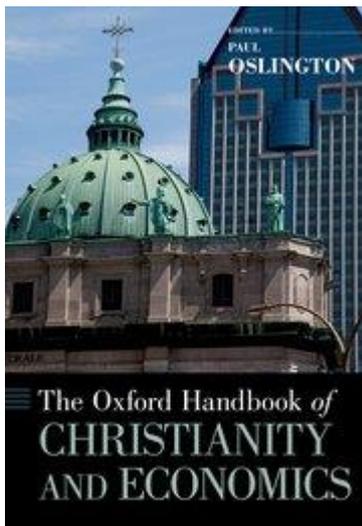


Paul Oslington (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 636 pages.

This volume is a monumental achievement. While not without limitations, editor Paul Oslington has compiled thirty-three high quality essays that provide an overview of historical and contemporary engagement between Christian theology and economics. Significantly, however, many of the essays go beyond overview to make fresh contributions from both theological and economic angles. It is perhaps the greatest strength of the volume that the essays are not merely dictionary entries, but make arguments; it is a 'handbook' in the proper sense of the word, with contributions on methodology as well as examples of how Christian theology and economic thought and research can be profitably brought together.



Though the editor's introduction describes the interface between religion and economics as 'a new interdisciplinary field', the essays frequently point to the sustained interest Christian theologians have taken in economic issues; parts I and II are testaments to this, while several of the essays in sections III and V also make use of theological engagement with economic matters. Part I gives an overview of the historical relationship between economics and Christian theology, through the Old and New Testaments, the Church Fathers, the Middle Ages, up to the present, with essays devoted to developments in Italy, France, and Britain. Each makes suggestions as to how the particular ideas represented might inform contemporary economics. Bruni and Zamagni's essay on Italian developments from the eighteenth century onward (though essentially summarizing [their recent monograph](#)) is a standout, detailing the concept of 'civil economy' in which the common good is seen as the proper motive for

economic activity, rather than self-interest. The section opens with an overview of the biblical material by M. Douglas Meeks, author of the masterful [God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy](#), which deserves a much wider readership than it has had. His essay here likewise deserves to be widely read, by economists wishing to engage the Christian theological tradition, by theologians with an interest in religion, and by pastors and preachers keen to engage such issues. Langholm provides an fascinating essay on Scholastic discussions about voluntary versus coercive contracts. In certain circumstances may actively make a decision to take a course of action that in other circumstances would be out of bounds, and in such cases a contract entered into may be considered conditional, that is, nonbinding. While not pursued in the essay itself, this opens up fruitful lines of thought that may apply to several contemporary economic issues, for example the pro-sweatshop arguments of some neoclassical economists.

Part II provides an overview of theological approaches to economic matters across a variety of Christian traditions, including Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Reformed churches, and Anabaptists. Shane Clifton's essay on Pentecostal approaches is the clear standout here. Acknowledging that Pentecostal theologians have not really begun to engage on such matters, Clifton explores the rise and character of the Pentecostal 'movement' as 'a free-market religion that has developed alongside the rise of globalizing capitalist society'. In contrast to the critique and even outright rejection of free-market capitalism by mainstream traditions, the Pentecostal approach can be seen as a practical 'participat[ion] in the redemptive transformation of the market' in order to promote Spirit-filled generosity. Nevertheless, Clifton acknowledges a need for the relatively young movement to grow in the discernment shown by older traditions, so that it might speak prophetically to its culture.

One of the chief weaknesses of the volume—perhaps better described as a missed opportunity—is the lack of Latin American, Asian, and Middle Eastern perspectives in these first two sections, a lack the editor acknowledges in his Introduction. African perspectives are addressed tangentially at several points where Pentecostalism is discussed. At over 600 pages already and with an emphasis on the major streams of historical Christian and economic thought, the gap is understandable. Nevertheless, such inclusions would have added considerable depth to the already deeply useful account of historical and theoretical developments.

Part III discusses capitalism and development in relation to Christianity. The essays combine cogent historical appraisals of the role Christianity has played in global development, both positive and negative. Two essays are particularly noteworthy. Robert H. Nelson explores the roots of the ‘religion’ of environmentalism, and argues that it finds its roots in a classical Calvinism in the form of American Puritanism. The great Jonathan Edwards is key to Nelson’s argument, especially his contention in his famous sermon ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ that if God was not gracious the earth would have killed us long ago. Emerson and Thoreau developed these ideas into the ‘God-less Calvinism’ that shapes the modern environmental movement’s assertion that humans bear ethical responsibility to and for the earth. Paul S. Williams discusses the ‘global economic order’, arguing that capitalism has, in the last thirty or so years, taken on a religious character. Economics is, he argues, ‘an inherently spiritual activity’. The contemporary focus on growth ‘is best understood as the triumph of Utilitarianism’. The supposed move of economics to a values-neutral science has masked the essentially religious impulses that shape its assumptions. Williams particularly highlights the centrality of capital mobility and debt in our global economy as problems, and suggests that the Old Testament idea of ‘Jubilee’ might provide the basis of a Christian proposal for a more humane economy.

Engagement of religion by economists is clearly a less developed area than the reverse. Nevertheless, each of the essays in Part IV provide snapshots of developments in this kind of engagement. Behavioural economics has been a boon for such study. One essay is dedicated to the intersection of behavioural economics and religion, while the others in part IV all engage with it to some degree. Essays analyzing churches in similar terms to firms and discussing clergy and volunteer church work through the lens of labour markets are exemplary in showing how the tools of modern economics might be fruitfully brought to bear on an understanding of church growth and decline. Intriguingly, most of the essays in this part begin with accounts of early explorations in an economics of religion by David Hume and Adam Smith.

The final Part V is a series of essays exploring how Christian theology and economics might inform one another in our contemporary context and into the future. Ben Cooper outlines recent advances in measuring happiness to indicate economic success as an alternative to growth. Set up as an imaginary conversation, Cooper notes that economists observe that growth doesn’t provide the increases in subjective wellbeing that their models suggest. Theologians reply (with reference to John Piper’s ‘Christian hedonism’), ‘find happiness in God!’ And the economists reply: that’s all well and good, but please let us help you clarify what you then mean by “happiness”. The interchange is a fruitful one. The most impressive essay in this final Part is Gordon Menzies and Donald Hay on identity and motivation in economic behavior. Building on recent advances in the economics of identity, particularly in the work of Nobel Prize-winning economist George Akerlof (who looms large in a number of the essays in the volume), the authors argue forcefully that the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption shape a theological anthropology that makes better sense of economic data on human behavior than the ‘a priori selfishness’ assumed in neoclassical economic theory. Instead, the Old and New Testaments present all human behavior as stemming from mixed motives—with the ability to curb ‘fleshly’ motives and grow in ‘spiritual’ ones on the basis of the work of Christ and the Spirit. Stunningly, they argue that an anthropology like this *must* be assumed, whether on a Christian basis or not, for any meaningful advancement in economics to be made.

I hope to have provided a brief snapshot of the contents of the volume as well as suggesting some ways in which the essays provide stimulating and effective examples of the intersection between Christianity and economics. Unavoidably, much has been left out. If the volume has any other weakness, it is the lack of engagement with heterodox economics, some forms of which many contemporary Christian theologians find much resonance with. This would, of course, have made the volume significantly longer. At the same time, there is a mainstream consensus in economic theory, and it behooves Christian scholars, whether theologians or economists, to engage with it. Critique of the mainstream is not absent from the volume. Nevertheless, direct engagement with heterodox approaches would serve to strengthen it even further.

For anyone interested in the intersection of Christianity and economics, this volume has much to offer. It provides both overview and new contributions to how Christian theology and practice might inform economics, and how economics might inform them in turn. Paul Oslington deserves full credit for compiling a masterful and stimulating collection that points toward the fertile ground such engagements may provide in the future.

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