

Money in Christian History

by John G. Stackhouse, Jr.

Many medieval manuscripts blossom with splendid decorations: fabulous animals frolic within huge capital letters; lush vegetation curls through margins; and intricate abstract patterns form dazzling frames. By the year 1300, however, gothic manuscripts began to present more distasteful sights. In one of these drawings, a worried-looking ape crouches and defecates three coins into a golden bowl. In another, a monster-head vomits gold coins into a golden bowl. The subject of money—the subject Jesus is said to have addressed more often in the Gospels than any other—now shows up graphically in Christian reflection.

It shows up, furthermore, in all of the strong ambivalence that has characterized Christian views of money through the ages. Money is shiny and beautiful, but also somehow related to filth, waste, and evil. Sigmund Freud drew modern attention to the linkage between money and excrement. Our own colloquial speech makes plain our ambivalence and even antagonism toward money: that man over there getting out of the limousine is "filthy rich" or "stinking rich," while the poor fellow leaving the casino penniless has been, ironically, "cleaned out."

Yet our common figures of speech also give money an exalted place, as virtually the staff of life: we routinely call it "bread" or "dough."

The Scriptures warn, however, that we do not live by bread alone, and our Lord challenges us to decide once for all between God and Mammon.

Early Christian Views

The earliest Christians seem to have been convinced that Christ would return very soon to consummate God's plan of redemption, wrapping up the current cosmos like an old garment and inaugurating a brand new order. Thus many early Christian documents advocate an indifference toward money. It's useful in its way for this short term—to support missionaries, to aid other Christians in times of famine, to house church meetings, and so on. But one must not take money too seriously, since it will become useless very soon when the Lord returns. And one especially must guard against idolizing it, for in the blazing light of the impending Second Coming, money is a paltry god indeed.

As time went on, theology began to adapt to the idea that Christians would be involved with the world for some time yet. As converts increasingly came from a wide range of economic classes, and the more so after Constantine began to favour Christianity in the Empire in the fourth century, differences of opinion in the church became evident on the subject of money.

North African theologian Tertullian, for example, proclaimed that "nothing that is God's is obtainable by money." Desert monks, with their vows of poverty, became the new "super-Christians" as martyrdom disappeared in the Empire.

A less-extreme view was offered by church leaders who allowed for private property and commercial activity while forbidding them to the clergy. Possessions and

business were seen as accommodations to human sinfulness following the Fall, and so the clergy, as the exemplars of God's new order, were to avoid them.

Augustine wrote in his commentary on Psalm 72 that wealth itself was not a problem for the Christian, but covetousness was. Indeed, the poor could be as susceptible to this sin as the rich. Augustine here exemplifies the Christian tradition of reminding critics that it is "the *love* of money," not money itself, that is "the root of all kinds of evil."

Clement of Alexandria pushed this view to the other extreme as he wondered whether rich people, who do not worry about their livelihoods, might be more apt to be confident of God's provision than the poor who were typically greedy and worried. Perhaps, that is, it was easier for the rich to enter heaven than the poor.

The poor generally received more solicitous treatment in other early Christian writings, however. In particular, the widespread and vehement prohibition of usury—lending at interest—reflected concern for the poor who *had* to borrow money. The great theologians Athanasius and Ambrose spoke for many others when they agreed that to engage in usury was to commit a deadly sin, to the cost of one's eternal salvation. The idea, commonplace in our society today, that one could lend at interest in order to *benefit* the borrower as well as the lender—that the borrower himself or herself could be much better off because of the use of loaned capital—seems not to have been considered.

(Indeed, it is interesting to note the recent call by evangelical activist Ron Sider for Christians to engage in precisely this practice: lending money to the poor to help them found "microbusinesses.")

Medieval Perspectives

The Middle Ages, stretching as they did for roughly a millennium from A.D. 500 to 1500, encompassed a bewildering range of Christian attitudes toward money. During this time, Christianity was supported financially by taxes, by donations of rich and poor, and by proceeds of the lands owned by churches and religious communities. Glorious cathedrals were raised, impressive monasteries were erected, and universities were founded.

In the same era, however, the spiritual heroes were the monks and nuns with their vows of poverty, and the new orders of friars who supported their ministry by begging. Francis of Assisi himself was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant whose group of poor friars sought and received recognition from the ornate throne of Pope Innocent III. (Indeed, some historians have argued that it was the friars, of all people, who helped to legitimate the emerging market economy of the west by living in the growing cities with the financial support of the growing merchant classes whom the friars then blessed for their donations.)

Not all friars were so positive toward money, however. The Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas echoed his philosophical hero Aristotle as he declared money to be essentially base and inert. Thus any lending at interest was contrary to the laws of nature—*God's* laws of nature—by making something "breed" that was inherently sterile.

By the later Middle Ages of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, Thomas's severity was a minority position in the church. The Renaissance had begun, and the Vatican became the artistic jewel in the Roman Catholic crown as money poured

in from all of Christendom to declare the glory of God in marble and gilt. Much of this money, furthermore, came from an innovation in church life that mixed the financial and the spiritual: indulgences.

Here was the issue that would incite much criticism of the church in the later middle ages. Could a sinner really offer money to the church in lieu of acts of penance—the money serving as symbol for evil actions foregone and good actions undertaken—and receive absolution? In the selling of indulgences, the metaphorically commercial nature of medieval folk religion—as in transactions along the lines of “perform this special act of devotion and get the appropriate spiritual benefit in return”—became literally commercial. God and money were now explicitly linked—but was this good?

Reformation Revisions

Martin Luther’s famous 95 theses were provoked by indulgence-selling. Thus the Reformation, one might say, began over a fundraising dispute.

The Reformers generally had a positive view of money as a gift of God. True, many Anabaptists followed Menno Simons in criticizing the mainstream Reformers precisely over their comfort with money. Most Anabaptists allowed for private property, but their characteristic emphasis on close Christian community prompted them to a high standard of communal sharing and a low standard of personal luxury. Some, such as the Hutterites, went all the way toward complete community of ownership.

For Luther, Calvin, Cranmer and others in the mainstream Protestant Reformation, however, money and other material goods were to be received gratefully from God and put to good use. The medieval glorification of poverty was discarded as one more example of “works righteousness.” Calvin in particular explicitly challenged the medieval prohibition of usury, seeing it as more Aristotelian than biblical. Instead, Calvin taught, usury was lawful and even necessary in some commercial contexts—for the good of all. Yet he continued the long-standing tradition of condemning those who would lend in order to exploit the poor. Such people, he thought, should be banned from the church.

The Puritans of England and the American colonies elaborated upon their theological mentor Calvin in this regard. While warning against wealth as a spiritual danger that makes one complacent and ungrateful to God, Puritans gladly went about their business (quite literally) as God’s work. Drawing on theologies of vocation stemming from Luther and Calvin that pronounced all worthwhile jobs as equally ordained by God, Puritans worked hard at all sorts of things with vigour and thrift. Not surprisingly, many observers—most famously the sociologist Max Weber—have credited their ethic with stimulating the rise of modern capitalism.

Subsequent critics have wondered, however, whether there has been a causal relationship in the other direction. Did the rise of capitalism in fact lead to the decline of orthodox, full-orbed Calvinism? Did the endorsement of business as a calling equal with all others, including pastoral or charitable work, give a convenient rationale for Christians to seek after this world’s goods in the name of the next? Did the Reformation doctrine of vocation thus go to seed, as Protestantism unintentionally prompted the rise of secularization and worldliness?

Modern Alternatives

Since the seventeenth century, Christianity has become a global religion in ever-increasing complexity. Christian views of money, not surprisingly, have spanned a very wide range indeed.

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, is often cited on this subject. Wesley was a master fundraiser, drawing in an annual income of £1,400 when a single man at that time could live comfortably on £30. But Wesley astounded the tax authorities when they found him living at a much more modest level than they could at first believe. Wesley was true to his famous motto, “Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can,” and died with a very limited personal estate after giving away a fortune over his career.

Wesley, however, raised few important questions regarding the structures of modern society that, in the eyes of many, have fostered a widening gap between rich and poor. Christian socialists such as F. D. Maurice in nineteenth-century England, Tommy Douglas in mid-twentieth-century Canada, and liberation theologians in contemporary Latin America have called upon Christians to work toward major structural changes in the way wealth is produced and distributed. The free market, they contend, has produced much wealth but too much inequity.

Without endorsing socialism, other Christians have agreed that those who have much of this world’s goods have simply not done enough to alleviate the suffering of the poor. New structures and habits of both thought and action are necessary to deal adequately with the world’s needs. Authors such as Ron Sider and John Howard Yoder, drawing on their Anabaptist heritage, have provoked Christians to reconsider their values. The American and Canadian Roman Catholic bishops have raised both eyebrows and hackles with widely-reported expressions of concern. And organizations—such as World Vision, Canadian Foodgrains Bank, the Salvation Army, and Citizens for Public Justice, among many others—have helped Christians put their changed minds into charitable—and sometimes political—action.

Other Christians have stoutly defended modern free trade. Some have gone as far as the popular American preacher Norman Vincent Peale, who urged his listeners to “put God to work for you and maximize your potential in our divinely ordered capitalist system.” The so-called health-and-wealth gospel, proclaimed by such television preachers as Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland and Fred Pryce, continues in this tradition.

More moderate have been Christians—such as George Gilder, William Buckley and Michael Novak—who have promoted the capitalist system as the most helpful system available for all concerned. They characteristically acknowledge, however, that it must be complemented with protections for the “deserving” poor.

In a similar vein, although with their distinctive approach, theologians (also known as Christian Reconstructionists) such as R. J. Rushdoony and David Chilton have taught that God’s people should expect Old Testament-type blessings from faithful use of the money God provides for them. Theonomists’ concern to apply both Old and New Testament principles to economics—their name refers to the law [*nomos*] of God [*theos*])—extends even to opinions on whether governments should be on the gold standard (they should be) and whether one should ever incur debt (one shouldn’t).

Thus as the twentieth century has concluded, it is apparent that the Christian tradition offers contemporary believers a rich—and perhaps perplexing—range of resources to consider on the subject of money.

What it seems not to provide, however, is a single answer so clear and sound as to decisively ease the discomfort of that troubled ape and that unhappy monster in those medieval manuscripts.

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