

Theodoret of Cyrrhus' Economic Thought*

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Introduction

The economic thought of the Christian Fathers consists of an organic continuity of the broader Biblical Tradition, which is enlarged and refreshed with new Christian perspective commencing in the Evangelia and the letters of the Apostels'. Christianity, a new, creative and fruitfull social skepticism was growing on the margins of a radically changing world. This world characterized the morphology of Late Antiquity and is diversified by fundamental socio-economic changes and institutional transformations. The acceptance of Christian theology is related closely to metaphysical perspectives constituting basically of a differentiation of individual life and a metamorphosis of interpersonal relations. Later, Christian attitudes became the context of a necessary social reformation, which proposed valid solutions redarding the institutional organization of society¹.

The economic ideas of the Christian Fathers and other ecclesiastical writers do not consist of an unified and homogeneous system of thought, as for example the rabbinic-judaeo thoughts², but they express personal beliefs for the individual economic behaviour into the framework of fragmented consideration of the economic activities. The Fathers who lived before the fourth century did not offer an unified framework related to the questions of the Christians committent in the economic sphere³.

The main economic concern of the Fathers was the moral consequences and implications of the existence side by side of rich and needy poor. Their doctrines in this regard can be most conveniently examined by treating separately their views on private property in common and their views on alms, although in their own exposition these were generally not separated⁴.

The Fathers denied that there was a natural right to private property. They maintained that in the beginnings of human society all things were held and used in common. They were influenced by the Greek and Roman myth of a primitive golden age, and at times assimilated it with the biblical myth of the garden of Eden, perhaps in

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¹ G. Gotsis, Problems of economic and political ethics in the Byzantine-patristic thought (in Greek), Athens 1997, pp. 15-16.

² B. Gordon, Biblical and Early Judeo-Christian Thought: Genesis to Augustine, in: S. Todd Lowry (ed.), Pre-classical Economic Thought, Boston-Dordrecht-Lancaster 1987, pp. 43-67, at pp. 48-50, 58-60. Cf. also R. A. Ohrenstein and B. Gordon, Economic Analysis in Talmudic Literature. Rabbinic Thought in the Light of Modern Economics, Leiden 1992, pp. 3-32.

³ B. Gordon, The Economic Problem in Biblical and Patristic Thought, Leiden 1989, p. 81.

⁴ J. Viner, Religious Thought and Economic Society, *History of Political Economy* 10 (1978) 9-192, at pp. 15-16.

order to have a more convenient basis for social theorizing than the biblical model of a single pair living in the garden of Eden⁵. For the gradual corruption of the original society postulated by the pagan myths, however, they substituted the Fall of man and original sin. Given the sinfulness of man, the Fathers conceded the necessity of some measure of private property. They never attached any religious value to private property as an institution or merit of any kind to it except in so far as there was no available substitute. They deplored the fact that under private property luxurious living and extreme poverty could exist side by side. They questioned or denied the possibility of acquiring great riches without resort to evil practices or without inheritance from persons who had resorted to them. They advised all Christians to avoid seeking riches, to avoid attaching value to them other than as reserve for almsgiving, and to beware of the propensity of the possession of riches to foster luxurious living, pride, and arrogance and distract attention from religious duties. As an ideal to keep in mind, if not to pursue actively, they pointed to the fully common use of possessions which they believed to have prevailed in the early days of mankind and among the first Christians. They did not advocate voluntary property, however, except as counsel for those who had a special vocation.

The main interest of the Fathers was in redistributing the general wealth and income of a community through almsgiving. An exception to this procedure was Theodoret of Cyrrhus. This article sets out to present and discuss Theodoret of Cyrrhus extraordinary ideas on economic inequality⁶.

Theodoret' Defence of Economic Inequality.

Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393 – 466), in a "Discourse on Providence"⁷ written about 435, presents an elaborate defense of the existing economic society, without any refer-

⁵ For the combination in the Patristic period of pagan "golden age" and biblical "garden of Eden" ideas, see George Boas, *Essays in Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Age*, Baltimore 1948, pp. 15–53.

⁶ Theodoretus' economic ideas have not been mentioned yet by the authors who dealt with the economic ideas of the Eastern Christian Fathers. Cf. A. Karayiannis' influential article, *The Eastern Christian Fathers on the Distribution of Wealth*, *History of Political Economy* 26 (1994) 39–67 and A. Karayiannis and Sarah Drakopoulou – Dodd, *The Greek Christian Fathers*, in: S. Todd Lowry and Barry Gordon (eds.), *Ancient and Medieval Economic Ideas and Concepts of Social Justice*, Leiden–New York–Köln 1998, which do not mention Theodoret. There is an absence on Theodoret' ideas in: E. Salin's, *Kapitalbegriff und Kapitallehre von der Antike zu den Physiokraten*, *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial – und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 23 (1930) 401 ff. [repr. E. Salin, *Lynceus*, Tübingen 1963, pp. 153–181, at pp. 161 – 164], Dem. Stephanidis' book entitled, *Ἡ Κοινωνικὴ Οἰκονομικὴ ἐν τῇ ἱστορικῇ τῆς ἐξελίξεως*, vol. I, Athens 1948, pp. 248–279 and L. Baeck's, *Il pensiero economico cristiano dell' Antichità al Basso Medioevo. Storia dell' economia mondiale a cura di Valerio Castronovo*, Roma–Bari 1996, pp. 531–554, at pp. 538–542. There is only a brief reference to Theodoret by G. Barbieri, *Fonti per la Storia delle dottrine economiche. Dall' Antichità alla prima scolastica*, Milano 1958, cap. VI, pp. 140–172, where he emphasizes: «La singolare dottrina economica di Teodoret di Ciro» and some more extended analysis by J. Viner, *Religious Thought and Economic Society*, *History of Political Economy* 10 (1978) 9–192, at pp. 18 – 20. See G. Gotsis, *Problems of economic and political ethics in the Byzantine-patristic thought (in Greek)*, Athens 1997, pp. 31 – 32.

⁷ *Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, *De providentia. Orationes decem: PG 83, 555B – 774B*. Parts of the work have been reprinted in: N. Bougatsos, *The Social Teaching of the Greek Fathers (in Greek)*, vol. III, Athens 1984, pp. 221–229, nos 2749–2767. Cf. Yvon Azema (ed.), *Theodoret de Cyr, Discours sur la providence*, Paris 1954. G. Koch, *Strukturen und Geschichte des Heils in der Theologie des Theodoret von Kyros*, Frankfurt / M. 1974.

ence to its being a necessary consequence of the Fall of man. Despite his systematic citation of biblical texts, the tone and manner of his treatment of social issues in this work are distinctly naturalistic rather than early Christian.

"Divine law [i.e. Revelation] did not bring new enlightenment, and only recalled the laws of nature". God had given different functions to different men, each according to his nature, and had so arranged things that each was serviceable to the community. If riches were equally distributed, no one would be willing to do humble tasks for others. Either each would do everything needed for himself, or mankind would back necessities. But without specialization of occupations, there would be lack of skill. Inequality, therefore, is a mode of social organization which yields to the poor as to the rich a more agreeable life, since it is the mode by which all satisfy their needs by mutually supplying each other with what is lacking to them⁸.

The service which the rich render to the poor is that of providing a market for their products. Theodoret admits that most of the rich live unjustly, but claims that the existence of some rich people who managed their riches with justice and honesty, who had not exploited the sufferings of the poor to increase their own wealth, and who had given the needy poor a share of their opulence, sufficed to limit condemnation to the unjust rich⁹.

Theodoret proceeds to apply similar reasoning to the relations of masters and slaves. The servant has advantages over the master. The latter has to occupy himself with the needs of his family, to pay taxes, to find a market for the surplus of his products and a source of supply for what he lacks. He is subject to crop failures; if, on the contrary, the harvest is abundant, he faces the problem of finding buyers. The slave, on the other hand, eats heartily, sleeps well, and has no responsibilities. Many masters work as hard as or even harder than their slaves, if worry is included as work. If there are faultless servants who have to endure unjust masters, then: "We can see that God, master of the universe, in response to the excessive malice of men, often leaves loose the reins of his government, and permits mankind to toss itself about as it wishes"¹⁰.

The main argument which provides Theodoret is the transcendental legalization of the inequality. The advocacy in favour of a given order, which guide us on the above explanation of the Divine Providence, is surrounded with the validity of the catholic beneficial perspective. The inequality states the existence of the involuntary poverty, a fact that offers the prerequisites and the possibility of salvation, of the poor and the rich¹¹. The existence of the poor constitutes an admonition to the rich to give themselves in good works, which they give them the opportunity to earn the salvation through charity. But the obligatory poverty pushes the poor towards the salvation, because it forces them to resort to manual labour as a necessary duty of every believer¹². The labour is functioning as counterbalance of the indolence and laziness: as ethical necessity of the Christian, the duty of the labour contributes to the excess of the dangers, to which the inactivity of the landowner's class indolence is

⁸ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *De providentia* 6: PG 83, 644B – 666C.

⁹ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *De providentia* 6: PG 83, 650A.

¹⁰ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *De providentia* 7: PG 83, 666D – 685C.

¹¹ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *De providentia* 6: PG 83, 657B.

¹² Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Interpretatio epist. ad Ephes.* 4: PG 82, 541A. *De providentia* 6: PG 83, 661C.

alluded¹³. This indolence is the one which enforces the existing human tendencies to the seen and the action of the evil¹⁴.

He later argues at length that virtue brings its own rewards of a material kind on this earth, but concedes that a full appraisal of the wisdom of Providence requires that account should also be taken of the rewards and punishments of another life¹⁵.

Theodoret's argument and analysis seems to be substantially different to the question of rich versus poor than that of the other Fathers. He seems to be providing both a theological apologetic for the social status quo and an argument for the operation of a benevolent Providence, by appealing to the attractive features of an essentially harmonious, non-socialist economic society which is the creation of Providence.

Conclusions

It is worth noting that Theodoret of Cyrrhus differentiates from the ideas of the Early Christian Fathers concerning the unequal distribution of wealth and legitimates it, providing that this inequality is the incentive for an improvement of labour.

¹³ *Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, De providentia 6: PG 83, 644D.

¹⁴ Cf. G. Gotsis, Problems of economic and political ethics in the Byzantine-patristic thought (in Greek), Athens 1997, p. 32.

¹⁵ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, De providentia 9: PG 83, 716D – 740B.