

## *Christian Attitudes to Finance in the First Four Centuries\**

**Frances Young**

[p.78]

The presupposition behind this study is that the Church has never existed in a vacuum, but exists and has always existed in particular social and cultural contexts. There is therefore no guarantee that the teaching of earlier Church leaders will have any immediate relevance today. Yet perhaps it is not altogether fruitless to observe how Christians in a markedly different situation wrestled with the moral problems of handling money.

Probably the most well-known fact about pre-modern Christian attitudes to finance is the total ban upon usury—the taking of interest. The Council of Nicaea, stated that usurious clerics were to be deposed; twenty years later, the council of Carthage declared that usury was reprehensible in laymen, and by the ninth century it was banned for all, with stronger and stronger penalties exacted in medieval times. It seems that Church leaders became more and more concerned about

[p.79]

the issue in the fourth and fifth centuries, though influential Christians had spoken against it from 200 AD onwards.

The earliest critics of usury based their stand upon the Old Testament, and scriptural arguments remained important. Some New Testament texts were drawn into the discussion, but the New Testament has no unambiguous teaching to offer; in the Old Testament, however, there are several texts (like Exod. 22.25; Deut. 23.19; Ps. 15.5; and Ezek. 18.8) which specifically denounce taking interest on loans. The original appeal to the Old Testament, however, was not primarily concerned with the practice of usury. It came as part of the Church's reaction to Marcion, the extreme Paulinist who thought that the Gospel rendered the Old Testament invalid. Thus, Tertullian suggested that the Old Testament prohibited interest in order that men might more easily form the habit of losing the principal itself—for Jesus said (Luke 6.34), If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive in return what reward shall you have?<sup>1</sup> For Clement of Alexandria also, the ban on usury was an example of the fact that the Old Testament contained the highest known morality preached by Greek as well as Jewish philosophers.<sup>2</sup> So, usury was just one example in a broader theological discussion, and at this stage it seems to have been extreme rather than general Christian teaching.

As Christian preaching became more and more insistent in the fourth century, both scriptural and philosophical arguments were taken up and sharpened. In common with pagan moralists<sup>3</sup> Christians stressed the fact that strict justice requires simply repayment, and that usury is inherently unnatural: by nature copper and gold are unable to produce fruit or 'offspring'—in Greek a play on the word 'tokos' which has meanings ranging from natural produce to interest on capital. 'A man defiles the earth with usury and interest, gathering where he did not sow

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\* This is an abbreviated version of a lecture given at Zion College in the City of London in March 1977.

<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* iv.17.

<sup>2</sup> Clement, *Paedagogus* i.10; *Stromatis* ii.9.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* i.10.

and reaping where he did not plant—reaping his gain not from the earth but from the need of the poor', said Gregory Nazianzen;<sup>4</sup> but the final phrase is the most significant. For, in the teaching of the Fathers, theoretical arguments are overshadowed by the fact that usury is persistently associated with greed and avarice, with callousness and inhumanity, with exploitation of the poor and lack of charity. For them usury meant injustice and covetousness, an assumption more readily understandable if we set it in the context of the financial, economic and social conditions of the Roman Empire.

Financial transactions played a remarkably unimportant role in the economy of the Roman Empire. The government produced a metal currency whose value was assumed to be the content of the metal (thus coin-debasement and inflation went hand-in-hand); but a good deal of exchange, and indeed tax-payment, was in kind rather

[p.80]

than coinage. The government financed itself solely by raising taxes at a level which remained fixed for decades—indeed even centuries, and never by means of borrowing. Capital and wealth was in the hands of individuals not corporations, and was invested in landed estates, trade and industry being relatively unimportant. Money-lending was largely a matter of private loans to people short of cash, whether persistently in debt or temporarily until the next harvest. For the most part it was undertaken by exceedingly rich men who were prepared to take on a high risk if the profit looked good; interest-rates were fixed privately and were almost entirely unrestricted by law. Thus investment was always regarded as a matter of seeking personal profit, often on an exorbitant scale. The idea of using financial investment for the benefit of humanity by providing employment rarely occurred to anyone—though there is a hint of this in the story of the emperor Vespasian who rewarded a mechanical engineer for inventing a device for transporting some heavy columns, but refused to make use of it on the grounds that he had to feed the poor by providing employment.<sup>5</sup> It was rich men rather than bankers who controlled any financial movements in the economy. Banking was of the small back-street variety, run by the urban lower-middle class of petty shop-keepers, little offices where the banker or his slave sat at a table and changed money. So banks played little role in the total economic picture, and in the third century acute currency problems in the Empire drove them into a state of decline.

Banking was never condemned by the early Christians. All our evidence points to the fact that the Christian movement largely spread amongst the urban business-classes in the first few centuries—they were a band of shop-keepers, traders and small businessmen, and business-ethics is discussed in a number of early Christian writings. Amongst this class it would be natural to find bankers, and there are scraps of evidence which confirm this suspicion. A man known as Theodotus the banker financed and led a splinter-group in Rome towards the end of the second century;<sup>6</sup> and about the same time Callistus, who later became pope and died as a martyr, had a career as a slave in charge of a bank set up by his Christian master which attracted deposits from Christian 'widows and brothers'. Callistus' bank apparently failed, but he must have had some financial abilities since after a somewhat chequered career he was eventually ordained deacon and given an important administrative post in the Church, from which he was elected to the primacy in preference to the scholarly theologian Hippolytus.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Orat.* xvi.18.

<sup>5</sup> Suetonius, *Vesp.* 18.2.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *H.E.* v.28.

<sup>7</sup> Hippolytus, *Ref.* ix.12, 1-14.

Given these instances, and the fact that banking, unlike acting and other dubious pursuits, was never included among the professions forbidden to Christians, it seems clear that the Church was not at

[p.81]

this stage totally opposed to earning a reasonable living by taking interest; money-changing must produce some profit if it is to succeed as a business, and Callistus' Christian clients undoubtedly expected some return for their deposits. Half a century later Cyprian complains bitterly about bishops in North Africa who were neglecting their congregations and getting rich through trade and usury;<sup>8</sup> Cyprian complains but other Christians must have found the practice morally acceptable.

Why then did the Church's attitude harden in the succeeding centuries? The answer lies partly in changing social conditions and partly in the Church's new position in society. By the fourth century the Church had ceased to be an illegal sect largely confined to the urban business-class; it had become the official religion of the empire embracing in some way all the social classes within it. As for general social conditions, the banks were in decline, and even more than in the past, money-lending was in the hands of rich individuals who could exploit the hardships of the lower classes. Roman society had always been characterized under the empire by a stark contrast between rich and poor. There were a few exceedingly rich land-owners, of whom the biggest was the emperor himself, and these constituted the class with economic and political power. Their power rested upon the backs of their slaves and tenants, all of whom lived pretty much at the subsistence level. The rich were the money-lenders and now they were in a position to take advantage of the situation when the ever-increasing tax-demands of the government in the last declining days of the empire crippled and eventually destroyed the peasant class: the tenant-farmers were reduced to serfdom by their creditors.

It was in these days of ever greater social polarization that the Church's attitude to usury hardened. It was only too evident that usury meant exploitation of the poor. It was not a matter of denouncing perfectly normal and regulated business practices; it was a moral attack upon the callous and unbridled greed of the rich which was all too obvious in contemporary society.

Now this moral attack upon the rich and its accompanying defence of the poor was deeply rooted in Christian tradition, and its motivation, though partly social and philosophical, was primarily religious. The earliest Church inherited from Judaism a sense of responsibility for the care of widows and orphans, a respect for the poor and defenceless members of the community, and also a belief in the atoning efficacy of almsgiving: many are the passages in Jewish literature of the Hellenistic and Roman period where almsgiving is regarded as equivalent to sacrifice and an adequate recompense for sins, a theme taken up in Christian teaching. It was by emphasis upon almsgiving that the Church was able to 'domesticate' the radical teachings of Jesus

[p.82]

and make them acceptable to people in this world. According to the Gospels, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom. As members of the upper classes began to turn to the Church,

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<sup>8</sup> *De Lapsis* vi.

this became a considerable embarrassment, and as early as 200 AD, Clement of Alexandria tackled the problem in a sermon, 'What rich man is saved?'. He came to the conclusion that the demand to sell all is meant in a spiritual not a literal sense. It means giving up our dependence upon and desire for riches; for, 'we must not fling away the wealth which is of help to our neighbours as well as to ourselves;... wealth is provided by God for man's use... Imagine a man who holds his possessions, his gold and silver and houses as gifts from God, and who serves the God who gave them by using them for the welfare of mankind.'<sup>9</sup> Thus was born the idea of Christian stewardship, and such teaching became a persistent theme of Christian preaching in the succeeding centuries, backed up by the assurance that almsgiving could purchase forgiveness of sins: 'God made you rich so that you could help those in need,' said John Chrysostom, 'that you might have release from your sins by generosity to others.'<sup>10</sup>

But Christian emphasis upon charity was no superficial inheritance; it was central to much of the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament, and the example of the love of Christ, giving himself even unto death for sinners, gave it a profoundly devotional sanction. In one generation after another we read stories of converts heeding the command of Jesus to the Rich Young Ruler; and when St Anthony responded and departed into the desert the monastic movement was born. The spread of monasticism coincided with that period of social polarization and increasingly strident attacks upon usury which we have already noticed. It was in these days that John Chrysostom spoke of almsgiving more than eighty times in just one series of sermons.<sup>11</sup>

Care for the poor was in fact the original reason why the Church as a society acquired its own finances. In our earliest evidence we find that clergy were not paid, but regular collections were made for the support of considerable numbers of virgins, widows and orphans. The first paid officials of the Church were responsible for administering the communal charity funds. The charity of the Christians became notorious: the pagan satirist Lucian comments that 'their original law-giver taught them that they were all brethren' and indicates that no expense was spared to aid other Christians in difficulties.<sup>12</sup> Tertullian reports that in his day non-Christians were saying, 'Only look how they love one another!' He explains that their common fund was made up of freewill offerings and was expended on feeding and burying poor people, caring for orphans and those in distress, and for the support of Christians in prison or condemned to the

[p.83]

mines for their faith.<sup>13</sup> Visiting and supporting the sick, the old and the disabled was a normal part of Christian activity. This activity was largely confined to the support of fellow-Christians, but by no means entirely. We have reports from both Alexandria and Carthage that in the great plague in the mid-third century the pagans tied in fear of infection while the Christians fearlessly tended the sick and the dying.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most impressive testimony comes from a later period: the emperor Julian, as part of his attempt to restore paganism after fifty years of Christian rule, tried to found charitable institutions to rival those of the Christians; 'It is disgraceful,' he wrote, 'that all men should see our people lack aid from us,

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<sup>9</sup> *Quis Dives Salvetur* 11-16.

<sup>10</sup> *De Stands* ii.5-6.

<sup>11</sup> *Homilies on Matthew*.

<sup>12</sup> Lucian, *Peregrinus*.

<sup>13</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* xxxix.

<sup>14</sup> Dionysius in Eusebius, *H.E.* vii. 22; Pontius, *Life of Cyprian* ix.

when no Jew has ever had to beg, and the impious Galilaeans (i.e. Christians) support not only their own poor, but ours as well.'<sup>15</sup>

Can we estimate the scale of this organized charity at various points in the Church's life? Conversion into modern currency for comparison is an unrealistic exercise, but the following figures give some indication:

***Second Century:***

Basic pay for a soldier	approx. 120 sesterces per annum
Subsistence diet	1,200 sesterces per annum
Marcion's contribution to the Roman Church treasury	200,000 sesterces

***Third Century:***

The Roman Church supported 1,500 widows and poor persons + 150 clergy <sup>16</sup>	
estimated cost between	½ and 1 million sesterces
Cyprian raised ransom money to free Christians from Numidian raiders, i.e. special collection over and above regular contributions	100,000 sesterces <sup>17</sup>

The above examples come from a time when the Church was an illegal group liable to persecution; after Constantine the scale became even more impressive: just after 400 AD, the Antiochene Church supported 3,000 virgins and widows, and the Church in Constantinople financed the care of 50,000 poor.<sup>18</sup>

Charity was therefore a major factor in the Church's acquisition and administration of finance; but by the early fifth century, charity accounted for only one quarter of the Church's expenditure, the rest being used for clergy stipends and the upkeep of buildings. Besides the traditional freewill offerings, the Church now received an allowance from the Government, and began to acquire enormous wealth through bequests, benefactions and dedications made by rich converts

[p.84]

who tried thus to obtain honour in the sight of the Christian God rather than seeking earthly glory by leaving property to the state or building temples to the imperial deities. The Church was acquiring new social roles, and was used by those seeking a guarantee of 'immortality'. Inevitably the rapid acquisition of wealth brought problems with it. Charges of embezzlement and misuse of Church funds increased in number and scale. Chrysostom investigated a case in which a bishop was accused not only of melting down Church plate and giving the proceeds to his son, but also of erecting Church pillars in his dining-room and using marble from the baptistery in his bathroom, not to mention disposing of Church lands for his own benefit and selling episcopal consecrations at prices proportional to the emoluments to be received from

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<sup>15</sup> Julian, *Epistle* 22.

<sup>16</sup> Cornelius in Eusebius, *H.E.* vi.43.

<sup>17</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle* lix.

<sup>18</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom in Matt. lxxiii* and *Hom. in Act. xi.*

the position.<sup>19</sup> But a more subtle problem was presented in conflicts of principle: someone gave an expensive robe to the Church at Jerusalem and then saw an actress wearing it—the bishop had sold it to provide for the poor, so causing a major scandal:<sup>20</sup> Yet charity remained a central Christian concern, and it is in this context of care for the poor that the condemnation of usury is to be evaluated. The poor were to be helped not exploited. In this moral stance as well as in the monastic movement, we meet a strong reaction against the increasingly worldly standards of the Church and of individual Christians.

Of course there are moral and social objections to charity. Indiscriminate almsgiving merely exacerbates social problems. Basil advised potential monks to channel their gifts to the poor through the recognized hospitals and almshouses of the Church for fear of encouraging vagabonds.<sup>21</sup> Lucian the pagan satirist had long since depicted Christians as particularly gullible characters, easily exploited by the unscrupulous,<sup>22</sup> and it did not take the modern socialist to discern the moral dangers of almsgiving, its encouragement of self-display and patronizing attitudes, and its basis in self-interest rather than Christian love when regarded as the purchase-price of salvation. Yet in the social conditions of that time, was any other reaction practicable? Can we blame Chrysostom for complaining in a sermon that the rich classes in Antioch were too inclined to shirk their responsibilities by directing those in need to the Church, or by finding moral excuses, like fear of encouraging cheating and beggary, for neglecting generosity to the poor which thronged the streets of the city?<sup>23</sup> It may be that we should judge not the mistakes and compromises of our predecessors, but rather take note of the fact that the teaching of the greatest Christians of the past was within the conditions of their own time, a sincere attempt, though doubtless inadequate and misguided, to ensure a practical outworking of the command to love, a command which is grounded in the Christian Gospel that God first loved us.

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<sup>19</sup> Palladius, *Dialogue* xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Sozomen, *H.E.* iv.25.

<sup>21</sup> Basil, *Epistle* cl.

<sup>22</sup> Lucian, *Loc. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. in 1 Cor.*

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