



## Origins of the Association for Social Economics

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## Origins of the Association for Social Economics

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In the November 2013 issue of the *Forum for Social Economics*, Robert Auerbach stated that he had been told that Abram Harris who died in 1963 was a founder of the Association for Social Economics (ASE). Sadly, Auerbach was misinformed. The ASE traces its origins to the Catholic Economic Association (CEA) and emerged officially from the CEA in 1970. The following further identifies ASE's origins and offers some background on the CEA's founders.

With considerable support from like-minded academics and other professional colleagues, American Jesuit Thomas Divine spearheaded the drive to establish the CEA in 1941.<sup>1</sup> Fittingly, he was elected the CEA's first president in 1942 and served as the editor of the *Review of Social Economy* from 1948 to 1959 (Divine, 1967, pp. 4–5). He was recognized officially as the founding father of the CEA in 1967 (Roets, 1991, p. 553).

Another American Jesuit—Bernard Dempsey—served on the Organizing Committee that was assigned three tasks: (1) compile a list of prospective members, (2) prepare a final draft of the CEA's Constitution and By-laws, and (3) propose candidates to stand for election as officers of the Association. Dempsey was elected second vice-president in 1942 (Divine, 1967, pp. 4–5) and served as its president in 1945 (Officers of the Catholic economic association 1948, p. 128).

Included among the early CEA members were Edward Chamberlin, John Ryan, Helen Potter, Raymond Saulnier, Joseph Solterer, M.S. Szymczak, and two other Jesuits—Joseph Becker and Leo Brown.

Dempsey and Divine did not speak with one voice. Dempsey was a staunch advocate of the solidarist economics of the German Jesuit Heinrich Pesch; Joseph Schumpeter served as Dempsey's doctoral dissertation director at Harvard University. Divine, on the other hand, championed the conventional economics of

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the founding of the Catholic Economic Association in 1941 see Divine, 1967.

Lionel Robbins who directed his dissertation at the London School of Economics and Political Science (University of London) in 1938 (Zollitsch, 1981, p. 5).<sup>2</sup> William Waters contends that the conventional economics espoused by Divine eventually became the dominant position within the CEA and the *Review of Social Economy* (Waters, 1990, pp. 91–98).

Both men prepared dissertations relating to interest. Divine's dissertation was published as *Interest, An Historical and Analytical Study in Economics and Modern Ethics* by Marquette University Press in 1959 (see footnote 2). Dempsey's dissertation was published in 1943, at least in part, as *Interest and Usury* by the American Council on Public Affairs and again in 1948 by Dobson and Company.

Divine's orthodoxy perhaps is best reflected in his article "The Nature of Economic Science and Its Relation to Social Philosophy" that was published in the *Review of Social Economy* in 1948. In his opening paragraph and in two other passages, Divine cites Robbins' 1932 classic "An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science" most approvingly. At the very end he directs criticism, apparently, at other CEA members.

We regret the tendency, characteristic of the American habit of wanting to get things done in a hurry, to undertake the solution of economic problems without a knowledge of economic theory adequate enough to throw all the light at its disposal on the implications of solutions proffered. (Divine, 1948, p. 117)

Divine then added parenthetically that "Unfortunately, Catholic textbooks on economic and social problems are not altogether free from censure in this respect."

It seems that some members of the Association took offense at Divine's criticism of Catholic economics texts. Waters reports that Goetz Briefs who was a charter member of the Association resigned as a member shortly after serving as its president in 1956 because he was convinced that it "had cut itself away from its solidarist roots" (Waters, 1990, pp. 91–92).

The CEA was re-named the ASE in 1970 in order to attract new members who supported CEA aims and objectives but were not Catholics. Among those who joined ASE were Bill Dugger, John Elliott, Wally Peterson, George Rohrlach, Warren Samuels, and Ron Stanfield, all of whom eventually were awarded the Thomas Divine Award for contributions to social economics and the social economy.

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<sup>2</sup> Divine archival materials at Raynor Memorial Libraries, Marquette University.

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