

Almsgiving, Property, Wealth

Christianity has, from its earliest beginnings, regarded voluntary giving to relieve poverty as a central religious and moral obligation. It has understood the holding of private property to be a limited right, contingent on providing for the needs of others. And it has typically regarded wealth as a morally ambiguous value, providing opportunities for generosity, but inseparable from temptations to greed and social injustice. In all three respects, Christianity reflects its Jewish heritage and perpetuates convictions prominent in the Old Testament.

During the long period of history reflected in the Hebrew Bible, political and social changes took place that deeply modified the understanding of economic morality. During the nomadic and early settled periods, neither extreme wealth nor extreme poverty were conspicuous. Family was the most vital social unit, the essential private property was family land, and care for the needy was typically provided by families for their own members. As towns grew, and included residents of different family backgrounds, this continued to be the case. The growth of large agricultural estates, however, introduced distinctions between employers and workers, often masters and slaves respectively, raising questions to which the Law responded with requirements of fair and timely payment of wages. The Law also regulated terms of enslavement and conditions of emancipation. The institution of slavery, it should be said, was not morally challenged in the Bible, and was accepted by Christian churches generally until the 18th century.

With the rise and frequent corruption of monarchy, Israel became familiar with the extremes of wealth and poverty. From the time of Solomon, royal extravagance was paid for by conscript labor, exploitative taxes, appropriation of land, and enslavement of debtors. Such abuses gave rise to prophetic denunciations of luxurious self-indulgence combined with indifference to widespread poverty. Three categories of persons are cited again and again as representing the most vulnerable and neglected: widows, orphans, and resident aliens.

The Law introduced programs for the relief of poverty, mainly in the form of periodically setting aside portions of harvested crops to be collected and consumed by the poor. It also tried to protect debtors by forbidding the taking of interest for loans, holding indispensable goods as security, and requiring that forfeited family land be periodically restored.

The New Testament shares with the Hebrew prophets an habitual distrust of wealth and of ambition for wealth. By contrast the poor are singled out as primary beneficiaries of the salvation that approaches with Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom Of God: "the poor have the Gospel preached to them." Jesus' advice to a conscientious rich man is to distribute his wealth to the poor and then become a disciple. The callousness of luxury and the absurdity of greed are satirized in some of Jesus' best-known parables, notably the story of a rich man who banqueted while a beggar starved at his gate, and of another who wasted his life expanding storage facilities for his ever-expanding wealth. Jesus also

introduces a characteristic warning, that philanthropy is often a form of hypocrisy, using ostentatious almsgiving to gain a reputation for virtue.

Outside the Gospels the New Testament maintains a consistently critical view of wealth and a deeply compassionate view of poverty. The Jerusalem Christians are said to have pooled their assets so as to share them equally. Early missionary journeys were combined with organized collecting of donations for poor Christian communities by those in better circumstances. Although there can be no doubt that disinterest in wealth was facilitated for early Christians by their belief that the world's history was soon to end, it is significant that as that belief faded with the passage of time, concern for the poor did not.

Early Christian communities everywhere maintained a strong tradition of sharing and assisting. Even their most illustrious enemy, the Emperor Julian, who tried and failed to reinstate pre-Christian paganism, conceded that Christianity would survive because it refused to tolerate poverty among its members. When Christian moral teaching was first systematically formulated, notably by St. Ambrose, who had been a Roman official before he was a Christian bishop, compassionate provision for the poor was stressed and immoderate pursuit of wealth was denounced. Early Christian theologians insisted that the material world had been created for all to share, whereas private property was a secondary development with only conditional claims.

During and after the Middle Ages, many monastic and related kinds of religious communities developed whose members committed themselves to austerity of life which included the renunciation of private property. In addition, many of these religious, both male and female, devoted themselves to serving the poor. The institutions that grew out of these beginnings became the most effective agencies of social welfare wherever Christianity spread, until quite recent times. Ordinary Christians were taught that contributing to these services was an important religious obligation, and collections for the poor were regularly taken up in local parishes.

Following the Protestant Reformation, many of these institutions were abolished. Luther, especially, gave the significance of a religious "calling" to work done in traditional secular occupations. Among Calvinists, insistence on work as an antidote to temptation contributed to what would later be called the "work ethic." Calvinists also led the way to reinterpreting the biblical prohibition of lending at interest, teaching that moderate compensation for creditors could encourage needed loans without oppressing borrowers. Protestant theological objections to Catholic monasticism were intensified by notorious corruption, including greed, within monasteries, some of which became objects of well-deserved satire. Among Protestants, civic, parochial, and private charities assumed many of the tasks of providing for the poor. In places where such tasks were habitually neglected, the poor became increasingly disaffected from churches largely populated by affluent gentry and their servants.

This alienation of the poor from main-stream Protestantism evoked a new evangelism, that focused on the lower classes and combined organized community assistance with missionary preaching. Within the Church of England, John Wesley's reforms, which

would become Methodism, set a powerful example. Wesley's famous sermon, calling on Christians to gain as much wealth as possible precisely in order to expand their contribution to the needy, articulated an economic spirituality that could be easily understood. New types of church organization, like the Salvation Army achieved outstanding success in efforts for both material and spiritual rescue of the urban poor. Combined with these efforts were political campaigns for the correction of social abuses, and, in particular, for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, whose defenders invariably pointed out that the Bible raised no explicit objections to them.

With the Industrial Revolution, and the political and social revolutions that arose from it, Christian churches perceived the need of translating their economic morality into terms more directly applicable to industrial urban societies. Attention was first concentrated on tensions between "capital" and "labor." The right of private property was generally affirmed, in contrast to Communist doctrine, but counterbalanced by insistence on the obligations of employers to employees, the right of employees to organize in unions to protect their interests, and the duties of government to ensure humane wages and treatment, and to provide for the unemployed. Stimulated by Marxist allegations that Christian religion encouraged postponing to the afterlife the satisfaction of workers' hopes and needs, Christian socialist parties arose in many European nations, making social justice their political ideology. In American Protestantism, the Social Gospel Movement both sought theological foundations for social justice, and encouraged political action to promote it.

Roman Catholicism was a major participant in this trend, but without actively collaborating with other Christian churches. Instead, a church-wide and uniform approach to social justice was assured by Vatican initiative, which generated a body of consistent and developing Catholic social teachings. These have appeared in a series of papal encyclicals beginning with Pope Leo XIII in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing until the last pope, John-Paul II. These documents have exerted great influence, and have taken progressive account of new moral developments in economic life. Notably, they have moved the subject beyond national confines, emphasizing the duties of rich nations to assist poor and underdeveloped ones. Within underdeveloped nations, especially in Latin America, a religious movement called Liberation Theology has encouraged organized resistance by the poor to exploitation in which both Christian governments and Christian churches have been complicit. Out of that movement, the phrase "option for the poor" has come to signify a conviction that the condition of the poor is the surest indicator of a society's justice, and the primary objective of reform.

The ancient biblical ideal of almsgiving has remained active in Christian churches, but with an increasing emphasis on large-scale, organized, systematic remedies for the plight of the poor and the moral abuses of wealth.

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