

can approach the political question suggested in her work with the benefit of the research she has so meticulously and clearly arranged.

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## Adam Smith as Theologian

**Paul Oslington (Editor)**

New York: Routledge, 2011 (146 pages)

This book arose from the widespread desire to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the first publication of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As the editor reports, the conference devoted to the theme of the book was held at the Royal Society in Edinburgh in January 2009. This was one of many conferences held in that year to celebrate Adam Smith and the publication of his first book. Of course, had Smith died before publication of his second book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, it is certain that celebrations for him would have been on a vastly diminished scale.

The book is part of the Routledge Studies in Religion (rather than the Routledge Studies in the History of Economics). The series thus far has an eclectic mix of themes and topics, with a considerable component of postmodern themes. The book under review appears to be the only one in the series devoted to the interface between economics and religion.

The editor, Paul Oslington, has a degree in theology and a PhD in economics. Oslington is currently a professor at the Australian Catholic University, where he holds a joint appointment in economics and theology. He is an established contributor to economics and religion.

*Adam Smith as Theologian* consists of a preface, an introduction, and eleven chapters. As there are 145 pages written by these 13 contributions, each contribution is around 11 pages in length. The focus is on brevity. Hence, at some point one must wonder whether a book of this length is like a collection of poems (poetry is a highly compressed form of writing but enlightening, or at least entertaining) or like a pile of undergraduate essays (one rarely finds enlightenment from this genre of writing and the word limit makes the reading mercifully brief).

The suggestion in the title that Smith was a “theologian” is controversial, as A. M. C. Waterman points out in the preface (vii). The controversy is not just a matter of giving an anachronistic name to the same activity. There is much uncertainty about Smith's religious beliefs and there is evidence that, in order to preserve his treasured privacy, he deliberately promoted that ambiguity. Despite his friendship with David Hume, the famous agnostic, Smith usually did not publicize that fact. The same applies to a considerable degree to Smith's support for Hume's ideas. While Smith had many unfinished literary projects, he never mentions any desire to publish his lectures on natural religion. We know from John Millar, who attended Smith's lectures, the general character of these lectures wherein Smith “considered the proofs of the being and attributes of god; and those principles of

the mind on which religion is founded” (reproduced in Dugald Stewart’s “Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith”). Unfortunately, Smith directed that almost all of his manuscripts be destroyed shortly before his death and the lectures may have been among them. Further, unlike Smith’s lectures on rhetoric and his lectures on jurisprudence, for which student notes have been found, no student notes of these lectures have yet surfaced. Therefore, the fundamental sources in which Smith’s theology may be found are missing. What remains is work where theology is not the main topic. All things considered, there is uncertainty about Smith’s private theological beliefs, the content of his lectures on theology (and even whether he believed what he said in the lectures), and the nature of the connection between his theology and the works that have come down to us (including the published books, the student notes from his lectures, and personal correspondence). There seems to be a lot of smoke concerning Smith as a theologian. The book, therefore, must attempt to clear some of the smoke away.

Blosser’s chapter (chapter 4) on the legacy of Calvin in Smith’s thought was possibly the best in the collection. Chapter 8 by Brendan Long discusses the Christian flavor of Smith’s writings, especially his theodicy. This was a thoughtful presentation of Smith’s views on evil, positive unintended consequences, and negative unintended consequences.

Collections often lack uniformity in terms of quality. This is no exception. Chapter 1 has not a single reference. Nevertheless, contributors usually stick to the topic. In more than one instance there seemed to be little attempt to keep to the topic (chapters 7 and 10). Chapter 6 is rather self-indulgent with discussions of tangential material, although somewhat compensating for this is proof of earlier usages of the “invisible hand” phrase. Of course, in several cases the contributors contradict each other. Indeed, at times, I wondered if the contributors could possibly be discussing the writings of the same human being.

Someone, either the editor or some official at Routledge, must take responsibility for the dreadful state of the finished product. The book, as published, reads more like a draft document ready to go to the copyeditor. I will not list the mistakes here. Some of them are serious.

Adam Smith is an important thinker (although perhaps somewhat below a first-rank thinker). His writings are important in the history of ideas and, to some degree, his theological views are of interest. In that sense, we may feel cheated by the brevity of the book. For some of the contributions, the word limitation was a good thing. Will you learn anything from the collection? Most readers will do so. I did. There are some useful points made in the book but less than I would have expected.

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