



## Review of Stefan Schwarzkopf's *The Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology*. Routledge, 2020, 395 pp.

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The *Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology* is based on the premise that economics and business administration have undergone a theological turn of their own after the secularization of society. It defines economic theology as follows:

It is the study of the forms of interaction between theological imaginaries on the one hand, and economic thought and economic-managerial practices on the other, both past and present. It identifies explicit and implicit theologies inherent in economic concepts, institutions and practices as well as the role of economic terminology within theological thought, both past and present (4).

On this basis, the forty-nine contributors from a range of disciplines study the way in which the development of theories in economics is grounded in the history of theology, or the way in which the sense of the sacred is still present or even activated in the profane realm of management, production, consumption, finance, and entrepreneurship in the contemporary world. Thus, the theological notion of justification by grace is seen as a source of inspiration for a way of speaking about the economy in which the good life is not seen as booty in a victorious trade war, but as a gift. In light of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic views of humanity, economic concepts such as money, debit and credit, property, prosperity, governance, markets, profit, and poverty are interpreted as incentives for the renewal of personal relations, while the exchange of goods and services is seen as potentially beneficial to the community (D. Stephen Long, W. Cavanagh, D. Bell, L. Bruni, S. Zamagni). Many contributors are critical of the concept of the *homo economicus* when it comes to explaining actual economic behavior. There is a growing realization, at least among theological economists, that human beings should first and foremost be seen as social, relational, or even loving beings.

The “Introduction” has been written by the editor of the handbook, Stefan Schwarzkopf, Associate Professor at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy at Copenhagen Business School, Denmark. Within economic theology, he discerns a *methodological* component (the tools to investigate the relationship between theology and economic concepts and practices) and a *theoretical* component (the claim that economic practices, behaviors, concepts and institutions are grounded in theological concerns over justice and personal transformation, and therefore are part of the realm of the sacred). As theological economic concerns precede modern economics, the relationship can be researched backward in time (the archaeological move) or forward (the genealogical move).

Economic theology is neither the ethical aspect of economic behavior nor the economic aspect of religion. The key assumption is that economic practices have not been completely desacralized and therefore merit theological analysis. Schwarzkopf observes that most histories of economics may briefly mention Xenophon and Aristotle, but really start with Adam Smith, as if two millennia of intellectual history in between did not matter. Schwarzkopf therefore argues that the discipline should define itself as a critical *method* that helps identify explicit and implicit theologies inherent in economic concepts and practices—something that mainstream social science approaches that focus on individual choices and social institutions often fail to see.

The handbook is organized in four parts: 1. Theological concepts and their economic meaning; 2. Economic concepts and their theological anchoring; 3. Society, management, and organization; and 4. Genealogy of economic theology. We summarize a chapter from each part to show what the reader can expect.

In the first part, the economic meaning is discussed of theological concepts such as providence, eschatology, confession, purgatory, faith and trust, justification and salvation, and guilt. Using an economic lens, the contributors develop new and fresh perspectives on these topics. “Providence” is discussed by Michael T. Dempsey, Associate Professor of Theology at St. John’s University in New York. He shows how ancient Israel, as liberated slaves, received the Thora to preserve the freedom and equality they received from God. In the Gospel, disciples are invited to take up the cross in solidarity with the poor and suffering, and then work with God against evil. Moving into the Greco-Roman world, providence became understood as the way the divine Logos works towards the perfection of the universe through the purification of sinners. Deists such as Adam Smith redefined providence in anthropocentric terms as the immanent operation of Nature that orders all things for happiness, prosperity, and material comfort. Freed from oppressive government involvement (that is, mercantilism), this system of natural liberty produces wealth without demanding that each person submit to the state, but only that each enjoy the freedom to pursue their interests without depriving others of the same. This is far more

efficient in distributing scarce resources than requiring the altruism or virtue of another. When Smith suggests that greed or self-interest produces unintended social benefits, he is not only describing the origin of wealth, but also explaining why a good and powerful deity would permit defects for the good of the whole.

In the minds of later thinkers, Dempsey argues, this view will not only vindicate vice as a social good but also regard any attempt to amend the social order as an act against God and nature. Thus, when Milton Friedman insists that any motive in business other than pure profit must be rejected as a pernicious threat to “the very foundation of free society,” he is not only indicating his faith in the efficiency of competitive markets, but also his belief that the greatest good can *only* be achieved through self-interest and competition. Traditional values of love or generosity are dismissed for unintended consequences that are said to do more harm than good. Dempsey concludes that many economists who praise the market for its ability to generate wealth through freedom, assume a negative definition of freedom as freedom *from* God and community.

In the second part of the handbook, the theological anchoring of economic concepts, we find chapters on profit and interest, money, debt and credit, free choice and consumer sovereignty, property and ownership, prosperity and wealth, poverty, corporations, government, and markets and marketization. Now it is the theological lens that gives surprising depth to economic concepts. Christina McRorie, Assistant Professor of Theology at Creighton University in Omaha (Nebraska), has written the chapter on “Property and ownership.” She observes that the linguistic roots of the term private property suggest that individual ownership withdraws a good from the community, even though it depends on that community for it to be acknowledged. In Abrahamic religious traditions, God is the ultimate owner of his creation. Human property rights are therefore better understood as a kind of stewardship. In Christian thought, this stewardship came to be seen as an accommodation of humanity’s fallen nature, making us unable to live in full communion. Goods hold both a blessing and a temptation. Over time, the things people can own have changed: we can no longer own slaves, but can own intellectual property or trademarks. Modern secular notions of property see the desire to own goods as a natural drive and the foundation of economic growth. As not God but the individual creates value, he or she should be at liberty to use their property at will. Property rights defend the work of the value creator. Marxian analysis, on the other hand, sees individual property as means of the privileged to coerce and dominate the oppressed. Feminist and other theorists argue that property rights, embedded within and shaped by cultural and institutional contexts, implicitly favor the status quo. Theologians have often argued in service to either position. But economic theology can also provide a method for assessing the patterns of thought that consumer culture and mainstream economics may encourage. McRorie proposes that such patterns are especially problematic where

they conceive of ownership as conferring rights that are not balanced by corresponding duties to the common good.

The third part of the handbook looks at topics in the fields of society, management, and organization from both theological and economic points of view. Its chapters discuss time, profession, organization, entrepreneurship, media, marketing, hedonism, leadership, intellectual property, and accountability. The essay on “Leadership” is by Peter Simpson, Associate Professor in Organisation Studies at Bristol Business School. Although leadership studies have steered clear of the ancient notion of ‘divine authority,’ scholars have suggested that “the sacred nature of leadership is not so much the elephant in the room but the room itself – the space that allows leadership to work” (K. Grint, quoted at 235). ‘Faith’ is an integral part of leadership that may be practiced by both leaders and followers, be it about God, Reason, the Leader, Best Practice, and so forth. The practice of faith is the social construction of a desired reality, often in times of uncertainty and anxiety. Heroic organizational leaders are supposed to be authentic, inspirational, and even transformational. They are the anointed kings, prophets, and priests of old. They lead through transcendence, separation, sacrifice, and silencing. Anxiety may set up the leader as an object of faith. In contrast, the notion of a universal priesthood points to a distributed leadership, or the leader as immanent and one of us: accessible and compassionate. A contemplative approach to leadership looks towards the sacred beyond the leaders. It does not use spirituality in performative and manipulative ways, but supports a tolerance of uncertainty and ambivalence. Faith is not just a projection of wishful thinking but can be thought of as a substantial inner capacity that allows a quality of disinterested attention to be maintained even in the face of uncertain, complex, and fearsome circumstances.

The fourth part of the handbook is about the genealogy of economic theology. It starts with chapters on Jewish economic theology, the early Christian concept of *oikonomia*, Late Antiquity, and the Middle Ages. Next it moves on to the development of capitalism in protestant Europe (the chapter on Martin Luther) and its less individualist counterpart in southern Europe, the Invisible Hand, Adam Smith, and the contribution of Quakerism. The final four chapters are on the ‘theology’ of neoclassical economics, Marxism, John Maynard Keynes, and Friedrich Hayek. David Andrews, Professor of Economics at the State University of New York, describes “John Maynard Keynes as Theologian,” despite the latter’s early hostility against Christians and self-regard as entirely rational and scientific. Keynes, however, came to regard religion (in the broader sense) more positively, in opposition to the selfish and materialistic tendency. Despite the atheism of Trotsky’s socialist ideal, Keynes recognized it as an inherently religious enterprise. Keynes recognized his own passion for love, beauty and truth, as well as other good states of mind as a form of religion. Supplying the material needs of people is necessary to achieve such states of mind, but can also descend into the moral problem of our age: the love of money, to

achieve security. Keynes believed in a future in which material needs would be supplied and the accumulation of wealth would no longer be of high social importance. Money would then become a simple means to the enjoyments and realities of life. “We shall once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful.” Later in life, when Hayek (in *The Road to Serfdom*) argued against planning in communist states, Keynes answers: “I should say that what we want is not no planning, or even less planning, indeed I should say that we almost certainly want more. But the planning should take place in a community in which as many people as possible, both leaders and followers, wholly share your own moral position. ... But the curse is that there is also an important section who could almost be said to want planning not in order to enjoy its fruits but because morally they hold ideas exactly the opposite of yours, and wish to serve not God but the devil ... Dangerous acts can be done safely in a community which thinks and feels rightly, which would be the way to hell if they were executed by those who think and feel wrongly.”

The fourth part may leave us with the impression that the theorists of economic theology (and perhaps much of economics and theology) are still very much located in the western Judeo-Christian and secularist traditions, rendering other traditions and worldviews ‘strange.’ But practitioners of economic theology can be found across the world and across a wide range of religions and cultures. An appropriate ‘exit’ of the handbook is therefore the article by Aaron Z. Pitluck, Associate Professor of Sociology at Illinois State University, on “Intellectual brokerage in economic theology,” specifically Islamic banking and finance. “How do I analyse my data when a pervasive social fact in my field site is contested – the existence or non-existence of Allah,” he asks, “and if He exists, what are His characteristics and wishes? In what ways does He act in and change events in my field site?” (380). Empirical economic theology must face the methodological and ontological problem of religious pluralism. In the introduction to his article, Pitluck argues that such empirical research can be done on the basis of a philosophical commitment to critical realism, coupled with conventional social science methodology. Given the plurality of transcendental experiences and non-experiences in the world, Pitluck applies the *principle of ontological and epistemological pluralism*: the best research strategy is one that makes as few ontological and epistemological demands as possible. His second principle *epistemic relativism*, holds that “our knowledge or beliefs about reality are always socially and historically conditioned.” (381) The third principle of *judgemental rationality*: by comparatively evaluating the existing arguments, we can arrive at reasoned, though provisional, judgments about what reality is objectively like. These principles allow social scientists to do empirical research despite very different life experiences of both theorists and practitioners, as Pitluck demonstrates with the remainder of his essay on the economic theological practice of Islamic banking and finance. It also allows theorists to broaden their view to include research on economic theological practices of real people beyond the context of codified western religions.

The editor and the contributors are to be congratulated on a very useful introduction to a field that asks relevant and necessary questions in a world that is in increasing need of worldwide and meaningful co-operation. Interdisciplinary research in this field may help us to better understand and navigate the waves and undercurrents of what is good, meaningful, and sacred in our economic practices.