

Book Review

Religion, Economics and Social Thought

By Walter Block and Irving Hexham (eds.). Vancouver, BC: The Fraser Institute, 1986.

This is a wide-ranging and fascinating collection of papers dealing with the impact of religion on what may be called the social economy. It is an ecumenical volume in that it begins with the Catholic Church, then considers several forms of Protestantism, then goes on to discuss Judaism, and finally considers Islam. It should be clear that the volume is predominantly "Christian," but the effort to include the other monotheistic religions is very welcome.

One difficulty in reviewing this volume is that many of the papers are informative but not representative of the religious traditions they represent. Thus A. M. C. Waterman's piece describes a particular phase of Anglican social thought, and the same is true of the one by Paul Heyne. Perhaps an overview is possible only for those movements which are no longer active, as in Ronald Preston's fine contribution on Christian Socialism in Britain. I must confess some surprise on finding the vigor with which any perceived defect of the market was defended.

For Muslims, some of the most interesting points about this volume are to be found in the instances of active politicians who took strong religious stands. Abraham Kuyper's vision of neo-Calvinism is the outstanding example in the paper by Bob Goudzwaard, but Waterman's presentation of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's views are equally revealing. Of less practical import, but nonetheless equally intriguing, is the account by John Yoder of the "First Reformation" in Czechoslovakia as well as the reasons for the neglect of this movement—lack of political support, linguistic distance from Western Europe, and an absence of shared doctrinal formulations.

The description of Judaism and the Market Mechanism by Meir Tamari provides many parallels with Islamic market supervision, and there is even

note of a “normal price.” The relationship of Judaism with capitalism is left in an unsatisfying form. While the enthusiasm of scholars like Warner Sombart is discounted, it is not clear how the relationship should be properly viewed. Susan Feigenbaum’s comment hits the crucial issues directly:

Professor Rivkin addresses two issues significant alike for Jewish theologians and practitioners. Does Judaism dictate a specific economic, social, and/or political system?; and is Judaism compatible with capitalism? To the first question, he concludes that

it is pointless to ask of a critically minded scholar what Judaism teaches about economic, social and political systems. A state (is) legitimate so long as that state (does) not require that Jews abandon their belief in a single God or their adherence to God’s two-fold Law.

In response to the second issue, Rivkin argues that

Judaism in its medieval form was not a religion for capitalist entrepreneurs . . . its central religious values were incompatible with capitalism. . . . [A] radically new form of Judaism [Progressive or Reform Judaism] said “Yes” to modernization and westernization; “Yes” to capitalism’s promise of overcoming scarcity; “Yes” to the free-choosing, risk-taking individual, and “Yes” to scientific and critical thinking.

Unfortunately, the rest of the comments or the discussion that follows do not provide enough evidence for the reader to come to any conclusion.

Imad Ahmad provides a clear and liberal interpretation of “Islamic Social Thought,” but the focus is mostly on economics. Hanna Kassis gives a sympathetic comment which, among other things, notes how “the first university in the Western world was founded in Muslim North Africa by a woman.” Dean Abdul-Rauf finds Imad Ahmad’s presentation somewhat lacking in spiritual force. The most interesting point in the exchange between Ahmad and Abdul-Rauf concerns the proper interpretation of *hakama* and has considerable import. I quote this important point at length:

Dr. Abdul-Rauf’s claim that the Qur’an gives some men broad authority to govern others is based on an incorrect translation of some very important verses. The word *hakama* in the verses he cites (4:58; 5:45, 47, 49) means to *judge* not to rule. It is indeed

incumbent upon all Muslims called upon to judge in accordance with justice and God's will. By no means does this give the state any authority at all to invent legislation. In fact, the Qur'an is quite explicit:

. . . If anyone's trial
Is intended by God, thou hast
No authority in the least
For him against God. . . . (5:44)

If Muslims must judge with justice and in accord with God's will as expressed in the Qur'an, then they must condemn the actions of government more often than endorse them. No state is mandated as such in the Qur'an. The requirements put upon those with authority are the same as those put upon all Muslims.

Nor does the hadith stating that "even if you are three you should appoint one of you to be in charge of you" support the view that the state has any superiority over its citizens. The hadith referred to is the same as that given in Chapter 243 of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, in the Book of Prayer:

(1417) Abū Sa'īd al Khudrī reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: When there are three persons, one of them should lead them. The one among them most worthy to act as imām is the one who is best versed in the Qur'an.

It is evident from the context that this is a statement on the appointment of a prayer leader and not the establishment of a state. Its occurrence in the Book of Prayer makes the validity of this interpretation clear.

I hope readers will find it worthwhile to probe this issue more deeply.

On the whole, this is a very good compilation, well worth having in one's library.

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