

EARLY CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS MONEY

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Introduction

The early Christian attitude towards money is strongly marked by Jesus' reply to the question concerning the duty of tax payment. When he saw the coins, Jesus said: "*Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's!*" (Mt 22: 21). With these words he defined the essence of relations between the domain of the church and the domain of the state, clearly delimiting nature and supernature, the secular and the religious. These two different and autonomous domains are not mutually exclusive. The domain of the holy neither excludes, nor renders redundant the worldly, its laws and competences. Jesus' remark about money as a symbol of all material goods should not be interpreted in the sense that money (material goods) belongs solely to the emperor (the state), but only that out of these worldly goods one should give the emperor his due, and God His due. In other words, Christians, in accordance with the teaching of Jesus, accept the political and religious dimensions of material goods (money), a fact that will fundamentally determine their attitude towards money.

Persecutions and violence in the first centuries had not favoured a quick adoption of a positive attitude towards politics and the state structures among Christians. Early Christian idealism, which saw its political ideal in heaven: "*... our citizenship is in heaven*" — as Paul says (Phil 3: 20), did not create favourable conditions for development of good relations with civil authorities. From the very beginning Christians consider themselves *citizens of heaven, a new people*, introducing into politics a form of mysticism that Roman mentality could ill understand or accept. As a "kingdom which is not of this world" (Jhn 18: 36), Christianity has opposed any attempt to build human happiness limited to this world and based on worldly goods only. Christians have firmly opposed all attempts to subject faith to the laws of the state as the only ones valid and binding, even if they are convinced that both the state

and the church have their source in one God Creator and Redeemer. Christians therefore did not refuse to cooperate with the state, after all, the majority of them were Roman citizens, patriotically proud and effectively dedicated to the common good of their own state.

Money as a Political–Religious Issue

As a religion that primarily strives to establish a relationship to God, Christianity is not interested in politics interpreted as an *art* (technique and technology) of establishing relationships and resolving issues. If, however, we interpret politics as the fruit of *civilisation* establishing relationships among people and the relationships of people to things — then politics is interesting to Christianity. Unlike the state politics of the time, which had been rooted in Roman law, Christianity taught the message of spiritual freedom that is above, and often opposed to, the law. Perhaps this is the very reason why the religiously tolerant Roman state, which had given freedom of religious belief to all Eastern religions, failed to give such freedom also to Christianity. For the Roman state, Christianity was a political, not a religious problem, because of its new, revolutionary, political ideas. Of the fact that their task was to establish new social relations, Christians have been aware from the very beginning.¹ Christian demonstrated this *novelty* in different ways: by defining themselves sometimes as “a new race” or as “a soul in the world”, emphasising their parallel affiliation to both homelands: the one *on earth* and the one *in heaven*. The revolutionary nature of the early Christian views was strongly influenced by this awareness of the duality of human destiny (on earth and in heaven), mirrored by the dual control of human life. In accordance with the teaching of Jesus, Christians must submit to God and the emperor, to give God what is due God and to give the emperor what is due emperor.

Allegiance to *two homelands (states)* is a theme that had also been discussed by the Stoics, who differentiated between a homeland within its spatial borders and the entire world as the homeland of all people. By identifying applicable state laws and natural law, Stoics demonstrate equal fidelity to their own state and to the world. The Stoic universalism of the human race (internationalism), the awareness that all people are citizens of the world, in the end erases all differences of interest between the national and the international homeland. The difference between the Christian and the Stoic view is reflected in the Christian acceptance of the positive role of the state, as well

1 See *Poslanica Diogenetu*, 5, 1–6. 10.

as in the delimitation of natural law and a new vision of the world which surpasses the rational limits of legal tradition.

The ancients' political view that everything is *res publica*, and as such belonging to the realm of the state, was brought into question by Jesus' words: "*Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's!*" (Mt 22: 21). Thus, two different levels of duty are defined: duty to God — which is independent of the state, and duty to the state — which is limited by duty to God. This is not to say that positive role of the state is being denied; these words in fact emphasise the responsibility before God and define the boundaries of the scope. Added to regular political duties are those that go beyond politics. Going beyond does not entail neglecting regular political duties, only their radical transformation. The aforementioned Jesus' reply, as well as the other one given to Pilate after the Jews had accused Jesus of "opposing payment of taxes to Caesar" (Lk 23: 2): "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jhn 18: 36), does not signify the giving up of politics and concern with the worldly problems. The kingdom that Jesus preaches about is surely not the Roman kingdom of the time, nor the fallen one of David, or any other to come after death and outside the world. No, it is a kingdom that must be realised in this world and in this life.

By shifting from a Semitic into a Greco-Roman cultural and geopolitical context, Christianity takes over the Greco-Roman understanding of reality, introducing at the same time a lot of new, diverse views. Thus, for instance, while Greeks and Romans interpret freedom or the state as final goods in themselves, Christians see them as mere tools for improvement and emancipation of man. The idea of universal equality and brotherhood of men is common to Christian and Stoic philosophers. However, while the Stoics differentiate between *wise men* and *madmen*, surrendering the madman to his madness, the words of Paul are already incompatible with the Stoic view: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor 1: 20). The original Christian cosmopolitanism in fact has no connection with the Stoic cosmopolitanism, which is exclusively of this world. The Christian cosmopolitanism is *acosmic*, at the same time the most universal and the most individual. The notion of individuality, which had already been developed by Epicureans, does not have importance in this world for Christians, unless it is in relation to the *other world*, which Christians long for and live for: "Let grace come, and this world pass away".² According to the early Christian teaching, individuality

2 *Didaché*, 10, 6, *Didaché* is one of the most important documents from the post-Apostolic times and the oldest source of information on the life of the first Christians. The work dates from around the year 70 AD, but it was published only in 1883, after it had been found in a manuscript dating from 1057 which belonged to the Patriarch of Jerusalem.

is interpreted as a synthesis of relationship between God and an individual. In God the Father an individual finds all people, and in God's state all individual human states. The opposition between the subjectively individualistic and objectively universalistic invitation, which is a fundamental antithesis to the system of thinking and living in the Antiquity, is achieved in Christianity by application of the logic that transcends nature. By following Christ, Christians answer their individual call to perfection which must be like the Heavenly Father. By becoming one with Christ, and through Him with all men, Christians answer their universalistic call. The conviction that an individual is above nature and therefore above the state, is a revolutionary Christian thought. The state is not omnipotent with respect to the individual, because a person has rights which in themselves are independent of the state authorities; although the state protects them, it does not establish them. To the legal establishment of the state powers according to the will of the people, Christians contrast the principle that all power is from God "*omnis potestas a Deo*," which at the same time means that the state powers are limited. Under the influence of the Stoic rationalism, the original Christian ethics of love is combined with the Stoic ethics of rights, transforming the mystical agaph into the legal *charitas*. This helped avoid isolation, but it took the edge off of the *revolutionary quality* of Christian ideas. Early Christians had accepted the positive role of the state as a temporary solution, but their loyalty remains divided between the longing for the *heavenly homeland* and obedience to the homeland on earth.

Christian Ideals and Attitude Towards Money

The early Christian view of money and material goods had been strongly marked by their religious belief and political views. The views had been very different, ranging from the idealistic, based on *the law of love*, to those closer to the traditional, Greco-Roman views. Christian individualism on one hand, and universalism on the other, had set course sometimes in the direction of a certain type of *holy anarchy*, and sometimes in the direction of a "religious communism of love."³ In terms of private and collective ownership, there had also been a diversity of views upheld by the early Christian writers. In addition to those advocating private ownership, there had also been those who, like convinced communists, advocated only collective partnership. There we must bear in mind that Christianity had originated from Judaism in which ethical and economic principles of private ownership very different from

3 See. E. Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der Christlichen Kirchen*, Tübingen, 1912; Italian translation: *Le dottrine sociali delle chiese e dei gruppi cristiani*, 2a ed., Firenze, vol I, 1949, p. 64.

those of the ancient Roman principles or the modern capitalist principles had been in effect. We know that in OT an individual's right to private ownership is restricted. In Jewish tradition, the land belonged to the family (not the individual), and if it was sold, the law required that on the fiftieth year, the Jubilee, it be returned to its original owners⁴. This practically prevented the land from being sold, and the Jubilee law represented an example of the social restrictions of individual rights. As sons of Abraham, Jews believe they are a single family within which no economic exploitation is allowed. Economic relations are based on the principles of solidarity and equity among sons of one father. The idea of the Jewish *brotherly* solidarity had been transformed by Jesus into the idea of the *neighbourly* solidarity, which includes all people, irrespectively of the spatial and national borders. In comparison with the Jewish solidarity based on *tradition* and *law*, Christians base their relations on the commandment of brotherly *love*, which makes the entire notion of property relative. This very fact forms the basis for understanding of the early Christian attitude towards money (property).

The Judeo-Christian restriction of private property — for the greater good, and the ancient Greek economic theory — which is based on ethics, had been built into the foundations of the medieval canon law. Contrary to this, the contemporary capitalist system is based on the economic theory rooted in Roman law — which strongly protects private ownership. Under Roman law, the purpose of the state was to ensure prosperity solely for the free Roman citizens within the boundaries of the state. Christian view, on the other hand, is that everyone, without exception, has an equal right to material goods which they ought to acquire through their own labour. The spiritual and material dignity of labour is the great and revolutionary novelty that Christianity had introduced into the ancient world, where labour in general had been despised. The value of labour is emphasised already by the Apostles Paul and James, as well as by many early Christian writers.

In our consideration of the early Christian attitude towards money and private property, we should bear in mind that the meaning of money and property then and now greatly differ. The pagan and Christian antiquity had not known money as *working capital*, in the sense of modern economic theories. The ancient money had in fact been *non-productive*, having almost exclusively a bartering value. Besides, in ancient times the notion of ownership, in the modern sense, had been virtually unknown. Ownership had existed, but it had been defined, distributed and organised by the state, depending on the circumstances and ways which today would be considered unjust and unacceptable. It is very difficult therefore to say whether early Christianity had

4 The Jubilee year had been celebrated in Israel every fiftieth year, when the purchased land had to be returned, in accordance with Leviathan 25, to its original owners.

been favouring private ownership or opposing it. In accordance with the Jewish tradition, in early Christianity ownership had been interpreted in the sense of *management* of goods belonging to other persons. A total rejection of any form of private ownership was an exception embraced by only a few, mostly radical and encratic⁵ sects, as well as by monastic communities, where renunciation of property had been motivated by ascetic, not economic reasons. Early Christianity had accepted private ownership and the state, but regarded them, however, as temporary and transient consequences of original sin; since they had not existed before man sinned, they will not exist in the kingdom in heaven either. This opinion had been present particularly in the early period of Christianity, when many had been convinced in the imminence of Christ's Second Coming (*Parousia*).

Radical political and economic changes in the beginning of the 4th century, as the Christian rulers rose to power, just like the increasingly frequent military incursions and raids of barbarian tribes, had brought about great inequality between the rich and the poor, as well as an unjust distribution of material goods. At the time when there had been so many poor and so few rich, a debate had started among Christians on permissibility and justifiability of wealth. "Wealth is not the work of Satan, as some think (...) Use money fairly and it shall not be evil."⁶ Like the *Gospel*, when it comes to possession of material goods, early Christian writers never speak of *right*, only of *duty*. In the early Christian literature it is not possible to find a text that would speak of the right of an individual to wealth, nor of the right of the poor to take by violent means that which belongs to the rich. "The Church, which is poor, does not raise its voice against those who rightfully own their wealth, those who inherited from their family for their own benefit and for the benefit of the poor".⁷ According to the early Christian view, wealth is a good in itself, but the possession of it is totally indifferent: it can be either good or bad. An excessive wealth had been considered by the early Christian writers as a moral and social evil, if it became a goal unto itself and if it served to an individual, instead of the common good. According to the early Christian understanding, wealth has a social and moral obligation to serve all. It is therefore not important whether property is in hands of an individual or in hands of many, but how it is used, who is handling it and to what purpose. This rule has always applied, even today, since the mere fact that the shares of a company are in hands of an individual or of many shareholders, shall not add any new value

5 Encratic sects overemphasized asceticism, demanded of their followers a complete rejection of the use of meat, alcohol, marriage and similar. According to Irenaeus, the founder of encratism was Tacianus, Christian apologetic writer from the second century.

6 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.*, VII, 6, PG 33, 632)

7 Epiphanius, *Hear.*, LXI, PP, 41, 1041.

to the company in question. What will, however, bring new value is the way it is being managed, the way it is being invested.

Augustine's View of Money

The restrictions of this paper do not permit a more exhaustive presentation of views of certain early Christian writers. Therefore we bring a brief overview of thoughts of one of the greatest Christian minds, Aurelius Augustine⁸. His numerous works did not bring any significant novelties in the early Christian treatment of money or economy in general. In Augustine's work we find the usual early Christian themes: the need for distancing oneself from wealth and material goods, solidarity in love and similar. For the purpose of this paper, I would emphasise only his thought on the social dimension of wealth. The starting point is his distinction between: *using* and *enjoying the fruits* (*uti* and *frui*),⁹ based on which he divides people into those who love God and those who love the world. The former use wealth to achieve a final, supernatural purpose; the latter find the final purpose in wealth itself. Augustine accepts the early Christian (particularly Basilus') thought that man is merely a manager of goods entrusted to him by God. The difference between men (managers), between those who belong to the *worldly state* and those who belong to the *God's state*, Augustine recognises as dependent on whether the amassment of wealth is a goal unto itself or a tool for achieving higher, spiritual goals. In accordance with the rule of *using* — wealth becomes the means of God's love so that His radical demands such as: whoever wants to love his neighbour ought to share with him his money¹⁰, do not come as a surprise. Amassing precious things is useless because it does not benefit everyone. Augustine therefore believes that money is more useful: "If you were to give me expensive clothes, I would sell them, as I regularly do, because, if those clothes cannot serve all, money I obtain from selling them — can".¹¹ Nevertheless, he does

8 Augustine was born in 354 in Tagaste (northern Africa). He had exceptional education first in Tagaste, then in Carthage, and taught grammar and rhetoric. After becoming a follower of the Manichean religious cult, in his mature years he converted back to Christianity, and was baptized by the Bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose. After the death of his devout mother Monica, Augustine went back to Africa, and became a priest and bishop in the town of Hippo, where he died in 430, as the Vandals were laying siege to the town. He wrote numerous and important works, becoming one of the greatest minds in the history of humankind.

9 See. *De doctrina christiana*, I, 4, 4.

10 *De disciplina christiana*, 6, 6.

11 *Serm.*, 86.

not oppose private ownership and accepts all ownership that is rightful. The problem is how to determine what *rightful ownership* means: “It is certain” — says Augustine — “that that which is lawfully owned is not the property of others; one can own lawfully only that which is owned rightfully, and one can own rightfully only that which is owned usefully. Therefore, all that is owned badly ought to be considered as the property of others; and whoever fails to use gainfully that which he owns, owns badly. Consider carefully then how many are those who ought to return things in their possession to others, even if those to whom these things should be returned are so few.”¹² By putting a sign of equality between rightfulness and usefulness, Augustine believes that all those who fail to use goods in accordance with law (usefulness), find themselves in possession of goods that belong to others. Additionally, Augustine’s economics is teocentric, the criterion of lawful possession and rightfulness is God, and not the applicable laws of the state. Usefully, and therefore lawfully, owns only he who obeys God and who in his obedience to God finds a measure of things, and with it, the ability of using those things gainfully. Beyond the limits of such rightfulness, *justice* can be *in-justice*, and what we call *ius* can be *iniuria*. This is where we should look for the measure of lawfulness and un-lawfulness: unlawful is all which departs from the order established by God, lawful is all which leads from disorder to order. Although God remains the final basis and measure of lawful possession of material goods, for Augustine private ownership is rooted in the laws of the state: “On what basis does anyone possess what he possesses? Is it not by human right? In fact, by divine right, the Earth and its fullness belong to the Lord... By human right one says, ‘This villa is mine, this house is mine, this servant is mine.’ Thus, by human right, by the right of the emperors. Why? Because God has distributed these same human rights through emperors and kings of the world... But (you shall say): What have we to do with the emperors? I have already told you, it is a human law. The Apostle wants kings to be served, wants them to be respected. Do not, therefore, ask: What have I to do with a king? For, what would you then have out of the property that you hold? Everything that is owned, is owned by royal right. You said: What have I to do with the king? Do not speak in this way about your property because you are therefore giving up the human law upon which is founded the right of ownership.”¹³

Besides, any wealth amassed for profit Augustine regards as *mammona iniquitatis*: “Mammona iniquitatis” — explains Augustine — “are worldly riches of any kind. Whatever their origin and in whichever way they have been

¹² *Ep.*, 153, 26.

¹³ *In Joann.*, *ev.*, *Tract.* VI, 25–26.

amassed, they are *mamona iniquitatis*. Wealth, then, belongs to the world of injustice? Money, which is called wealth, is injustice. For, if you are looking for the true riches, they are something entirely different.”¹⁴

Augustine’s views about wealth are obviously radical, similar to the views of his great adversary Pelagius, who claimed: “Remove the rich and there will be no more poor!”¹⁵ However, contrary to Pelagius, Augustine has a very pessimistic view of human actions. He thinks there are very few people who are capable of living at the same time in wealth and in freedom. In a world where the majority of people belong to the *earthly state*, dominated by egotism, there is little room for optimism. All *unlawful* possessors of others people’s goods ought to give them back, but looking at historical events and methods of amassment of those goods, there are very few of those who live according to faith and justice, but also of those to whom the goods may be returned. The *earthly state* remains until the end of history a stage upon which men fight each other in order to establish their own dominance, both economic and political. Only the citizens of *God’s state* know that what they own belongs to the poor and that charity is required by rightfulness and answered by relieving the poor.

In Place of a Conclusion

Early Christian views of money (economics) do not materially differ from those of ancient Jews or Greeks and Romans, who had subordinated economics and economic benefits to the principle of *common good* (*bonum commune*). The *humanist socialism of the Stoics*, which considered private ownership as a breakdown of the ideal natural order, influenced the Christian views of money and material goods. Based on the Revelation, Christians concluded that the corruption of the original human nature and distorted views of material goods had their source in original sin.

The fact that early Christian authors, when writing about material goods, principally speak of *duties* and the equality of men in *duties*, it could have been a good way to arrive to equality in *rights*, too. The reason why this has never happened ought to be found in the fact that the rich have failed to seriously lay down for themselves the moral principles recorded in the *Gospel*, principles that had often been advised by early Christian writers.

14 *Serm.*, 113, 2, 12.

15 Pelagius, *De divitiis*, 12, 2.