’s chapter 2 on the Enlightenment, Enthusiasm, and Superstition in the eighteenth century is very helpful in sorting out the different meanings of all these terms. There are at least two enlightenments: French and British, the former radical and hostile to religion, the latter friendly to religion. “Enthusiasm” is code for Methodist while “superstitious” is code for Roman Catholic. He declares that there is no evidence for the delicious tombstone of an Anglican priest: he had “served his Maker for forty years without the smallest sign of enthusiasm.” And that was meant as a compliment!

Although he cites Bishop Lavington’s book, *Enthusiasm of the Methodists and Papists Compared*, he does not point us to the picture worth a thousand words (or even more, since Lavington’s book came out in three volumes from 1749–1751): Hogarth’s fabulous print of “Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism” (1762). Hogarth unmercifully satirizes George Whitfield, John Wesley, and crypto-papists. Looking bemusedly

through a window at the religious chaos is a Turk calmly smoking a pipe. Some things don't change.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Dissenters and the Socinians. Similar to Jonathan Clark, he emphasizes the strong correlation of religious and political differences. Establishment Anglicans tend to be sympathetic to monarchy and hierarchy; the Dissenters/Socinians tend to be hostile to hierarchy and authority. In the United States this could be a major part of the explanation of the American Revolution—Boston being filled with dissenters and even proto-Unitarians such as Jonathan Mayhew.

One must remember that Waterman is Canadian; in Canada Tory traditions are strong and sympathy for the American Revolution is somewhat attenuated. Waterman reveals at several points that he is comfortable with the high doctrine of the church. In terms of the Eucharist he affirms his belief in the “real presence” if not transubstantiation; the high doctrine of the church is the idea that the church is not voluntary but a divine society based on the mystical body of Christ.

I suspect that Waterman might be as perplexed as John Henry Newman was when he met Bishop Hobart of New York: “he [Newman] confessed himself puzzled as to how Hobart managed to yoke together the high doctrine of the church and republican sentiments.”¹ Is it possible that this perplexity causes him to miss the genius of the American Revolution that allows Bishop Hobart to affirm both a high doctrine of the church and republican sentiments simultaneously? You can have your cake and eat it too. The Church is too important and sacred to have it aligned with a corruptible and corrupted establishment.

Let us return to his treatment of political economy in the “long eighteenth century” which can stretch from 1660 (the Restoration) to the 1830s. Waterman treats the political economy of the eighteenth century—Bishop Berkeley, Bishop Butler, Josiah Tucker, and even Adam Smith—as compatible with Christian thought. As a group they were optimistic about expanding wealth and lived in a world of increasing returns.

Malthus lived in the world of diminishing returns and pessimism about improving man's earthly lot. The responsibility for economics being called the Dismal Science rests on Malthus. He offended the literary Romantics Southey, Wordsworth and Coleridge whom Waterman describes rather accurately as “repentant ex-Jacobins-turned-Anglican-Tory.”

What did Malthus say that offended the more religious type thinkers? In the first edition of his *Essay on Population*, he stated that

A man who is born into the world already possessed...has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and in fact has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover

for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own orders if he does not work on the compassion of some of her guests (cited in pp. 118–119).

Granted Malthus deleted the passage in the next (1806) edition, but the damage was done.²

One of Waterman's great contributions is his treatment of those Christian thinkers who tried to control the damage that Malthus inflicted on the world by his ill-thought-out theodicy. These are thinkers in the early nineteenth century only vaguely familiar to economists: William Paley, Edward Copleston, J. B. Sumner, and Richard Whately. They reacted to Malthus by completing his theology/theodicy in a way that made the Anglican establishment—at least for a little while—not unhappy with the market economy.

Perhaps the most important of these men for modern economics is Richard Whately, Anglican Archbishop of Dublin. Although Waterman gives Whately credit for the positive/normative distinction, he does not pay attention to the fact that Ludwig von Mises credits Whately for introducing the term “catallactics,” the neutral science of exchange.

The reason for Whately's attempt to isolate the science of economics stems from his being caught between a rock and a soft place. The rock was the attempt of the secular atheists and Benthamites to appropriate economics for themselves. If C. S. Lewis could describe in a poem the “wintry breath of Malthus and Paley,” then Bentham and James Mill would have to be described as an absolutely freezing breath. John Stuart Mill is an intermediate case of some complexity.

The soft place was the fuzzy moralizing of the Romantics who didn't want any objective science. The Romantic Tories didn't pay any attention to Malthus's rehabilitation by the sensible religious thinkers who are Waterman's heroes.

Waterman claims that the methodological strictures maintained by Whately were sustained by John Neville Keynes and transmitted to Lionel Robbins in the twentieth century. But there are problems here. John Neville Keynes made a distinction between positive science—concerned with what is—and normative science relating to the criteria of what ought to be. Finally he adds on to this an art, which is a “system of rules for the attainment of a given end.”

Most modern economists who invoke the fact/value distinction wish to argue that there is no such thing as Keynes' normative science. Surely that is the point of Lionel Robbins' methodological admonitions. If twentieth century orthodoxy builds on Whately and Senior, then it is only by throwing out the most important leg of their stool: the science of ethics. Even the

other leg, the *art* of prudential adjustment to the realities of the world, so that means are efficacious in achieving the end desired, has not been one of the high points of modern mathematical economics.

Let us return to “catallactics.” Neither Waterman nor the Austrians really capture the point of this neologism referring to a neutral science of exchange. As Waterman points out, it makes no commitment to the idea that one *should* pursue wealth or equate wealth with self-interest or the public good. Whately wanted to preserve the independent stance of religion and morality. Yes, prostitution is an increase of wealth defined catallactically, but that does not mean that it should be allowed in the circle of exchange. These are questions that should be referred to the science of ethics.

Furthermore, neither Waterman nor the Austrians pay attention to the possible theological overtones of the Greek roots of catallactics. The word comes from the Greek for *reconcile*. The complexity of the root *katallasso* captures both branches of Whately’s concern: the word means, “change, exchange (especially of money) hence of persons to change from enmity to friendship, to reconcile.” In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians he says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (5:19). And the venerable hymn, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” with lyrics (and theology) by Charles Wesley has the memorable line, “God and sinners reconciled.”

The Christian vision of Whately is most succinctly expressed in a letter he wrote to the Professor of Political Economy at Columbia in 1834 (not quoted in Waterman): “There have been many treatises on the Art of Wars; ours may I think be called the Art of Peace; for I am persuaded that a just view of Political Economy and of Christianity would, hand in hand, persuade all people to beat their swords into plowshares.”

Waterman’s great synthetic powers are demonstrated in his chapter 13 on Establishment Social Thinking. He very carefully states about the Church/State relationship in England, “The two were identified politically, if only contingently.” He points out that the traces are still important, even if only symbolically, in the Coronation rites and the fact that there are still Bishops in the House of Lords.

He then covers the long eighteenth century discussed earlier. In the nineteenth century, the Christian Socialism of Ludlow, Kingsley, and Maurice (1848–1854) flowered in the vague alliances between theologians and social activists of the later nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries: the Guild of St. Matthew, the Christian Social Union, and the Church Socialist League.

He frankly states that their economics was “naïve and confused” which was a legacy of the Romantic revolt against political economy which threw out any objective economic science. Carlyle, Ruskin, and their twentieth century admirers such as R. H. Tawney did nothing to improve the situation.

He has a few good words for William Temple and many good words for Denys Mumby who even though a Christian Socialist recognized the incompetence and amateurishness of the “Christendom” group—Canon Demant, Reckitt, and T. S. Eliot. They may have been sound in their “incarnational theology” but they were goofy in their devotion to “social credit” ideas.

In the last chapter (which requires great skill of the technical economist to understand—theologians beware) he details the period from 1870–1950 where neoclassical economics provided the intellectual backbone to an attempt to develop a “scientific socialism” which could replace capitalism peacefully, “retaining all of its economically benign features whilst avoiding its waste, inefficiency and social injustice.” Outside of Austrian economics (he only mentions Hayek and Mises in passing) it is difficult to find such a hard-hitting analysis of the intellectual foundations of socialism. But in the period from 1950–2000, the vision was abandoned, partly because of political and economic realities.

In conclusion, Waterman’s book is richly deserving of a careful reading and re-reading because of its complexity and the importance of the underlying themes. He is to be complimented for bringing economics and theology together in a rigorous manner.

Endnotes

- 1 Quoted in Rowell (1983), p. 4.
- 2 An extraordinary reworking of this analogy of the feast and banquet table in the twentieth century was provided by Louisiana’s funniest demagogue, Senator and Governor Huey Long. The verbal transcript which follows does not do justice to the rhetorical skill of Huey. Senator Long tells congressional interns the benefits of his “Share-the-Wealth” program, Washington, D.C., December 11, 1934:

According to the tables which we have assembled, it is our estimate that 4 percent of the American people own 85 percent of the wealth of America, and that over 70 percent of the people of America don’t own enough to pay for the debts that they owe.

Any man with a thimble-full of sense ought to know that if you

take 85 percent off of that table and give it to one man that you are bound to have 2/3 the people starving because they haven't got enough to eat.

Giv'em a yacht! Giv'em a Palace!

Send 'em to Reno and give them a new wife when they want it, if that's what they want.

How many men ever went to a barbecue and would let one man take off the table what's intended for 9/10th of the people to eat? The only way to be able to feed the balance of the people is to make that man come back and bring back some of that grub that he ain't got no business with! [Laughter and applause]

Now we got a barbecue. We have been praying to the Almighty to send us to a feast. We have knelt on our knees morning and nighttime. The Lord has answered the prayer. He has called the barbecue. "Come to my feast," He said to 125 million American people. But Morgan and Rockefeller and Mellon and Baruch have walked up and took 85 percent of the victuals off the table!

Now, how are you going to feed the balance of the people? What's Morgan and Baruch and Rockefeller and Mellon going to do with all that grub? They can't eat it, they can't wear the clothes, they can't live in the houses.

Giv'em a yacht! Giv'em a Palace! Send 'em to Reno and give them a new wife when they want it, if that's what they want. [Laughter] But when they've got everything on God's loving earth that they can eat and they can wear and they can live in, and all that their children can live in and wear and eat, and all of their children's children can use, then we've got to call Mr. Morgan and Mr. Mellon an Mr. Rockefeller back and say, come back here, put that stuff back on this table here that you took away from here that you don't need. Leave something else for the American people to consume. And that's the program. [Applause]

Reference

- Rowell, Geoffery.** 1983. *The Vision Glorious: Themes and Personalities of the Catholic Revival in Anglicanism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. ■