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## Religion, Economics, and Public Policy (Book Review)

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begin in 1994 with Nelson Mandela as president and F.W. De Klerk as one of two deputy presidents, the country made the transition to majority control. The DRC added its voice to renunciations of apartheid before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (651). Eleven languages were given official status, including Afrikaans, but the very multiplicity of sanctioned languages makes likely the growing preeminence of English. In a pessimistic statement, Giliomee opines that "by 2000 it appeared as if Afrikaners had become a minority linguistic group rather than an organized ethnic group with myths of origin and kinship, capable of mobilization as a potent force" (665).

As a recent visitor to starkly beautiful South Africa, I can report that it is painful to hear distant cousins express their sense of loss when some of their children and grandchildren emigrate for economic opportunity to Europe, North America, Oceania, and other African nations. Their government bureaucracies, businesses,

and universities may not exclude according to color, language or, they think, standards of merit. They pay the bulk of the tax burden to enlarge economic opportunities for others and for the heavy cost of domestic security. In addition, they buy guns, electronic alarms, guard dogs, and protection systems for their homes, businesses, and automobiles. The representation of their interests in the political realm is destined to have minority status as long as their lives will last. Yet they do live under a rule of law with civil and religious liberties, entitled, if with little joy, to free speech and economic opportunity. They are educated, pragmatic, and resourceful. Moreover, they are as African as the people of color around them. The burden of the sins of their fathers and the tasks for integrating themselves into all aspects of their multicultural society rests upon them and their children. They may not overcome, but they need God's forgiveness and blessing to do more than survive.

*Religion, Economics, and Public Policy* by Andrew D. Walsh (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), xii + 158 pages \$67.95 cloth. Reviewed by Jonathan Warner, Professor of Economics, Dordt College.

Like many Christians, Andrew Walsh noticed early in life that people's religious values seem to make a difference to their views on public policy. In this book, he seeks to analyze the "culture wars"—the battle for the hearts and minds of America between, on the one hand, conservative, orthodox Christians and Jews and, on the other hand, nominal religionists whose views have been formed by secular (and often more liberal) elites. The former group shares a commitment to certain transcendent truths (the truths of religion), which they take to be a guide to morality and the way to live; the latter group does not. It is easy to see the way that this division works out politically: the former group tends to lean towards laissez-faire capitalism and the views of the Republican party; the latter tends to lean towards greater government intervention and the dogmas of the Democratic party.

Except, of course, this picture is an oversimplification. Not all evangelical Protestants vote Republican; nor do all secularists vote Democrat. Libertarians, whatever their religious beliefs, will tend to favour the small-government approach of the Republicans; African American Christians tend to vote Democrat.

Dr. Walsh's thesis is that the culture-wars hypothesis is too crude, especially in its analysis of social and economic policy. Is it really true that orthodox Christians inevitably find that their faith leads them to support free market economics, or that a loss of faith is associated with more sympathy for the role of government in the economy? Dr. Walsh answers this question by examin-

ing the history of relationships between religion and political economy. To illustrate his arguments, Dr. Walsh uses the second part of the book to examine the part played by religious groups in two of the policy debates of the mid-1990s: health-care reform (the defeat of "Hillarycare") and welfare reform (the 1996 amendment providing term limits for government-funded benefits). Walsh has relatively little to say on economics per se, focusing rather on the effects of religious belief on social policy. However, underlying social policy decisions are some assumptions about economics: as John Maynard Keynes once commented, "Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist" (*The General Theory* 383).

Evangelical Christianity has not always been a friend of the political right. Dr. Walsh's account of what he calls the "ironies of the twentieth century" starts with William Jennings Bryan, whose concern about the poor made him an icon of the Democratic party long before he became a martyr for the fundamentalist cause at the Scopes monkey trial. And yet, after the failure with the prohibition experiment, evangelical interest in politics waned until the rise of the new religious right of the Christian Coalition and Moral Majority in the 1980s. While Bryan would stress Jesus' compassion and concern for the poor (as expressed in the kingdom ethic of the Sermon on the Mount), the new Christian right stresses the need for responsibility and accountability. The sinful nature of mankind means that people will

always try to get something for nothing, and a society that encourages this attitude will produce a nation of lazy and indolent people. Thus, even private charitable giving might well be inappropriate, a conclusion reached two centuries ago (but for rather different reasons) by Thomas Malthus. Some proponents go further than talking only of the need for limited government intervention. Dr. Walsh places right-wing Christian leaders, such as Gary North and others, within the Social Darwinist camp: because the Fall imposed scarcity, life on earth becomes a battle: only the fittest will survive. The invisible hand of the market mechanism is really the hand of God: wealth is a sign of God's blessing, and poverty, therefore, is a punishment for sin (so that, by and large, the poor are responsible for their own poverty). Welfare programs cause poverty and encourage immorality, for it's easier to get welfare benefits if you're a single mother than if you are merely single. The Reagan revolution with its emphasis on the virtue of trickle-down economics provided the means by which the poor might be saved from poverty.

On the other hand, the idea of a limited government is as old as the American republic. The consensus that the Government should stay out of people's lives remained an article of faith for many up until the Great Depression. The Keynesian revolution in economics and the discovery that, in certain circumstances, governments could successfully manipulate the economy to remove the curse of unemployment led to the growth of government programs to help the poor. The perceived success of the New Deal ushered in an era of expanding government and growth in the belief that political action, if not exactly capable of establishing the Kingdom of God in America, could, nevertheless, ameliorate the fallen state of the earth. As Richard Nixon observed in 1971, "We're all Keynesians now."

Nixon was speaking just before the breakdown of the Keynesian consensus. The stagflation of the later 1970s shifted the terms of the debate. Because government had failed to deliver, redemption must come about, not through more government but through less. Perhaps political activity on this earth wasn't even worthwhile. Hal Lindsay's *Late Great Planet Earth*, arguing that the Rapture was imminent, reinforced this belief. Others kept the spirit of evangelical political action alive by arguing that the God-ordained structures of government were overdue for a change. In contrast with western Europe, American has maintained high levels of religious belief and practice. While there may be an elite that is secularized, the majority of the population claims some religious affiliation, making the various religious constituencies important for electioneering. The minds

of believers are precious trophies to be captured in the battles of the culture wars.

Dr. Walsh illustrates the trend to the right in Evangelical thought by giving an account of the intellectual journey of Reinhold Niebuhr. In 1926, Niebuhr proclaimed himself to be a socialist, but by the 1950s, he had become famous as an anticommunist theoretician. His decreasing confidence in the possibility of building a socialist utopia on earth prior to the second coming of Christ mirrors the path of evangelical thought. Russian communism, he came to see, was more of a threat to world peace than was Western democracy. While both Marxism and laissez-faire capitalism were misguided in the degree of optimism they expressed for the building of God's kingdom on earth, the comparative peace and justice provided by the American system was something to be welcomed.

The decline in influence of the old mainline Protestant denominations (as the pronouncements of their leaders tended to become politically and theologically ever more liberal than their membership) set the stage for the rise of a challenge from the theological and political right for the hearts of evangelical believers. Dr. Walsh's own denomination, the Disciples of Christ, has not been immune from this trend. Prior to Mr. Reagan's presidency, successive administrations had increased the scope of social policy in the wake of the New Deal, based on the assumption that governments could (and should) improve the lot of the poorest members of society. When the Reagan administration moved away from this consensus, the National Council of Churches passed resolutions deploring the trend. However, hardly anyone paid attention: they were at odds with the spirit of the times. Similarly, churches' criticisms of the first and second Gulf Wars and of the impeachment of President Clinton tended to be out of step with the feelings of believers in the pews.

The history of the Roman Catholic Church in America is different in a number of important respects. Firstly, the Roman Catholic church was essentially one of nineteenth-century immigrants, of the underclass in American society. Secondly, during the twentieth century the Roman Catholic Church became steadily more significant, as a higher proportion of new arrivals in the U.S. were Catholic rather than Protestant. The latest mass influx—of Hispanics—suggests that this trend will continue. Thirdly, it is a church not given to theological liberalism, but it is socially liberal. The long tradition of Catholic social thought, dating back to the late nineteenth century, lines up with old mainline Protestantism to stress compassion and the need for social justice, while Catholic opposition to legalized abortion gives it a common cause with the new Christian right.

Dr. Walsh does not specifically mention the Reformed churches in his analysis. Kuyperian sphere sovereignty allows for a more nuanced and richer account of the interaction of faith and culture. It is not necessary to believe that one's preferred positions must be worked out via the legislative process. Thus, one could hold both that homosexuality is an abomination in God's sight and that justice requires that there be no discrimination against gay men and women. As a result of this approach, the Reformed tradition could also play a mediating role in the culture wars, albeit from a rather different standpoint than that of the Roman Catholic tradition.

*Religion, Economics and Public Policy* was published in 2000. If anything, its thesis has become more relevant since then. The 2000 general election showed a nation divided in half, and the effects of President Bush's tenure have been to widen the rifts between the two sides of the culture wars. The developing discussion over gay marriage is the latest battle. The secularized view that sexual morality is a matter of personal preference, not something in which the state should be seen to be discriminatory, is pitted against the deeply-held con-

viction of most Christians and Jews that the creational norm for marriage is a life-long union between one man and one woman. The debates over abortion, stem-cell research, and even such matters as vouchers for education are likely to continue to be important battles in the war.

Identification with the conservative consensus of the 1980s has declined, as America seems to be becoming a more polarized nation. Perhaps one consequence of the popularity of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' "Left Behind" series and of the revival of a Hal Lindsay apocalyptic will be a new cultural disengagement by Christians. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which stresses Jesus' suffering and the way of the cross, will no doubt strike a chord with many who are disenchanted with the kind of Christian triumphalism that thinks that political action is the means of redemption.

But this is speculation. Dr. Walsh is to be commended for providing a clear and concise account of twentieth-century trends in the culture wars, one that gives perceptive hints concerning how the culture wars may play out in the future.