



## Review of Brendan Long's *Adam Smith and the Invisible Hand of God*, Routledge 2022, 280 pp.

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My experience over the past several years has been that when two or more Adam Smith scholars are gathered together in his name, the conversation very often turns to one of two scholarly debates. One is political, namely: is Smith best understood as a thinker of the right or a thinker of the left? The other debate is religious, namely: is Smith best understood as a religious thinker or a thinker hostile to religion—or, if we want to put it more bluntly, as a theist or an atheist? Brendan Long's comprehensive study is an intervention in the second of these debates. It specifically aims to show not only that Smith was a theist, but also that our failing to attend to the religious dimension of his thought—whether out of ignorance or indifference or hostility—prevents us from fully appreciating the richness of his moral and political and economic philosophy, and has led to “an impoverishment in Smithian studies” (3).

The book itself is organized around eight chapters and three appendices. The first chapter provides an introduction to the problem of religion in Smith, and the second offers an overview of Smith's corpus. Subsequent chapters focus on different specific aspects of Smith's engagement with religion. Chapter three examines Smith's biography, highlighting various personal and intellectual influences on his religious ideas. Chapter four turns to the question of Smith's own personal religiosity. Chapter five looks at Smith's social theory and its possible debts to natural theology, while chapters six and seven respectively examine the relationship of Smith's invisible hand to providentialism, and the relationship of his theism to the Christian understanding of God. Here we find the author taking some of his strongest positions, including advancing the claim that Smith presents a sort of “creation theology” and that “it is the incarnational role of Smith's God in human living which most aligns his thinking with a Christian perspective” (179). The book's concluding chapter examines contemporary implications of Smith's engagement with religion.

The strengths of the book are several. First, Long is extremely well-versed in the long history of the debates in the Smith literature over the place of religion in his thought. At several points in the book Long provides detailed synopses of the key scholarly claims that have served (and indeed continue to serve) as important points of reference for our scholarly debates, offering us lucid and compelling overviews of the core elements of the theistic readings offered by scholars from Jacob Viner to A. M. C. Waterman, of the atheistic readings of scholars from Joseph Cropsey to Peter Minowitz, and of the moderate mainstream

consensus position that Long (I think rightly) associates with thinkers such as Knud Haakonssen and Samuel Fleischacker, who have argued that Smith likely is best understood as a theist rather than as an atheist (if indeed these are the only two labels on offer), but that Smith's theism is not in any real way determinative of his positions, nor is it necessary to accept this theism in order to profit from Smith's insights.

A second and related strength of the book is to be found in its appendices, in which Long helpfully lays out, in a series of tables spanning over thirty pages, all the references to God and to scripture that are to be found across Smith's corpus. This is a wealth of primary source material that repays careful study. And this study will be itself facilitated by the care Long has taken not just to identify and cite but also to contextualize and classify these citations. Some classifications necessarily rely on interpretative decisions that some scholars may be likely to resist; I have in mind especially Long's inclusion of references to "nature" (both in its capitalized and uncapitalized forms) as a "divine name." But even those who are inclined to resist the inclusion of such references in a table of the divine names will be indebted to the author for providing so useful a research tool.

For both of these reasons, this is a book that I will want my graduate students to have in their hands. At the same time, I am not confident that the arguments advanced in the book are likely to reshape or transform the current scholarly debate over the status of religion in Smith's thought. What the book very usefully provides is a compelling synthetic statement of the best available arguments for the significance of theism in Smith's thought. In so doing, however, it does not break radically new ground, nor does it confront the objections to the theistic reading in a way likely to sway skeptics to its side. Of course, it may well be that this is too much to ask of any book—especially one on such a contested topic. And indeed, even if Long's book is unlikely to convert the skeptic, it will be of great use to both the skeptical and the already converted in its lucid distillation of the key poles in the debate and its clear delineation of the most contested points within the debate.