



Economic theology: a question of academic primacy? A response to Beltramini

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I would first like to thank Enrico Beltramini and the editors of *ephemera* for giving me the opportunity to respond to the review, which I found to be a very thoughtful and balanced piece. The review raises a number of substantial issues. Most importantly, it laments a supposed absence of meta-theoretical reflection in the Handbook. My concern is that the review's call for meta-theory is in fact not much more than an insistence on the academic and intellectual primacy of theology over what Beltramini calls the 'secular disciplines' of the social sciences. Another reviewer of the Handbook, Boston University theologian Nimi Wariboko, expressed a somewhat similar view when observing that my definition of economic theology rendered it essentially a subfield of economic sociology. Looking at a number of chapters in the Handbook, I am not certain that these assessments are correct. Even so, the perceived absence of grand theory serves a particular purpose. The Handbook's target audience – secular social scientists and economists, that is people who often think that theology has nothing to tell them – simply switches off when they hear 'economic theology'. A major reason for this rejection is that the term 'theology' is often understood to be associated with nothing more than a religiously and morally infused critique of the neoliberal order and capitalist institutions. Scaling back on this does emphatically not mean however that the Handbook's authors enjoy what Beltramini calls a 'friendly relationship' with capitalism and the liberal order. A careful reading will show that very much the opposite is the case. A critique of the market and

of economic values having become the only arbiter in social life is present explicitly in practically all of the chapters.

I wonder, however, why engaging in meta-theory should imply that theology has to assert its primacy over economics. What gain does the reviewer precisely envisage? It is worth remembering that the stark opposition of religious and secular academic subjects that Beltramini invokes here is the outcome of specific, and itself rather ‘earthly’, events that took place at the University of Paris during the late 13th century, when the Bishop of Paris attempted to assert his authority over what was being taught at the University’s faculties. It is a possibility, an option, but not an absolute necessity, to base religious arguments on an established theology. Church fathers like Augustin saw no such need: for them, ‘theology’ referred to narratives of Greek mythology. Admittedly, what Beltramini calls ‘God the Almighty’ is not centre-staged in most of the chapters. This, in turn, has to do with the fact that our target audience – the archetypal Western academic – has since the late 13th century become conditioned to think of theology as something different from and even opposed to their own trade, as dogmatic and mindless summaries of church teachings. Would a deliberate front-staging of God in the Handbook have overcome their indifference? Most certainly not: ‘god-talk’ tends to reconfirm the acquired self-permission to switch off and thus provides excuses for not having to pick up this Handbook.

This brings me back to question as to what would be gained by opening economic-theological debates only to those who agree with the primacy (or superiority?) of theology over economics and other social sciences. Not only does such an attitude risk alienating the very people I would like to engage with. *Fiat iustitia pereat mundus* is a motto that will win debates, but often leave you alone in the room. Much more importantly, however, there is even in theological terms no absolute necessity for it either. This can be shown by pointing at the long tradition of thinking a theology without God. The *possibility* of such a theology was accepted even by Thomas Aquinas and became resurrected in Georges Bataille’s notion of ‘atheology’, or acephalous theology. Hence, talking about God on the one hand, and talking about theology or in terms of theology on the other, does clearly not have to mean the same thing. If the debate really is to continue, a hope stated in the last sentence of the review, theologically minded people might be well advised to

first kindle curiosity rather than to insist on the illegitimacy of liberal secularism as the outcome of the debate.

references

Wariboko, N. (2020) 'The Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology', *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 519-521.

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