

## BOOK REVIEW

Montero, Roman A., *All Things in Common: The Economic Practices of the Early Christians* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2017). xi + 133 pp. Pbk. \$20.00.

The oft-quoted Marxist saying ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!’ becomes the leitmotif of Roman A. Montero’s monograph. He quotes it in each of the ten chapters (plus the introduction and conclusion) as the distillation of Jesus’ teaching on the church’s handling of wealth. His contention is that Christians ‘related to each other’ (p. 118) along the lines of this Marxist axiom for at least the first two hundred years of the church’s existence.

After a forward by Edgar Foster, Montero briefly introduces his theme, the famous Marxist maxim. He opines that the two texts from the book of Acts on communal living (Acts 2.44-45; 4.32-35) are the application of Marx’s dream for society.

Chapter 1, ‘The Economic Context of First-Century Palestine’, lays out the author’s picture of life in Palestine during the ministry of Jesus. The author follows Warren Carter, Richard Horsley and William Herzog in finding a society of ‘devastating and extreme poverty, where people would often go hungry’ (p. 6), an economy where ‘land rents rose’ (p. 11) and where ‘debt was seen as a major source of oppression’ (p. 12). He regards Palestine (‘the world in which Christianity began’) as a land of ‘brutal poverty, oppression and corruption’ (p. 13). In this chapter, the bleak picture Montero paints is based entirely on his reading of selected secondary sources. One need only note at this point that there are other voices with regard to Palestinian society which the author either does not know or has deselected. Furthermore, his dystopian view of first-century Palestine is not necessary for his overall thesis. Why must one first establish that life was harsh in order to make a case that the church was serious about helping the poor?

In Chapter 2, ‘Economic Relationships’, the author reveals his sociological basis for the thesis of the book. He discards the language of ‘economic systems’ in favor of the term ‘economic relationships’. The former is too

modern and does not fit into the ancient intellectual world. He follows the work of David Graeber in identifying three ‘moral principles’ on which economic relationships may be founded: hierarchy (working by precedent mostly), exchange (a reciprocal relationship) and communism (non-violent relationship based on trust). Economic relationships are based on ‘practice and ideology’ (p. 26). Montero defines communism as a ‘network of assumed mutual obligations’ (p. 20). He illustrates by imagining a person who needs some milk. Instead of searching for milk for sale and bartering for it, he asks a friend who will give the milk away, knowing that at some time in the future he may need eggs from the first man. Thus, the needs of the first man have been met without bartering, without exchange of money and without violence.

In describing communism, the author clarifies that he does not mean communism within a ‘legal framework’ necessarily. That would be formal communism. He means a mindset, a mutual set of values and accepted obligations (such as giving milk to a person needing milk). This chapter makes many good points, but also displays some unclear thinking. In denying that communism is reciprocal (which is the basis of the exchange system), the author seems to me to ‘muddy up the waters’. His illustrations of communism definitely exhibit reciprocity. One man receives milk from another man because the latter might need and want eggs someday. He expects a kind of reciprocation. So there is reciprocity in communism, just not exactly the same kind as in the exchange system. The book needs more clarity in this area. Secondly, the author often fuses charity with communism. Is all charity communism? How does informal communism differ from love? This is not clear either. Finally, in this chapter, there might be an idealistic strain of thinking: ‘If communism can be established, one can avoid all the trouble of calculating costs and bartering ...’ (p. 19). One could conclude in this chapter that money exchange and bartering are inherently evil and that communism is the remedy to most of the world’s problems. Again, there are many good points in this chapter but some things need clarity.

Chapters 3 and 4 are on the Essenes and Hellenistic Philosophers respectively. Montero finds formal communism in 1QS (*Community Rule*) and informal communism in the *Damascus Document*. He discusses the idea of friendship and helping out certain segments of society (if not all) in the writings of Aristotle, Cicero and the Pythagoreans.

Chapter 5, ‘The Economic Practices of the Early Christians’, brings us to the heart of this monograph. Here Montero handles not only the two texts

from Acts referred to above, but also Acts 5.3-4; 6.1-3; Jas 2.1-13; 1 Jn 1.5-7; 2 Cor. 11.7-9. He then turns to the late first- and early second-century CE Christian sources: Justin Martyr (*1 Apol.* 14, 69), Tertullian (*Apol.* 39), *Did.* 1.5-6, 4.7-8 and *Barn.* 19.8. His point is that Christians did not consider themselves free to give or not to give. Giving was part of what it meant to be a Christian: ‘This (systematic welfare) is not something that could have been maintained if the obligation to share had been merely voluntary in the modern sense of the word ... a Christian would have been considered no more free to not practice sharing than he or she would have been considered free to practice fornication or sorcery’ (pp. 57, 64). Montero summarizes his survey of Christian sources with five conclusions: (1) Christian communities had a morally motivated informal communism; (2) There was also a system of formal communism (i.e. organized giving); (3) The giving practices were theologically based and tied with liturgical practices; (4) These practices were widespread and long lasting (into the second century); and (5) The sharing was across ethnic and class backgrounds.

This chapter was well argued and supported. Based on this chapter alone, one could conclude that the author has made his case whether or not one agrees with some of the other assertions elsewhere in the book.

Chapter 6, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons: Dealing with Freeloaders’, cites texts showing that there were those that tried to exploit Christian generosity (2 Thess. 3.6-15; 1 Tim. 5.9; *Did.* 12-13). Hence the early church developed a set of rules for charitable giving to strangers. The giving, then, was not really just to anyone who begs (as Jesus had commanded).

Chapter 7, ‘A View from the Outside’, reports pagan reactions to the early Christian generosity. The author cites Lucian’s story of Peregrinus Proteus (who gamed the system as a con artist) and the writings of Emperor Julian (the Apostate) who laments the attention Christians were getting because of their generosity. The author concludes that these texts ‘confirm for us that the economic practices of the early Christians were successful’ (p. 81).

If Chapter 5 gets to the core of Montero’s thesis, Chapter 8, ‘The Theological Origin of Christian Sharing’, provides the ideological background and justification. He finds the early church’s theological basis for its striking generosity in the law of Jubilee as stated in Leviticus 25. Beginning with Jesus’ sermon at Nazareth—as related only in Luke 4—he concludes that Jesus declared a Jubilee for Israel during his ministry (when debts are forgiven, slaves freed and land returned). He then seeks to trace the Jubilee concept through Jesus’ teachings, handling Lk. 6.20-49, 11.2-4, and 22.25-27. He then argues

that the church reflects the same Jubilee morality in 1 Jn 3.16-17; Jas 1.27; 2.1-9; and 2.14-17. He concludes, 'There was a direct connection between Jesus' declarations ... the reflections of the Christian leaders such as James and John ... and the economic practices of the Christian community' (p. 103).

This is an interesting and helpful collection of and interpretation of texts, but I was less than convinced. Did Jesus interpret his ministry as a time of Jubilee? More than one scholar has suggested this. What should give us pause, however, is that the sermon at Nazareth is only presented as a Jubilee-sermon in Luke 4. Matthew and Mark have a different take on the Nazareth experience. Secondly, one need not see Jubilee behind admonitions for generosity. These arise naturally from a number of passages in the Torah. Thirdly, the Jubilee emphasis on freeing slaves and returning land are not found in Jesus' teachings. Did Jesus declare Jubilee? He might have but it is not clear that he did. Nor, would I say, is this theological explanation necessary to establish the author's thesis in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 9, 'The Universal Community', Montero argues that Paul took up the Christian ethos of informal communism, 'a communism that applied across all ethnic, social, and cultural lines' (p. 106). Paul was following Jesus' teaching on 'breaking the ethno-national barriers and extending the Jubilee ethic of sharing to people outside the Jewish nation' (p. 107) as seen in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Pauline Christianity brought together the universalism and communism based on the universal messiahship of Jesus Christ. This chapter connects the teachings of Jesus, the church's proclamation of the messiah and Pauline ethical teaching.

In Chapter 10, 'Why Others Get it Wrong', the author takes on some New Testament heavyweights (Dunn, Crossan, Fitzmyer, Polhill and Marshall, among others), maintaining that they have misunderstood the two texts of Acts 2 and 4. They see these events as spontaneous, rare, non-normative, and/or idealized fantasy. These scholars are in error for three reasons: (1) they approach the texts in terms of property rights rather than based on economic relations; (2) They read the texts in the context of the twentieth-century conflicts between socialism and capitalism; and (3) They stress the voluntary nature of the Jerusalem church's giving activities. But, argues Montero, if we drop the 'assumption of a capitalistic framework', the texts take on a new significance (p. 116). This chapter is a good summary of his thinking and an interesting challenge to traditional exegesis.

The concluding pages of the monograph list the items the author believes he has established. In sum, his thesis has been that the ancient church up to

the end of the second century CE practiced the Marxist maxim. But the author writes not just with an antiquarian interest. He seeks in these concluding pages to make application: 'Those who take on the name Christian must consider its implications in today's ultra-capitalist world if they are to stay true to the spirit of the early Christians' (p. 120).

While I like this book, I can criticize it for the reasons stated seriatim above. Most importantly, his dark picture of first-century Palestine is overdone and unnecessary to his thesis. Secondly, based on the evidence, he insists much too strongly that Jesus declared a Jubilee. He may have done so but it is not well established. Again, this conclusion is not necessary for his basic thesis.

On the other hand, this little monograph does what socio-scientific interpretation of the Bible is supposed to do: It presses the reader to step outside his or her twenty-first century socio-economic context, to go beyond ethnocentrism and reconsider Scripture in a new way. For that we thank the author and are in his debt.

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