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Money, Poverty and Human Flourishing

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Christopher A. Franks, *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas's Economic Teachings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

Christianity can feel like a bit of a tightrope walk: being “in the world,” but not “of” it indicates to us that there is a fundamental tension Christians encounter and experience when it comes to the world. Does “the world” mean temptation, persecution, and humiliation? (Yes.) Or does it mean the truth, goodness, and beauty of creation, the joy of relationships, the wonder of being at all? (Also yes.) All Christians’ actions are thoroughly colored by this tension.

The response to this tension often tends in two seemingly opposite directions: (1) run away from the world and close oneself off from an increasingly hostile culture or (2) accept the world whole-cloth, and perhaps sprinkle one’s Christianity’s on top in the form of holidays and rituals, but never in a penetrating way. Notice above I wrote that these two tendencies are *seemingly* opposed; upon closer inspection, we find that they share the same metaphysical root: neither thinks Christianity can actually engage with the world in any meaningful way. That is, neither of these responses to the fundamental Christian tension actually believes that Christianity can transform the world. So we come upon one of the oldest and most profound questions at the heart of being a Christian: do Christianity and the world ultimately have anything to do with each other?

This very question lies behind Christopher A. Franks’s excellent book, *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas's Economic Teachings*. Franks looks at the question of the relationship between Christianity and the world through the lens of money and poverty to great effect, and in doing so, also gives a fine recapitulation of both Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s understanding of money and economics, as well as offering a correction to those who misinterpret Thomas as a proto-capitalist. But most of all, Franks shows the intrinsic connection between the evangelical counsel of poverty—which seems, in a way, superhuman, and therefore impossible—and what it means to live in this world.

Regarding the position that views Thomas and his economic theory as precursors to a capitalist economy, Franks dismantles it, explaining, first of all, that the word “economy” has taken on a new meaning: when we say “economy” we refer to a “market economy,” which Franks defines as fostering “a construal of nature in which human claims to secure welfare from raw materials seem to be prior to any external order” (36). The key here is what “nature” and “order” mean. For both Thomas and his predecessor, Aristotle, an individual’s welfare and security is entirely bound up with the welfare and security of the greater community, which in turn grows out of a natural order. To understand either Aristotle’s or Aquinas’s economic teaching, it is key to see that both understand “how fitting it is for humans to have a sense of the priority of their membership in a natural order that precedes them” (41). To say that we have lost this sense in our modern liberal society would be an understatement.

A non-market economy, which recognizes a natural order which both precedes and, I would argue, exceeds it, will naturally affect how we understand money. In its explicit or implicit recognition of what is natural, a non-market economy will also recognize that nature can only sustain what it generates, and thus will have built-in limits. In short, “only the acquisition that is limited by what is required for human sustenance is natural” (43). Franks assures us that this does not mean a life of mere subsistence, for nature never intends subsistence, but rather *flourishing*. Still, limits are necessary for this flourishing. In this case, money is just a stand-in for those things that allow man to flourish within the natural and communal order. That is to say, money is not valuable in itself (which to our liberal ears sounds almost oxymoronic), but only inasmuch as it replaces the “use value” of a particular concrete thing. In a non-market economy, therefore, money is tightly bound to concrete things found in nature (and made by man), which in turn have natural and easily visible limits.

In a market economy, on the other hand, money is not intrinsically tied to nature since neither is the economy itself, and so money takes on value *in itself*. Because neither the economy nor money is tied to anything natural, the acquisition of money is the telos of human activity rather than the flourishing of man and his community. Here, money is the goal instead of the means, and it has “exchange value.” The perversion of the value of money from use to exchange has profound implications, none of which I can address here, but the crucial point is that every time Aquinas writes about money, he is thinking of something very different from what we know today.

So then, does Thomas, like Aristotle, think the key to human flourishing is simply to acquire wealth to make one’s life comfortable within reason and operate an economy according to natural limits? Here Franks points out another common mistake when it comes to the Angelic Doctor: interpreting him as if he is simply Aristotle baptized. To be sure, Aristotle’s teachings on money and the economy are a solid foundation, but as with so many other of his philosophical insights, they must be completely transformed from the inside out once looked at with the light of Christ.

Franks calls the understanding of economy as intrinsically linked to nature an Aristotelian deference, but in Thomas, this is transformed and “deepened into an acknowledgment of our fundamental ontological poverty before God” (105). Here, as with all of his work, Thomas’s thoughts revolve around the double foci of the ontology of creation and the cross of Christ. These two poles—ultimately unreachable to Aristotle—shape all of his thought, even what we might begin to call his “economic theory.”

While Aristotle recommends deference to nature, Thomas implores Christians to abandon themselves into the hands of God. While Thomas’s understanding of the world does not exclude nature and its limits, it can also reach further back, to the Creator himself. Now, how does this affect Thomas’s understanding of money, and how to use it? At first glance, in comparison to Aristotle, not all that much: our societies should still reflect the natural order, our money should still be valued in terms of use, and our activity should still be directed toward human flourishing. However, now we have this sticky situation of the evangelical counsels, one of which is to imitate the poverty of Christ. What are we to do with that?

Notice what’s at stake here: is every Christian (and, therefore, hopefully every person) called to live as Christ did, giving up all material possessions and simply trusting in the Lord to provide? This seems untenable and, in fact, seems to ignore the natural order and limits of the world—after all, even Christ relied on those people who were not poor. But is the only other option that the counsels are only for the select few, having nothing to do with most Christians (and, therefore, most of humanity)? This seems implausible as well, if we are all called to be like Christ.

We have an echo here of the dialectic I presented above: it seems unnatural for every person to practice the evangelical counsels, and it seems unchristian to say that the evangelical counsels, including poverty, don't have anything to do with living a normal Christian life. Franks reminds us here that the evangelical counsels are not, in fact, ends in themselves, but rather, like all things in Christian life, an aid for virtue. The counsels, says Franks, help to specify a mature perfection of Christian virtue; however, "they are neither sufficient nor necessary for perfection" (127). According to Thomas, the counsels—including poverty—are always ordered to charity, that is, the love of God. But charity involves other things as well, including deference to nature and community, and an acknowledgment of one's vocation, both of which would help one to determine whether practicing the evangelical counsels to the fullest is his correct path. In short, to pursue poverty as an end in itself instead of as a means for charity is almost as bad as the perversion of pursuing money as an end in itself.

What, then, do the counsels have to say about living the world? Surely they are not totally disconnected from most Christians, called as we all are to be like Christ? The evangelical counsels are the inner form of all Christian life, meaning they *inform* all of our activity, and of course, what human flourishing means. In the case of poverty, it is there as a constant reminder of what is true about us *ontologically*: that we are creatures, called out of nothing by He Who Is. A certain amount of material poverty and precarity is then appropriate to every Christian (albeit in differing forms). While Aristotle calls for deference to nature, which would include the acquisition of a certain amount of wealth so as not to burden society with one's own neediness, Christians are called to trust in the Lord, which may include neediness, weakness, and even humiliation. The fundamental disposition of the creature is gratitude, but also confidence: confidence that his Creator will never abandon him and that he—the creature—will always be cared for. He who creates us out of nothing will never let us return to it—but he will ask more of us than we thought we naturally contained. In this sense, Christians do disregard nature and its limits—but only in order to surpass it.

Thus, Franks helps us realize that part of the tension of Christianity is not to ignore the world or simply accept it as is, but—in and through our gratitude and confidence—to transform it. It is only through an ontological poverty (which includes, but is not limited to, material poverty) that this transformation can occur. And it is the poverty of Christ—his trust in the Father to the point of death—that is the fullest expression and fulfillment of the profound meaning of creatureliness.

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