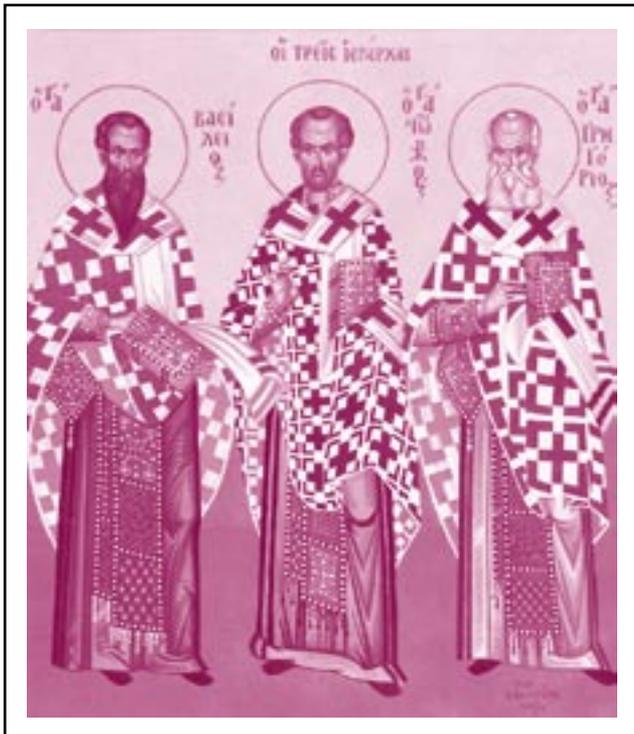


Father James Thornton

# WEALTH & POVERTY

in the Teachings of  
the Church Fathers



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FATHER JAMES THORNTON

**WEALTH AND POVERTY**

**in**

**the Teachings of the  
Church Fathers**



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . . 9

Chapter

I Wealth and Poverty in the Age of the Fathers . . . 20

II The Theological Foundation of Patristic  
Social Teaching . . . . . 50

III The Voice of the Fathers on Wealth  
and Poverty . . . . . 64

IV Philanthropy in Græco-Roman Society . . . . 129

V Patristic Philanthropy in the Modern Age . . . 141

Bibliography . . . . . 154

Index of Names . . . . . 166

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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary tradition-minded Christians are frequently critical of the society in which they live. They believe that our modern, rootless, commercially-oriented culture is filled with selfishness, contempt for life, obsessions about money and material things, and a general falling away from any sincere regard for values and concepts of a transcendent nature—values and concepts which, for the most part, our forebears held in high esteem.

Despite its emphasis on things transcendent and the social criticism of today's traditional Christians, however, it would be wrong to assume that the contemporary Church, by advocating social activism, is suddenly interjecting itself into the midst of such issues for the purpose of responding *tardily* to an agenda which, at least in recent centuries, has seemed to be primarily the domain of the forces of secularism. Rather, social concerns are as old as the Faith itself. The very structure of the Church witnesses to this. The Orthodox theologian Savvas Agourides wrote some years ago that, "...in the dogma about the Church as the family of God, Orthodoxy expresses the deepest social character of its message. We don't find this family character of the Church only in the theology of the Fathers, but also in Orthodox worship and art."<sup>1</sup> This view of Christianity as a family dates from the Church's earliest days.<sup>2</sup> Father Georges Florovsky has stated the concept succinctly: "Christianity is essentially a social religion."<sup>3</sup> Concern for the moral and

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<sup>1</sup> Savvas Agourides, "The Social Character of Orthodoxy," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 8, (Summer 1962-Winter 1962-3), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Igino Giordani, *The Social Message of the Early Fathers*, trans. Alba Zizzama (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1977), 122.

<sup>3</sup> Georges Florovsky, "The Social Problem in the Eastern Orthodox Church," chap. in *Christianity and Culture*, vol. 2, *The Collected Works of*

social health of society is by no means a recent discovery of secular ideologues and theorists, but is, rather, one of the very fundamentals of the Church's heritage. The Holy Gospels themselves demonstrate that such concern was present from the inception of Christianity. Furthermore, Eastern Christians, particularly, can look back on an impressive history in this regard. That history is centered in the period some characterize as a "golden age" of the Church Fathers. It is by no coincidence that this same "golden age" corresponds to the period in which the pagan Roman Empire was transformed, in quite dramatic circumstances, into what modern historians call the Later or Christian Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup> Christian social teaching came to be part of that Empire, as one result of this Christian metamorphosis.

Except among the ancient Hebrews, and for certain periods in ancient Egyptian history, the concepts of organized assistance for the poor, based on an ethical foundation, and of philanthropy, in the modern sense of these terms, were unknown to the ancient Mediterranean world.<sup>5</sup> An authority in this field notes that organized,

*Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1974), 131.

<sup>4</sup> Some historians distinguish between the "Later Roman Empire" and the "Byzantine Empire." This, we believe, is an artificial distinction. The two are simply different titles for the same empire. In fact, the term "Byzantine" is quite modern. With the accession to the throne of St. Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century, with his conversion to Christianity, and with his moving of the imperial capital east to Constantinople, all of the elements that came to characterize what we today call the Byzantine Empire were in place. To distinguish between pagan and Christian Rome has a certain legitimacy. However, distinctions between a Latin-speaking "Later" or "Christian Roman Empire" and a Greek-speaking "Byzantine Empire" are imaginary and the product either of Western polemical writing or sheer ignorance. Certainly, until the very end of Byzantium in the fifteenth century, the inhabitants of the Empire considered themselves Romans, the heirs not only of St. Constantine, but indeed of Romulus and Remus. By their Turkish conquerors they were always called "the Roman Nation." See Arthur Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 10-22.

<sup>5</sup> A. R. Hands, *Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca, NY:

voluntary assistance for the poor in pre-Christian Græco-Roman society was never well developed, but always somewhat ephemeral in nature and founded on a wholly different philosophical and moral base than that which held forth after the conversion of the Empire to Christianity: "What was current [in the pre-Christian era] could not be compared to what we encounter in the Græco-Christian civilization of the Byzantine world—well organized philanthropy, spontaneous expression of selfless love and compassion, church- or privately- or state-organized institutions."<sup>6</sup> The historian Glanville Downey comments similarly: "In the days of the pagan Roman Empire it was felt, as one of the accepted facts of life, that the state and its secular authorities, both local and imperial, had no responsibility for the systematic relief of poverty and unemployment, or for the medical care of the sick poor."<sup>7</sup> Thus, it was left to Christianity to expand and universalize such concepts and to carry them far beyond their former highly limited, narrowly ethnocentric frontiers. This was, of course, only natural, given the requirements set down in the teachings of Jesus Christ in the New Testament in this regard. One might say that what Christ taught, what the Gospels conveyed, and what the Church Fathers exhorted the new Christian society struggled to achieve.

We must keep in mind that it would be a mistake, in studying the writings and teachings of the Eastern Church Fathers, especially, to look for a cohesive and developed set of socio-political theories, or to search for endorsements favorable to one or more of the ideologies which dominate thought in the present-day world. They are not there.<sup>8</sup>

Cornel University Press, 1968), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1968), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Glanville Downey, *Antioch in the Age of Theodosius the Great* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 119.

What is there is a sharp critique of many features of the society of that time, of needless suffering, of extravagance, and of certain injustices. Proposed solutions to these problems we find grounded, in this age, on an entirely Christian *Weltanschauung* and focused on men, not on systems. These solutions grow organically from the rich soil of the Holy Scriptures and anticipate, without optimistic delusion or Manichean dualism, the stark reality of a fallen world sunk deeply in sin and at odds with God's plan for mankind.

Nor should one expect that this Christian society, in which the Eastern Church Fathers were the principal inspiration in matters of ethics and values, was entirely successful in its application of Patristic social teaching. Certainly Byzantine society contained its share of both poverty and extravagance. But one may maintain that, in so far as the Patristic message permeated sundry areas of Græco-Roman society and genuinely transformed them, to that extent it was successful in implementing a new approach to the social problems of the time. Indeed, to that very extent it remains a feature of ancient life especially worthy of thorough exploration.

There is little question that for many centuries neither the Eastern Church nor the Christian Byzantine Empire has received fair treatment by Western historians. "In the whole annals of the world's history there has survived the record of no civilization which has been subject to such conscious misinterpretation as the Byzantine."<sup>9</sup> Many have placed the blame for the gross distortion of important segments of Eastern history at the doorstep of the famed historian

<sup>8</sup> Peter C. Phan, *Social Thought*, vol. 20, *Message of the Fathers of the Church*, ed. Thomas Halton (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier Inc. 1984), 16. See also Metropolitan Methodios (Fouyas), *The Social Message of St. John Chrysostomos*, vol. 6, *Θεολογικά και 'Ιστορικά Μελετάι* (Athens: N.P., 1984) 87-93.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Byron, *Byzantine Achievement: An Historical Perspective* (NY: Russell and Russell, 1964), 34.

Edward Gibbon.<sup>10</sup> For example, in a recently published work, we read that “the long campaign of denigration [of the Byzantine Empire] seems to have been given its initial impetus in the eighteenth century by Edward Gibbon.”<sup>11</sup> This same writer goes on to note that much of this hatred stems from a particular affection for pagan Græco-Roman civilization, a bias that marked the Renaissance age and continued throughout several subsequent centuries. A consequent enmity thus arose towards the civilization that came to reshape pagan Rome and Greece and, eventually, to supplant them. Byzantium often came to be seen as a “betrayal of all that was best in ancient Greece and Rome.”<sup>12</sup>

A deep disdain for Byzantium characterizes, then, the attitude of representatives of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rationalistic tradition. Perhaps one of the more outrageous specimens of such bigotry is worthy of note here. In his *History of European Morals From Augustus to Charlemagne*, W. E. H. Lecky, in an astonishingly sweeping generalization, writes:

Of that Byzantine Empire the universal verdict of history is that it constitutes, without a single exception, the most thoroughly base and despicable form that civilisation has yet assumed....There has been no other enduring civilisation so absolutely destitute of all the forms and elements of greatness.<sup>13</sup>

It might be noted here that, while we are concerned with an historiography popular within the English-speaking world

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<sup>10</sup> An historian says of Gibbon: “Accurate in every statement of his work, there has lived no individual writer responsible for a greater volume of inferential falsehood than he.” *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1924), vol. II, 13.

# WEALTH AND POVERTY in the Teachings of the Church Fathers

by FATHER JAMES THORNTON

"A superb volume on the important social teachings of the Orthodox Fathers with regard to wealth and poverty. Father Thornton avoids the snide secular spirit that underlies the thought of some Orthodox writers on this subject, presenting his materials with objectivity *and* piety. This is an important contribution to our understanding of early Christian, Byzantine, and Orthodox social thought."

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