

The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity

Peter Brown

Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015 (xix, 262)

Athanasius tells us that Antony, when a young man, heard the Lord's admonition, "[G]o, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matt. 19:21 ESV), and he immediately did so, becoming afterward an ascetic monk in the deserts of Egypt.

That episode is in many ways emblematic of the themes treated in Peter Brown's recent book, *The Ransom of the Soul*, though the book focuses exclusively on developments in Western Christianity. What does it mean to accrue "treasure in heaven"? What does it mean that "[t]he ransom of the soul of a man is his wealth" (Prov. 13:8)? The use of the latter for the purposes of afterlife speculation is easily disposed of because it rests on a misunderstanding of "soul"—in the original context the meaning was the rather commonsensical "wealth can save your hide"—but the meaning of the former question is perhaps trickier, and the verse in which it is contained was often taken literally in antiquity. The book raises the issue, in other words, of the relationship between money in this world and eternal life in the next; or, rather, of the ways in which that relationship was conceptualized and imagined from antiquity to the dawn of the Middle Ages.

Brown is a master of his craft, and this book, based on lectures delivered at the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna (2012), is consistent with the high quality readers have come to expect from the doyen of late Roman studies. The writing is crisp, the authorial voice sympathetic but probing (sympathy is not, after all, the same as apology or partisanship), the pace leisurely, meditative, unhurried.

The last is especially significant, because one of Brown's chief goals is to describe the pace of imaginative change in the ancient psyche (xiii–xiv), something difficult to do and rarely even attempted in standard historiography. The result is a textured picture of evolving views of the status of wealth and of the permeability of the border between this world and the next over several centuries.

To put it in the crassest schematic terms, the conceptualization of the bestowal of wealth and its objects passed through three phases of binary opposition: (1) citizen vs. noncitizen (the classical period), (2) rich vs. poor (Christian late antiquity), and (3) lay vs. religious (early Middle Ages). In each of these, what one did with his wealth would have consequences for eternity.

With citizen versus noncitizen, we are in the context of classical civic euergetism. Conspicuous displays of wealth—in, say, large-scale building projects—were intended to serve the citizenry regardless of class and to glorify the benefactor within the orbit of his polity. Such benefactions contributed to the postmortem reputation and memory of the giver; sometimes, as in Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* (not discussed by Brown as it is outside the scope of his book), those who served the commonwealth well were given a place among the stars in the Milky Way.

With the legalization of Christianity in 313, a mass of both rich and poor flooded into the church, construed by Brown as previously tight-knit and more or less middle class. This fact, together with a strong doctrine of the perils of sin and the Lord's admonitions about wealth, radically altered the imagined connections between this-worldly wealth and the prospects of a blessed afterlife. The poor as such became objects of mercy, and mercy toward them could aid the almsgiver in his pursuit of beatitude.

Brown deftly traces this development, especially through the works of Augustine, in chapters 2 and 3. Augustine had long been reticent to say very much about the prospects of a potential purification after death; he allowed that it might be possible but did not wish to speculate and instead urged his congregants to get right with God *now*. This was particularly incumbent on his putative third group of men, the *non valdes*, the average believers who had entered the church in such great numbers and who were neither all-star Christians nor utterly profligate sinners. Offerings at the tombs of the saints would not save their souls. For their security, Augustine preferred older, less flashy forms of piety, namely, prayer and almsgiving.

His dispute with Pelagius and his followers over the nature of sin (chap. 3) caused him to clarify and expand on his position. Because Augustine held, against the Pelagian view, that all men would continue to struggle with sin and corruption throughout their pilgrimage through this veil of tears, they needed a regular way of expiating their small-scale sins, and the expiatory work of Christ was apparently not sufficient. Instead, their expiation could be accomplished through small-scale almsgiving—in contrast to the headline-making dispatches of fabulous fortunes common among the super-rich in Italy, where Pelagius was active. Almsgiving, for Augustine, was able to offset the punishment due for middling sins.

This human agency was strenuously amplified in the following two centuries by the Gallic preachers of repentance (chap. 4): Salvian of Marseilles, Hilary of Arles, Faustus of Riez, and Caesarius of Arles. A greater stress on both human freedom and the impending (final) judgment in an emerging post-Roman civic context was deployed to generate corporate, not just individual, repentance in a Christian kingdom: “group penance” (144), pressed by the bishops, was promoted by the Frankish kings. Perhaps, one gathers, this penance and social reform might stave off judgment and the dangers of hell—threatened more and more at those who were in the church now that the other world and this world conceptually had been more closely intertwined.

Such intertwining continued in the days of Gregory of Tours (538–594), the subject of chapter 5. What becomes clear is that the church itself as an institution (in keeping with the corporate focus noted above), together with the related institution of the large-scale monastery, was the beneficiary of outlays of wealth caused by trepidation about death and judgment. Thus foundations and endowments of religious institutions come to play a more and more central role (“Epilogue: Columbanus, Monasticism, and the Other World”) in Gallic giving. Wealthy donors founded monasteries so that, in return, monks and nuns could pray for the salvation of their souls.

What was lost by all these changes? In Brown's view, "what was left behind was almost too big to be seen: the erosion and final replacement of the mystique of the ancient cosmos by a Christian model of the universe dominated by the notion of sin, punishment, and reward" (205–6). Less sympathetically, and less cosmically—but no less accurately, it seems to me—one might add that the poor, always invisible in antiquity, once more receded into the background for a piety that was, paradoxically, increasingly individualistic and focused on an ever-more mythologized, and ever-more harrowing, postmortem odyssey of trial by demons, against which the soul had to be protected at all costs. It was, indeed, an "imaginative revolution" (209).

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**Theology and Economics: A Christian Vision
of the Common Good**
Jeremy Kidwell and Sean Doherty (Editors)
New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015 (293 pages)

The multiauthor *Theology and Economics* is the product of scholars involved with the Kirby Laing Institute of Christian Ethics and the Association of Christian Economists (UK). It is divided into three parts, focused, respectively, on: (1) interdisciplinary barriers, (2) proposals for more constructive transdisciplinary work, and (3) various concepts of the *common good*. Each section ends with a summarizing essay. The work-as-a-whole concludes with: an editorial summation, selective bibliography, index, and notes on the contributors that afford brief introductions to the individual essayists. The editors pick up Isaiah's eschatological theme of beating swords into plowshares as illustrative of what they mean for the work to accomplish.

Part 1 opens by asking why a conversation proclaimed "important" frequently seems unprofitable. Andy Hartopp concludes this is a case of conversation partners "speaking different languages" (i.e., using different concepts, jargon, and methodologies). Michael Pollitt blames the breakdown primarily on theologians, listing some of their "common" economic misconceptions. Eve Poole's taxonomy of theological methods and Mark Chapman's critique of Red Toryism were not, at least to this reviewer, evidently relevant to the defined section focus. Malcolm Brown wraps up the section by questioning how much his fellows have advanced the conversation. He essentially charges Pollitt with knocking down strawmen, feels that Poole's application leaves much to be desired, and considers Chapman "not directly addressed to the broad question of dialogue between theology and economics."

Matthew Arbo launches part 2 by arguing that an ambiguous doctrine of God, combined with uncritical optimism in the goodness of commerce, led Adam Smith to presume that his deterministic model of economic evolution expressed the divine will. Andrew Henley laments economics' dominant anthropology (i.e., *homo economicus*), as well as its claim