PROBLEMS

Christianity and Economics: from the Origins to the Middle Ages

Paolo Brezzi
University of Rome

It is not necessary to point out that the New Testament was not intended as a socio-political message, and that the Gospels were not written in defence of contingent conditions or in support of any particular contemporary interests, nor even to put forward economic doctrines favouring one or another class. It is true, however, that Christianity was born and developed within a specific historical context. Its exponents were men of their time and surroundings, and, as a result, in the same way that they were forced to use the language of their contemporaries in order to make themselves understood, when explaining religious and ethical principles, they had also of necessity to bear in mind contemporary conditions of life, institutions, and the pressures which accompanied them, and to refer to these more or less directly and explicitly.

It is for this reason that it is possible and worthwhile to define a train of economic thought — just as one might also a train of political or social thought — among the early Christian texts. This of course is not systematic and has no 'technical' details, but is constituted of general precepts and indications, even a series of suggestions which allow the individual to organize himself in a certain fashion by relating religious criteria to the practical attitudes which occur in individual and collective everyday affairs in this particular aspect of human life.

So delicate a position, which provides a balance between extreme but always distorted opposites, could easily have given rise to differing or contradictory interpretations, and this in fact is what happened. Some held that the essence of Christ's message lay in the warning of the coming of the Kingdom of God (eschatology) and as a result all care for worldly matters was useless and hence also the labour required to produce such transient objects was valueless. Others concentrated on the salvation of the individual

immortal soul (soteriology), neglecting everything that did not affect the individual and his destiny, treating the individual only as a spiritual and extra-terrestrial being. Others, on the contrary, found in those pages a true statement of social revolution, the appeal to the poor and oppressed to throw off every yoke, to pull down the powerful from their thrones and refuse obedience to earthly authorities. Some envisaged the coming age as an earthly paradise in which abundance and plenty reigned and rewards were reaped without labour, while others rediscovered philosophical ideas of stoical and cynical tendencies, with their concomitent socio-economic implications. There were others who connected the Old and New Testament directly, seeing the second as a nationalist manifesto or as the programme of a priestly community modelled on the traditional Hebrew characteristic, that is, closed to universalism, to productive labour and to the creation of new or complex secular orders.

As one can easily appreciate, every interpretation contains some truth and one can find some substantiation in the various sacred authors by isolating different statements relating to historical events. But all are equally unbalanced in the attempt to make one particular aspect of over-riding importance, to make a single theory out of a collection of ideas which are essentially organic. There is no cause to enter here into questions of exegesis or problems of faith. We have made this rapid panorama in order to demonstrate that differing logical consequences and varying modes of application follow from the criterion chosen as a starting point, even for the problem which interests us most directly. Any ' economic doctrine ' — given the limits and perspectives which we have mentioned — is derived from and subordinate to the particular over-all conception which is taken to be authentic in explaining early Christianity in fact and thought.

However in order to reach some conclusions which provide an outline of the origin and evolution of Christian approaches to economic problems, it is worth attempting an honest eclecticism so as to grasp the most positive and fertile ideas which occur in these formulations and to attempt to put these elements together in some meaningful synthesis. But even this would be insufficient to ensure an adequate understanding of the problem in question unless the nature of the society in which Christianity was born is known, unless one bears in mind the labour relations and the most common types of economy, together with the conditions of life, both for individuals and social groups, together with the relations between different classes, and so forth.

* * *

An awareness of the complementary nature of what is called ancient history and Christian history (or Church history, given that we are concerned with an institution rather than a doctrine) is one of the major achievements

of recent historiography. The two are really twins — as an apologist of the second century recorded — which grew up together and were connected by a thousand more or less visible threads; they were never in radical opposition despite the clashes which occurred. Developments in the Mediterranean in the last centuries of the pre-Christian era which culminated in the Roman Empire were the indispensable premises for the propagation of the ' Good Tidings ' (it was not by chance that St. Paul referred to the ' fullness of time ', while so many others saw the hand of Providence in events which otherwise contained little that was honest, just or holy). The Roman Empire itself was an expression of the fact that the ideological crisis of Graeco-Roman society had been resolved. But however one explains the appearance of Christianity on earth, it is clear that in historical terms the two factors — classical antiquity and the religion of Christ — are integrated and interdependent, that each can be understood only if seen in conjunction with the other (although due to didactic pressures and the limitations of scholarship it is convenient to keep the two separate and entrust detailed research to the respective specialists).

If such a way of working is valid for any historical problem relating to the period, it would seem to be particularly useful in relation to the study of the economy and society, and consequently it is necessary to keep before one's eyes an over-all picture of the situation in order to establish connections and discover the most pertinent themes. The principal points to consider are property, slavery and currency. While there were clearly great differences between one region and another in the vast Roman Empire, between the economy of rural and outlying provinces and that of the great metropoli and the capital, one can assert that the attitudes and practice concerning these three themes were sufficiently uniform to provide valid and generalizing tests for comparative purposes. Here we must state clearly what has already been implied — that is, that the Hebrew — Palestinian milieu is not of central interest, given that it was based on a family-centred economy, in which there was no great distinction between rich and poor, was largely without significant capital concentration, and preserved an active sense of justice derived from religious principles; it created no demand for servile labour and had certain characteristic institutions (such as the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee) which served to impede speculation and redistribute property leading periodically to an almost original state of equality among men. All of this was certainly not an incentive for economic life, for commercial exchange and the accumulation of goods and wealth.

After repeating that in the Gospels there is no explicit definition of economic theory, and after mentioning that many of the statements that recurr in the Gospels can only properly be understood in terms of the language in which they were formulated, (while we too frequently know them only

in translations of translations), one can assert that the dominant attitude in Jesus appears to be an indifference toward material things, an aloofness from such concerns, and a totally different set of objectives and attitudes. Condemnations of the rich, warnings of the dangers inherent in excessive attachment to worldly labours, and warm recommendations to charity and to providing for brother creatures are frequent. But all things are seen in the long term giving primacy to moral rather than economic activities, and making a cautionary devaluation of those goods which were the object of so much of man's attention. Just as private property itself is not attacked, there is no *a priori* denunciation of slavery, but it was stated poetically that those who took no care for the morrow are the best provided for (the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, because their Heavenly Father thinks of them), so it was clearly stated that all were equal and brothers, free and responsible, and that often those of the most modest and disparaged appearance had greater merit than those who were held to be powerful, due to their high office.

There is no need to rehearse the cases when Christ referred to, or met, rich and poor, nor the comparison in his speeches and parables which were drawn from the economic world, from business, labour and social relations, (but they are clearly numerous and well chosen). It would be more interesting to know something of the background of his closest disciplines, of their former occupations, their wealth, the way in which they settled their affairs after becoming disciples, as well as the way that small community was administered (one thinks immediately of Judas, and in a critical sense he must be seen in unprejudicial terms in order to appreciate the motives of his behaviour which are explicible in relation to the problems caused by money). From this one moves naturally to think of the famous community of Jerusalem which was often considered to be an experiment in communism — in the limited context of consumer goods — which was officially legalized by the approval of the nascent Church.

The truth was quite different, however, not only because this was a case solely of an invitation, not an obligation, to hold goods in common — severe punishment attended not those who broke the rules but those who were unfaithful and made untrue declarations — but even more because resources were scarce, the situation was temporary and from the beginning had been accepted as such, was not seen to be applicable in any wider context, and, finally, the driving force was essentially only half economic and charitable, the result of zeal rather than thought out economic and empirical ideas and aims. This does not mean that the episode should be forgotten, but it should be assessed bearing in mind that it was exceptional — an examination of the New Testament texts taken all together clearly shows this to be true. At the same time it is easy to appreciate the subsequent fortune of these ideas and the way they have been employed as proof in various tendentious causes,

but here we are outside the bounds of academic discussion and there is no need to say more.

Before passing on to St. Paul it is worth looking in detail at the brief epistle of St. James (without discussing its authenticity and sources) because of its violent tone, its seemingly explicit call to social revolution, the grave threats it contains, while placing great importance in good works for salvation. Various factors serve to give these severe declarations a different perspective, one being its certain origin in the Judaic world which — as we have said — knew only a poor, egalitarian and religiously inspired economy. While it is true that it reflects the more popular positions of the first Christians, they certainly joined others with whom there was no conflict although some friction as occurs within any collective group. Finally one should mention again the very clear ethical character of the whole work, which leads the author to condemn injustices rather than possessions, attitudes rather than individuals, particular misconduct rather than a class. Generosity towards the poor, permanent care for the needy are seen simply as the application in one specific field of a general directive given to human kind on earth, in a world that was full of dangers for the soul from which one should detach oneself as soon as possible.

We shall not attempt to mention all the suggestions scattered through St Paul's fine letters, although that would entail producing a rich anthology, but we must give some space to the famous admonition to earn one's bread by honest labour — (of which the apostle himself provided an example by making clothes with his own hands in the midst of his exertions during his apostolic travels) — which he accompanied with advice to be honest in business and never remain idle. St. Paul defended the rewards derived from manual work and from the exercise of intellectual professions, and did not condemn the rich; in fact he was prepared to use their economic resources for good ends. But he insisted above all upon the equality of all God's children, each of whom was a member of a mystic body, although he admitted the variety of abilities in using this simile, and that some had greater dignity than others. From this it follows that all are equal (but servants of Christ), and that no one can be treated as a mere ' thing ', but once again the ultimate implications of such a premise were not drawn. Paul did not condemn slavery, but sent the slave back to his master, so accepting the legislation of the time. He found fine words of exhortation to reciprocal love and understanding, but looked to the basic concepts of a social hierarchy which did not attempt to eliminate the inhuman condition of so many beings. St Paul's religious yearning, his universalist concepts, his fatherly sensitivity rise above any doubts or criticism, nor can anything reduce the importance of this giant of history, but it is necessary to see his position in the evolution and application of the ideas in the field with which we are concerned in true perpective.

* * *

Christian propaganda was always directed in particular at the great commercial centres of the Mediterranena basin, and the first Christian communities were those of the main cities (most of which were maritime), of the Roman Empire: Antioch, Thessalonia, Ephesus and Corinth, Alexandria and Carthage, Smyrna and Lyons. This had important consequences for the social composition of these Christian communities, which in turn influenced attitudes towards economic activity. Preaching was of necessity directed at those who were in close contact with merchants. In becoming converted these people did not change their way of life but remained in contact with non-believers in various relationships and accepted the existing political reality (they paid their taxes and other obligations to the State) and so put off indefinitely the realization of ' new heavens and new earths '.

The original Judaic group was replaced between the end of the first century and the middle of the next by a more homogeneous group of Graeco-Roman believers, among whom were many members of the aristocracy, imperial functionaries, merchants, although none was ever called on to renounce his post or profession (save some openly immoral activities, but in such cases the community provided for whoever was ' unemployed '). These points would become much more concrete if they were backed by textual evidence, by the examples of names and places, by figures and numerical data. Just at present it is not necessary to do so, although one can confidently state that such a tendency can easily be shown because the sources are explicit, even if the references are normally incidental to other purposes, the importance of which is not to be denied, but which are, historically speaking, less important.

The personal difficulties of Hermas depict in the flesh a situation which is frequently referred to. He was rich, came from the world of commerce, and so belonged to a petty bourgeoisie able to appreciate the value of money and use it to good effect. On entering the Christian community in Rome he found many other 'brothers' who were in good economic positions, but he himself was aware that his membership of the Church was formal rather than effective, and it was only after the collapse of his fortunes and the confiscation of his possessions that he became fervent. Hermas finished by reconciling himself to the misfortune that had befallen him and even wishing it upon others, because it was through this that he had understood the hardness of a rich man's heart and the connection that wealth created with worldly interests. He who sees the earth as his permanent home will think of building houses and buying estates but a Christian must see things differently; he must not forget that earthly possessions are divine in origin, that they were given for virtue to be made of them, for the rich to give alms and charity.

There were therefore a good number of wealthy men at Rome who formed the nucleus of the Church and maintained its benevolent and charitable institutions. Ignatius of Antioch, Diogenes of Corinth and others speak of the financial means of the Roman community, praising the generous gifts to poorer communities and even the name of a certain Theodotus, a banker who may have administered the huge communal funds, has been preserved. At the same time Carpoforo, a Caesarian freedman of good reputation, opened a bank with Christian funds drawn from various sources (from poor widows among others): his agent was Callixtus who unfortunately did his accounts badly and had to declare bankruptcy to the great loss of his modest investors (the details may be found in a violent attack on Callixtus written by Hippolotus). Carpoforo at once forced Callixtus to work on the mill wheel and subsequently he was condemned to the mines in Sardinia. After an amnesty he returned to Rome and again won a good reputation as an administrator, being financial director of a large suburban cemetery which bears his name even today.

Rather than the far from clear problems of Callixtus, what is of greater importance for our purposes is the existence of these pious but industrious men who formed the most active sector of the community among the Christians. While in the non-Christian world passage from the ranks of the '*humiliores*' to those of the '*honestiores*' (we should say from the proletariat to the middle class) was becoming increasingly difficult at the end of the second century and thereafter, within the Christian community the process of social and economic interchange continued to the benefit of all, given the increasing importance of Christianity at the time (one thinks for instance of the prevalence of Latins over Greeks — which can be shown by the fact that writings were now made in the former language — which occurred in Rome, and by the development of the Western community in relation to the early communities which were mainly oriental).

With the third century the picture becomes fuller, and from Tertullian to Clement of Alexandria, from Origenes to St Ciprian — not to mention the minor writers, apologists and conciliar decisions, pontifical letters, epigraphs and so forth — the only problem is that of chosing from such an abundance of material. We shall take a number of the more important examples concerning the specific question of Christian attitudes towards economic matters, property, money etc.

In the first place, and it could not be otherwise, there are constant warnings of the dangers of wealth, not in itsef but as the root of all evil, of attachment to earthly things, love of gain, for ethical rather than economic motives, together with appeals to make good use of it, to be generous to those who have nothing, (even when mention is made of the 'communion of goods' the true implication is at once defined in order to avoid misunderstandings and making proprietors uneasy). Among the 'heretics' — that is,

sectarian movements which the ecclesiastical authorities condemned and which interest the historian as indications of conditions and attitudes, pressures and aspirations — there were some which claimed forms of communist ideals, but even these were usually placed in the future and were hoped for rather than seen to be attainable in practice, at least in the short term.

A second theme which predominates in the Christian literature which refers to these problems was an allegorical interpretation of the New Testament passages that were most thorny, (typical would be the short passage '*Quis dives salvetur?*' which might suggest only an interior, not a real, detachment from wealth) although statements which were hardly favourable to private property — because it creates enmity, jealousy, discord etc. — continue and the appeals to moderation, parsimony, honesty in trading and in administration increase. Orabona has rightly remarked that it is arbitrary to attempt to find in these authors 'the consolidation of Christian economic ideas on conservative bases, in contrast to earlier traditions', but it is undeniable that considerable progress was achieved in those centuries and that brotherliness in economic matters was now understood in a quite different manner. The only firmly established point was 'the ethical evaluation of economic goods, the use of which was laid down, in harmony with the teleological community of divine origin, in favour of the most needy'.

Ciprian, a bishop of Carthage in the mid third century, provides precise and wide ranging information. He came from a family of Decurions and had himself been a lawyer, but after being converted he gave away 'nearly all his goods' (as his contemporary biographer recorded) giving alms '*de quantitate sua propria*', and in one of his works with the indicative title '*De opere et eleemosynis*' he showed himself to be extremely severe against the rich 'who are virtually unable to understand how reality develops'. His description in the '*De lapsis*' of the moral decline of the clergy due to their excessive material involvement, their unbridled desire to grow rich, their immoderate business practices which even included usury, the failure to fulfil contracts etc. is well known. 'Every man waits to increase his own substance; many bishops, neglecting their divine functions, become administrators of worldy goods, abandoning their sees and travelling around pursuing fat deals on the market; while their brothers suffer from hunger, they fill their pockets with cash by putting their hands fraudolently and avariciously on farms belonging to others and by increasing the tax on the monies given in loan'.

We know from other sources also that the Church possessed land — under what legal title is not known, however, and hence whether and why they were confiscated in times of persecution — that they had their own treasuries ('*arca*') from which they drew the financial requirements necessary to aid the needy, to bury the dead, to support widows and students, to provide food for slaves and prisoners. This was the only way left to fulfil the com-

munal ideas of early Christianity, but the individual contributions were always voluntary, free and spontaneous (they became known as ' pious deposits ') although they were of major importance — the size of some of the funds was assessed in times of plague, barbarism, invasions etc., and are known — and provides new evidence of the high average condition of the leading Christian Churches and of the presence among the Christians of influential and wealthy men (Valerian's imperial edict of persecution even established different penalties, varying with the social positions of those affected; clearly senators, nobles, knights, courties and state functionaries would not have been mentioned had they not been in some number among the persecuted).

* * *

The situation changed completely in the new century, the fourth, due to the Emperor Constantine's decision first to admit the '*corpus christianum*' as a recognized association with freedom to perform its worship, and then subsequently to favour the religion openly (for political motives rather than personal conviction). The result however was the same and the ecclesiastical institution was put in a position of special privilege. In economic terms the consequences were extremely important, because not only as result were there many ' conversions ' (!), but the funds increased, financial assets grew out of all proportion, the social influence of the clergy became decisive and the yardstick for judging temporal values was radically changed.

It is not our task to make any moral assessment of this development — normally the period is condemned outright and both Protestants and more recently Catholics have been highly critical of the ' age of Constantine ', and of the centuries which followed. It is our task however to outline the repercussions in the sector in question, taking as a firm assumption that ' in a world in which political and social structures were undergoing major transformation, reference in general terms to economic theories by the Church took on greater importance and was expressed more explicitly ', (Orabona). Among the most pressing problems the most important at the time was the question of private ownership of goods, and the debate extended beyond all previous bounds because the writers (the so called Fathers of the Church, be they Greek or Latin) permanently drew on the Biblical and theoretical themes of God to all men, on the natural equality among all beings which was strengthened by the brotherhood of the redeemed in Christ. More direct reference was made to actual situations, and with harsh criticism of the conduct of erring Christians, giving a picture of some precision of the sad conditions in which the maltreated poor lived. This also explains the range of interpretation of these writers among scholars, because it was only necessary to emphasize this or that phrase or axiom in order to arrive at quite contrary conclusions, to find traces of communism or class struggle, ideas of social

revolution, negation of all property rights and so forth in passages and tracts which had in fact a quite contrary aim, attitude and logic. In either case however the importance of these works is not in doubt.

The inclusion of Christianity among the active forces of the Roman State brought advantages and disadvantages even in simply economic terms. It was inevitable that the Church leaders should become defenders of the existing order, should favour the conservation of the *status quo* and should undertake various enterprises which, even when the ends were general welfare, freed them from financial and patrimonial difficulties and as a result placed them in a social system which, if not injust and dishonest, was certainly partisan and narrow. But it is the very virulence of the criticisms launched by the Fathers mentioned above which provides the proof of the existence and importance of such a situation, together with the inadequacy of the remedies put forward, given that no one went to the root of the problem but merely demanded greater understanding towards the poor, greater moderation in pursuit of business, and a sense of responsability with regard to the final '*redde rationem*'. But once again we must avoid any moral judgment and view the situation in historical terms. This involves taking account of the ' turning point ' which occurred in this period, which proved decisive for the subsequent development of Western civilization and provides the basis for subsequent Christian doctrinal positions in economic matters.

The African Lattanzius did not fail to repeat that God gave the earth to all in common so that no one should be deprived of what nature provided in abundance. He also stated that rich and poor should not exist, because the idea of justice made all equal. He also suggested that every man should ' be content with his own '. Yet at the same time he was opposed to any collectivist regime, and condemned Plato's communistic opinions; wealth, he reminded his readers, was an opportunity to exercise virtue, and property, capital and whatever lies at our disposal has a productive economic function which rebounds to the good of all. As a result we are always in a median position, a sort of laborious balance which provided freedom for practices that were too lax and easy for those more familiar with day-to-day affairs and least sensitive to abstract duties.

The ' tone ' of the three Cappadocians, (Basil, Gregory of Nazianzo and Gregory of Nice) and John Crisostomos is a little more lofty, and their austerity is more obvious, but the fundamental criteria do not differ significantly from those already mentioned. In addition, none of them ever wrote, despite their output, anything on economic matters, and it is only in their moral homilies that one finds odd references calling for the redistribution of goods, for succour for the needy, exhortations to be just and moderate, to overcome greed and egotism, to avoid being deluded by corruptible things. Once again, then, the origin of social inequality is seen in ethical principles, while the solutions to those evils are never seen in ' scientific ' but rather in

spiritual and religious terms. On the other hand individual economic enterprises are never attacked, in that neither trade, profit, nor the improvement of one's standard of living are ever forbidden. In fact it is suggested that there is a ' sort of semi-economic utilitarianism ', in the assertion that charity is also a good investment for money, that good will come to those who do good, that ' gifts grow with giving ' (an extremely modern economic concept based on the ' greater utility to be obtained from the circulation of wealth ', but which was put forward by Crisostomos in an incidental fashion without any awareness of its importance).

St Ambrose of Milan is normally considered the most radical of all, but his claimed ' communism ' falls far short of the mark if his sentences are read without preconceived ideas (" only *usurpation brings about private* rights " but for him the word means custom not theft). In fact, as in St Augustine of Hippo — who generally had more conservative attitudes — one finds the belief that property has a social function, that commercial profit must not exceed the bounds of equitable prices, that interest rates should be low, and that whatever is given to the poor is essentially restitution (but even here the debate is conducted in ethical and religious terms and is never put forward as a practical guide for economic behaviour). Without being truly novel these ideas were still quite different from those of classical Roman law (one needs only to think that ' in the ancient law of Quiretes the integral absolutism of private property held sway ' and that with regard to the price of money, the punishment of debtors and so forth, customs then current were much more severe). These ideas, then, slowly brought about some improvement which led to the defeat of earlier economic and social concepts, and bore fruit in Justinian's legal codes.

The Christian Church of the 4th and 5th centuries, however, made its voice heard in other ways and had direct influence in economic matters, through the decisions of the synods and councils and through the regulations established in their constitutions (of these ancient canonical compilations one might cite the Directions of the Apostles and the Apostolic Constitutions which have survived only in reordered versions, but which contain disciplinary precepts of a very early date and so serve our purpose). As is always the case this particular subject is introduced almost secretively and in relation to other ends, but the information does exist and can be assessed with some precision. One must not forget that these decisions always had some contingent motivation, and that they referred to individual problems and as a result emphasized this or that point according to the urgency felt by the Church authorities in defining a given principle, in giving advice, or in avoiding a threat etc. The themes dealt with are the customary ones and do not require further comment.

However, without embarking on a narrative of the history of the period it is worth mentioning the revolts of slaves and the destitute which raged in

virtually every province, especially in Africa (the famous '*circumcelliones*' and the Bagaudes of Gaul who must have been similar). We do not need to inquire into the conditions of those unfortunate beings but many of their declarations did not go unnoticed. Certainly they had no clear or systematic doctrine, but they drew attention to certain demands for equality, justice, communism, respect for persons, which, no matter how distorted or adapted to their own particular problems, contained an echo of early Christian thought and were based on these imaginary rather than empirical examples of a brotherly division of goods among those who shared the same faith and spiritual sustenance. This does not mean that they contained an authentic interpretation of the Gospel, but this current still survived and was historically influential, as monasticism, which was a typical phenomenon of the 4th and following centuries, would seem to indicate. This was itself a silent response to the line taken by the 'official' Church, and in economic terms constitutes a remarkable example of the abolition of the private ownership of goods, of the collectivization of production, of the superceding of monetary values and of drastic reductions in consumption.

* * *

We cannot consider here the changes resulting from the Germanic invasions and the new political and administrative orders of the various Roman-Barbarian state that arose in Western Europe in this period in the territories of the former Empire because, other considerations apart, they did not cause radical innovations in social structure, nor did they lead to the formulation of new economic doctrines. Culture, however, generally moved backwards together with the 'conception of the world', and became enclosed within more narrow limits, and this did have certain results in the field which concerns us. In the tracts of various men of religion, in pontifical letters, in monastic rules, in sermons and in other similar texts one finds scattered references to economic matters in which, for the most part, the sort of things that had been said by the Church Fathers in the golden age were simply repeated, and clumsily. But if one studies them closely one sees that there are some reflections of the conditions in which the authors found themselves and of the 'incidents' which needed immediate solution. It is gleanings of this sort which provide the basis for the present analysis of the whole period that runs from the 5th to the 8th century. The latter date provides a natural *terminus* to our discussion, as the introduction of Aristotelian thought, commercial progress, the rapid circulation of money, the development of a middle class, and the religious reforms radically altered life and thought in medieval Europe and laid the foundations for a new phase of Christian economic thought.

Severinus Boethius can be seen as the last voice of antiquity. Seeking human happiness in his '*De consolatione philosophiae*' which was written in prison, he declared, following the classical philosophers, that wealth cannot procure it, although certain possessions may be useful in its attainment. In fact there are several very interesting passages on monetary problems in Boethius, but all in all he depicts an economy bent only on pursuing the essential, contented with little, and so no source of pain or worry. Cassiodorus was more realistic. He came from one of the great Roman families, was a minister of the Gothic king Theodoric, and finally became a monk at Vicario in Calabria. He outlined a type of economic policy which we would now call planned, assigning the task of interfering on behalf of the general good and on behalf of the weak, to the government. Hence he demanded the creation of grain deposits, and price fixing for essential foodstuffs, large-scale imports to prevent speculation, progressive taxation of the rich, (a thing unheard of at the time) and he elevated the status of manual labour.

The motto of St Benedict of Norcia, the founder of the monks of the West, is so famous that it is unnecessary to give further evidence of the importance he attached to (agricultural) toil: *ora et albora*. As all know, a good part of our lands were reclaimed and cultivated by his followers, spread throughout the continent. For centuries their work was unfailing and without respite, devoted despite all kinds of dangers and at the cost of major sacrifices. The results are overwhelming and worthy of unqualified admiration. But here however we must look at the guiding idea of the order (which went under Benedict's name, even if it was not directly his own, although this is a problem that does not concern us). This can be reduced to the principle of total eradication of individualism putting a communal spirit in its place, which in turn animated a family ruled by a father (the abbot) which had detailed instructions against every eventuality. The dominant law was that of mutual understanding and human solidarity, respect for the individual attitudes and physical and mental abilities of individual members, finalizing everything in the love of God, but without neglecting the just necessities of life, (the products of labour could be sold as long as fraud and 'the vice of cupidity' were avoided).

One Benedictine monk, Gregory, who came of a noble Roman family, and who had previously been prefect of the city, then ambassador to Constantinople, and finally Pope (590-603), found himself facing a very difficult situation due to the foreign menace of the Lombards, dearth and famine at home and the general distress of an impoverished and suspicious population. He showed extraordinary skill as the prudent administrator of the huge estates of the church which were scattered all over Italy and was able to give good advice to the local officials, to suggest more renumerative forms of cultivation, more suitable types of livestock, the most profitable sales and purchases. Everything was measured against the yardstick of religion, love

of God and one's neighbour, and the salvation of the soul, but he also showed an equal practical skill and an acute sense of reality (he was worried constantly that the peasants should be given fair wages). Although Gregory had no economic system, his activities were remarkably pratical and provide a wealth of interesting points. He cannot be seen simply as an intransigent defender of private property (ecclesiastical possessions), because he saw the Pope as keeping them jealously only for the general good of the believers of Rome, who needed material assistance to be able to work and survive.

As one advances through the medieval centuries other names occur (Isidore of Seville, Bede, Rabano Mauro, Raterius of Verone etc.) but their ideas are repetitive and derivative, while at the same time the economic situation was dominated by an auto-consumption system; money did not circulate, direct farmers and share-croppers disappeared; life in the cities declined, landed property was of little value and the international markets were virtually dead. Nevertheless, alongside the customary references to the moral dangers inherent in the possession of wealth, and the habitual exhortions to charity and moderation, and leaving aside some of the tendentious interpretation of the more ' scabrous ' passages in the Gospels (philology was indiscriminately subjected to socio-political ends) and various indicative practical suggestions based on the naive concepts of nature of the time (be like the bees, the ants, etc.) it is possible to find a new conception in these medieval public writings.

This is the statement that povery, like disease, is a divine punishment inflicted on specified individuals for some mysterious fault. The same could be said of slavery, theoretical justification for which was sought in presenting it as ' an institution of divine right established to remedy human nature fallen into sin ' (but one immediately asks why did so drastic a remedy affect only certain people, while those to whom it was not administered were obviously so much better off?). In short, then, the poor man was lazy, idle, inactive, and slavery had a pentitential function, while economic goods were indispensable to life on earth and greater profits served to satisfy personal needs and made possible the distribution of the rewards of labour. Even beggars who, although they did not work still received money, and so outdid the egoistical rich in pride and arrogance were rebuked!

To complete the picture one must remember that ' things divine were put up for sale ', to use the expression of the Bishop of Verona mentioned above, at the end of the 10th century — Church lands were split up by incontinent priests and given to their illegitimate offspring; or else they were purchased in simony by nobles and endowed as episcopal revenue to some member of their family who had been appointed to the office without vocation or preparation. All of this had repercussions on economic life, caused losses and decline in value, and prevented serious productive work. The great Gregorian ecclesiastical reforms were from this point of view as well a beneficial, liberat-

ing and progressive movement, even though their leading champions, since they were nearly all austere monks, were not aware of the importance of economic facts and gave ' the impression of too static a vision of affairs ' (Orabona) bending every activity to their religious ideal without always adapting their rigid moral code to the unchangeable daily needs of the masses.

The most interesting figure amongst the group of reformers in this context is St Peter Damian († 1072). He warmly insisted on the relativity of the rights of property, pointing out that the owners were no more than administrators of their goods, and in giving something to others they were offering not of their own but rather restoring another's belongings. He also exalted work as a duty which was heavy and burdensome but rewarding, depicting humanity exerting itself in the effort to realize itself more fully (' tunc omnia sunt veraciter hominis si ipse homo sit veraciter homo '). This was a programme of life which, were it applied, could have brought about amazing results by readmitting within the bounds of Christianity a number of human endeavours which previously had been unjustly excluded; it was also the decalogue of true Christian humanism, in championing wordly action in terms of a higher ideal.

During the 12th century there were indications of new doctrinal positions, and although St Bernand or Clairvaux savagely attacked the pauperism of certain heretical sects and also persecuted Arnold of Brescia for his ' subversive ' opinions on Church property, Hugh of St. Victor came to provide a philosophical revaluation of economic affairs by including them and their related doctrine in the general framework of his practical ' philosophy ' (in fact, this was in his view divided into ethics, economics and politics, that is the individual, the private, the public, or moral, the dispensative and the civic). This was a major step forward, even if it drew on ideas of classical authors. It was made even more important by the recognition which one finds again in Hugh's writings, of a further autonomous sector of philosophy, the mechanical ' the science to which we must turn for the manufacture of all manner of things '; this was divided in turn into seven individual sciences (the making of wool and armour, sailing, agriculture, hunting, medicine and drama), some of which are strange yet the intention is unequivocally good.

Virtually identical classifications may be found also in the work ' *De divisione philosophiae* ' compiled by Domenico Gundissalvi, who lived in the 12th century, was archdeacon of Segovia, and translated Arabic texts into Latin. But in the opinion of a scholar in this field, Barbieri, one finds in him a greater ' modernity in many of his insights '. He envisaged in fact a hierarchy of good which were offered to man, affecting both the spirit and the flesh (among the latter we find food, drink and clothing). Yet while their use is essential in life, they can also be used arbitrarily and out of curiosity " which incites ambition, pride etc. ", which brings us once again in Gundissalvi to ' an explicit condemnation of that acquisitive anxiety which the economic

ethics of the Middle Ages considered to be contrary to the principle of self-sufficiency and of superfluity for the poor' (ibid). Finally the Englishman John of Salisbury must not be forgotten. In his '*Polycraticus*', although he condemned the search for wealth and the greed of the avaricious, he recognized the value of money, accepting 'the principle of supply and demand as determinants of the value of goods'. He distinguished between an intrinsic and natural value in things which had stable characteristics and another value which was variable and resulted from the 'subjective estimation of the things themselves'. We are faced then with a mass of ideas 'concepts and observations on economic matters which are worth recording' (ibid.) as the herald of new and important doctrinal positions.

* * *

Some conclusions can be drawn now. The predominance of ethical over economic considerations in all Christian writings from the first centuries through to the Middle Ages cannot be doubted. The same is true of the clear explanatory but partial attitude towards the subject, with a corresponding absence of systematic or objective treatment. Rather one finds a fervour and a commitment which would possibly not be present in any purely 'scientific' treatment. One can also detect a linear process of development which from time to time drives off extremist solutions, anchoring itself on positions which were very moderate without being blindly conservative and which, in the long term, had a certain reformist influence. This occurred indirectly. It was not directed toward the institutions which existed in the various historical situations in which the Christian doctrine developed in order to overturn them, but was directed rather toward personal convictions so that they might be better guided, trusting more in the exhaustion of the opposing forces than in any effective direct attack.

Once it was conceded, as religion demanded, that labour was the price man paid for his original fall, all things connected with work, which was almost exclusively manual, came to be seen as a virtuous exercise. This was a sort of veneer which tended to sweeten the more repellent and burdensome forms of toil by representing them as an opportunity for gaining credits for the life beyond. This was a double-edged weapon, however, because it could serve equally to oppress the riotous and any form of protest, hence favouring the privileged and not satisfying the duties of social justice and legitimate aspirations for improvement. To balance this tendency there was always the concept, which became increasingly explicit, of the public function of property and of the obligation to consider possessions in terms of general utility and as an instrument for the common good. The exact meaning given such ideas, however, needs to be examined case by case, as well as the practical implementation of such noble principles.

Finally we must mention the atmosphere of charity within which all men carried on their lives; alms-giving, charity, hospitality, care of the sick, the distribution of food and subsidies, the defence of the weak were all undertaken in a spirit of Christian love, to fulfil the first and fundamental precept of the divine law. The object of charity lay in the other life and so it was not to be undertaken as a civil office, or duty, but simply as a religious function. Enormous gaps, inequalities and curious absences of feeling remained, however, although what was achieved had no motive beyond evangelical charity. But the historian must note two results: in the first place this never constituted a solution to economic and social problems that was either adequate or effective, and perhaps even encouraged begging and living off others. Secondly, these practices reduced the value of money, which was not considered productive in itself (this is connected with the medieval ban on asking interest on loans and on making money self-productive in any way). Certainly the intention was to root out usury, but there was also the danger of restricting all worthwhile enterprise and also lawful desire for profit.

One cannot claim with any confidence that during the first twelve centuries of its history Christianity favoured a consumer economy. All incentives were lacking, man was to be content with satisfying needs, to think more of the distant future than of the immediate present, to fear that material needs might distract him from looking after spiritual affairs. In addition the general tendency was to await orders from above, to do what was ordered but not to attempt bold initiatives because there was no desire to upset the established order, to change relations between the classes or upset the social hierarchy. Such things were clearly not an incentive to economic development, and did not favour increases in wealth because they gave no value to material possessions.

Despite this, and because of the connection between the economic and the moral, as well as the religious spirit which permeated all human action and the orientation towards eternal life imposed on temporal existence, it followed — almost unconsciously and without being considered important, although the repercussions were evident and striking — that a certain seriousness, generosity and honesty were imposed in the fulfilment of mans' labours that are not found in other contexts, for the contract must be rigidly adhered to and nothing personal or compelling must be added to it. One may ask however whether this one positive factor is sufficient to redeem the macroscopic deficiencies of ancient and medieval Christian economic thought.

More detailed information may be found in the authors cited in the texts, as well as direct references to the sources, and a critical and up to date bibliography (G. Barbieri, *Le dottrine economiche nel pensiero cristiano*, in « Grande antologia filosofica », Milan, Marzorati, vol. V, 1954; L. Orabona, *Il pensiero economico del cristianesimo*, in « Storia delle idee politiche, economiche e sociali », edited by L. Firpo, Turin, UTET, 1970).