

# Wealth and Commerce in Eastern Christian Thought

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Markets create material prosperity. But does that increase in wealth come with a spiritual cost? The Eastern Orthodox church has long maintained a tradition of thought that is skeptical about wealth and warns of the effect it may have on the state of one's soul. More recently, some contemporary Orthodox theologians have also begun to turn a critical eye toward activities and institutions associated with wealth, namely commerce, trade, and markets. In this article, we will argue that this need not be the case. Drawing upon multiple sources, including pre-Chalcedonian church fathers such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Holy Scripture, and the monastics, we argue that one can distinguish between moral perspectives about wealth and commerce. Specifically, we call attention to an underappreciated tradition of Patristic thought that maintains a cautious optimism about commerce.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Markets create material prosperity. But does that increase in wealth come with a spiritual cost? The Eastern Orthodox Church has long maintained a tradition of thought that is skeptical about wealth and warns of the effect it may have on the state of one's soul. More recently, some contemporary Orthodox theologians have also begun to turn a critical eye toward activities and institutions associated with wealth, namely commerce, trade, and markets. Perhaps the harshest critic is Orthodox philosopher David Bentley Hart, who argues the New Testament condemns obtaining and possessing wealth not just as morally suspect, but as an

*intrinsic evil.*<sup>2</sup> To Hart, all gains, regardless of whether they are obtained through good fortune or industry, are ill-gotten gains.

Other critics, albethey less extreme, include His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. They both express concern over a globalized economy and the effects markets have on the poor, the environment, and the Church. Patriarch Bartholomew, often considered a world leader in environmental theology, has argued that the fundamental cause of the abuse and destruction of the world's natural resources is greed and the unrestrained quest for wealth by citizens in so-called "'developed' nations."<sup>3</sup> He has also said humanity "has succumbed to a theory of development that values production over human dignity and wealth over human integrity."<sup>4</sup> Patriarch Kirill has expressed similar criticisms,<sup>5</sup> stating in a joint statement with Pope Francis that "while the material wealth of humanity increases.... The unrelenting consumerism of some more developed countries is gradually depleting the resources of our planet. The growing inequality in the distribution of material goods increases the feeling of the injustice of the international order that has emerged."<sup>6</sup>

Twentieth-century Orthodox theologians such as Vladimir Soloviev and Sergei Bulgakov have also written about the moral and spiritual issues associated with Christian participation in economic life. Soloviev writes, "The very fact of economic suffering shows that economic relations are not tied to the principle of the moral good as they should be.... In a living society with a future, the economic elements are connected and determined by moral goals."<sup>7</sup> Like Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov also viewed the Christian moral life as bound up in economic activity. The economy is "a function of death."<sup>8</sup> It is also "[t]he struggle against the antagonistic forces of nature ... becoming their master, or proprietor...."<sup>9</sup> Bulgakov's solution to this problem, as Payne and Marsh note, was "for human beings to exercise their freedom to bring about the restoration of fallen creation.... Christianity stresses labor as an act of re-creation and joy, in offering the created world back to the Creator."<sup>10</sup>

These criticisms differ in emphasis and intensity, but they all attempt to identify some moral failure associated with our participation in the wider economy (environmental degradation, inequality, etc.). Wealth, especially the love of wealth, is spiritually dangerous. But should wealth be seen as morally contiguous with economic activities such as trade and commerce? Answering yes makes intuitive sense. After all, beginning in the nineteenth century, commercial activity has created vast amounts of wealth—so much so, in fact, that real GDP per capita has increased at least 3,000 percent in liberal-democratic nations.<sup>11</sup> As such, the

association of wealth and commercial activity has gotten stronger for the last two and a half centuries. To see both as morally dubious is tempting.

In this article, we will argue that this need not be the case. Drawing upon multiple sources, including (1) pre-Chalcedonian church fathers such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus; (2) Holy Scripture; and (3) monastics, we argue that one can distinguish between moral perspectives about wealth and commerce. We call attention to an underappreciated tradition of Patristic thought which maintains a cautious optimism about commerce, and we focus primarily on pre-Chalcedonian sources in order to demonstrate how far back this tradition can be found in Orthodox thought.

The article will proceed as follows: In the first section, we define the terms *wealth* and *commerce*, where we discuss the church fathers' moral and spiritual project in contrast to the explanatory and descriptive project of modern economics. The second section discusses scriptural, Patristic, and monastic sources on wealth and commerce. In the third section, we discuss the implications of our view for the Church today. The final section concludes.

## Wealth and Commerce, Ancient and Modern

Modern economists think about wealth and commerce differently than the church fathers. This is largely because the fundamental aims and methods that define their projects differ in important respects. The project of modern economics is primarily descriptive and explanatory. Milton Friedman succinctly describes this methodological approach in economics, writing, "economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgments.... [I]t deals with 'what is,' not with 'what ought to be.' Its task is to provide a system of generalizations that can be used to make correct predictions about the consequences of any change in circumstances."<sup>12</sup> Of course, no science is value-free. The scientific enterprise itself rests on basic values such as open inquiry, the worthiness of debating ideas, and honesty. Hence this conception of economic theory should not be interpreted reductively. We wish here only to affirm the limited scope of economic theory. As Dylan Pahman notes, "The economist, when faced with an ethical question, can offer cost-benefit analysis, but *as an economist* he or she refrains from outlining a system of morality and making ethical judgments."<sup>13</sup>

The project of the church fathers, in contrast, is primarily normative and evaluative. It is fundamentally pastoral in nature. They are concerned with spiritual questions regarding how wealth or commerce can affect the state of one's soul, or the way in which the faithful Christian ought to live. Neither project, whether it be the explanatory project of the economist or the spiritual project of

the fathers, is comparatively “better” or “worse” because they do not share the same aims or goals.

This is not to say there is no overlap between the two. Just as the fathers discuss topics that are of interest to economists, many economists discuss and disagree publicly on normative issues, especially those related to policy. Economists have also long understood the importance of religion and spirituality in human affairs. For example, Alfred Marshall writes, “Economics ... is on the one side a study of wealth; and on the other, and more important side, a part of the study of man. For man’s character has been moulded by his every-day work, and the material resources which he thereby procures, more than by any other influence unless it be that of his religious ideals; and the two great forming agencies of the world’s history have been the religious and the economic.”<sup>14</sup> Borrowing Marshall’s distinction between the religious and the economic, we can summarize some simple differences between the two. First, economics as a social science is not intended to answer questions about what is right or good. And although econom-*ists* are often vocal about normative issues, econom-*ics* is a descriptive endeavor. Second, although the church fathers are interested in topics such as wealth, poverty, and commerce, their aims are moral in nature insofar as they relate to the Christian spiritual life.

Differences in context should also be kept in mind, especially when comparing ancient and modern thought. Ancient economic reasoning includes several assumptions that are not entirely applicable to the modern world or modern economies. Perhaps the most important one is that ancient authors often assumed the total amount of wealth in the world was fixed. In order for one person to have more, another must have less. For example, John Chrysostom regards the wealthy as being guilty of theft. He likens the rich to “robbers lying in wait on the roads, stealing from passers-by.”<sup>15</sup> Saint Ambrose argues that we do not give our own wealth away to the poor, but rather we are “giving back something of his. For you alone are usurping what was given in common for the use of all.”<sup>16</sup> This kind of world is what economists call a *zero-sum* world. The church fathers did not experience sustained economic growth as we have. This is perhaps why most of the ways to obtain wealth in the ancient world were seen as morally and spiritually suspect. Morally praiseworthy ways to get rich were in short supply.

Moral reasoning in a zero-sum world will inevitably be different than in a world in which economic growth is the norm. However, it would be foolish to dismiss out of hand the church fathers’ insights about wealth as irrelevant. On the contrary, we must extend their insights to our modern context. Moral truths do not become false due to the passage of time.

To discuss the issues of wealth and commerce, we first define our terms. We refer to the free exchange of goods as *commerce*, which we also use synonymously with *trade*. We are interested in exploring commerce not as an activity only performed within the context of modern, well-developed markets, but as a fundamentally human activity that transcends historical contingencies. Adam Smith observed that commerce was “common to all men,” and was manifest in mankind’s “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange.”<sup>17</sup> Exchange is natural and ubiquitous. Because commerce is uniquely human—and not performed in isolation—that any analysis of the morality of commerce carries implications about the way people should live and how they should engage with others. The fruits of commerce—wealth—are bound up in this as well.

But what do we mean by *wealth*? To an economist, the word *wealth* can be used to refer to one of four things. Alchian and Allen provide us with a succinct list of meanings for wealth: “(1) the goods and resources owned by someone; (2) the market value of a set of physical goods, sometimes called assets; (3) the market value of all resources owned minus one’s liabilities, where the excess is net assets, net worth, or equity; [or] (4) human wealth measured by the present capital value of future earnings from personal services.”<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of this article, wealth will not be understood as (2)–(4). Definition (4) is ignored because it is referring to what economists often call “human capital,” a modern concept foreign to what the New Testament authors or church fathers had in mind. For (2) and (3), the market value of a set of goods is determined by the price those assets would command in a market. Reading these definitions back into an ancient worldview is anachronistic.

So wealth in this article is defined as (1); however, this definition can be amended to include a crucial distinction in Orthodox thought, which is that between sufficiency and excess. These concepts are ubiquitous in Scripture as well as the writings of the church fathers. For example, Hennie Stander comments that “[t]he concept of sufficiency versus superfluity runs like a golden thread throughout all the literature of the Patristic authors.”<sup>19</sup> Chrysostom, commenting on how to use our goods “as belonging to others,” instructs us to “use our goods sparingly ... we do not spend them beyond our needs, and do not spend for our needs only, but give equal shares into the hands of the poor. If you are affluent, but spend more than you need, you will give an account of the funds which were entrusted to you.”<sup>20</sup> Basil echoes this sentiment, going as far as to say, “For if we all took what was necessary to satisfy our own needs ... no one would be rich, no one would be poor, and no one would be in need.”<sup>21</sup> The same distinction is found in Scripture.

Warnings in Scripture about excess (1 Tim. 6:10; Luke 12:15) are found alongside exhortations to God to provide that which is necessary for life (Prov. 30:7–9; Phil. 4:19; Matt. 6:25–34). Douglas Meeks notes this when he writes, “[t]he dividing line for defining wealth [in Scripture] is twofold: (1) what is necessary to survive the day and (2) what is necessary to fulfill one’s calling as a child of the covenant or as a disciple of Jesus Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Any amount of material wealth above what is necessary is considered excess. So we can amend our definition of wealth: *wealth* is the goods and resources owned by someone that are sufficient or necessary for them. Thus, excess, or riches, are those goods and resources over and above what is sufficient for a person.

In the next section, we take up the issue of what Eastern Orthodox social thought has to say about wealth and commerce. Specifically, we will attempt to distinguish our perspectives on wealth and commerce by highlighting a tradition of thought which, while remaining skeptical of wealth, displays a cautious optimism about commerce.

## **Commerce in Scripture, the Fathers, and Monastics**

Scripture includes numerous warnings about riches as an obstacle to salvation (Job 31:25; Ps. 48; Luke 16:1–26; James 1:9–11), about the dangers of the love of money (Num. 31:8–24; Prov. 26:18–29; John 12:3–8), and woes to the wealthy (Matt. 13:22; Mark 10:23; 1 Tim. 6:17–18). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says concerning the person who receives the Word of God among thorns, “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful” (Matt. 4:19). This is not a very positive image. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs us that storing up treasures on this earth cuts oneself off from heavenly treasures, emphasizing that “no one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:9; Luke 16:13). Christ warns the wealthy, “woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger” (Luke 6:24–25).

Perhaps the most famous example of Jesus’ teaching on wealth comes from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which chronicles the story of a rich man who ignores a beggar, Lazarus, who lies outside the rich man’s gate in destitution and sickness (Luke 16:19–31). When the men die, Lazarus is carried by angels into heaven while the rich man suffers in flames, illustrating the state of his soul as someone who is merciless. Also illustrative is the Lord’s injunction to the rich young ruler: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21; cf. Matt. 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30). While the Old Testament

contains many examples of God bestowing his blessings upon people through wealth (Gen. 41:2; 1 Chron. 29:12; 2 Chron. 9:22; 17:1–5), material prosperity is not a guarantee of God's favor (Ps. 48; Job 21:23–26).

What does Scripture have to say about commerce? In the Gospels, there are no references that teach directly on the issue of commerce, but there are examples that indirectly address issues of labor, exchange, and commerce that deserve attention.<sup>23</sup> The first is the casting out of the merchants from the temple. This scene is recorded in both the synoptic gospels (Matt. 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48) as well as the Gospel of John (John 2:13–25).<sup>24</sup> In this story, Jesus ejects the money-changers and merchants from the outer area of the temple called the court of Gentiles. A market was set up for Jews to buy and sell sacrificial animals such as cattle and doves, which included stations for Jews to exchange their Roman currency for Jewish shekels. Jewish law required that all temple donations be made in Jewish currency, and this created lucrative opportunities for money changers. Even the high priests, selling doves to lower-class Jews who could not afford more expensive animals, profited from these exchanges.

In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Chrysostom writes, “At one time then He said, that the Temple was made by them ‘a den of thieves,’ showing that what they sold was gotten by theft, and rapine, and covetousness, and that they were rich through other men’s calamities; at another, ‘a house of merchandise,’ pointing to their shameless traffickings.”<sup>25</sup> To Chrysostom, the moral transgression of the Jews selling in the temple was not only that of greed but also of dishonor to God’s house. Saint Augustine interprets this passage similarly, remarking, “It was not a great sin, then, if they sold in the temple that which was bought for the purpose of offering in the temple: and yet He cast them out thence.... [W]hile they were selling what was lawful and not against justice (for it is not unlawful to sell what it is honorable to buy), He nevertheless drove those men out, and suffered not the house of prayer to be made a house of merchandise....”<sup>26</sup> Although Chrysostom and Augustine agree that the merchants were acting unjustly by selling in the temple, Augustine makes clear that buying and selling items related to temple worship is not unjust itself.

It should be noted that many of the apostles, and even Jesus himself, were employed as tradesmen. Jesus and his brother James were employed as carpenters (Mark 6:3; Matt. 13:55). Peter, Andrew, John, and James are all employed as fisherman along with Zebedee, the father of John and James (Matt. 4:18–22; John 21:2–8). We learn in Mark 1:20 that James and John’s fishing enterprise with their father was similar to a business, as it was remunerative enough for them to hire extra laborers. And although Paul accepted financial assistance from those to whom he ministered, we are told that he supported himself by working as a

tentmaker (Acts 18:3). In all these examples, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus and the apostles were engaged in some form of commercial activity to support themselves, selling their wares or their labor.<sup>27</sup> In the case of the apostle Paul, we are told this explicitly. We find no indication that engaging in these trades was morally or spiritually problematic.

Silence can only be so persuasive, however. We know that Jesus and his apostles were not wealthy men as a result of their trade, but what of other Christians who were wealthy as a result of theirs? In Acts 16, we are told of the conversion of Lydia, a dealer in expensive purple cloth:

A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16:14–15 NRSV)

As a dealer in expensive textiles, Lydia is a well-to-do woman with a large enough house to host the missionaries. Comparing her story with that of the rich young ruler, we can see that in the case of the rich ruler, his wealth was a stumbling block in the pursuit of his relationship with God. Lydia, by contrast, was also a person of means, but she worshipped God with pureness of heart and her entire household was baptized. She even offered her home up to Paul, using her wealth for righteous ends. Another well-known example is Joseph of Arimathea, who is described as a rich man and a disciple of Jesus (Matt. 27:57). Although we are never told exactly how he became rich, it is nevertheless significant that he was a close follower of Jesus, who used his resources in a holy way as Lydia did. Perhaps the most important example was that Joseph purchased fine linens to prepare Jesus' body for burial, which the Gospel of Matthew tells us was in his own tomb (Mark 15:42–47; Matt. 27:60).

To summarize up to this point, we have examined a few key examples in Scripture that might give us some insight into a basis for the church's view on commerce. This will serve as the foundation for analyzing the writings of the church fathers.

Turning our attention now to the early fathers of the church, we find a cacophony of opinions on such topics as wealth, exchange, trade, and commerce. Some Patristic scholars argue that the writings of the church fathers, especially John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea, have a negative view toward trade.<sup>28</sup> Stander argues that the church fathers objected to trade on two separate grounds: (1) because trade was driven by a desire for wealth; and (2) because trading



often required or involved lying and other deceptive practices.<sup>29</sup> He notes that agricultural production, which was the dominant form of production at the time, was not generally disapproved of because the labor in it is evident, and other forms of economic activity such as trade (where the labor was not evident) were condemned.<sup>30</sup> Laiou argues on similar grounds. Commenting on Chrysostom's *Homily on Matthew*, 61, she writes,

[T]here is general condemnation of the desire for wealth, especially if it entails the exploitation of others. The model presented is that of autarkic production, and the one thing that justifies economic activity is labor... Exchange or trade is condemned, because the labor involved in it is not evident and because the profession itself is constructed on lies and deception.<sup>31</sup>

There are several important ideas we can identify in these arguments. First, labor is considered the input that determines the economic value of an economic good or activity. This is often referred to by economists as the labor theory of value, which holds that the value of a good is determined by the amount of necessary labor required to produce it. Second, there is a distinction between trade and selling the product of one's labor as, for example, an artisan.<sup>32</sup> As Chrysostom put it,

Come then, let us examine the race of workmen and artisans. For these above all seem to live by honest labors, and the sweat of their own brow. But these too, when they do not take heed to themselves, gather to themselves many evils from hence. For the dishonesty that arises from buying and selling they bring into the work of honest labor, and add oaths, and perjuries, and falsehoods to their covetousness often, and are taken up with worldly things only, and continue riveted to the earth; and while they do all things that they may get money, they do not take much heed that they may impart to the needy, being always desirous to increase their goods.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, by this account an artisan's labor is evident in what he produces, whereas in exchange one's labor is not.

Laiou's analysis is restricted to Chrysostom and Basil, and it is limited insofar as she quotes a single sentence from Basil and relies on one homily to substantiate conclusions about Chrysostom's thought in general.<sup>34</sup> There are more resources in the Patristic witness from which we can draw to investigate their views about commerce, specifically with Chrysostom. Chrysostom appreciates the contribution of trade to the world—especially trade conducted over the sea. Douglas Irwin, in his detailed work on the history of trade, writes that Chrysostom's views on commerce were an example of what has come to

be known as the “doctrine of universal economy.”<sup>35</sup> Jacob Viner describes the doctrine of universal economy as containing four elements of thought: (1) a belief in the universal brotherhood of man; (2) a description of the benefits to mankind from trade and commerce; (3) affirmation that scarce goods are spread across the world; and (4) God intentionally distributes resources across the globe to promote commerce and cooperation between peoples.<sup>36</sup> In his *Letter to the Penitent Stelechius*, Chrysostom echoes the fourth sentiment, arguing that God created the world and seas in such a way as to require people to trade with one another, prevent distance from discouraging friendship, and make the earth as if it were one house inhabited by all:

For, that the length of the way might not deter us from a mutual converse, God has given us a shorter road, the Sea, which lies near every Country; that the world being considered as one house, we may frequently visit one another, and mutually and easily communicate what each country affords peculiar to itself: so that each man who inhabits a small portion of the earth, enjoys whatever is produced elsewhere, as freely as if he were Master of the whole. And, as if we were at a well-furnished table, we need only stretch out our hand and give what stands before us to those who are placed at a distance from us, and in our turn receive from them what stands within their reach.<sup>37</sup>

Here he notes that resources belonging to different regions of the earth are an incentive for men to enjoy the benefits of commerce. The unequal distribution of resources is intentionally part of God’s design for the world, as it allows us to enjoy the blessings of a “well-furnished table.” Chrysostom is echoing the thought of his teacher, the fourth-century Antiochian pagan Libanius.<sup>38</sup> According to Irwin, in his *Orations* Libanius writes that God does not bestow all products on the Earth, but rather he distributes them over different regions “[i]n order to force men to have social relationships with one another, and that they might need the help of other people. This was, as Libanius believed, the reason that commerce was called into being.”<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, Chrysostom was not the only student of Libanius that shared a positive view of commerce. Basil of Caesarea wrote that the sea

is good in the eyes of God, because it girdles the isles, of which it forms at the same time the rampart and the beauty, because it brings together the most distant parts of the earth, and facilitates the inter-communication of mariners. By this means it gives us the boon of general information, supplies the merchant with his wealth, and easily provides for the necessities of life ... and blessing the poor with the supply of what they lack.<sup>40</sup>

Basil acknowledges the ability of commerce to “remedy the wants” of the poor, although he still understands commerce can be used by the wealthy to export their “superfluous” goods.

One may look to two more Christian theologians who had positive remarks about commerce conducted by sea. Ambrose of Milan, writing around the year 389, says, “The sea is good . . . as a carrier of merchandise, thereby linking distant people together.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Theodoret, archbishop of Cyrus and a student of Chrysostom, states in his *Discourse on Providence*:

For the Creator, wishing to instill harmony into human beings, made them depend on one another for various needs. For this reason we make long voyages on the sea, seek our needs from others, and bring back cargoes of what we want; nor has providence allocated to each section of the earth all the needs of mankind lest self-sufficiency should militate against friendship. Accordingly the sea lies in the center of the earth, divided into countless bays like the marketplace of a huge city, providing an abundance of every necessity, and receives many sellers and buyers and brings them from one place to another and back again.<sup>42</sup>

The frequent imagery of the sea joining mankind together as one is a powerful one, and it demonstrates that there was an appreciation for the benefits of trade across the world. The sea does not provide merely an avenue for human fellowship, but this fellowship is inspired by the need for us to trade with one another. Without the need for trade, or the need to bring goods from one place to another where there are none, it is unclear what purpose the sea would serve. As Libanius and Chrysostom noted, the unequal distribution of resources across the world is part of God’s plan.

There is a frequent acknowledgement among these Patristic authors of a cautiously optimistic attitude regarding exchange. Commerce and trade, especially on the sea, can bring humans together and ensure their cooperation. And it is through this cooperation that God expresses his providence. The image of the earth as one home, as one house which is inhabited by all of mankind, communicates a message of not only an economic appreciation for the benefits of commerce but also one of fellowship between peoples. In his commentary on Job 26:10,<sup>43</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus writes, “This is the chain of fluid nature. And how doth He bring upon it the Nautilus that inhabits the dry land (i.e., man) in a little vessel, and with a little breeze (dost thou not marvel at the sight of this,—is not thy mind astonished?), that earth and sea may be bound together by needs and commerce, and that things so widely separated by nature should be thus brought together into one for man?”<sup>44</sup> Here Gregory notes that the earth is bound together

“by needs and commerce” *for human beings*. The provision of need is one of the purposes for commerce, which is made possible by the sea. This theme is a recurring one from the sources we have examined here, and they paint a much different picture from the image of traders we saw before. Commerce here is appreciated as something intended by God for the benefit of humankind, so that we may come together in a kind of fellowship. The need to trade with one another expresses an occasion for us to meet the needs of our fellow man, and in doing so, act in accordance with God’s will.

These poetic expressions of the benefits of commerce are incongruent with an interpretation of the Fathers that regards them as condemning trade outright and without qualification. There is evidence that we can be optimistic about commerce while remaining cautious about the possible pitfalls it may pose to individuals who engage in it. The question of how, then, we engage in commerce in a spiritually edifying way is a question we take up in the next section. Before we do that, however, we will briefly discuss how a very special kind of Christian engaged in trade: monastics.

Here we turn our attention to the writings of the desert fathers and the views contained in the writings of the Eastern monastics. Specifically, we will be focusing on those passages located in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Monastics are important because their lives are dedicated to the ascetic ideal. This meant that they took the Church’s teaching on wealth and lived it out to its extreme, taking on poverty willingly. As Fr. Daniel Payne notes,

with the development of Christian monasticism in the fourth century, a more literal understanding of Christ’s injunction to sell all of one’s goods and give them to the poor and to follow him was appropriated.... This radical renunciation of wealth became the ideal to the prophetic witness of the eschatological Kingdom of God on earth. The hermits and monastics of the desert became the evangelical witnesses of the higher way of living the Christian life. By interpreting Christ’s injunction to the rich young ruler literally, the monastic movement demonstrated that salvation came through detachment from material wealth.<sup>45</sup>

The poverty of monastics should not be understood as taking on a life of destitution, though. The asceticism of Eastern monastics is most aptly characterized as being centered around the notion of necessity and sufficiency.<sup>46</sup> Helen Rhee, a scholar of the socioeconomics of the early church, writes that monastic poverty was “patterned after economic self-sufficiency.”<sup>47</sup> The desert fathers embodied the same notion of necessity expounded by Chrysostom and Basil. The way they often achieved self-sufficiency was through commerce, making and selling wares

they produced themselves. This is well documented. The history of monasticism in both the East as well as the West is inextricable from commerce and trade.

Perhaps the most well-known collection of stories of monastics is *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, which records the wisdom of Christian hermits and ascetics of the fourth and fifth centuries. It is widely regarded as a source of spiritual wisdom for Eastern Orthodox Christians. A careful reading of the text reveals almost a dozen references to monks selling goods they have produced to support themselves or raise money for the poor. In book 6 of the Latin version, which deals with poverty, there is a particularly illuminating account of monks who find it spiritually difficult to sell their wares in the market. Abba Pistamon responds,

A brother said to Abba Pistamon: “What am I to do? I find it painful to sell what I make.” Abba Pistamon replied: “Abba Siosis and others used to sell what they made. There is no harm in this. When you sell anything, say straight out the price of the goods. If you want to lower the price a little, you may—and so you will find rest.” The brother said: “I have enough for my needs from other sources, do you think I need worry about making things to sell?” The old man answered: “However much you have, do not stop making things, do as much as you can provided that the soul is undisturbed.”<sup>48</sup>

In this account, we see that the selling of goods was not considered evil in and of itself. Abba Pistamon tells the young monks that there is “no harm” in doing so. Interestingly enough, rather than telling them to stop selling their goods, he advises them to continue producing their wares as long as doing so leaves the soul undisturbed and they honestly price their goods. There is also the implication that the buying and selling of goods by monks was common, as Abba Pistamon refers to the fact that “Abba Siosis and others” also sold the goods they make.

Monks would often draw a distinction between the poverty and possessions of anchorite monks and those cenobitic monks in possession of corporate wealth. As Daniel Craner also notes, “scholars who encounter the impressive remains of certain early Byzantine monasteries still sometimes express surprise at what appears to be a departure from the strict ideology of ascetic poverty depicted in early monastic literature, like the *Life of Antony* or ‘Sayings of the Desert Fathers.’”<sup>49</sup> This image of monastic enterprise is not consistent with the view that commerce is intrinsically evil. It is also important to note that implicit in this account there are familiar commercial themes. The monks not only own and produce their goods, but they also own the revenues associated with their sale, and we know from other references in the *Desert Fathers* that monastics would use the profits derived from the sale of their goods to support and feed themselves as well as the poor.<sup>50</sup>

## Implications for a Modern Church

The church fathers examined in this essay occupy a special place in the history of the church. After Constantine's victory in 312 at the Milvian Bridge and the subsequent recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire with the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 AD, the church's presence was no longer that of a persecuted minority. The church was publicly recognized to own lands, receive financial assistance from the state, and was exempt from taxation. As Helen Rhee notes,

[The] joint edict of toleration with Licinius (the so-called Edict of Milan, 313 CE) officially acknowledged what had been a *de facto* reality of the church's ownership of buildings, cemeteries, gardens, and other movable and immovable properties throughout the third century by ordering their restoration. Then he granted the churches and bishops financial assistance (3,000 folles) that would turn into regular support and clerical exemption from all compulsory public services and personal taxes so that they could devote themselves to worshipping their God on behalf of their communities and the empire.<sup>51</sup>

The church acted as an intermediary between the poor and the wealthy since the church assumed the role of caring for the poor. As such, "Constantine made the church not only officially visible (much more so than before) but also accountable to the public for the very public gifts it received."<sup>52</sup> The rhetoric of the church's teachers was shaped by this massive change in the church's visibility and social status. There was no "watering down" of the church's message; rich and poor alike were not relieved of their duties of almsgiving and charity. Nevertheless, teachings on wealth and commerce, especially that of Chrysostom and Basil, responded to the needs and interests of a changing social reality.

This is perhaps why many of the pre-Chalcedonian Patristic authors adopted such harsh rhetoric against the use and abuse of wealth. Riches and the fruits of creation (i.e., wealth) pose a danger to those who possess them; and it is very tempting to misuse them. This is why St. Chrysostom says, "Let your riches be justly gained, and without rapine."<sup>53</sup> If we act as a proper steward of the wealth we are given, distributing the excess to the poor, then we use it wisely. However, when it comes to the way we make money, the fathers disapprove of those who sought profits at the expense of others. Commerce, as an activity by which wealth can be created, was looked upon with some suspicion. Nevertheless, as we have shown, there is a tradition of thought where commerce is also praised for the blessings it bestows upon humanity.

We are required therefore to become proper stewards of these material blessings. Perhaps the earliest commentator on the issue of stewardship is Clement of Alexandria. Clement's *Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* is, as Jaroslav Pelikan notes, "unique" and "isolated" as it is the only work of a pre-Nicene Father to directly address the problem of a Christian stewardship of money.<sup>54</sup> Pelikan notes that the concrete and practical implications of Clement's view on wealth can be outlined as a set of specific principles found in the following passage:

For he who holds possessions, and gold, and silver, and houses, as the gifts of God; and ministers from them to the God who gives them for the salvation of men; and knows that he possesses them more for the sake of the brethren than his own; and is superior to the possession of them, not the slave of the things he possesses; and does not carry them about in his soul, nor bind and circumscribe his life within them, but is ever labouring at some good and divine work, even should he be necessarily some time or other deprived of them, is able with cheerful mind to bear their removal equally with their abundance.<sup>55</sup>

There are five principles Pelikan identifies: (1) money is not intrinsically evil, since it is a gift from God; (2) men are free to use these gifts (money et al.) for "the God who gives them for the salvation of men"; (3) God grounds Christian stewardship in the incarnation of Christ, who in turn requires that we discharge this obligation for the "sake of our brethren"; (4) Christians should give and possess money in such a way as to avoid becoming enslaved to it; and (5) the Christian is one who does not carry their wealth or riches about in their soul, but they can "bear their removal equally with their abundance."<sup>56</sup>

These principles all fall nicely under the definition of stewardship offered by Fr. Robert Holet, who defines it "as a right and holy human interaction with other human beings and with creation itself, carried out as a fruit of humankind's relationship with God."<sup>57</sup> In the Orthodox tradition, stewardship is understood in light of *oikonomia*, which is "a mode of responsible servanthood by one who is lesser, in service of one who is greater."<sup>58</sup> In this context, stewardship is holistic, as it encompasses the spiritual dimension of man and makes it preeminent. It is primarily practiced by the act of offering, or giving back to God and those around us. This especially includes the fruits and material blessings we receive as a result of our labor.

Labor and commerce, though, are not performed in a vacuum. Neither is wealth created in a vacuum. Economists today specifically refer to wealth *creation* to emphasize the now distinct economic realities in which we find ourselves. The church fathers did not have much experience with economic growth. In fact, we

often forget exactly how stark the differences are between our world and theirs. Global productivity has increased by a factor of at least 1,550 percent since the nineteenth century.<sup>59</sup> This is not to say that we can dismiss what the church fathers had to say because they did not witness economic growth. But it is not absurd to recognize that one will reason differently in a positive-sum world, where persons can become wealthier without anyone else becoming poorer.

Again, our escape from a zero-sum world does not blunt the church fathers' forceful arguments about the effects of wealth on virtue. Commercial activity—producing and consuming wealth—presupposes a social context, and all of us participate in an overlapping space where households, civic organizations, governments, and markets meet. The question is how to navigate and conduct ourselves in this space. In practice, we all belong to moral communities with particular, fundamental normative beliefs and rules that govern ethical behavior. For Orthodox Christians, the highest moral authority in our community is the church. The church is the place in which commerce can be transformed. It is where we learn to use the fruits of creation well, and it is the arena in which ascetical struggle contends against wealth-induced vices.

We rely on institutions such as the church to regulate and guide our behavior. Commerce, given its fundamentally social character, falls under the sphere of the church's guidance. We need not reject commerce because it is a source of wealth, but given its essentially human character, it must be offered up to the church for sanctification. The church can transform our economic lives and our personal lives to give us moral guidance on the use of our labor's fruits. Ultimately, as Christians and members of the church, we should follow the advice of the church fathers and submit to the church's role as the continuing presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit, from which she derives her authority over faith and morals. This includes the proper practice of commercial activity and the right use of its fruits, that is, wealth. Attempting to create an empty space between markets and the household will not help our relationships with one another. Improper uses of wealth, as St. Basil reminds us, often take the form of disobeying our most holy obligation: to love one another as God loves us.

## Conclusion

In this article we have argued that the church's pessimism toward wealth did not uncritically extend to commerce. There is an underappreciated tradition from the pre-Chalcedonian Fathers of the church characterized by the notion that: (1) wealth is not intrinsically evil, but should be approached with an attitude of skepticism regarding its dangers; and (2) this view can be combined with an at-



titude of cautious optimism toward commerce, where the church governs and directs our proper use of wealth. To defend these claims, we surveyed the writings of several influential Patristic authors, including monastic sources, and detailed their respective views on wealth and commerce. We conclude that despite the reality of the ever-present dangers and temptations associated with wealth and commerce, these inescapably human features of creation cannot be totally condemned. Christians must treat the production and distribution of goods as something that occurs within the church and for the church.

## Notes

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2. See David Bentley Hart, ed., “Introduction,” in *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), xxvi.
3. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, ed. John Chryssavgis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 344.
4. Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven*, 33.
5. For examples of ecclesial statements on economic justice and social issues, see, e.g., David Bentley Hart and John Chyrssavgis, eds., *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, 2020, <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos/>; Russian Orthodox Church Department of External Church Relations, *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, 2000, <https://old.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/>.
6. Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis, “Meeting of His Holiness Pope Francis with His Holiness Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia: Signing of the Joint Declaration,” The Vatican, February 12, 2016, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160212\\_dichiarazione-comune-kirill.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/february/documents/papa-francesco_20160212_dichiarazione-comune-kirill.html).
7. Vladimir Soloviev, *Vladimir Solov’ev’s Justification of the Moral Good*, ed. Thomas Nemeth (New York: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2015), 292–93.
8. Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. Catherine Evtuhov, Russian Literature and Thought (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 73.

9. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 73.
10. Daniel P. Payne and Christopher Marsh, “Sergei Bulgakov’s ‘Sophic’ Economy: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective on Christian Economics,” *Faith & Economics* 53 (2009): 47.
11. See Maddison Project Database 2020 et al., “Maddison style estimates of the evolution of the world economy. A new 2020 update,” 2020, <https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-project-database-2020>.
12. Milton Friedman, “The Methodology of Positive Economics,” in *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 4.
13. Dylan Pahman, “Deification and the Dismal Science: On Orthodox Theology and Economics,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 61, no. 3–4 (2016): 37.
14. Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics*, 8th ed. (London: MacMillan and Co., 1920), 6.
15. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2020), 15.
16. Ambrose of Milan, *S. Ambrosii De Nabuthae, a Commentary, with an Introduction and Translation*, trans. Martin R. P. McGuire (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1927).
17. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vol. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1976), 1:24 (1.2.1–2).
18. Armen A. Alchian, William R. Allen, and Jerry L. Jordan, *Universal Economics* (Carmel, Indiana: Liberty Fund, 2018), 516.
19. Hennie Stander, “Economics in the Church Fathers,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, ed. Paul Oslington (Oxford University Press, 2014), 22–43, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199729715.013.011>.
20. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, 49.
21. St. Basil the Great, *On Social Justice*, trans. C. Paul Schroeder, Popular Patristics Series 38. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 69.
22. M. Douglas Meeks, “Economics in the Christian Scriptures,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, ed. Paul Oslington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199729715.013.011>.
23. The parables of Jesus frequently refer to commerce or commercial themes but typically do so as a way of illustrating broader spiritual or moral lessons. They should not be understood as lessons about whether specific commercial practices are licit or illicit.

24. The synoptic gospels differ from St. John's Gospel insofar as the synoptic gospels describe Jesus cleansing the temple before the fourth Passover of his public ministry, while John describes Jesus casting out the merchants before the first Passover of his ministry. See Archbishop Averky (Taushev) and Nicholas Kotar, *The Four Gospels*, vol. 1, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament (Jordanville, New York: Holy Trinity Seminary Press, 2015), 171–73.
25. John Chrysostom, "Homily XXIII on John 2:11–20," in *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John*, in *NPNF*<sup>1</sup> 14:369.
26. Augustine of Hippo, "Tractate X," in *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John*, in *NPNF*<sup>1</sup> 7:70.
27. Jesus, as a carpenter, would have likely been engaged in more than just woodworking. It is likely that he would have also been employed as a builder, sometimes with stone, partaking in manual building on a number of different sites. See Craig A. Evans, "Context, Family and Formation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14. See also Daryn Graham, "Carpentry and Vocation During Jesus' Lost Years," *Vox Reformata: Australasian Journal for Christian Scholarship* 81 (2016): 81–128. Furthermore, given the limited amount of work that would have been available to Joseph and Jesus in Nazareth, some scholars offer the theory that Jesus would have worked on sites in the wealthy Roman cities close to Nazareth, namely Sepphoris and Tiberias. For further discussion, see Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, vol. 8 (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1986).
28. See, e.g., Stander, "Economics in the Church Fathers"; Angeliki Laiou, "Trade, Profit, and Salvation in the Late Patristic and the Byzantine Period," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman, Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 243–64.
29. See Stander, "Economics in the Church Fathers," 31.
30. See Stander, "Economics in the Church Fathers," 31:  
trade is for obvious reasons an important aspect of economy. But not all the Church Fathers approved of commercial activities. In the case of agriculture and manufacturing, an individual's labor is evident. However, in the case of trade, one's own input is not that clear, and it is difficult to see how trade is linked to labor. The Church Fathers, therefore, had two main objections to trade. The first argument against trade was that it was driven by covetousness and an eagerness to acquire wealth (Tertullian, *Idolatry* xi). In a world where economic independence or self-sufficiency was the order of the day, there was no place for abundance and superfluity. The second argument against trade was that it is based on deception. It was believed that merchants deceived those who purchased merchandise from them, as well as exploiting the misery of poor and hungry people.

31. Laiou, "Trade, Profit, and Salvation," 246.
32. See Laiou, "Trade, Profit, and Salvation in the Late Patristic and the Byzantine Period," 246.
33. John Chrysostom, "Homily LXI," in *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, in *NPNF*<sup>1</sup> 10:359. See also Laiou, "Trade, Profit, and Salvation," 246.
34. Although this article is limited to Eastern Christian thought, there are numerous Western Church fathers who, although hesitant about the dangers and temptations associated with trade, do not condemn trade as evil in and of itself. See, e.g. Augustine, "Psalm LXXI," in *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, in *NPNF*<sup>1</sup> 8:315–26; Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 11, in *ANF* 3:67–68; Ambrose, *On the Duties of the Clergy*, 3.2.10, in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 10:69.
35. Douglas A. Irwin, *Against the Tide: An Intellectual History of Free Trade* (Princeton University Press, 2020).
36. See Jacob Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order: An Essay in Intellectual History* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1972), chap. 2. See also Douglas A. Irwin, *Against the Tide: An Intellectual History of Free Trade* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 15.
37. John Chrysostom, *Letter to the Penitent Stelechius*, trans. J Bareille, vol. 1, *Oeuvres complètes de S. Jean Chrysostome* (Paris, France: Library of Louis Vives, 1865), 143.
38. Irwin, *Against the Tide*, 16.
39. Irwin, *Against the Tide*, 16.
40. Basil the Great, "Homily IV," in *Hexæmeron*, in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 8:72–75. See also in Irwin, *Against the Tide*, 16.
41. Irwin, *Against the Tide*, 16.
42. Irwin, *Against the Tide*, 16.
43. "He has described a circle on the face of the waters, at the boundary between light and darkness" (Job 26:10 NRSV).
44. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration XXVIII: The Second Theological Oration," 26, in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 7:298.
45. Daniel P. Payne, "Eastern Orthodoxy's Theology of Economics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, ed. Paul Oslington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 199, <https://doi.org/10.1093/xfordhb/9780199729715.013.011>.

46. See Dylan Pahman, “Markets and Monasticism: A Survey & Appraisal of Eastern Christian Monastic Enterprise,” in *Orthodox Monasticism Past and Present*, ed. John A. McGuckin (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015), 535–62, <https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463236656-035>.
47. Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2012), 184.
48. *The Sayings of the Fathers*, in *Western Asceticism*, ed. Owen Chadwick, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 12 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 38.
49. Daniel Caner, “Wealth, Stewardship, and Charitable ‘Blessings’ in Early Byzantine Monasticism,” in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman, Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 222.
50. See *The Sayings of the Fathers*, 37, 111.
51. Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 179.
52. Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 180.
53. John Chrysostom, “Homily XII: 1 Timothy iv. 1–3,” in *Homilies on 1 Timothy*, in *NPNF<sup>1</sup> 13:444–48*.
54. Jaroslav Pelikan, “Stewardship of Money in the Early Church: A Close Reading of Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved by Clement of Alexandria,” in *Good and Faithful Servant: Stewardship in the Orthodox Church*, ed. Anthony Scott (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 20–24.
55. Clement of Alexandria, *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 16, in *ANF 2:595*.
56. Pelikan, “Stewardship of Money,” 20–24.
57. Robert Holet, *The First and Finest: Orthodox Christian Stewardship as Sacred Offering* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2013), 3.
58. Holet, *The First and Finest*, 39.
59. Maddison Project Database 2020 et al., “Maddison style estimates of the evolution of the world economy. A new 2020 update,” 2020, <https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-project-database-2020>.