

Book Review

NICHOLAS CAPALDI & THEODORE ROOSEVELT MALLOCH
AMERICA'S SPIRITUAL CAPITAL

(St. Augustine's Press, 2012)

BY ALLEN MENDENHALL

If you're ever tasked with teaching a weeklong course on America's religious heritage and its relation to economic prosperity, you will find an indispensable guide in Nicholas Capaldi and Theodore Roosevelt Malloch's *America's Spiritual Capital*. In only 138 pages, made up of six short chapters, each of which could serve as the subject of extensive discussion, Capaldi and Malloch systematically outline the ways and reasons that American prosperity issues from Judeo-Christian principles and heritage, or what the authors call, *contra* scientism and secular humanism, *spiritual capital*. A four page introduction tells you everything the book will address and even charts the thesis and supporting points for each chapter. The purpose of this, I think, is to present information to readers in mnemonic form; the authors seem to want to instruct, not to entertain.

The authors define "spiritual capital" as "our most fundamental beliefs concerning who we are and the meaning of our lives, with special regard to how those beliefs relate to our professional careers and the economy." They contend that spiritual

capital grounded America during her rapid and chaotic transition into modernity. In a globalized world, this spiritual capital helped (and helps) America not only to flourish, but also to serve as a symbol of freedom to other nations. The more pointed argument seems to be that spiritual capital and economic capital are fundamentally linked so that the former gives rise to the latter. To this end, the authors argue that "there is a symbiotic relation between America's spiritual capital and our political institutions and freedoms." That is another way of saying that not just any spiritual capital will bring about wealth and happiness. America has benefited because her spiritual capital is uniquely enabling

in its underlying doctrines and practices.

The points here are not new; probably every reader who will pick up this book will have heard them before. That is also part of the charm of the book—its ability to recycle old themes in ways that seem fresh. It is as if the authors know that a tired defense of American spiritual values will not help to ward off organized, enthused counter-forces, such as Rousseau/Marx-derived meta-narratives, militant secularism, and militant Islam, to name a few of the authors' examples. Nor will a tired defense do much to edify sympathetic readers predisposed to complacency in the face of opinions with which they already agree. These are the readers most likely to come across this book.

Readers will find here an interesting synthesis of an array of different thinkers: Plato, Aristotle, David Hume, René Descartes, St. Augustine, Francis Bacon, Adam Smith, Max Weber, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Lord Acton, Christopher Dawson, Wilhelm Röpke, Eric Voegelin, Michael Oakeshott, Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig



von Mises, and others. Even the latest giants of the intelligentsia make an appearance: Samuel P. Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, Gary Becker, Charles Murray, Israel Kirzner, Deide McCloskey, and Forrest McDonald, to mention just a few. Seeing these names alongside several Biblical passages—sometimes to show mutual illumination, sometimes to draw contrasts—adds an element of academic highbrow that is lacking in more popular and perhaps less-nuanced books that address similar topics. Be that as it may, *America's Spiritual Capital* never—not even once—degenerates into esoterica. Its prose remains clear, concise, and straightforward.

What is not clear is the target audience. The information

presented is at times too basic for an academic audience (the authors are themselves academics used to writing for academics), and even those who grew up in or lately have entered into what is broadly conceived of as the Judeo-Christian heritage can probably go without one-line footnotes about how Jews and Muslims reject the idea that the historical Jesus was the Messiah foretold in the *Old Testament*. Such a fact goes without saying. Juxtaposed against these plain essentials are more complex and controversial treatments of difficult philosophical questions—for instance, the conflicts within Christianity regarding the relation of the individual to institutions, or the critical distinction between patriotism and nationalism. There is, then, a disjuncture of sorts between the simple and the complex. Maybe it's better to suggest that there are gradations of difficulty that jump too high or too low from one successive section of the book to another. This is not bad so much as it is curious, and a reasonable explanation might be that the authors had in mind a vast audience with disparate levels of education or familiarity.

During the recent presidential campaigns, the religious beliefs of both candidates were called into question. It remains to be seen what effect Christian votes had on the outcome of the race. It seems appropriate to wonder whether the civil institutions of the United States have not drifted from the religious principles and foundations that sustained the polity for so long, and whether such a drift, if it has in fact occurred, is related to the steady growth of the federal government over the last four decades.

There is a hint of urgency underlying Capaldi and Malloch's arguments, as though the two have blurred the line between the prescriptive and the merely descriptive; beneath their ordered reports and analyses is the suggestion that America's spiritual capital should be

more than remembered—it should be recovered.

In light of the end-of-chapter summaries and the Afterward that seem aimed at generating conversation and debate, I reiterate that this book would be a valuable teaching tool—one that, despite its stated thesis, is careful to separate Christianity the religion from Christianity-influenced political and economic theory. Capaldi and Malloch acknowledge that Christians themselves do not speak with one voice. That there is an effort at all to emphasize the multiplicities within Christianity suggests how slippery a signifier "Judeo-Christian" can be. Although the authors take pains to qualify and interrogate that term, they do not avoid the tendency to conflate it with "Christianity," which is a distinct though obviously related thing.

All in all, what the authors have accomplished is impressive. A thin book that can raise and address tremendous issues with caution and precision is a feat. To read a text with drawbacks that are also its strengths can give one pause: should we who embrace our Judeo-Christian heritage not be concerned more often with retelling what has already been told, with adding new and trenchant expression to ancient canons and doctrines? There is, after all, as the author of *Qohaleth* tells us, "nothing new under the sun," and that is refreshing to contemplate. Capaldi and Malloch have brightened old truths with a method and order that could equip us to give new articulation to what we have heard and read many times before. The result of their efforts deserves thoughtful consideration.

Allen Menderhall is a writer, attorney, and doctoral candidate in English who lives in Atlanta. He has taught at Auburn University and Faulkner University Jones School of Law. Visit his website at AllenMenderhall.com.