



Review of Alina Potempa, *Wie Katholiken die moderne Ökonomie entdeckten. Rezeptionsweisen in Spätaufklärung und Ultramontanismus*, Brill Schöningh 2022, X+380 pp.

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In line with the basic premise of Paul Oslington's *Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics* (2014) to see history as the best place to start for understanding relationships between Christianity and economics (p. 4), the author of this book aimed to interpret the views of two leading Catholic thinkers on economic developments in their time. These two are Ignaz Heinrich von Wessenberg (1774–1860) and Charles Périn (1815–1905).

Wessenberg was the pastoral reformist and vicar-general of Konstanz, who in his youth was influenced both by Enlightenment thinking and by the Jesuits. His emphasis on the *Nationalkirche* made him unacceptable to Rome as a bishop's candidate. Since this aristocrat became a deputy to the first chamber of the Grand Duchy of Baden, he lived his Catholicism in a constructive dialogue with the society of the time. This is precisely why, after Vatican II, the judgment of him became more positive than in the period before, in which he was accused of having opened the ecclesiastical structures too carelessly to the world (cf. p. 55).

Périn, professor at the University of Leuven, became the protagonist of post-revolutionary Belgian ultramontanism. His thinking probably influenced Pius IX's *Syllabus errorum*, the appendix to the encyclical *Quanta cura*, which critically addressed liberalism (cf. p. 173). His *De la richesse dan les sociétés chrétiennes*—the title is an allusion to Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*—was of great influence in Europe, but his ultramontane thinking was not accepted by the Belgian episcopate. Both of these thinkers, in times of great social and economic upheaval, gave careful thought to Adam Smith's ideas, as well as the principles of the science of national economy from their Catholicism.

Potempa takes a thorough approach. The introductory chapter of her book, originally a dissertation defended at the University of Wuppertal, first deepens the understanding of developments in nineteenth-century German Catholicism, in the study of economic thought and Christianity c.q. Catholicism, the Catholic Enlightenment, ultramontanism and the tension between the religious and economic view of trade, trade policy, or the view of poverty and wealth among church fathers and theologians in general, insofar as this is relevant to the

reflections in the main body of her book or her concluding chapter. In the second and third chapters—devoted respectively to Wessenberg and Périn—she presents the material sources of both authors, the historiography of the research and their lives and work. The subsequent portrayal of the economic situation in their time and in their countries—which differed because in Wessenberg's time industrialization had not yet really emerged—serves to clarify Wessenberg's economic-theological position as a political economist committed to free trade. It also serves to clarify Périn as the architect of an economic thinking in which liberalism is seen as dangerous, and faith—more so than in Wessenberg's case—dictates morality in economics. Potempa does this in the respective chapters with exemplary symmetry.

For the two theological-economic thinkers, their views on trade policy, their corporatist thinking (pp. 67–100; 183–208 respectively), their views on education (pp. 101–22; 109–216), their exposition with early socialist designs of society (pp. 123–31; 217–39) and their views on poverty and wealth (pp. 132–7; 240–55), among others, are carefully analyzed. It becomes clear that as a pragmatic church reformer, enlightened liberal politician in Baaden and economic science theorist, Wessenberg played more registers than did the scholar Périn. This makes them unequal 'magnitudes.' In the case of Wessenberg's analysis, Potempa also does not always succeed in making clear the extent to which cross-pollination occurred among the three approaches to economics, which Wessenberg's different roles entailed. But that does not alter the fact that she convincingly and valuably traces his view of trade to his perception of God as *Dieu Horloger*, who, in the spirit of Smith, presupposed an order of creation in which man could trade freely. Because vices and breakdowns in trade and commercial policy can be traced to human vices, he considers education essential (cf. pp. 78, 85, 99, 108–23)—in the same way that he, Catholic Enlightenment thinker, considered reform of the church and popular piety beneficial when it stood in the way of promoting the common good (p. 149).

The analysis of Périn's work is also thorough and leads to some fine insights. Like Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti*, Périn assumes humanity to be a large family, which benefits most from a middle ground between absolute freedom and absolute protectionism, because the former makes people individualists but the latter can hinder progress (pp. 153, 189, 190–1, cf. also 240, on limiting state intervention). He was one of the first Catholics to systematically use Catholic truths of faith as a basis for assessing liberal economics. Progress he also saw as a danger to Catholic religiosity. He stressed the need for an ethic to test logic in economics. Potempa makes a very plausible case that Périn's ultramontane political economy was therefore certainly not unmodern (cf. p. 303), although it may seem so at first glance.

The final chapter shows once again that both their views on the role of religion in economic developments—in Périn's case it was much more decisive—led to a certain asymmetry in their view of the church's authority in this regard (pp. 309, 311, 315, 321). Potempa also points out, perhaps at times somewhat too implicitly, the parallels in their view of human dignity. This could possibly have been elaborated a bit more. But this does not alter

the fact that Potempa's study is a very well-researched, well-structured and well-written study on two thinkers who should not be forgotten. Their thoughts can still make us think.