



Review of Albino Barrera's & Roy C. Amore's *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Economic Ethics*, Oxford University Press 2024, 736 pp.

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Religion and science pertain to two separate spheres, each with its method, scope, aims, and dignity. Therefore, their paths should not cross. This, in a nutshell, is the idea of Non Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA), elaborated in 1997 by the paleontologist and historian of science Stephen Jay Gould. The genesis of this idea has to be found in the Oxford economist Richard Whately, who, at the dawn of his discipline (early 19th century), argued that economic science should be separated from politics (political economy) and ethics. The *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Economic Ethics*, edited by Albino Barrera and Roy C. Amore, sees a loss in the NOMA approach: “In spite of, or perhaps because of, their otherworldly concerns, religions have been prolific in their admonitions on what constitutes right and good economic conduct ... Indeed, religions have long been acknowledged to play an important role in socio-economic life” (p. v). The aim of the *Handbook* is thus not to challenge NOMA; this has already been done in various branches of literature. As the authors make clear in the Preface, they aim to present the economic teachings of world religions and to describe points of overlap and contrast. Their understanding is that economic ethics is one field in which interreligious dialogue is possible and needed. In what follows, I present the book's structure and then briefly mention some possible lines of constructive criticism.

The *Handbook* is divided into two parts. The first, entitled “Worldwide Religions” (p. vii), is a collection of chapters written by several scholars on the economic teachings of various religions. These range from religions arising in Asia (like Confucianism or Hinduism), or in the Middle East (Christian, Jewish), to economic teachings coming from “Regional Religions” (p. viii), such as Aztec Religious Economic Ethics and Chinese Popular Religion. A great deal may be learned from these regional and popular perspectives—about “spirit money” (p. 268), for example, which in Chinese popular religion constituted a facsimile of money that people burned as offers to please or propitiate the deities—a kind of economic-retributive relationship with the deity/deities. The second part of the *Handbook* contains “Thematic Chapters” (p. viii) exploring the relation of various topics—finance, business ethics, feminist economic ethics, poverty, inequality, and consumerism—to religions. As typical in the handbook structure, the reader can locate their topic of interest in the table of contents, using the book chapter as a starting point from which they may dive deeper into complicated topics,

thanks to the bibliographies that each contributor of this *Handbook* put at the end of their chapter.

The final thematic chapter, written by Albino Barrera, attempts an “Analytical Synthesis” (p. 659). The author, endeavoring to take stock of more than 600 pages of knowledge about the economic teachings of the various religions, makes this claim: “religions in this Handbook converge in their economic teachings ... the convergence is not just superficial ... it goes deep down all the way to their underlying premises on the nature of the world (cosmology) and the human person (anthropology)” (p. 659). Barrera lists some topics in which there is a convergence between worldwide religions, such as cosmology (belief in natural order), anthropology (utter dependence on God, woundedness, objective standard of right and wrong), economic teachings (thick theory of the Good, non-instrumental view of the earth, proper approach to wealth, beyond self-interest, moderation in consumption, dignity of work, and so on). All testify “the degree to which these religions’ vision of the ideal economic life is completely antithetical to what prevails in contemporary secular praxis, public economic ethos, and mainstream, neoclassical economic thought” (p. 659). From here, I move along to present my constructive criticism of this book. It is ‘constructive’ because while I recommend reading the *Handbook*, I do think that future editions should address and clarify some issues.

The first issue this *Handbook* faces is the (partial) sacrifice of complexity and plurality to the altar of unity and convergence. While I am sympathetic to the editors’ aim, the analyses of some of the religions’ economic teachings are conducted rather superficially. As it is closer to my area of expertise, I will mention the case of Christianity (explored in chapter 8 by Barrera). There, among other topics, the condemnation of usury of Patristic and Medieval Scholastic authors is mentioned:

Christian economic ethics banned the charging of interest or the imposition of harsh terms and conditions for loans. To do so is usurious and to be deserving of the most severe censure. On the eve of the modern industrial economy, we see a change in Christian thinking on the charging of interest. Money ... it is no longer merely a medium of exchange or a store of value ... it has taken the role of capital (p. 207).

Such a claim overlooks the late Middle Age Franciscan reflections on usury and interest (Giovanni Olivi, Bernardino da Siena, Bernardino da Feltre), including the creation of the *Monti di Pietà* (proto-forms of banks that loaned money to poor people and, in some cases, allowed for a small amount of interest). The Christian world, both from the side of theology and popular religion and practices, was much more plural and diverse than a unanimous condemnation of usury (Todeschini 2023). Franciscans were also less suspicious of self-interest and private property than Dominicans were, as seen by comparing the economic teachings of Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus (Bruni and Santori 2023). Since these differences (among others) are overlooked in the *Handbook*’s treatment of Christianity, the

analytic comparison and convergence found with other religions somehow loses its conceptual strength. The issue is not just historical. Even recent accounts of Catholic economic ethics would not be “antithetical to contemporary economic thinking” (p. vi), as Barrera argued about Christianity and other religions. I am referring to the works, among others, of Michael Novak (1993), Samuel Gregg (2001), and Robert Sirico (2022). Even if one does not agree with these perspectives, they deserve to find a place in the attempt to compare Christianity with other religions. In this respect, it would have been more desirable to have a conclusive chapter that accounts for similarities between certain streams or interpretations of religions, stressing the internal complexities and even contradictions in the religions’ economic ethics.

The second issue regards the distinction between theology and religion. Some chapters of the *Handbook* pertain more to the theological sphere (i.e., reflections and arguments surrounding God and the world), whereas others move closer to popular religion (i.e., how people receive and ‘live’ theological teachings). Furthermore, some chapters (e.g., chapter 27) are empirical (i.e., applying qualitative methodologies), while most apply conceptual/historical methods. These are not problems *per se*, but the *Handbook* lacks an introduction that sets the reader’s expectations and clarifies these issues. More should be said about what constitutes ‘religion’ and about the various methods the book chapters apply. Two pages of preface simply do not suffice for a book so broad and rich in content.

To conclude, I recommend the *Handbook* as a precious source of knowledge and wisdom coming from all religions. At the same time, I hope for an elaboration of the interreligious dialogue on economic ethics that moves from convergence on the surface to partial, and yet fruitful, encounters on specific issues that go deep down in the complex and plural articulation of each religion.

References

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