

Religious Arguments over Free Trade by Francis Wayland and Francis Bowen  
Topic Number 4

[1] The question of free trade in American policy has remained unresolved since the development of political economy in the eighteenth century. However, the contemporary discussion of the topic does not encompass the religious aspects of the problem, whereas Francis Bowen and Francis Wayland, prominent political economists of nineteenth-century America and supporters of natural theology, devoted a large part of their argument to the determination of the divine will in that regard.<sup>1</sup> While Bowen argued on theological grounds for protectionism as a way to care for a nation's interests, Wayland portrayed free trade as the fulfillment of God's will for humanity. Based on close analysis of their arguments, I conclude that Wayland's standpoint is more logically consistent in relation to the main ideas of the American religious tradition of his time. In my essay, I am going to explain why, in the context of Adam Smith's social theory, the natural theology of the mid-nineteenth century implies that support for international free trade is a part of God's plan for the world. This argument is based on a comparison of Bowen's and Wayland's takes on the following aspects of the divine design: freedom of economy, morality of actions, and cooperation in production.

[2] In order to settle the problem of trade from the perspective of Bowen and Wayland's religious beliefs, it is essential to understand their theological background. Bowen was a Unitarian and president of Brown University, while Wayland was a Baptist and Harvard professor, yet their religious beliefs were akin to each other. Both believed in the natural theology that preached that the laws and principles of the material world help understand the

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 1856 (5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1868); Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 1837 (Boston, MA: Gould and Lincoln, 1854).

spiritual world, including the nature of God.<sup>2</sup> Inspired by Newtonian approach to the metaphysics of the universe, they perceived the world's harmony as a manifestation of God's unity, and therefore regarded religion and science (including the science of man) as two ways of describing the truth.<sup>3</sup> Thus, they not only accepted the social mechanisms presented by Smith as accurate, but also "sacralized" them as ideas squarely fitting into their view of the ordered universe.<sup>4</sup> Believing in social progress towards the millennium, they promoted political economy as a method whereby a society could grow morally and materially.<sup>5</sup> Considering the importance they attached to discerning God's will with regard to social questions, their discussion on free trade is strongly rooted in the above-mentioned creed.

[3] In the context of a divine design of the world, which is complete and universal, the freedom of international trade seems to be a natural consequence of the laws that God established; therefore, it is Wayland's intuition, rather than Bowen's argument, which is more consistent with the notion of a benevolent and intelligent Creator. On the one hand, Bowen urges policymakers not to "meddle with the general laws of the universe" in case they intend to pass a legislation designed to change the course of a national economy.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he supports restraints on international trade to protect the supply of the most necessary products of domestic industry, and even considers measures as radical as "absolute prohibition" of imports as legitimate in the event of international conflict.<sup>7</sup>

[4] While his concerns may be perceived as sensible, they do not follow the unitarian interpretation of the universe. Applying a Newtonian system of divine laws that govern the

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<sup>2</sup> Stewart Davenport, *Friends of the Unrighteous Mammon*, 1815-1860 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008): 37, 43

<sup>3</sup> Stewart Davenport, *Friends of the Unrighteous Mammon*, 66, 68

<sup>4</sup> Stewart Davenport, *Friends of the Unrighteous Mammon*, 80

<sup>5</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "millennium," accessed November 15, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/millennium>: Millennium: "the thousand years mentioned in Revelation ... during which holiness is to prevail and Christ is to reign on earth."

<sup>6</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 23

<sup>7</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 24, 26

world in different aspects and on different scales of its existence to the science of man, one can conclude that the *laissez-faire* principle should work as well on an individual level as on the international level. Nonetheless, Bowen went as far as to portray the rivalry and competition among nations (an external threat) as analogous to “open vice and crime” (an internal threat) so that the state is legitimized to prevent it. Yet, competition among nations is a phenomenon analogous to competition among individuals rather than to vice or crime. Hence, Bowen’s case against unrestrained international trade is a departure from his religious interpretation of political economy that otherwise assumes economic freedom.

[5] Wayland, however, emphasizes that the freedom of trade among different regions, including different countries, is intended by God, who meant “that men should live together in friendship and harmony.”<sup>8</sup> In Wayland’s perception, it is the same benevolence of the Creator that made people capable of exchanging goods both in a domestic and in an international setting. Trade then seems to be not only a God-given way to multiply and share the “means of happiness” among peoples, but also to be an incentive for peace and cooperation.<sup>9</sup> In addition, as the author argues, free trade leads to faster accumulation of wealth by less advantaged nations, thus leading to their convergence to richer countries rather than to their exploitation or some other type of harm.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in Wayland’s universe, there is no need for an adjustment to adapt *laissez-faire*, as Smithian social mechanisms readily work on a micro- and macroscale. Hence, Wayland’s understanding seems more intuitive from the natural theology’s perspective, since he does not presume the necessity of state limitations to fulfill the divine will regarding international trade, while Bowen does.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 91

<sup>9</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 90; Stewart Davenport, *Friends of the Unrighteous Mammon*, 81

<sup>10</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 92

<sup>11</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 27

[6] From the assumption of God's design of social order in its natural state follows a positive judgement of the actions that people take to pursue their self-interest, including commercial exchange with foreigners—this as another issue where Wayland's approach is consistent with natural theology, while Bowen's is not. Bowen argues that the results of the decline of uncompetitive branches of domestic economy are "a serious evil."<sup>12</sup> He goes on to call the consequences of free trade "artificial and unnecessary checks" to the realization of the "designs of Providence."<sup>13</sup> While he tries to argue in the defense of God's plan, and to remain an advocate of *laissez-faire* (using a counterintuitive, or even inverted, definition of the "infringement to the *laissez-faire* principle"), he actually denies that God's laws or free-market principles are universal. He rejects the notion that commercial intuitions lead to good, and posits that the state should care for national economic independence. In this way Bowen suggests that the people's actions, when they engage in international commerce, are bad even though they result from a natural process. This is inconsistent with both Smithian tradition and natural theology.

[7] Wayland, on the contrary, maintains that the laws governing humankind hold in the case of international trade, and that free exchange is a "necessity."<sup>14</sup> He believes that each nation "should" develop and use its natural advantages so that it people can become "richer and happier" thanks to the exchange of goods produced in a higher quantity.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the trade between the North and the South provides Americans with more "means of happiness" than each of these nations would produce separately.<sup>16</sup> Wayland's standpoint does not assume governmental intervention, as the process occurs in the natural state as a result of

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 26

<sup>13</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 27

<sup>14</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 88

<sup>15</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 91

<sup>16</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 90

people's self-interested actions.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Wayland's reasoning suggests that people's actions within free trade generally lead to good outcomes, which is coherent with natural theology.

[8] Yet the most persuasive theological argument for free international trade that Wayland forwards against Bowen is that only a peaceful cooperation in production among nations facilitated by international exchange complies with God's design of the harmonious coexistence of humankind. Bowen, in fact, states that the distinguishing characteristics of nations' economies lead to "opposition of interests" and thus "rivalry."<sup>18</sup> He claims that the inevitable competition "in the great market of the world" is not only a result of active policy of foreign states, but even their mere "superior natural advantages."<sup>19</sup> However, if it is the case that individuals acting in their self-interest benefit the society, then it would follow that nations acting in their self-interest would also benefit the global community; yet, this not what Bowen argues. Hence, his reasoning stands in a stark contrast with the notion that God made nations unique so that they could peacefully cooperate (and compete) for the good of the world economy.

[9] Wayland, in turn, bases a large portion of his argument on applying the rule of division of labor to "people of different districts," both within and across nations, according to him, "[t]he separation of the earth into warring nations, is nothing but the arbitrary work of man."<sup>20</sup> In a world created by God, the "division of labor [is] suggested by geographical position," so that local communities specialize themselves in particular kinds of production, and people are intentionally made "necessary to each other," so that they have an incentive to "live together in friendship and harmony."<sup>21</sup> Even though humankind does not always achieve this goal, the general principle still holds and suggests the divine design of the universe. In

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<sup>17</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 88-93

<sup>18</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 24-25

<sup>19</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 24, 25

<sup>20</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 88, 90

<sup>21</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 91

addition, the principle corresponds well to what the Protestant ethical tradition refers to as “calling,” or a duty associated with God-given talents and occupation, whereby one fulfills his or her mission and benefits other people (in this case, the idea would be applied into a whole nation). Therefore, Wayland’s emphasis on the natural division of labor among nations, which requires peace and cooperation in a free international market, is more consistent with natural theology than Bowen’s rivalry-focused viewpoint.

[10] Before reaching a conclusion, it is important to make certain clarifications to the arguments presented above. While Bowen generally criticizes unrestrained free international trade as a threat to a nation’s economic independence, he does not argue against every case of international exchange.<sup>22</sup> What is more, as he clarifies by making a distinction between the trade within a confederation (which he accepts) and trade between two continents (which he rejects), his criticism is based more on political rather than economic reasons.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the general approach he takes, and the extent to which he denies the efficiency of natural laws, is sufficient to make the case against the consistency of his opinion on that matter with his religious background. Another caveat is that Bowen emphasizes that “[t]he law of nations is a very imperfect code,” which is “very imperfectly observed.” It explains why the same rules that work for individuals under a state law may not apply to an international setting. However, even if it is a plausible observation, it breaks away from the unitarian perspective on the universe.<sup>24</sup>

[11] In conclusion, the worldviews of Francis Bowen and Francis Wayland, which incorporate natural theology and Adam Smith’s social theory, underlie their discourse on political economy. Since both believe in the unity of the universe coming from its divine design, this framework is useful to examine the coherence of their arguments for or against

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<sup>22</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 26

<sup>23</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 26

<sup>24</sup> Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 24

free international trade. Crucial motives of this discussion, yet not explicitly pointed out as such in the original sources, were the problems of freedom, morality, and cooperation in production. In all of these aspects, Bowen's thinking, though reasonable, turned out to be inconsistent with the clerical economists' worldview, while Wayland's line of argumentation complied with both natural theology and Smithian principles.

## Works Cited

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## Credits

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