

Christianity and Political Economy in the First Half of 19th Century Britain

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The purpose of this review is to examine some recent studies that shed new light on the relation between Christianity and political economy in Britain in the first half of the 19th century. It has been thought that the influence of Christianity on social theory at that time was giving way before the growing appeal of philosophic radicalism and other secular ideas, but recent historiographies emphasize the ideological alliance of political economy and Christian theology, or Christian political economy (CPE). In A.M.C. Waterman's view, in the early 19th century CPE was the mainstream of Anglo-Scottish social theory, and philosophic radicalism was peripheral. B. Hilton argues that CPE was brought into the world of public policy chiefly through Liberal Tories and had an important influence on trade and financial policy and poor law amendment.

From this perspective, Malthus was the first Christian political economist. Malthus's demographic ideas were absorbed into both secular political economy and CPE and were modified to conform to Paleyan natural theology, in part by Paley himself, and by J.B. Sumner. Noetics largely accepted Sumner's version of Malthusian population theory,

upon which, P. Mandler argues, political economy was introduced into Oxford. Oxford economists attempted to prove that with deductive reasoning political economy did not undermine divine benevolence and wealth and virtue were not incompatible.

Hilton emphasizes the role in ideology and public policy of evangelical political economy, especially in T. Chalmers's thought. Seeing Malthusian population theory as revealing a providential moral discipline at work in the economic order, Chalmers was a doctrinaire adherent of laissez-faire individualism who believed that economic policies such as protectionism would obstruct the operation of the 'natural system.'

D. Winch regards W. Whewell and R. Jones as CPE thinkers. They objected not only to Ricardian economics but also to Noetics's CPE, which they saw as having lost its moral dimension in economic activity. For Winch, it was the moral dimension of political economy that brought Whewell and Jones close to Malthus: the ethical school of political economy.

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