

Render Unto God



# Render Unto God:

## *Christianity and Capitalism in Crisis*

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Render Unto God: Christianity and Capitalism in Crisis

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## INTRODUCTION

# CHRISTIANITY, CAPITALISM, AND CRISIS

RYAN C. MCILHENNY

*One can behold in capitalism a religion, that is to say, capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion. The proof of capitalism's religious structure...still today misleads one to a boundless, universal polemic. We cannot draw close the net in which we stand. A commanding view will, however, later become possible.*

—Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

In her latest book *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* Joyce Appleby writes: “Every economic downturn gives critics a chance to draft obituaries for capitalism.”<sup>2</sup> Criticism of any system reaches a clamor during times of crisis. Within the last two centuries alone, significant economic depressions have regularly inspired populist movements—movements that focus predominantly on the problems inherent to capitalism. This is not to say that criticism is absent prior to an economic nadir, but it certainly becomes a wakeup call for many across nations and among different classes. (Indeed, we should be moved by the tenacity of those intellectuals/activists who regularly remind the world of the frailties of capitalism.)

This book is not a funeral oration, nor is it a prophetic heralding of an imminent utopia. It unabashedly affirms this depressed moment in history to offer yet another much needed critique of capitalism. The '08 financial meltdown—the conditions and consequences of which come too eerily close to that of the 1930s—has inspired a spate of literature that reconsiders the nature of capitalism. Numerous writers have resurrected the ideas of those who first exposed the social and moral ills that accompanied early modern capitalism from the Atlantic System to the Industrial Revolution and to the information age. The specter of the Diggers, the Owenites, the Fouriers, Proudhonian anarchists, and, of course, the Marxists has been conjured, and their dry bones have been

given new life. For the late Eric Hobsbawm, the 08 crisis shows that “there could no longer be any doubt that [Marx],” to use a familiar example, “was back on the public scene.”<sup>3</sup>

Raising consciousness appears to be the necessary precondition for change. This often begins by creating a crisis before a solution can be articulated. Martin Luther King said it well in his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”: “[I]njustice must be exposed, with all the tensions its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion *before it can be cured.*”<sup>4</sup> Most social and political movements—especially revolutionary ones—have rarely been preceded by a well-worked out plan of action post-breakdown. Anthropologist David Graeber asks in *The Democracy Project*, “When has social change ever happened according to someone’s blueprint?” Graeber suspects that a detailed vision for social change is a “hangover from Enlightenment ideas that have long since faded out virtually everywhere except America”:

We cannot really conceive the problems that will arise when we start actually trying to build a free society. What now seems likely to be the thorniest problems might not be problems at all; others that never even occurred to us might prove devilishly difficult. There are innumerable X-factors....What might a revolution in common sense actually look like? I don’t know, but I can think of any number of pieces of conventional wisdom that surely need challenging if we are to create any sort of viable free society.<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding the unknown, those involved in mass social movements certainly make their concerns known. The Occupy encampments and anti-austerity protests around the world have been focused, first, on raising awareness of problems which we all must give an answer. To help understand the new populist mood and their silent supporters, here are few bullet points from a study published in *Business Insider* around the time that the occupy movements began:

Unemployment has been at its highest level since the Great Depression. 1 in 6 are unemployed

The time between unemployment and getting a new job has been considerably longer than other periods: close to 14 million Americans who want to work are unable to find a job

Corporate profits have skyrocketed more than they had in the 1950s (two wars help)



Average salary of CEOs has increased 360 times the average worker, but the average worker pay has increased 4%

1% of Americans hauled in a bigger percentage of the country's total pre-tax income than at any time since the late 1920s

1% of Americans owned 42% of the financial wealth in the country (1% of New Yorkers owned more than 42% of NY's wealth)

In 2008, the top 5% owned nearly 70% of all the country's wealth (on the eve of the Depression, 5% owned 30% of the nations income)

Taxes on the nation's highest earners have been close to the lowest they've ever been (35% in 08 and 25% in 1928-9)

Banks have been buying risk-free treasury bonds and other government guaranteed securities and collecting interest on money they're not collecting.<sup>6</sup>

Little has changed. Bloated financial institutions continue to make both risky investments and huge profits while jobs continue to stagnate. Consider the latest Cromnibus bill passed by Congress, written by Citigroup, which allows the continuation of risky investments that created the Great Recession in the first place. It's as if those in the 1%—especially those responsible for the disaster—know what they're doing and know they can get away with it, since their habits have been protected for the last forty-plus years. They hold power—a power that corrupts absolutely. Talk of the 1% is no mere political haranguing by a bunch of pot-smoking liberal arts majors. Although largely symbolic, the 1% represents a real body of people—the wealthy elite. Peter Edelman, professor at Georgetown University Law, and former Clinton advisor, offers his own numbers on the 1%:

The top 1 percent took-in 9 percent of all personal income in 1979, and that figure skyrocketed to 23.5 percent in 2007. The top fifth took in 53 percent of all after-tax personal income in 2007. The income of the top 1 percent went up a staggering 275 percent between 1979 and 2007, while that of the bottom 20 percent grew just 18 percent in those twenty-eight years. (Income in the middle barely grew either.) The income of the top 0.1 percent (one one-thousandth of the population) increased a staggering 390 percent...By 2007, the top 1 percent held a larger share of income than at any time since 1928.<sup>7</sup>

An economic crisis of the current magnitude impacts the entire world. The occupations have been inspired in part by the unrest in Europe and the Middle East—a transnational revolutionary movement galvanized in large part by the global economic meltdown. When challenging issues of power, it is quite difficult to separate them from politics. Each major revolutionary period has witnessed not only a crisis of liberal capitalism but also of democracy. Revolutions of this kind center on regaining the voice of those who have been abused by political and economic elitism. The revolutionary moment of the Occupiers and young Arab dissidents is that they desire a pure democracy—a democracy that will give the oppressed the opportunity to change power structures for the betterment of society.

The problems around the globe have created a crisis in confidence. First, the catastrophe stands as “a historical moment when the ruling elites—from the financiers through the Detroit auto executives to liberal politicians—have lost credibility.”<sup>8</sup> This is true only for those not blinded by ideology. Many Americans, including the current “change-promising” President, continue to believe in the genius of our so-called “ruling elites.” The lack of faith in the human participants at the top is never really absent among the critics of capitalism. Second, notwithstanding the number of supporters, many are beginning to show less confidence in capitalism itself. The fundamental components of capitalism include free markets, open competition, profit motive, and the privatization of the means of production—not to mention the disproportionate chunk taken away by corporations. Many suggest that greed is not central to capitalism, yet if capitalism is a means of investment to produce more wealth, then greed must be a part. Honestly, what is central to the motivation of capitalism but profit? No modest disparity gap exists between the very influential upper elites with everyone else in America but a chasm that cannot be bridged by the impotent values undergirding capitalism—ingenuity, hard work, and patience. The idea that capitalism is not a zero-sum game is purely academic, for in reality, especially in the last few years, there have been a very few winners and a lot of losers. The losers are often accused of ignoring the ethics of capitalism (ingenuity and hard work), but in the current climate such moral activity is irrelevant.

The authors of this volume courageously offer their own critiques of capitalism. They first confront the assumption that a critique of capitalism is, necessarily, a rejection of it. Ned Pace, author of *Gangs in America*, shares this frustration:

One of the disabilities of being an American is that when we try to talk—or even think—about the workings of power, we often find ourselves

strangely hobbled, swinging wildly between naivete and cynicism. We live in a world of complex and finely tuned institutions and legal structure, yet our outlook is often formed through incoherent images, shallow concepts, and simplistic ideologies. We easily lapse into false dichotomies: if you're not going for capitalism, you must be against it.<sup>9</sup>

Criticizing capitalism—in Pace's case, corporate capitalism—smacks of a lack of patriotism. The hegemony of capitalism, wherein those who may or may not benefit from it but nonetheless continue to support it, insulates it from criticism. Are we really that afraid of pointing out the central failures of capitalism? Edelman laments the passivity of most people: "It has been astonishing to me that so many people who have been hurt badly by the recession and Washington's failure to build on the stimulus package of 2009 have been so silent." This is indeed befuddling. It's not just those who are silent, but those—even the victims of the current crisis, the majority of us—who continue to brook no criticism of the capitalist system.

A Christian "perspective [on the Great Recession] has been relatively small to date," writes E. Philip Davis.<sup>10</sup> Christians are often too stubborn or too afraid to confront almighty capitalism. Jay Richards's *Money, God, and Greed*, a book which offers no criticism of capitalism (can one be both a critic and proponent?), suggests that "a good Christian can be, *indeed should be*, a good capitalist."<sup>11</sup> "Good" in what sense? A creative advertiser who legally manipulates—i.e., lies—to sell a shoddy product that ultimately generates capital is *no less* a "good" capitalist than one who far exceeds the moral integrity of our first president. But the question is whether the converse is true: If you're not a good capitalist are you *not* a good Christian? Skeptical comments about the logic of capitalism are seemingly sacrilegious, hence the reason why we penitently shut our mouths. "In some respects," asks David Barsamian in an interview with Richard Wolff, capitalism is "almost taken on a theistic, theological dimension. To question it becomes equivalent to heresy."<sup>12</sup> In reality, it is not so much the heresy that we're afraid of committing, but the intimidation—in various forms—that we face if we question the social ramifications of capitalism.

Now that the Cold War is over—as well as history (apparently), given the triumph of neo-liberalism, according to Francis Fukuyama—the fascist culture that instilled fear in those who criticized capitalism has seemed to wane.<sup>13</sup> And now the current catastrophe is too big to ignore. Notwithstanding, Christians have failed to confront the rampant greed that in no way violates the "logic" of capitalism. Capitalists decry the stealing inherent in socialism—which is odd since most socialists are socialists

because they oppose the “grand theft” of modern capitalism—yet they fail to see that capitalism has its being not only in protecting one’s property (by violence usually) but also in stealing from others. (I imagine that many of my evangelical brothers and sisters would be nonplussed if I were to tell them that my own socialist leanings arise *because* I believe strongly in the eighth commandment.) The financial miscreants who gambled with our money through naked short selling, unchecked CDO ratings, high-risk over-the-counter derivatives, or subprime mortgages, for instance, knew what they were doing, and they knew they would get wealthy—and get away with—doing it. Please understand. I’m not saying that the supporters of a liberalized market are blindly possessed by the demon of rapacious materialism. Rather, I’m challenging the notion that intractable greediness somehow runs counter to capitalism. It simply does not. Evangelicals need to ask deeper questions. Are the regular booms and busts of the world’s interconnected economy something that the global community should simply accept since there are no alternatives? Should we consider such fluctuations as endemic or work toward solutions beyond a band aid approach? Can we challenge the authority of the gospel of wealth without being labeled passionate utopians?

Many within the evangelical community believe that Christian morality fits nicely with modern capitalism. Yet the bond between the two has not always been strong. In defending their legal right to common lands, the Diggers and the Levelers in pre-Industrial Revolution England appealed to God and the scriptures: the creation was given to all people. Evangelical Christians as well Christian slaves in the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth century worked to abolish racial slavery—though systems of slavery continue to exist—that required a revolutionary change in the understanding of private property. Nineteenth-century radicals argued that the consequences of industrialization blasphemed God’s intent for the human family. Labor activists, socialists, and communists in Gilded Age America utilized Protestant rhetoric to shape their opposition to unfettered industrialism. Fundamentalist Christian William Jennings Bryan denounced the trickle-down theory of economics in his famous “Cross of Gold Speech.” The wedding of Christianity and specifically laissez-faire liberal capitalism (i.e., free markets) has intensified from the mid-twentieth century on. Christians have strained to offer a biblical justification for capitalism. Yet nowhere in scripture does one find a defense of the legal personification of the corporation, that exorbitant debt (with outrageous interest) augments consumer power (usury was condemned—in instances with the death penalty—up until the dawn of the pre-modern world), that support for the rich will lead necessarily to a

deluge of jobs, or that an individual can own and therefore dispose of a human being at will. Since the late 1970s and well into the 80s, political rhetoric has made such historical and theological positions sound orthodox.

One of the considerable challenges in any scholarly work is defining terms. The word (and name) *Christian* designates not only the followers of Jesus Christ—one person in two natures, fully God and fully human—but also those who affirm the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith—the creative and redemptive work of an absolutely sovereign Triune God toward a fallen world—as revealed in scripture and outlined in the early creeds of Christendom. Taking into account the historical developments in theology, defining *Christian* today need not be an onerous task.<sup>14</sup>

Given its paradoxical ubiquity yet elusiveness, *capitalism* is exceptionally more difficult to define. It is pure cult, according Benjamin, since it has no doctrines or confessions. A familiar argument used by Christians in their apology for capitalism is that the Bible condemns stealing and therefore protects private property. Hence, capitalism simply centers on private property—nothing more, nothing less. Unfortunately, it's much more complicated. It's true that scripture protects property, though not in the classical economic sense, and offers sanctions against stealing, but it does so not in a modern corporate capitalist context. Modern capitalism is much more than earning and thus owning inanimate objects like fruits, pens, cars, or houses. Acquiring (consuming) stuff is a human activity that goes back to creation, but capitalism is not.

Capitalism is not a matter of making a product and determining an agreed upon price, which may happen to yield a modest profit. It is not strictly a matter of an employee freely agreeing to work for someone else in exchange for a modest wage. It is not simply the reallocation of resources or wealth. Neither is it about making money to either produce or consume a product, for making something might be a necessary but not sufficient—believe it or not—condition for generating capital. Creating something of value is as old as creation, although God's good creation was made for use and enjoyment, never for privatization and exploitation, though many have tried. Each of these realities, of course, plays a role in the evolution of what we call "capitalism."

Capitalism is much larger—and different—than the sum of its parts. We must first reorient ourselves to the entirety of capitalism.<sup>15</sup> Capital, according to David Harvey, "is not a thing but a process in which money is perpetually sent in search of more money."<sup>16</sup> Capitalism is another name for *more*—a desire for more by the possessive individual. It has spread around the globe. Marx and Engels understood this: "The need of a

constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe...we have intercourse in every direction.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite the hailstorm of criticism during financial crises, the reality is that capitalism has a way of transforming itself, which allows it to survive but not without exacting a great toll on the human community. This is the totalizing nature of the system, its “dynamic of expansion,” according to Frederic Jameson. In order to survive, Jameson contends, capitalism “must continue to absorb everything in its path, to interiorize everything that was hitherto exterior to it.”<sup>18</sup> Consumption is all encompassing; it includes not only the push to consume/eliminate God’s good creation, but also that of his crowning creation—humanity. Jameson and others, including world-systems analyst Immanuel Wallerstein, intimate that today’s global capitalism may be reaching its final crisis: “the approach of the world market (of which surely globalization is at least the foreshadowing), as well as the absence of a new world war which might have destroyed the accumulation of capital and its plant and inventory and made some new reconstruction possible—these things along with capitalism’s transformation into a financial system mean that we are in a historically different situation.”<sup>19</sup> Capitalism feeds on itself, devastating the resources it relies on for sustenance like natural resources and human labor. But it revives itself by exhausting other natural and social resources. “Capitalism,” Harvey continues, “has so far survived in the face of many predictions of its imminent demise. This record suggests that it has sufficient fluidity and flexibility to overcome all limits, though not, as the history of periodic crises also demonstrates, without violent corrections.”<sup>20</sup> Yet capitalism’s reach is no longer local. The real issue is how capitalism will reinvent itself after consuming the globe. If capitalism needs the occasional “shock,” to borrow from Naomi Klein, then we will see more crises in the not too distant future.<sup>21</sup> But can this form of capitalism be sustained, especially when humanity is increasingly exhausting the globe’s resources.

Along with seeing capitalism as a historical process, we can identify a central defining feature. Capitalism is created when “surplus value” of the output of workers is taken to secure the power of a small cadre of non-laborers. “A capitalist system,” writes Richard Wolff,

“[is] one in which a mass of people—productive workers—interact with nature to fashion both [the privatized] means of production (tools, equipment, and raw materials) and final products for human consumption. *They produce a total output larger than the portion of that output (wages) given back to them.* The wage portion sustains the productive workers: it provides their consumption and secures their continued productive labor.

The difference between their total output and their wage portion is called the 'surplus,' and it accrues to a different group of people, the employers of productive laborers: capitalists."

The wages earned by the laborer are used to pay for goods and services provided by the capitalists. "The capitalists use the surplus," Wolff continues, "to reproduce the conditions that allow them to keep obtaining surpluses from the productive employees." Capitalists invest their surplus in state apparatuses that "enforce the contracts they have with their workers." Finally, they use the surplus "to sustain institutions (churches, schools, think tanks, advertising enterprises) that persuade workers and their families that this capitalist system is good, unalterable, and so on, so that it is accepted and perpetuated."<sup>22</sup>

Part of what Marx meant when he wrote that religion represents the "sigh of the oppressed creature...the *opium* of the people" is that religion tends to distract and also numb us from the negative social consequences of modern industrialization.<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding Marx's atheism underlying his attitude toward religion, there is partial truth in what he says. The sigh is very real. Christians not only fail to confront the manifestations of sin in the fallen world, they also fail to see that God has a special interest in protecting the weak, especially the poor who are exploited by the wealthy. The objects of true and undefiled religion include those who have been neglected by society: the widow, the orphan, the slave, and all others oppressed—oppressed by wealth. The authors of this volume believe that disentangling Christianity and capitalism at the theoretical level may be a move in the direction of ameliorating the moral problems inherent to capitalism. The Christian's chief duty—as it is for all humanity—is to render absolute allegiance to God, not the idol of capital. Democrats and Republicans—both, by the way, follow the dictates of oppressive liberalism—must reconsider their religious-political allegiances.

The (anti-capitalist) multimillion-dollar revolutionary question is whether capitalism can be overturned without going back to an equally oppressive nationalistic regime like that of the former Soviet Union. Perhaps, capitalism cannot be dismantled in our day: "In a period like our own, in the absence of alternatives, the reaction of even the critics of the system to its crisis and its injustice is simply to repair it and hopefully thereby to reform it." For Jameson, capitalism "cannot be reformed," and any attempts to do so ends up "strengthening and enlarging it."<sup>24</sup> To be clear, the present work is not intent on eliminating capitalism *per se*, but to arouse the conscience of believers to realize the nakedness of the emperor. Criticism of capitalism for the large handful of anti-capitalist intellectuals may not be enough to make a long-lasting change, but it's a start.

Criticism stimulates conversation. Along with offering a critique of capitalism, *Render unto God* is interested in the question that brings us back to the beginnings of modern capitalism: *How can we ameliorate the human and environmental cost of the system?*

When answering the question as to whether the Jewish community should pay taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:17), Jesus was not offering an apologetic for a biblical theory of economics. It should also be noted that his parable of the talents is not about wise financial planning, despite the hermeneutical gerrymandering of not a few evangelicals. Jesus' main focus was to bring the kingdom of redemption through his suffering, death, and resurrection. This is not to say that Jesus was uninterested in the poor. A transformed life cannot help but to love God first and neighbor second. This leads to the second point related to the title—namely, that the Triune God demands Christians to give an account of their social actions. He has a special concern for the marginalized of the world. Throughout the pages of the Old and New Testament, God reprimands the wealthy—especially those who accumulate riches by exploiting others, which, as mentioned above, *does not* contradict the system of capitalism. Many Christians forget that “true and undefiled religion” is to take care of those who have been forgotten, marginalized, and erased/made invisible by those, according to conservationist John Muir, inebriated by “gobble gobble economics.”

God demands an account of how Christians serve the poor, how they serve Christ. Christians must consider, then, whether the system they inherit crystallizes possessive individualism, fractures families, and creates poverty. Is the rapid increase of poverty in contemporary emerging countries created by the system itself no less, something that Christians should ignore? Should they move beyond the system-serving sponsor-a-child programs and, instead, focus on the root problems of dependency poverty? Should Christians ignore the devastating environmental consequences of “burning carbon based substances such as oil and coal to obtain energy” for the sake of profit?<sup>25</sup>

Those committed to capitalism remain so even during times when their idolatrous god seems to die. Like the Philistine's Dagon, whose image the Philistines restored numerous times, many remain committed to capitalism when it too falls, enduring through trials and tribulation, booms and busts. While under the complete sovereign rule and direction of God, creation has been entrusted to humanity to maintain and cultivate. Christians must reconsider the profit motive, an essential element of capitalism (if not its moral *telos*), challenge the bloated coffers of the powerful elites, and take seriously the real struggles of thousands of innocent men and women



suffering from unemployment. The authors of this book desire that (especially Christian) readers will reevaluate their commitment to God and money.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” *Selected Works*, trans., Chad Kautzer in *Frankfurt School on Religion*, ed., Eduardo Mendieta (NY: Routledge, 2005), 259-262.

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* (NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 422.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism* (New Haven: Yale, 2011), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

[http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

Cesar Chavez used King’s letter in his “Letter from Delano” in the late 1960s.

<sup>5</sup> David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement* (NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2013), 282-284.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/what-wall-street-protesters-are-so-angry-about-2011-10?op=1>.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Edelman, *So Rich, So Poor: Why It’s So Hard to End Poverty in America* (NY: New Press, 2012), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Greg Albo, Sam Gindin, Leo Panitch, *In and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives*, Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ted Nace, *Gangs of America: The Rise of Corporate Power and the Disabling of Democracy* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2003), 9.

<sup>10</sup> E. Philip Davis, *Crisis and the Kingdom: Economics, Scripture, and the Global Financial Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), xix.

<sup>11</sup> Jay Richards, *Money, Greed, and God: Why Capitalism is the Solution and Not the Problem* (NY: HarperCollins, 2009), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Wolff, *Occupy the Economy: Challenging Capitalism* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (NY: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism offers an succinct answer to the label “Christian”: “Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus partaker of his anointing; that so I may confess his name, and present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to him: and also that with a free and good conscience I may fight against sin and Satan in this life and afterwards I reign with him eternally, over all creation” (Lord’s Day 12, Q&A #32).

<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (NY: Oxford, 2010), 40.

<sup>17</sup> Marx and Engels quote in Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (NY: W.W. Norton, 2014), 55.

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<sup>18</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011), 146.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, *Enigma*, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (NY: Picador, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Richard Wolff, *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 22-23.

<sup>23</sup> John Raines, ed., *Marx on Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2002), 171.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>25</sup> Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 308.

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE PRIVATION OF PROPERTY, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

BRAD LITTLEJOHN

Private property, we often hear, is the foundation of freedom, of democracy, of prosperity. Above all, private property is the foundation of capitalism—upon this, most of capitalism’s defenders and detractors are agreed. Rodney Stark offers a fairly typical formulation when he declares, “Capitalism rests upon three factors: secure property rights, free markets, and free labor.”

But if we are to evaluate such claims, we must first have some idea of what private property *is*. This seems simple enough at first blush to modern Anglo-Americans steeped in a few centuries of robust private property rights. We are perhaps inclined to take the notion for granted, imagining that it is self-explanatory, and that to question it is to reject it. But on closer examination, this clarity dissolves into a hazy maze of legal and philosophical ambiguities.

Suppose, for instance, I own a Porsche.<sup>1</sup> Does this mean I can do whatever I like with it? Well, not quite. It entails not merely rights vis-a-vis the rest of society regarding the use of the Porsche, but also responsibilities. I cannot, for instance, drive it through your fence. Nor may I drive it on the left side of the road. Nor may I allow the engine to fall into such disrepair that it emits dangerous levels of pollution. If property rights were absolute, they would be meaningless, since my property rights could trample on yours at will, and vice versa. And where exactly do my rights and responsibilities begin and end? What if I lend you the Porsche for the next month, and you run over the neighbor’s dog? Am I responsible, or are you? If the engine breaks down, are you responsible, or am I? Suppose I die—what happens to the Porsche then? Do my property rights die with me, so that I have no say over who gets the Porsche? Or can I leave it to whomever I want?<sup>2</sup> Lawyers have not quarreled for centuries over such questions (and come to radically different conclusions in many cases) merely out of a spirit of contentiousness, but because the answers are far from clear.

Indeed, a Porsche is comparatively easy—but are all forms of property the same? Jeremy Waldron suggests otherwise: “The objects of property . . . differ so radically in legal theory, that it seems unlikely that the same concept of ownership could be applied to them all, even within a single legal system. In England, the ownership of a Porsche is quite a different thing from the ownership of a piece of agricultural land.”<sup>3</sup> Agricultural land opens another can of worms. How much water can I take from the stream running through my land? What about the underground aquifers? Can I pollute this water, since it’s on *my* land? Are mineral rights to the resources under my land separable from rights to the land itself? What about access rights—does land ownership mean that I can forbid anyone to cross my land? In short, unless we insist that our own local (or utopian ideal) property system represents the “true” concept of private property, of which all others are corruption, it seems we must admit that private property is a concept of which many different conceptions are possible.<sup>4</sup>

These ambiguities have not loomed large for most champions of private property in recent generations because they have all seemed to pale in comparison to the alternative—state communism. Even though West Germany had somewhat different property laws than the United States, we could comfortably lump the two together as “private property” systems against the wholesale denial of private property on the other side of the Iron Curtain. This polarity has long allowed defenders of capitalism to get away with sloppy generalizations.

But the time has come to grow up and admit that there are in fact alternatives other than pure private property and its negation. In medieval feudalism, a sophisticated web of property relations dictated in what respects a lord owned a patch of land, in what respects individual tenants owned it, and in what respects it was left common for all.<sup>5</sup> In ancient Israel’s law, patrimonies were privately held, but they did not carry many of the rights we associate with private property (such as the right to sell in perpetuity, restricted by the Jubilee law) and were subject to many duties of communal use that we would consider infringements of property rights (such as gleaning). Many traditional societies have operated with such mixed systems, in which both private owners and the community at large each have had certain rights and duties toward property.<sup>6</sup> The logic of such a mixed system is still partially reflected in the belief of Western democratic socialist societies that, although generally privately administered, many of the fruits of property belong to the body politic.

Such ambiguity is not terribly troubling in itself. As long as we are making the argument that private property is important because it is the foundation of capitalism, we can get by with a pragmatic and flexible concept of private property, which will simply take whatever form is best to help ensure the

success of capitalism. If capitalism is justified, and private property is essential for its success, then private property needs no further justification, and we can iron out the legal details on an empirical basis. Many economists and jurists today take essentially this approach,<sup>7</sup> although libertarians often still rely on a very strong doctrine of sacred and absolute private property.<sup>8</sup>

The ambiguity only begins to loom large when strong moral claims are made about private property. If I want to complain that certain governmental policies are unjust because they infringe upon property rights, or allege that taxation for social expenditures is *ipso facto* “theft” (a charge made regularly by the American Right, and in many Christian writings on the subject),<sup>9</sup> then I must have some solid ground upon which to make the accusation. Unless we are certain what private property *is*, we’d best not bandy about charges that it has been violated. Such charges, I suggest, generally go together with a claim opposite to that with which we began: that capitalism is essential because it protects private property.

Although clearly this is not the same as saying that private property is important because it supports capitalism, so regularly and carelessly are the two claims combined that perhaps you’ve never thought about them as distinct claims. And yet it makes quite a difference if we argue that private property is important because it enables capitalism, or that capitalism is important because it enables private property. The former is generally the claim of economists, who consider capitalism to be economically optimal, and private property as a means to that end; the latter is often made by ethicists or theologians seeking to justify capitalism against its detractors on moral grounds. The former claim can remain quite pragmatic and agnostic about the precise nature of private property; the latter, however, presumes some fixed ideal. Most importantly, the former claim is happy to treat private property as a social construct, a legal right—a principle that human beings developed and agreed to enforce because of its social benefits. The latter claim, however, will want to establish private property as a *natural* right, as something that pre-exists society and which society is bound to protect (particularly if it wishes to justify rhetoric denouncing governmental meddling as “theft”).

### Getting Rights Wrong

This distinction, between *legal* right<sup>10</sup> and *natural* right (or what we might call a “human right”) has enormous implications for how we understand and treat private property. If private property is essentially a product of the law, created and defined to serve the ends of human society, then presumably a society can change the laws regarding its use so as to better achieve those ends. However, if private property is a God-given right, then the law must simply protect it

against any intrusion, and must not dare to intrude itself upon it. Historically, philosophers and ethicists recognized the important difference between these two approaches. John Locke, for instance, was quite self-conscious about his departure from the prevailing legal-right justification of private property and the need for a natural-right justification in order to defend private property as strongly as he wanted to.<sup>11</sup>

And yet, crucial as this distinction is, few writers today seem even able to notice it. Rodney Stark's acclaimed book *The Victory of Reason* offers a striking example. Stark begins his discussion of property rights with the familiar assertion, "The Bible takes property rights for granted."<sup>12</sup> He then narrates that the early Church regrettably considered private property to exist only as a result of sin, before crediting St. Augustine (incorrectly, as it turns out)<sup>13</sup> for regarding private property "as a natural condition." "By late in the eleventh century," he goes on, "the writer known only as Norman Anonymous wrote in one of his influential tracts that private property is a human *right*: 'God made poor and rich from one and the same clay; poor and rich are supported on one and the same earth. It is by human right that we say 'My estate, my house, my servant.'"<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, Stark here commits an elementary misreading of the original, anachronistically importing the very modern notion of "human rights" into an altogether different argument. The Norman Anonymous's claim is precisely the opposite—that private property is a matter of the *ius humana* ("human right" or "human law"), in contrast to the *ius divina* ("divine right"); it exists only by the agreement of human society.<sup>15</sup>

Stark goes on to cite scholastic authorities John of Paris, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas, all arguing that private property was "instituted" for "the convenience and utility of man"<sup>16</sup>—all three authorities are making pragmatic human-law arguments, not natural-right arguments—before citing William of Ockham in favor of the conclusion "that since it [private property] is a *right* that *precedes* the laws imposed by any sovereign, rulers cannot usurp or arbitrarily seize the property of those over whom they rule. A sovereign can infringe on private property only when 'he shall see that the common welfare takes preference over private interest.'"<sup>17</sup> Again, Stark's quote works against his interpretation. Ockham, in line with his predecessors, is asserting that, since private property is instituted by society to serve society's interests, any private right to property can be overridden when the "common welfare" demands.

This ambiguity is common in modern Christian defenses of private property, which first pretend that all that is needed is to quote the eighth commandment,<sup>18</sup> but then seem to hesitate, laying great stress on the pragmatic argument that a free market needs private property.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps this is because, as a matter of fact, a natural-rights approach is quite difficult to sustain

(indeed, even Locke wavered uncomfortably between the two). For instance, all that “Thou shalt not steal” really tells us is that, given an existing social structure of property arrangements, it is wrong to take it upon oneself to violate these arrangements; it does not stipulate what form such arrangements should take.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, taken in wider context, it does offer support for a broadly private-property regime, but hardly a recognizably modern one, since the laws of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy actually portray a mixed private-tribal-public property system. Most importantly, it does not tell us that such property arrangements exist independent of human agreement, nor does it prescribe a particular form of property arrangements.

If we are to go further than this and argue that God has decreed that property should be possessed by individuals,<sup>21</sup> rather than collectives, and that these individuals alone should have the right to determine its use and subsequent distribution, then there are really only two main options open to us. We can say that God bestowed private property over the whole earth on Adam and his heirs at creation, and from these initial arrangements derive all subsequent derivations of property. Or we can say that the earth was owned by nobody at creation but was free for the taking to the extent that anyone mixed his labor with a portion of it, and that the subsequent property rights were ratified by God and need no further justification. The first was Robert Filmer’s approach,<sup>22</sup> which few if any would favor today,<sup>23</sup> since Locke effectively refuted it more than 300 years ago, and it underwrites a top-down monarchism rather than a wide capitalist distribution of property. The latter, of course, is John Locke’s approach,<sup>24</sup> which quickly succeeded in gaining wide influence over the Christian ethical tradition despite its relative novelty. It was even enshrined in official Catholic teaching in Leo XIII’s famous 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*,<sup>25</sup> to the chagrin of many Catholic social ethicists since. Today, it still seems to hold subconscious sway over many Christian thinkers, despite having been almost thoroughly discredited and discarded in recent generations by philosophers and legal scholars, who have mostly returned to pragmatic human-law justifications for property rights.<sup>26</sup>

Locke’s approach remains compelling, no doubt, because of its immediate intuitive appeal and its resonance with Biblical themes of dominion and moral desert: “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”<sup>27</sup> We immediately connect this with Locke’s argument that we gain a right to a share of the earth by mixing our labour with it. We think of the work of the craftsman, artist, or inventor, and the obvious conclusion that the product of their work rightfully belongs to them alone, and we assume, with Locke, that the same principle must undergird private property in general. The problem with this inference, of course, is that while it is quite true that I am justly entitled to the work of my hands, no patch of land is the work of my hands. I may work *upon* it, but only

God can claim to have made it, and as he has made it for the use of the whole human race, it is not obvious that I can claim it as my exclusive property in a way that a craftsman can claim the chair he builds.<sup>28</sup>

If the natural-rights argument is historically novel and philosophically questionable, what does the alternative look like? In the next section of this essay, I shall offer a brief account of the historic Christian teaching on property rights and how the medieval consensus broke down. I will then take a brief look at Scripture to see just how strongly it supports private property rights. Finally, I will look at some of the implications of a shift back to the historic Christian understanding of property and what they might mean for contemporary economic and political discourse.

### **Private Property in the Christian Tradition**

In the early centuries of the Church, private property was almost universally looked on with disfavor.<sup>29</sup> Christians claimed to continue the practice of the Jerusalem community in Acts, in which “neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common” (Acts 4:32) and many Church Fathers, such as St. Basil and St. Chrysostom, preached fervently against the evils of private accumulation. The legal institution of private property might have an important role in restraining the chaos unleashed by sin, but it was no more natural than was capital punishment and the redeemed community of the Church was to seek to embody the natural sharing that God intended. Although their thought is frequently dismissed as an odd aberration stemming perhaps from Stoic influences, the Fathers saw it as commonsense theology:

But is not this an evil, that you alone should have the Lord's property, that you alone should enjoy what is common? Is not ‘the earth God's, and the fullness thereof’? If then our possessions belong to one common Lord, they belong also to our fellow-servants.... Mark the wise dispensation of God. That He might put mankind to shame, He has made certain things common, as the sun, air, earth, and water, the heaven, the sea, the light, the stars; whose benefits are dispensed equally to all as brethren.... Yet those greater things He has opened freely to all, that we might thence be instructed to have these inferior things in common.<sup>30</sup>

Christians today will readily give lip-service to the idea that ultimately all that we have is from God, and we are merely “stewards.” The Fathers took the idea quite seriously—we cannot *own* the world, but are merely to *use* it, and as God intends it for the use of all mankind, we cannot lay claim to it in a way that excludes others from adequate access to its fruits. Contemporary Christian



writers often dismiss this sort of rhetoric as zero-sum thinking that wrongly assumes one person's ownership must always come at another's expense.<sup>31</sup> However, the Fathers had an additional theological rationale for their suspicion of private property. For to view one's property as one's own private possession was inextricably linked with the tendency to view *oneself* as one's own, to forget that we are not our own but Christ's and thus belong to Him and to one another.<sup>32</sup> This, for Augustine, was the root of all sin: "Augustine conceived the disordered love of the soul as the *privatization of good*, in that it entails the soul's turning away from the 'universal common good' to its 'private good,' that is, to itself as privately possessed. Pride, 'which is the beginning of all sin,' he defined as the soul's delighting in its powers 'to excess,' as if 'there was no God' and so it were the source and owner of them. From pride flows avarice."<sup>33</sup> Augustine would have seen his fears confirmed in the Lockean argument, so readily swallowed by modern Christians, that we can stake exclusive ownership over the products of our labor precisely because we have exclusive ownership over ourselves.<sup>34</sup>

But could such a negative judgment of property last? How was this idealized view of evangelical virtue to be reconciled with the apparent need for imperfect human society to establish and maintain private property arrangements? It is conventional to assert that this ideal view would not long outlast the Constantinian assimilation of the Church to a position of power in society, and that bishops who would have once been private property's strongest opponents were soon its largest possessors. There is truth in this cynicism, to be sure, but it is considerably overstated. The monasteries and the Church's large charitable structures continued to embody models of common ownership, often with great success that defy today's economic orthodoxy. However, this very success created additional tensions, as monks intent on renouncing earthly goods wondered how this could be consistent with living in very prosperous monasteries. In the 13th century, the Franciscan movement responded by embracing on a more radical poverty that renounced even communal *ownership* in favor of mere *use*, while seeking to still affirm the less rigorous discipleship of property-owning Christians. The papacy, by now very rich and claiming almost unlimited proprietary dominion, reacted by enunciating a remarkably modern take on property, insisting on the necessity of legal property rights and their congruence with natural rights. Anticipating the 17th-century patriarchalism of Robert Filmer, Pope John XXII "ascribed to Adam from the moment of his creation full ownership (*dominium*) of earthly goods, after God's own *dominium*."<sup>35</sup> Although the Franciscan posture was always thereafter to remain an outlier, the mainstream of Church teaching also proved very hesitant to embrace the novel doctrines of John XXII.<sup>36</sup>

A more enduring reference point was provided by the formulation of Thomas Aquinas, who in his *Summa Theologia* II-II, question 66,<sup>37</sup> sought to reconcile the Church's historic teaching on the unnaturalness of private property with the increasingly influential Aristotelianism that saw it as natural. Aquinas's solution was elegant but subtle, and has often been misunderstood by modern writers.<sup>38</sup> He sought to affirm, with the Christian tradition, that the natural law prescribed common ownership, while arguing that it did not thereby *forbid* private ownership. Private ownership, then, although not *natural*, was not thereby *unnatural*; rather, it was a legitimate and (perhaps) necessary development and augmentation of the natural law.<sup>39</sup>

Although Aquinas has no hesitation in attributing to mankind as a whole, by virtue of his divine image-bearing, a right of dominion over the world and its fruit,<sup>40</sup> this is quite distinct from the question of private ownership,<sup>41</sup> which he addresses in article 2, "Whether it is lawful for anyone to possess something as his own." Here, he invokes a further distinction to resolve the problem—between "use" and "the power to procure and dispose" (*potestas procurandi et dispensandi*),<sup>42</sup> which we could call "administration" for short. The use of external things is given to all men in common, and yet, in order that the goal of common use may be best achieved, it is generally more effective that individuals be given the right, or perhaps better, the responsibility, to administer a certain portion of the world's goods for their own use and that of others. Aquinas gives three reasons for this: (1) the tendency towards laziness and abdication when working on something commonly possessed; (2) the confusion that results from the attempt at common administration; and (3) the quarrels that result when each tries to claim his just share of the common property. In view of these practical concerns, he argues that "it is necessary to human life" to allow a private right of disposition, while keeping the use of external things common, "that is, in such a way that he [the owner] is ready to share them with others in the event of need."<sup>43</sup>

This doctrine has crucial implications for understanding both the original justification and the current use of private property. First, since private administration of property is usually going to be the most effective way to ensure that it is well-used, rather than quarreled over, private property is a perfectly natural development. But it is a *development*—unlike the general right of man's possession of the earth, the right of private possession does not derive from anything inherent in the nature of the world, or man's relationship with it, but from the requirements of the common good arising from man's relationship with other men. It thus can take its force only from the agreement of society and the legal definition of property arrangements according to the need of that society.<sup>44</sup>

Second, since God created the world for common use, common use has priority over private disposition, and the latter exists to serve the former. For this reason, private property cannot be justified in itself but only insofar as it serves as a means to facilitate common use. According to John Finnis, the justifications for particular property rights are based on “general justice”—the advantages they will bring to the whole community.<sup>45</sup> Private property is a “derivatory and secondary” right, with “the obligation to realize the primary purpose of property, namely, use,” according to Anthony Parel, who even says, “if there is conflict between use and ownership, there was no doubt in Aquinas’ mind which should prevail.”<sup>46</sup> This means that the particular legal arrangements governing property rights may act to limit private property when it is used for selfish or harmful ends. For instance, Aquinas insisted that a man in desperate need is justly entitled to that portion of the world’s fruits that is needed for his basic sustenance, and so he may “steal” what he needs from a rich man without being guilty of theft—a proviso that even Locke felt compelled to retain.

This synthesis—human origin but natural validity, private administration but common use—remained the basic reference point for Christian ethicists into the seventeenth century. Although the Protestant Reformers shared this consensus, the Reformation undoubtedly helped change the terms of discussion. Massive transfers of church properties to rich merchants and landowners, together with the loss of many traditional restraints on property owners, paved the way for a rapid transition from customary mixed property arrangements to concentrated private ownership. Moreover, Protestant leaders, eager to combat the legalistic works-righteousness that characterized much of the monastic teaching on property renunciation, and leery of what they saw as the militant communism of the Anabaptists, sought to affirm much more strongly the good of private property. This served to tilt the rhetorical balance away from the earlier focus on common use, even if the doctrine was formally maintained.<sup>47</sup>

By the seventeenth century, philosophers and ethicists were increasingly seeking to ground the right of property directly in nature, but it was Locke who made the decisive move. Locke accepted the notion that the earth was created for the common use of all mankind and that private property was the best way to ensure that its fruits were best developed and used; so to this extent, he stood in line with the earlier tradition.<sup>48</sup> However, he made a crucial shift. Locke did not want private property rights to be a product of the social contract—they must arise from individuals alone, who thus have the freedom to maintain them over against society, even if they fail to use them for the common good. To this end, he developed the notion that, in the beginning, individuals made property rightfully their own by finding it, enclosing it, and

laboring upon it.<sup>49</sup> Any subsequent legal arrangements must respect this original acquisition and cannot tamper with it any more than the owner himself permits. To be sure, Locke thought, as do all his Christian followers, that property owners ought to use their possessions morally and for the good of others, but if they failed to do so, that was between them and God.

## Searching the Scriptures

But is this what God says? Many of us are no doubt accustomed to hearing that “The Bible takes private property for granted”;<sup>50</sup> that the Eighth Commandment demonstrates it to be a “divine institution” or a “sacred right”; that the many examples of wealthy patriarchs and saints prove not only private property, but large accumulations of it, to have divine sanction; and that Peter’s condemnation of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 clearly asserts the right to private property.<sup>51</sup>

Once again, however, these claims often suffer from a crippling lack of clarity. If the point were to prove that private property is *legitimate* or *useful*, many of these arguments would be quite important. But they cannot go much further than this. They do not, for instance, provide an account of the origin of private property, or the basis for it. They do not tell us the conditions of its legitimacy, or whether private property (let alone our Anglo-American form of it) is the only appropriate, biblically-mandated system for property. Nor do they even tell us whether private property is an imprescriptible right, rather than merely one “right” among others, which under various circumstances should be constrained or even abolished in favor of other considerations. And yet it is toward such a self-authenticating, exclusive, imprescriptible right that many evangelical capitalists are aiming in their Biblical defense of private property.

As mentioned earlier, it is not clear that the eighth commandment can tell us more than that, in a society where there is a settled system of property rights, it is wrong to take it upon oneself to violate such rights, unilaterally appropriating for oneself what is considered the property of another. There is nothing in the eighth commandment that makes private property a *natural right* rather than a product of society. Some may draw parallels to the seventh commandment, insisting that unless marriage is a social construct, property must not be either.<sup>52</sup> But this simply draws attention to the difference between the two in Scripture. We know that marriage is a divine institution rooted in creation, because we are told this in the creation account. Yet the eighth commandment, thousands of years along in the Scriptural narrative, is the first normative statement on property. We simply do not find in Genesis 2 the sort of account that a theologically-sensitive Lockean would want us to find: “And

God saw that it was not good for man to be propertyless. So he took Adam to a plot of land, had Adam mix his labor with the soil, and presented the plot to Adam. And Adam said, ‘Sweat of my brow and labor of my hands! You shall be called “Manland” for you came out of man’s labor.’”

Moreover, while marriage may be a divine institution, the Old Testament law and the examples of the patriarchs is proof enough that it is subject to a great deal of variation depending on human social and political arrangements, in a way that many capitalists today refuse to countenance for private property. Indeed, many of these practices (such as polygamy) would be considered unacceptable today. Just as “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” then, can only give us the barest start toward a theology of marriage, it would be rash to expect the prescription of a divinely authorized economic system from “Thou shalt not steal,” or from the fact that the patriarchs owned property.

By the time we come to the New Testament, the testimony on property becomes very ambiguous indeed. The teachings and practice of Jesus often appear to be deeply hostile to private property, as does the practice of the early Church, which seems to favor a sort of communal property arrangement. While these themes are often overstated and incorrect to deduce from the New Testament a requirement of some kind of Christian socialism,<sup>53</sup> it is certainly not fertile ground on which to construct a strong defense of private property. Indeed, why else would its defenders turn to such an unlikely passage as Acts 5, where Ananias and Sapphira, who secretly withheld a portion of their wealth for themselves, are contrasted with all the other believers who were selling everything and making their property available to all in common? Those anxious to find support of private property are quick to point out that Ananias and Sapphira’s chief sin is not their greed but their deception, and that they were not compelled to share. This is true enough. But they then go on to make out a robust affirmation of private property from Peter’s statement in Acts 5:4: “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?” Yet this statement does not go further than affirming a *de facto* power of possession (and by implication, a legal right), nor does it remove the context’s strong suggestion of disapproval for an attitude that laid much stress on such rights.

And yet the Bible clearly does allow for property rights, protects them, and perceives their benefits. While there may be little Biblical support for a natural-rights Lockean understanding of private property, neither does Scripture, even in Luke and Acts, seem to call for a legal abolition of property. But how do we square this with the sharp critiques of wealth that issue from the mouths of the prophets, the New Testament writers, and Jesus himself? How do we square it with the example of the Jerusalem community, where “neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but

they had all things in common”? (Acts 4:32) After all, we cannot simply brush aside this example as a voluntary one-time experiment, quickly abandoned and rarely imitated.<sup>54</sup> In Acts 2-4, we have the first example of the Gospel at work as it was meant to be, the formation of a Christian community of love and sharing, clearly intended by Luke to represent the fulfillment of Christ’s message and a model for the Church. Indeed, this appears to be how it was taken by the early Church, which frequently articulated its aspiration for such a life of “all things in common.”

The Thomist model of private administration and common use helps us to make sense of these seemingly conflicting testimonies, which have often polarized Christian readers into hard-left or hard-right readings of Scripture. If private property is a good, but only so long as it serves the common good, then it is no wonder that Jesus and the prophets attack situations of inequality so viciously. If the rich are unwilling to use their goods for the benefit of all, making sure that others around them share in the fruits of their prosperity, then they may need to sell all that they have and give it to the poor. However, other wealthy saints in the New Testament use their resources to support the fledgling Christian communities in their midst, opening their homes for worship, and sharing with those in need, but without legally forfeiting their property to the collective. On closer inspection, the model of Acts 2 and 4 probably describes not so much an actual collectivization of property, as a transformation in the way the Christians in the community viewed their wealth—no one thought of his property as his own but treated it as if it was common, at the disposal of the needs of the whole community.

Understood this way, there is no need to play off the New Testament against the Old. Although the communal element is certainly intensified in the New Testament church, the basic posture toward property—the usefulness of private administration, but the importance of common use—appears in the way the Pentateuchal laws deal with property. Israelite families are expected to each hold their own plot of land as a gift from God and repeatedly encouraged to share its fruits with those who do not have adequate property of their own. Israel’s laws institutionalize several measures to ensure a large element of common use, including the gleaning laws, tithing laws, sabbath-year laws, and the Jubilee ordinance.<sup>55</sup> Nowhere do we find the concept that private property is free from any constraints and conditions but the will of the individual property-owner.

## **So What?**

And yet one may fairly ask, “So what?” After all, any Christian, even the most ardent libertarian capitalist, will affirm that God wants us to be generous and