

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

The Problem of Wealth: A Christian Response to a Culture of Affluence

Elizabeth L. Hinson-Hasty

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017 (256 pages)

Poverty is often seen as the condition of having too little. In this book Elizabeth L. Hinson-Hasty says that the problem is that some have too much. She argues that the “most pressing theological and moral problem of our time” is “popular US attitudes toward the unlimited right of white individuals to their wealth and to the ways in which our current dominant forms of wealth creation are increasing poverty and accelerating the wealth gap within the United States and between nations around the globe” (10). Her proposal is to “radically alter our attitudes, systems, and policies that support and justify the increase of one’s individual wealth at the expense of a larger commons and to learn to distribute wealth and money more justly” (10). This goal is accomplished by inviting “people of relative privilege to ask what will motivate those who profit from the current systems and structures to transform them for the sake of the commons” (22). She advocates a program, called Zacchaeus economics, where one restores oneself to community by returning what was received “because of unjust economic policies and unfair, unearned social privilege” (236). Hinson-Hasty maintains that her program is consistent with the Christian worldview and spends much of the book defending that position. The book is an ambitious and wide-ranging work, touching on fields such as economics, anthropology, comparative religion, biblical exegesis, and theology. There is much to be applauded in this book, although as an economist, this reviewer found parts that are wanting.

The book's chapters cover many topics. Hinson-Hasty begins with a progressive interpretation of some of the economic teachings of figures such as Jesus, John Calvin, and John Locke. She then moves to the present day and discusses several critiques of mainstream economics. She argues that the mathematizing of economics and placing undue stress on positivism deemphasize social relationships and nonmarket values and that economics shifted from its original theologically informed roots to economism. Hinson-Hasty then turns her attention to a critique of two social philosophies of wealth creation—social developmentalism and neoliberalism—and faults both for having an individualistic approach that ignores the common good.

The book includes a discussion of what Hinson-Hasty calls the hyperindividualism and hypercompetition in our culture. After noting that the human person is meant to be in relationship, Hinson-Hasty concludes that *homo economicus* is not descriptive of flesh-and-blood people. Instead, she offers the idea of Social Trinity, an idea inspired by socialist Vida Dutton Scudder, to introduce love in social relationships in the economic sphere and an ethic of enough.

A chapter is devoted to searching for common ground among different faith traditions—Native American religions, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam—and exploring other formulations of love in the social context. The book then moves to describing the different communities that sprang up in response to poverty. Finally, the book concludes with a set of stories modeled on the New Testament parables.

The Problem of Wealth tackles a very serious economic and social problem. However, there are some significant difficulties with the economic arguments. Also, the loose (and at times, incorrect) use of definitions, statistics, and economic analysis is noticeable to anyone familiar with economics. The most fundamental problem with the argument is the ambiguity of what is to be redistributed. Among economists and policymakers, poverty is typically defined as either income poverty or asset poverty. Hinson-Hasty states that the two concepts are synonymous because, “[e]conomists measure wealth in two ways, income and net worth as the total value of assets minus total debt” (80). Throughout the book she seems to propose income inequality as the problem yet advocates asset redistribution as the solution. While economists would agree that wealth is a measure of a stock, the claim that it is also a flow should give one pause. In addition, her focus is on financial (i.e., balance sheet) wealth. Economists are keenly aware that tangible and intangible productive capital are a component of wealth and they consider increasing human capital (most critically, education) as important in reducing poverty. Her definition of wealth entails a logical inconsistency because financial assets have different rates of return. If security A, for example, provides twice the yield than security B then the person getting A should get half the value that the person getting B receives in order for incomes to be equal. If both people receive securities of identical values then the person with A gets twice the income as the other.

In support of the thesis that her program is consistent with Christian thinking, Hinson-Hasty refers to a wide range of ecclesial documents. To this reviewer, who is familiar with Catholic social thought, it seems incongruous to include the papal encyclicals as

supporting documents. The encyclicals Hinson-Hasty cites use strong language to reject much of her program. While, like Hinson-Hasty, they criticize capitalism and adduce some of the same issues she raises, they do not condemn it as they do socialism. To take an example from one of the referenced documents, Pope Pius XI states that socialism is incompatible with Catholic dogma and, in opposition to one of Hinson-Hasty's central arguments, capitalism "is not to be condemned in itself. And surely it is not of its own nature vicious" (*Quadragesimo Anno*, nos. 101, 117).

Another example is when Hinson-Hasty states, "The ultimate purpose of human labor and the creation of wealth is for the sake of the commons" (160). The Catholic view is that human work is primarily for the sake of the worker, not the commons. While acknowledging that work has a social character Pope John Paul II argues, "work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes 'more a human being'" (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 9).

There is value in what Hinson-Hasty says, and her description of the effects of poverty should resonate strongly with people of goodwill. Her poignant stories show a deep concern for the poor that should be emulated. Her analysis identifies and articulates some of the negative effects of our economic system that mainstream economics tends to ignore. Undoubtedly power comes with wealth and power can be (and often is) abused.

Many will disagree with Zacchaeus economics but all people of goodwill should continue to have a healthy and vigorous debate on poverty. What is missing in this expression of the progressive view is a more fully developed and internally consistent intellectual structure. In the end the reader is still left with the unanswered questions of what is wealth, why wealth equality is desirable, and what is the relationship between the program of wealth redistribution and Christian social thought.

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How to Survive the Apocalypse: Zombies, Cylons, Faith, and Politics at the End of the World

Robert Joustra and Alissa Wilkinson

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016 (206 pages)

Dystopian and apocalyptic stories are certainly not new but are especially popular as of late. *The Hunger Games* franchise, starting with its first book in 2008, seemed to stoke a fire for dystopian literature (and later, films) targeted at young adults. Following the 2016 presidential election, bookstores stocked up on Orwell's classic *1984*, and Amazon reported it as the number one bestseller in the days following the inauguration. And women have publicly protested various issues around the world while dressed as handmaids after Margaret Atwood's popular novel was adapted as a web series by Hulu in 2017. Joustra and Wilkinson's book digs into what is behind the stories of apocalyptic television series and