Malthus Among the Theologians

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The history of political economy in Britain can be interpreted at least as much as a plea for the establishment of an educational programme as it can as the development of a new way of analysing human society. Its institutionalisation in the predominantly clerical universities of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain has finally begun to be seriously studied, and the published lecture courses of men such as Richard Whately and his fellow Drummond professors at Oxford have proved a useful source for such study. When affirming an insight of the chief instigator of the academic study of political economy, Malthus adverted to the circumstances which often produced this sometimes unpredictable collusion between clericalism and the development of any new academic discipline: ‘It is a just remark of Adam Smith, that the attempts of the legislature to raise the pay of curates had always been ineffectual, on account of the cheap and abundant supply of them, occasioned by the bounties given to young persons educated for the church at the universities.’ In such a society, the deeply clerical cast of even the most apparently worldly of sciences was, before the intellectual and religious crises of the mid-nineteenth century began to take their secularising effect, something of an inevitability.

The work of Malthus, himself a sometime curate, at the East India College is clearly part of this educative process, and his own pleas for the teaching of political economy in the Essay were plainly deeply felt. Nor yet was this education to be restricted to those members of the upper and middle classes who studied at the universities. Malthus felt that ‘a few of the simplest principles of political economy’ could be taught to the poor. The benefit of this education to society at large would, he argued, have been ‘almost incalculable.’ On this matter, Malthus was also following the radical thinking of Gilbert Wakefield, his former tutor at Warrington Academy. Institutionalisation, at whatever level, is not, however, the same as professionalisation, and one has to realise that few political
economists could have been described simply as ‘political economists’ during the period of Malthus’s working life.

For all his desires that political economy be taught to working people, Malthus was actually less certain how it might be taught to them than he was thoroughly convinced that it ought to become a subject of university education. The Smithian division of labour was not, however, as applicable to the clergy employed in the universities as it was to the emerging numbers of factory workers. Hence, in large part, the significant interpretative problem of identifying precisely what it was Malthus saw himself as doing in preparing the various editions of the *Essay*. This problem is made all the more acute because of his status as an Anglican clergyman. Plainly, those who responded to him, either positively or negatively, frequently thought of him as having a dual office as priest and teacher. William Godwin, against whose earlier incarnation as perfectibilist Utopian Malthus had directed so much of the energy of his *Essay*, denounced him in 1820 as the clerical fabricator of an anti-Christian doctrine which required not only a new religion for its effective promulgation, but also a new God. In a miscellaneous tract published in 1838, William Manning, an autodidact Treasury messenger who argued for democracy against the politico-religious ‘superstitions’ of his time, likewise lamented Malthus’s doctrine of population, declaring its author to be ‘an enemy of human nature, and his doctrine a tissue of falsehood and impiety towards the Creator and preserver of the universe.’ Such lay denunciations emphasised Malthus’s clerical office in order further to expose his supposedly anti-Christian sentiments. Malthus could thus be disparaged not only as a hireling to the great, preaching a doctrine which Godwin considered acceptable only to aristocrats and aldermen, but also, and potentially even more damagingly, as a hypocritical priest: hence, perhaps, something of Marx’s venomous appraisal of ‘Pastor’ Malthus, a sobriquet borrowed from Cobbett and approved of by Hazlitt.

Was Malthus necessarily a theologian and a moral philosopher, as well as a political economist? Certainly, no rigid departmentalism prevailed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and it is Malthus as theologian, both implicit and explicit, who will be the focus of this essay. The essay’s title has been influenced by Stephen M. Fallon’s *Milton among the philosophers* (1991), a fascinating study of a poet who was also necessarily a philosopher, and it is such a sense of the essential permeability of office and purpose that will inform the following discussion of Malthus’s *Essay*. In developing this aspect of Malthus’s thought, due regard has to be paid to the claim made by