

Jacob Viner on Religion and Intellectual History

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Jacob Viner 1892-1970: Photograph from Jacob Viner Papers Mudd Manuscript Library

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Abstract: Jacob Viner, one of the greatest historians of economics, devoted a substantial amount of his time to the influence of Christian theology on the formation of economics. This paper traces the development of Viner's approach to intellectual history, including his commitment to scholarly objectivity, humility, contextual study and evaluation, and recognition of the role of material interests. Viner's interest in religion follows from this approach, and she is these characteristics. A number of important lines of enquiry were opened by Viner, but his work was unfinished, unsatisfactory in some ways, and much remains to be done on the historical relationships between Christian theology and economics.

Introduction

Jacob Viner is among the greatest historians of economics. He was described by his friend Lionel Robbins as “probably the greatest authority of the age in the history of economic and social thought” (Robbins 1970 p6) and by Mark Blaug as “quite simply the greatest historian of economic thought that ever lived” (Blaug 1985 p256). Donald Winch wrote of his former PhD supervisor that Viner was “the leading economist-scholar of his generation, combining a comprehensive and meticulous knowledge of scholarly sources with the analytical acuteness of someone who was simultaneously making significant contributions to economic theory” (Winch 1983 p2).

Viner’s historical work includes his *Studies in the Theory of International Trade* (1936) which remains unsurpassed as a history of international economics, his important studies of Adam Smith (1927, 1965, 1968a), the history of laissez faire (1960), eighteenth century social thought (1968b) mercantilism (1948), Bentham and Mill (1949), Marshall (1941) as well as influential reviews of the work of Keynes (1936), Schumpeter (1954), Hayek (1961a), and CB MacPherson (1963). His lifelong interest in links between religious and economic thought never generated the great book he advertised to Princeton University Press as “an intellectual history of the economic aspects of Christian theology from the Fathers to modern times” (Viner papers box 34/9 , quoted in Winch and Melitz’ introduction to Viner 1978 p2). Fragments have appeared (Viner 1972, 1978, 1991) and a large amount of unpublished material remains in the papers. Viner was famous as a correspondent and the records we have of his interactions with Heckscher, Ohlin, Haberler, Graham, Samuelson and Meade while they built the modern theory of international trade are priceless, as is the extensive correspondence with Frank Knight, Lionel Robbins, Milton Friedman, and Hayek. Perhaps no economist has read as much in their lifetime as Viner.

As well as being a great practitioner of the history of economics, Viner’s work is interesting because he pioneered, with a typical lack of fuss, a broader historiographic approach which is perhaps now supplanting practitioner history among historians of economics. He much preferred doing history to talking about it, but invitations to deliver various special lectures have given us some succinct public statements of his approach (Viner 1950, 1963), and more is revealed in correspondence.

There is less contemporary interest in Viner’s work than we might expect. A large number of obituaries and surveys of his work appeared in the years after his death in 1970 (the list of authors is almost a roll call of the major figures in 20th century economics), but interest in his work among

international trade theorists and policy economists is currently low. Viner's name is not associated with any major theoretical innovation, nor does his non-mathematical style and emphasis on qualification and sensible application of theory seem likely to come back into fashion anytime soon. What I find more surprising is the neglect of Viner among contemporary historians of economics. Exceptions are articles by former students Donald Winch (1981, 1983) and Arthur Bloomfield (1992), Doug Irwin's (1991) introduction to a collection of Viner's essays on the history of economics, and Groenewegen (1994).

The present paper traces the development of Viner's approach to intellectual history and identifies its main features. Some of this ground has been covered by others (especially Winch 1983) but there is little discussion of the religious side of Viner's research program. I will argue that the increasing amounts of time devoted to understanding the role of religion, and more specifically Christian theology, represents a natural development of Viner's program and is pursued in the same way. There is no evidence of particular personal religious motivations. The present paper in no way claims to be comprehensive survey or evaluation of Viner's historical work, it merely picks out some important works and episodes which illustrate his approach, and especially his approach to religion¹.

What was Viner's method of intellectual history and how did it develop?

Viner's earliest work in international economics – his Harvard PhD thesis *Canada's Balance of International Indebtedness* completed in 1922 under Frank Taussig was described him as “an inductive verification of the general theory of the mechanism of international trade” (1924 pi). He considered the British classical tradition very much alive, and in order to verify it had to establish exactly what the mechanisms of international trade and indebtedness in this tradition

¹ A biography of Jacob Viner is needed, but this would absorb a qualified scholar's full attention for several years, requiring deep knowledge of knowledge several sub-fields of economics, the economic policy context, and considerable historical sensitivity. Winch (1981 p525) offers some comments on why he has not undertaken the task despite spending a great of time with the papers. It is pity that Lionel Robbins' push in the 1970s for an edition of Viner's correspondence failed, given the richness of his interaction with many of the central figures of twentieth century economics. Among other things a Viner biography would offer new perspectives on the Chicago School, the development of 20th century American economics, the changing historiography of economics through the 20th century, and the difficulties of interdisciplinary research on economics and religion. A project of similar scope is Ross Emmett's biography in progress of Frank Knight.

actually are – a task he applied himself to in various places in the thesis –especially chapter IX where he discussed controversial points in classical theory of international trade.

Viner's investigation of questions in international trade through dialogue with the classical economists was taken further in a series of articles through the 1930s which were expanded to be published as *Studies in the Theory of International Trade* in 1937. This work is advertised as tracing “the evolution of the modern orthodox theory of international trade from its beginnings in the revolt against English mercantilism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, through the English currency and tariff controversies of the nineteenth century, to its present day form” (1936 pxiii). Elaborating on this, Viner distinguishes his work from a textbook, suggesting his objective is not to synthesize but to “resurrect forgotten or overlooked material worthy of resurrection, to trace the origin and development of the doctrines which were alter to become familiar, and to examine the claims to acceptance of familiar doctrine” (Viner 1936 pxiii).

His method is to expound the theory as faithfully as he can, with close attention to the primary sources, and to criticise and develop it where appropriate². This method is perhaps why many readers find *Studies* frustratingly unsystematic. Viner is pursuing particular questions in international economics such as the nature of the international monetary adjustment mechanism and the proper measurement of the gains from trade, not attempting to provide pedigree for current theories, nor cover everything. Such a dialogical starting point for Viner's historical work may help explain why he avoided the sin of Whig history that so many of his contemporaries were later found guilty of, and why writing a comprehensive history of economics (along the lines of Schumpeter) never had any attraction for him.

Viner in the *Studies* assumes that doing historical work is doing economics, an assumption he shared with his generation of economists – characterised by Goodwin (2008) as the golden age of the history of economic thought from about 1920-70.

An invitation to deliver a lecture at University of Chicago in 1926 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the publication of the *Wealth of Nations* led to an article “Adam Smith and Laissez Faire” published in the *Journal of Political Economy* which remains in my view one of the best things written on Adam Smith. It is distinguished particularly by the attention to the wider moral philosophical and theological context of Smith's work, and has been the starting point for much of

² The method is almost Talmudic, with the opinions of the classical economists substituted for the rabbis.

the recent work on Smith's theology³. Many of Viner's observations are currently being pursued by Smith scholars, such as the link between Smith's view of markets and the doctrine of providence, the Augustinian view of government, the importance of the Jansenist-Jesuit debates, and Adam Smith's theodicy. Besides astuteness, the article displays two of the other characteristics of Viner's work in the history of economics, extremely broad reading, and a scrupulousness that resists the recruitment of past figures into contemporary causes.

By the time of Viner's move from University of Chicago to Princeton in 1946 he was spending increasing amounts of time on the history of economics⁴. His interest in economic theory was waning, partly because the abstract and general modes of theorising which dominated international economics at this time were not to his taste, and perhaps also in recognition of his lack of mathematics which was making it difficult to contribute at the level he would have liked⁵. The falling away of the theoretical side of his dialogue with the classical economists left the historical part intact. There was a continuity between the dialogue method of his early work in trade and his later more explicitly historical work. In one sense it was the same project, just with less speaking and more careful listening to the older writers.

Over time Viner moved to describing his historical work as something distinct from economics. His 1950 Brown University Convocation Address "A Modest Proposal for Some Stress on Scholarship in Graduate Education" expresses this. Scholarship is defined as "pursuit of broad

³ Forty years later his interpretation of Smith remained intact. He wrote to Alec Macfie in 3 Nov 1965 "I do not adhere to everything in my 1926 lecture, although I do think I was substantially on the right track". Other correspondence noted the consonance of his interpretations with those of the editors of the OUP bicentennial edition of Smith's works, which he sadly did not live to see completed. Viner's last writings on Smith (Viner 1965, 1968) strengthen his theological reading, for Viner's years of study since 1926 of the British natural theology tradition convinced him that the flaws in the economic system that Smith points out in the *Wealth of Nations* are perfectly compatible with divine providence, fitting the *Wealth of Nations* better into the larger theological scheme.

⁴ Ross Emmett asked the very good question of who influenced Viner's approach to the history of economics. The answer is not clear – Arthur Lovejoy seems to have been a model (Viner to Lovejoy 31 May 1949), but Viner did not take up his method of tracing unit ideas. Viner's interest in the history of economics seems to have been stimulated at McGill under JC Hemmeon and Stephen Leacock and at Harvard under Frank Taussig, then evolved through experimentation, conversation and correspondence with a variety of figures, including Lionel Robbins, Frank Knight, Jacob Hollander, Joseph Spengler, Schumpeter and Hayek.

⁵ Correspondence with J R Hicks in revealing in this respect. In 1935 Viner wrote "Theory has been moving so rapidly in the last few years and I have been so occupied with untheoretical matters, that I already feel as if I belong to a past generation" and in 1945 "I have been lagging behind shamefully of late in the theory field". However Hicks, Samuelson and others continued to send Viner theoretical papers through to the 1960s, and profited from the comments they received. Also Corden and Chipman correspondence.

and exact knowledge of the history of the working of the human mind as revealed in written records” (Viner 1950 p385) which involved “commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding”(p386). I take the use of term scholarship to be a way of buying some linguistic space to reinterpret the task of history of economic thought, then perhaps approaching the peak of its influence in the economics profession. Viner claimed no utilitarian justification for scholarship “I do not claim ... either material rewards to the scholar or tangible benefit to the community” (p387). In fact it can “distract attention from more vital matters” and be “out of place” (p387). But Viner nevertheless pleads for its place in graduate education (p395).

Among the papers in Princeton is a remarkable set of handwritten notes entitled “Why Study the History of Economic Thought?”. It appears to be the talk to Harvard Economics Faculty and Graduate Students that Viner reports giving in letter to Donald Winch 30 July 1962, and which is mentioned in a footnote to Winch’s 1962 address “What Price the History of Economic Thought”.

Viner in these handwritten notes gives three reasons to study the history of economic thought (1) “Problem solving” as “past controversies throwing light on current issues” (2) “As throwing light on economic history” (3) “as part of the history of ideas” for “cultural value” or “intellectual curiosity”. He then asks whether economists need to know the history of their discipline, cryptically answering that only imperfect disciplines are interested in their history. Something of Viner’s mature method is revealed by the guidance he offers on how to read old texts. The first step should be to read a good general history of the period. Then ask who was the author, and what might be his and motives and biases. Then what was he trying to do. Viner warns of the dangers of reading modern meanings into old terms and “eisegesis”. He then offers criteria for appraisal. Firstly, the immanent criteria of consistency. Secondly, appropriateness for his time and purposes. Thirdly, achievement in terms of his predecessors and tools/data then available. Fourthly, influence. Fifthly, significance for our time⁶.

At this point we might pause to consider Viner’s teaching of the history of economics. He seldom taught the history of economic thought course at Chicago, as this was mostly taken by his friend and sparing partner Frank Knight. After moving to Princeton he regularly taught the graduate

⁶ There is considerable resonance between Viner’s Harvard lecture and Quentin Skinner’s (1962) manifesto of the history of ideas. I have seen no evidence in the Viner papers of influence in either direction, nor with others such as JGA Pocock and John Dunn pursuing a similar program. Viner in this period was spending at least as much time with historians and literary scholars as he spent with economists and I doubt he would have been unaware of this trend of thought.

course “Economics 504 -History of Economic Thought”. The Princeton Handbooks include a course description, presumably written by Viner: “The development of doctrine from the 17th to the 19th centuries with respect to the economic role of the state and the nature of economic process, considered in the light of the contemporaneous political and ethical thought and political and economic institutions”, and an outline/reading list for 1954 is preserved in the papers. It is puzzling there is not more material relating to his teaching in the papers and most information I have comes from the recollections of students and colleagues.

Arthur Bloomfield, a PhD student from the Chicago period recounted experiences of Viner as a teacher in his 1992 JEL survey which go some way to balancing the view many formed of Viner on the basis of his involvement in the notorious Chicago price theory course which acted as the entry gate to the PhD program in economics. Donald Winch (who completed his PhD thesis on classical political economy and the colonies under Viner in 1960 - published as Winch 1965) offers some very helpful recollections of Viner's teaching of the Princeton graduate courses in international economics and the history of economic thought. Winch (1981, 1983) emphasized Viner's love of argument, often playing both side, his fierce concern for accuracy and neutrality in discussing the work of past figures. This coheres with the dialogical method that I believe underlies Viner's published work. I was fortunate to have a conversation in Princeton with Viner's last PhD student, Jacques Melitz, who completed his thesis on Henry Sidgwick, and who painted a similar picture of Viner's teaching of history economic thought. Jacques also kindly sent a copy of the reading list for the course taught in the fall of 1957 (identical to the 1954 outline in the Viner papers except for some handwritten additions). He noted that Viner began with Scholastics on a just price and usury, and never got past section IX on "The English Classical School" in a course outline that ended with section XIII on the 1870s "The Shift in Emphasis from Cost Explanations of Value to Utility or Demand Explanations". Viner's review of Schumpeter was distributed and discussed in class. William Baumol (1972 p13), Viner's closest colleague in economics at Princeton, who later took up his teaching of the history of economic thought, emphasised the balance, the sense of the meaning of scholarship, care and integrity as the marks of his teaching. Viner's favourite teaching location seems to have been the card catalogue in Firestone Library at Princeton, where many a graduate student was caught in long but invariably helpful conversations⁷.

⁷ Sadly Viner's bibliographical card catalogue estimated by Machlup (1972b p353, 362-3) at 20,000 cards, and a quarter of a million items by Donald Winch (1981 p12 when working on the Viner papers in the mid-1970s) seems to have been destroyed, along with a list of its headings prepared by Princeton librarian Dorothea Collins.

Characteristics of Viner's approach to the history of economic thought.

Drawing together of Viner's own statements, his practice is indicated by his published historical work, and the recollections of students and colleagues, the main characteristics of Viner's historical work in my view are:

(1) Commitment to scholarly objectivity. In his last major public address (the Jayne lectures for the American Philosophical Society in 1966) Viner briefly described what he valued in historical work - above all objectivity. This he summarized in two precepts "first, be as neutral as you can in reporting other men's ideas, yielding neither to favourable or unfavourable bias, nor to unmotivated carelessness; second, bear in mind that this, even an approach to accuracy in reporting, is an arduous and difficult art, calling for unremitting self-discipline (1972 p2)" Similar statements may be found in earlier lectures such as the "Modest Proposal" and "Why Study the History Economic Thought".

His first precept of objectivity was neutrality. Viner had strong views of certain topics relevant to his historical work (e.g. an attachment to what he called the old English liberalism, to the free trade doctrine classical economics and, to cosmopolitanism, a hatred of injustice,) but strove to avoid them intruding into his historical work. Viner didn't use historical arguments to justify theoretical or policy propositions – the case was always made conceptually and/or empirically. Keeping one's commitments completely out of historical work is impossible, but when Viner saw a writer's agenda overwhelm the subject matter he felt duty bound to criticize. Targets included Keynes' reading of the classical economists (Viner 1936), some of the work of his friends Knight and Hayek (mostly criticized in correspondence), Schumpeter's history (Viner 1954), and most trenchantly CB MacPherson's reading of Locke (Viner 1963). Viner had a long association with Princeton University Press, at one time chairing the editorial board, and some of his reports for the Press in the papers make bracing reading. Viner's other work in trade and economic policy released him from needing to use his historical work as a vehicle for other agendas. This is what I believe he meant by comments in some of his lectures about historical work being a diversion or vacation.

In the late Jayne lecture though he follows the usual call for objectivity, with a comment that one can "sometimes pay a higher price in surrendered values than it is worth in some circumstances" (1972 p2) leading to "lifeless, bloodless anemic" (1972 p2) history. We then have a rather wistful passage where Viner seems to confess to this sin, pleading in his defence that that history of ideas

has been practised alongside other work where Viner has tried “to generate ideas of my own or to improve the morals of others” (1972 p2).

Accuracy of reporting was Viner's second precept of objectivity. Accuracy and a concern for bibliography that bordered on the obsessional have been noted by previous commentators on Viner's work. He is reported on his deathbed insisting that certain references be checked by his daughter. In the previous section we have recollections of Viner's concern for accuracy as a teacher, but students were not the only ones to benefit from Viner's concern. His Princeton colleague Ansley Coale received a four page letter in response to something the eminent demographer had written on Malthus⁸. Viner dismantled Coale's account of Malthus, providing references to the primary texts, and ended “I don't think demographers any more than economists are under obligation to be historians of dogma, but if they do wish to lecture or talk about Malthus they are obliged to make at least moderate effort to represent him correctly” (Viner to Coale Nov 17 1962)

(2) Humility. As we have seen in the “Modest Proposal” essay Viner rejects most of the utilitarian arguments usually advanced for the history of economic thought. In the Jayne lectures it is finally humility which is the profit of historical work: “If one should ask what profit, beyond the satisfaction of curiosity, knowledge of the history of ideas brings. I would not claim much more for it than that by helping us to understand the mental processes of our predecessors it helps to attain humility with respect to the validity and durability of our ideas” (Viner 1972 p112). He saw a virtue in being subject to the texts, just as in his earlier work in economics there was a virtue in being subject to correction by empirical evidence.

(3) Contextual study and evaluation. A passage from one of Viner's last works has sometimes been quoted as summarizing his approach: “I am a historical relativist of what is perhaps a peculiar kind. I believe each century has a right to its abuses, but that no century has a right to condemn, to praise or to offer apologies for another century's lapses from perfection” (Viner 1968 p302). It should be noted that the passage is preceded by “in moral matters ...” and comes after a discussion of the high moral tone commonly adopted by historians towards eighteenth century social arrangements.

⁸ Coale's regard for Viner is indicated by him being one of the generous supporters along with William Baumol of the posthumous publication of Viner's unfinished work *Religion and Economic Society*.

It would be wrong to attribute to Viner the common relativism of laziness or spinelessness that makes all historical arguments or moral positions equal. Viner's historical work is full of evaluations, but they are almost always evaluations in terms of the writer's context. In the essay from which the relativism quote comes Viner strives to avoid moral judgments of 18th century British writers based on twentieth century norms.

(4) Recognition of role of material interests in the history of ideas. Viner began his AEA Ely lecture the "Economist in History" quoting Keynes "the ideas of economists and political philosophers ... are the chief rulers of the world; ...it is ideas not vested interests, which are powerful for good or evil" but suggests he has seen little evidence to support this (Viner 1963 p226). On the contrary Viner is "impressed by the extent to which vested interests and going institutions seem to have the power to generate ideas congruent with themselves" (Viner 1963 p226).

In many places Viner traces specific links between material interests and ideas. Some of the strongest statements of the importance of interests are in unpublished lectures, such as his earliest comprehensive treatment of the eighteenth century social thought (Viner 1940⁹) and the Shaw Lectures given in 1956 at Bryn Mawr College *British Social Thought from the Restoration to the American Revolution*. Viner opens "Essentially these lectures consist of an exploration of the intellectual procedures whereby for over a century doctrine was harnessed to the support of a static social policy (Viner 1956 lecture 1 p1)" and "harmony prevailed between doctrine and social policy ... and this harmony was primarily the result of adaption of doctrine to policy rather than the other way round" (Viner 1956 lecture 2 p38). Later in the 1966 Jayne lectures he discussed how eighteenth century intellectuals found it necessary to align (at least superficially) beliefs and social policy objectives, and how overwhelmingly doctrine is accommodated to policy rather than the opposite. (Viner 1972 p96)

Viner was reluctant to give in to something like a Marxian theory of ideology or the Strong Programme in the Sociology of Knowledge which was evolving in Viner's last years. Among other things, having interests determine ideas made history too simplistic. Viner's reluctance is perhaps behind the increasing denials that Viner is doing social history (e.g Hicks correspondence 1969, Christopher Hill correspondence, Viner 1972 p2 Viner 1978 p152). The denials otherwise seem strange because Viner had vast background knowledge of the periods on which he wrote, and because as we have seen urged and practised contextual evaluation of past writers.

⁹ Donald Winch dated this manuscript in the 1930s or early 1940s.

(5) Location of historical study of economics.

Viner was one of the first to express the now popular view that the historical study of economics needs to move outside economics. There is a sense of this in Viner's separation of historical scholarship from substantive economics. In correspondence with Donald Winch through the 1960s that we see Viner's position on the separation sharpening. Winch, then in Edinburgh teaching the history of economic thought, wrote to Viner about the "familiar problem of how to combine one's work as an economist with a scholarly study of the past" and how he is "afraid the teaching of the history of economic thought is at a low ebb here. It is injected in a very unsatisfactory way into the teaching of elementary economics and I tutor those final honours students who opt to do the subject, but they are very few" (Winch to Viner 23 Feb 1962). Later that year he wrote lamenting the "growing indifference of economists to the history of economic thought" (Winch to Viner 2 July 1962). Viner's influence on Winch is evident in his lecture "What Price the History of Economic Thought" (Winch 1962) of which he writes to Viner that he him expects "detect the influence of your own approach". Viner reports his own lecture at Harvard (Viner 1962) where he "dealt in part with the shrinking role of the history of economic thought in the profession but did not express serious regret". "If the history of economic thought is to have a flourishing future, it will have to be, as in the case of the history of science and for very much the same reasons in the humanities (including history) departments of the universities" (Viner to Winch 30 July 1962). Similar views were expressed to George Stigler (Viner to Stigler 7 Feb 1970) where he suggests the history of economic thought be relocated, following the example of IB Cohen at Harvard, from science to history of science or humanities departments.

For Viner himself this transition had happened to some extent with his appointment at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he increasingly spent his time in preference to the economics department. For Donald Winch it became a reality with a group of historians and political scientists at University of Sussex¹⁰. The problem at the moment though is that there are few paying jobs for historians of economic thought outside economics departments.

¹⁰ If Viner had lived another decade it would have been interesting to have observed the nature of his participation in the new journal *History of Political Economy*. There are hints in correspondence that he wasn't especially enthusiastic about it seeming to entrench the history of economic thought within economics, albeit outside the mainline economics journals. Failing health in last year of his life made it impossible for Viner to contribute an article despite requests from the editor Craufurd Goodwin (11 March 1969 and 25 March 1970). There was of course the posthumous publication of his "Religious Thought and Economic Society" manuscript by *History of Political Economy* in 1978.

Why was Viner so interested in Christian theology?

At one level Viner was uninterested in religion. Although growing up in an observant and conservative Jewish family in Montreal, the unanimous testimony of his surviving friends and family was that he was not personally religious, nor have I found anything in the papers to suggest otherwise. His file “Jewish topics” is slim, there are occasional mentions of the family attending religious events, of the children needing to know what religion was, and a few cases where Viner’s interest was sparked by newspaper articles on religious topics. He asked that he not have a funeral, and his passing was marked instead at Princeton University.

It is striking how little of his personal views on religion are revealed in the papers of a scholar who was so well informed about Christian theology¹¹ and spent a significant part of his life studying the role of religion in economics. Perhaps the fullest discussion of religious matters occurs in his correspondence about Adam Smith with Alec Macfie in the 1960s. Viner is unwilling to engage in speculation about Smith’s personal views, or to let the exchange stray into the territory of his own personal views, writing to Macfie on Nov 3 1965 “I am not really interested in Smith’s views re religion except as items of intellectual history to be analysed if at all for their logical character and their relevance to his thought on other matters”. A hint might be a comparison by Viner of his views to Hume’s in a 1967 letter, but even here it is not clear the comparison applies to their religious views. In the letter to Ohlin on 21 July 1967 Viner lamented his decreasing energy, saying “the only doctrinal or intellectual drive ... is intellectual curiosity” and “I am afraid that in my old age I will be (philosophically) more of a disciple of Hume than I was ever before”.

There are some remarks in correspondence about what religion should be. For Viner it is worldly; he wrote to Alec Macfie “The question for Smith, I think, is, what does God want? And his answer, an adequate level of living for as many persons as possible” (Viner to Macfie April 4 1963) which is an answer Viner seems to approve of. Viner ended his AEA Ely lecture with the remark that in America “religion and economics each pursued the good life, largely side by side and sometimes hand in hand. So may it continue” (Viner 1963a p246). Overall, there does not

¹¹ One of the recollections of Viner is of a small reticent man who spent many hours in the library of Princeton Theological Seminary, irritating staff by leaving card catalogue drawers open. An indication of the meticulousness of Viner’s theological research is his request to Ansley Coale (Viner to Coale Aug 31 1962) for a book on Papal teaching on overpopulation Viner read at Harvard and now wants to check quotations against the original Latin texts in the Princeton Theological Seminary library.

seem to have been any strong personal agenda in Viner's work on religion, and any personal interest was on its usefulness in this world¹².

What is driving Viner's scholarly work on religion is an increasing conviction that the development of economics cannot be understood without attention to theology¹³. A few years before his retirement which was mostly devoted to studying links between religion and economics he wrote: "Economics, of course, is a stepchild of other disciplines; the direct line of descent is from the moral theology of the late middle ages through the deistic moral philosophy of the 18th century, to the secularized utilitarian ethics of the 19th century. Economics still carries the stamp of its origins" (Viner 1957 p193)

Viner's historiographical method carries over to his work on religion. Consider the characteristics of his method identified earlier in the paper:

(1) Commitment to scholarly objectivity, including neutrality and accuracy. Much writing on religion and economics in 20th century America offended these scholarly values. Viner, who knew the connections were important, wanted to do better. His combative seems to have been particularly aroused by suggestions that America's prosperity was attributable to Protestantism, perhaps explaining why he devoted so much energy to a detailed demolition of the Weber thesis (eventually published as chapter four of Viner 1978).

(2) Humility. Viner's scholarly humility is evident in his work on religion, and I suspect one of the reasons Viner was attracted to this area was that it was something he initially didn't know a lot about. There was perhaps an attraction in learning to speak about a subject where he did not have the authority he possessed when speaking about international trade or monetary matters. Together with a scholarly humility though, there was the combative streak that took satisfaction in ambushing unwary specialists in intellectual history and religion.

(3) Contextual study and evaluation. Viner's recognition of the importance of the religious context of economics, and in particular of Adam Smith, showed itself in his massive and detailed study of 17th and 18th-century religious thought. We have the evidence in the Viner papers, in reports of the (now sadly lost) bibliographic notecards, and recollections of the amount of time he spent in the library of Princeton Theological Seminary.

¹² The only agenda I can see any hint of is a distaste for the complacency of the mid 20th century liberal Protestant ascendancy in America, paralleling the complacency of the 18th century Anglican establishment.

¹³ Winch (1983 p13) expressed a similar view of the reasons for Viner's interest in theology.

(4) Recognition of role of material interests.

Some of the strongest arguments Viner makes for the role of material interests in shaping ideas involve religion. The accommodation of eighteenth century social theory to the interests of the English gentleman was mentioned in the last section. He (in my view erroneously) takes seventeenth and eighteenth century natural theology as accommodating science to religion (Viner 1972 p12). Viner's discussion of the development of doctrine (for instance the unpublished notes Viner 1960c and briefly in chapters 1 and 2 of Viner 1978) alludes to John Henry Newman's classic account of the doctrinal development (and there are notes on Newman in the papers) but more attention is paid to the material interests of the Catholic Church. Changing views on usury are discussed from this viewpoint (Viner 1978 and also in an unpublished paper Viner 1961b). Changing church positions on wealth and poverty receive the same treatment - he discusses on how the early church's social teaching was conditioned by its position in society- how interests of a persecuted and poor minority sect in the early years differed from those of the established and wealthy institution under Constantine (Viner 1978 ch1).

Influences of Theology on Economics According to Viner

This paper is not the place for a detailed analysis and evaluation Viner's arguments for various influences of Christian theology on economics (if indeed the two can be cleanly separated before the nineteenth century). His most important arguments are:

- A) That an optimistic providentialism of theological origin provides the basic framework for Adam Smith's thought (Viner 1927, 1968, 1972 etc).
- B) That what Viner calls 'the theodicy tradition' shaped 18th century thinking on the economy more generally.
- C) That the 17th century Jansenists Jean Domat and Pierre Nicole anticipated and indirectly influenced the thinking of subsequent political economists on self-interest and economic order (Viner 1978 ch3).
- D) That theological arguments for free trade (e.g. thrift and plenitude) preceded and shaped the economic arguments for free trade (Viner 1937).

A consensus verdict on Viner's work on religion is yet to emerge. Reviews of the posthumously published material¹⁴ in theology history and economics journals were mixed. His discussion of the Church Fathers was criticized for narrow coverage, and seeming to equate Scholasticism with Aquinas. These criticisms are not quite fair in terms of Viner's aims and the discussion would have to remain one of the best by an economist, notwithstanding the work of Barry Gordon (1989 etc). Subsequent specialist treatments such as by Justo Gonzales (1990) on the Church Fathers or Odd Langholm (1992) on Scholastic economics have now surpassed Viner's chapters. The literature on the social and economic character of the early church and its social teachings has moved so quickly (Esler 2000 is a good survey) that it is by no means just Viner's writing of the 1960s that looks decidedly inadequate. Particularly awkward is the assumption of the early church's anarchic/communistic character (the writings of Edwin Judge 1960 and others have undermined the older view) although Viner (1978 p14) wrote in a more guarded and skeptical way than many of his contemporaries.

Viner was sometimes undone by lack of specialist knowledge of theology. For example Viner was confused by a reference Wilhem Ropke had given him (see correspondence Oct 6 1958) to a condemnation by Augustine of the evils of trading based on Psalm 71:15, not realising that the Psalm numbering scheme differed in the version Augustine used and the modern English version Viner was using. Further clouding the issue was a mistranslation of the Hebrew word meaning something like "knowing" into "trading" in the Greek Septuagint and then Latin versions of the text. Viner's conclusions can now be read at page 35 of his 1978 book.

¹⁴ Reviews of Viner's 1978 book by eminent scholars in other fields include WHC Frend in *Journal of Theological Studies*, Duncan Forrester in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, William Countryman in *Church History*, John Noonan in the *Economic Journal*, Christopher Hill in the *American Historical Review* and Robin Lovin in *Journal of Religion*. Reviews by economists include Lionel Robbins for *Economica* and Norman Morse for the *Canadian Journal of Economics*. It was not reviewed in *JEL*. *HOPE* did not commission a review as publisher. Significant reviews of the 1972 volume include John Dunn in the *Economic Journal*, Bob Coats in the *American Historical Review*, Joseph Spengler in *JEL*, and William Baumol in *Jnl Ec History*.

My own preliminary assessment of Viner's arguments on the influence of theology are that:

Viner's work on the theological context of Smith and 18th century political economy (arguments A and B above) has stood test of time and is bearing much fruit (Hill 2001, Long 2006 and others working in the area frame their work as a recovery of Viner's insights)

Theodicy (argument B above) was rightly identified by Viner as a crucial topic for 18th and early 19th century economics, and Waterman (1991) has subsequently and largely independently deepened our appreciation of this.

Viner's argument about the importance of Jansenism for the development of political economy, (argument C above) is currently being investigated by Gilbert Facarello (1999), Anthony Waterman (2008a, 2008b) and others, especially connections through Boisguilbert, Mandeville and Cantillon. This may end up being one of Viner's most important insights.

The links between theology and international trade (argument D above) are still largely to be followed up, with few scholars having the requisite knowledge of both international trade theory and theology.

It was unfortunate that Viner lacked the time and energy to complete his ambitious program of tracing the relations between religion and economics. His impossibly high standards meant a work of such scope could probably never be finished - Melitz and Winch's introduction to Viner (1978 p4-5) notes that Viner put aside the great book religion in about 1964, diverting his remaining energy to other projects. Even the bibliographic aspects of the chapters he completed seemed too much. If a scholar with Viner's vast knowledge and almost obsessive work habits could not complete such a book we must ask whether we will ever see a work of the scope he envisaged. Max Weber had a breakdown after completing some of his early studies on religion and economics (including Weber 1905), and when he died in 1920 had long given up a great work on the topic. Ernst Troeltsch (1911) fared better, but his work remained a part-installment of the hoped-for general history of relations between religion and economics.

Conclusions

Viner's most important contribution to the history of economics in my view was pioneering a dialogical and contextual approach, although we didn't see full development of this in his lifetime. His other main contribution, which flows from his contextual approach, was showing that attention to Christian theology illuminates development of economics in 18th and early 19th centuries. A consensus verdict on Viner's work on religion is yet to emerge, but there are a number of lines in enquiry he began which are bearing fruit. It is hard to imagine we will ever see a work on religion and economics of the scope Viner envisaged.

Whatever our assessment of Viner's arguments, one thing that is clear is that more work is needed on this key figure in the history of economics. The breadth of his coverage and depth of scholarship makes Viner an intimidating figure for typically highly specialized contemporary scholars. Further studies are needed of his work on international economics, on the architecture of the post WWI system, and his work on religion. Above all an intellectual biography is needed, which would deepen our understanding not just of Jacob Viner but of twentieth century economics, American public policy making, relationships between religion and economics, and the development of the history of economics as a field.

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Note: Where an article has been reprinted in Irwin's 1991 collection of Viner's *Essays on the Intellectual History of Economics* I give page references to this edition. For unpublished manuscripts folder and box number in the Viner papers at Princeton is given.

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Appendix A: Brief Chronology

1892 Born in Montreal to Romanian Jewish immigrant parents.

1914 McGill BA

1915 Harvard MA

1922 Harvard PhD under Taussig.

1916-1946 University of Chicago. JPE editor with Frank Knight 1929-46.

1917-8 Government service with Tariff Board and Shipping Board.

1922 *Dumping* book published.

1924 PhD thesis published as *Canada's Balance of International Indebtedness*.

1926 "Adam Smith and Laissez-Faire" *JPE*

1931 "Cost and Supply Curves" article with famous envelope curve error.

1937 *Studies in the Theory of International Trade*.

1937 Review of Keynes *General Theory*

1934-52 Government Service with Treasury and State Dept.

1940 AEA Presidential Address "The Short View and the Long in Economic Policy"

1946-1960 Recruited to Princeton University by President Harold Dodds to undertake graduate teaching and research. Appointed also to Institute of Advanced Studies.

1949 Bentham and Mill articles.

1950 *Customs Union Issue* published.

1950 "A Modest Proposal" Convocation Address at Brown University

1954 Review of Schumpeter *History of Economic Analysis*

1956 Begins *Religion in American Life* for PUP, eventually grows into his unfinished book.

1959 "Intellectual History of Laissez-Faire" *Jnl Law Economics*

1960-1970. Retirement in Princeton, working almost exclusively on intellectual history, especially the influence of religion on economics.

1962 AEA Ely Lecture "The Economist in History". Awarded Francis Walker Medal.

1965 *Guide to John Rae's Life of Adam Smith*

1968 "Adam Smith" in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*.

1969 Died in Princeton.

Some of material on religion and economics has been posthumously published as *Role of Providence in the Social Order* 1972 (based on 1969 Jayne lectures), *Religion and Economic Society* 1978 (this grew out of the Religion in American Life commission), *Economics and Freedom* 1991 (1959 lectures at Wabash College) but much remains unpublished.

Appendix B: Tributes to Viner

Lionel Robbins “the outstanding all-rounder of his time in our profession” (Robbins 1970 p2) and “probably the greatest authority of the age in the history of economic and social thought” (Robbins 1970 p6).

Mark Blaug “quite simply the greatest historian of economic thought that ever lived” (Blaug 1985 p256).

Donald Winch “the leading economist-scholar of his generation, combining a comprehensive and meticulous knowledge of scholarly sources with the analytical acuteness of someone who was simultaneously making significant contributions to economic theory” (Winch 1983 p2)

Peter Groenewegen writes of the “historical legacy of Viner” (Groenewegen 1994 p85).

Frank Knight’s respect for Viner was expressed in a warm correspondence over forty years. Begins with Viner writing in 1920 to Knight as a “kindred soul” to which Knight responds “the feeling of intellectual kinship is entirely mutual”.

Hayek expressed deep respect for Viner, despite his rejection of repeated invitations to join the Mt Pelerin Society and various disagreements.

Milton Friedman, student at Chicago in 1932, described Viner’s course as “unquestionably the greatest intellectual experience of my life” (quoted in Irwin 1991 p5) and Viner as “one of the great teachers and scholars of our time and all times” (Friedman 1971 p247)

Paul Samuelson, student at Chicago in 1935, “there has never been a greater neoclassical economist than Jacob Viner” (Samuelson 1972 p9). Viner “the most celebrated scholar in international economics in our times” (Viner to Samuelson 1969).

Gary Becker, student in 1951 at Princeton, acknowledged in correspondence his gratefulness for “the stimulation in lecture and discussion” of his interest in price theory.

George Stigler, Viner the “Dean of Historians of Economic Thought” (Stigler 1982)

Roy Harrod described Viner as “the foremost economist of our age” (quoted in Bloomfield 1992 p2053).

AEA Francis Walker medal citation “He represents the greatest degree of theoretical keenness (with no need for fancy techniques), alertness to policy issues, and historical scholarship in both institutions and economic ideas. In all fields to which he has contributed, including his specialty, international economics, his name will survive brightly as a deflator of pretentious nonsense as well as an original creator. What we all might learn from him is intellectual honesty and fearlessness, a willingness to stand firm on the unpopular side of any issue, theoretical or practical, whether that side be radical or conservative, newfangled or old fashioned” quoted in Machlup (1972a).