

***THE PROBLEM OF OWNERSHIP IN CHRISTIAN  
POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY***

**Robert Charles Pingpank '59  
Richard Thomas Nolan '59**

**Philosophy 208  
Philosophy of the State  
Professor Blanchard W. Means**

**April 1958**

## INTRODUCTION

“The claim of the Christian Church to make its voice heard in matters of politics and economics is often very widely resented, even by those who are Christian in personal belief and in devotional practice. It is commonly assumed that religion is one department of life, like art or science and that it is playing the part of a busybody when it lays down principles for the guidance of other departments, whether art and science or business and politics.” [William Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, p. 9.]

It is our purpose in writing this paper to investigate the Christian principles of ownership. It is not our intention at this time to present them as Truth or the “best!” Neither do we claim that all Christians will agree with our conclusions. However, this paper is an effort to understand the problem of ownership in Christian terms.

rep & rtn

*2007 NOTE: OUR WRITING STYLE, PUNCTUATION, ENDNOTE AND BIBLIOGRAPHY FORMS, AND SEXIST LANGUAGE OF THE 1950S HAVE NOT BEEN EDITED/CORRECTED.*

The following resources from *Living Issues In Ethics* (rev. ed, 2000) might be of use with this topic:

Ch. 11 “The Political Order” [www.philosophy-religion.org/living/11.pdf](http://www.philosophy-religion.org/living/11.pdf)

Ch. 12 “The Economic Order” [www.philosophy-religion.org/living/12.pdf](http://www.philosophy-religion.org/living/12.pdf)

A major motif of the Christian Scriptures is that God is the absolute owner of all. One illustration of this point is the biblical affirmation, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that therein is; the compass of the world, and they that dwell therein.” (Psalm 24:1). Whatever proprietary pretensions human beings may have, we are not absolute owners of all that has been provided by the Creator. Man is steward of God’s bounty; it is the living God that has given man “dominion” over the earth. And since this dominion is the gift of God, man’s control of the earth’s resources is finite and contingent, and must be referred to God Who is the ultimate owner and controller. As Henry Scott Holland puts it, “Men’s authority to say of anything ‘that is mine’ rests, finally, on his power to say ‘I am God’s.’”<sup>1</sup>

This being the case, the claim of man to fame rests upon his being a good steward of the Creator’s bounty, not on his right to absolute ownership. No ‘Divine Right’ has been given to one particular person, group, or class to exercise complete and final ownership over property. God gave the earth to all men. The first story of Creation in the book of Genesis recognizes this truth, for it tells us that God created man and gave him “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28b). There is no mention of a class of *haves* and a class of *have nots* here. God is the ultimate owner of all and has given the land to all men who are themselves an order of His creation. The responsibility impinging upon man from this gift would seem to be that man be *fruitful*.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27).

Here in the commandment of God, we come to the truth that the person who is committed to the will of God finds himself turned to the needs of his fellow man. The love that we are to show God and to our neighbor is a love that makes itself known in the willingness, where appropriate, to be self-sacrificing and to serve. The God of the Christian, far from causing man to neglect the responsibilities of community life, forces man into that life - “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40).

A careful reading of the parables of Jesus will show that he did not sever himself from the Old Testament principle that all possessions are God’s and that man is, therefore, only a steward. The truth that holding all things in trust is the attitude of all who are truly waiting for the “kingdom of God on earth” may be seen in the following Biblical passage: Luke 19:11-27. The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21) well illustrates the finiteness and contingency of man’s power of possession. For those who have ‘eyes to see’ God is the real owner. The attitude of Jesus to those who make acquisition their primary occupation of life may be seen in Luke 12:20-21 where is stated “Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19ff.) stresses that great “virtue” which often comes from the accumulation of great wealth is hardness of heart, which manifests itself in indifference towards others. It was not property or money in itself that condemned Dives, but the character that was shaped by his accumulation of wealth.

The impact of this aspect of the Bible upon our everyday life is well summed up by Bishop Emrich, who states: “Jesus, we repeat, planned no ideal society, nor did he give us any specific advice for the weighty questions that confront us today. Rather, He gives us the background against which all discussion on the problem of property must be set by bringing home the urgency of the divine command, ‘Seek ye first the Kingdom.’ Without his spirit of service and of concern for the needs of our brothers all discussion builds upon a false foundation.”<sup>2</sup>

Taken as a whole, the Old and New Testaments would seem to show that the role of man in this life is one of service with a readiness to live sacrificially when called upon. Concern for the needs of one’s brothers is equal to concern for our God, according to writings of the early church.

The Christian is, therefore, called upon to judge his own life and that of his society's against this standard. The end to be sought is the Kingdom in which God and man are of primary concern and *things* are subordinate.

If the biblical insight is carried to its logical conclusion, human fulfillment is seen *in community* and not out of it. The Christian Faith does not recognize the isolated individual or the so-called self-sufficient individual. Furthermore, since man's fulfillment is in community, it follows that the institutions of man must be geared to the service of the said community; the justification of all property whether it be in land, tools, or what have you, ought to be in its service to the community or society as a whole. The way one controls his property will be an "outward and visible sign" of his inner attitude toward his neighbors, his community as a whole. If his attitude in actuality is one of service and concern, it must be revealed through his institutions, whatever they may be.

Holland expresses well, the importance of community on personality when he states that: "Personality lies in the relation of person to person. A personality is what it is only by virtue of its power to transcend itself and to enter into the life of another. It lives by interpenetration, by intercourse, by communion. Its power of life is love. There is no such thing as a solitary, isolated person. A self-contained personality is a contradiction in terms. What we mean by personality is a capacity for intercourse, a capacity for retaining self-identity by and through identification with others--a capacity for friendship, for communion, for fellowship. Hence, the true logic of personality compels us to discover the man's personal worth in the inherent necessity of a society in which it is realized. Society is, simply, the expression of the social inter-communion of spirit with spirit which constitutes what we mean by personality, fellowship and individuality are correlative terms."<sup>3</sup> How well community is realized may be gleaned from an observation of the structures of a given society.

The Christian philosophy must insist, therefore, when addressing itself to the problem of ownership (in order to be consistent with its basic premises) that property does not exist merely for the increased acquisition of wealth, but for the service to the community as a whole. Also, those adhering to the Christian religion will, in this interpretation, recognize that property is justified through its function. "Property is moral and healthy only when it is used as a condition not of idleness but of activity, and when it involves the discharge of definite personal obligations."<sup>4</sup> All proprietary rights which do not produce the result of service, broadly conceived, are to be abolished. Rights cannot in community be divorced from obligations. Property exists for use and not for power.

The truth that man truly finds himself in his relationship to and service of others enables us to see the weakness of *radical individualism*. Individualistic theories - by asserting the right of men to make of their own lives what they can *in isolation* - tend to make the individual an absolute so that he, not the community or the Creator, is the sole point of reference. This mentality leads to the assertion that to each man, *he* is the center of the universe. Consequently, what started out as a glorification of the individual with all his capacities leads to his own enslavement. Seemingly paradoxical, service to others leads to freedom for oneself. We would do well to remember the idea of Jesus' when he said "For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." (Mark 8:35).

Our present society has by and large lost sight of the sense of the community. The individual, rather than the community is given the emphasis. The individual is seen as quite absolute, and because of this, private ownership is seen very often, in its own right, as absolute. This being the case, property is seen to exist for the increased acquisition of wealth and power over others. Property, in this sense, exists not so much for use as for power and allows increased capital into the hands of those who are to all intents and purposes parasitic on the society as a whole. The equitable distribution between reward and accomplishment is thrown into complete distortion. Further, because the end of this kind of society is the accumulation of wealth, there has been a lessening of the artistic, cultural, and intellectual, accomplishments of our time. No place is given to this sort of thing while man's sight is primarily concerned about and centered around wealth--when success, prestige, and worth are measured in dollars and cents. Provision will not satisfactorily be made as long as the means of life are considered as the ends. Tawney expresses it well when he states: "Like the hypochondriac who is so absorbed in the process of

his own digestion that he goes to his grave before he has begun to live, industrialized communities neglect the very objects for which it is worthwhile to acquire riches in their feverish preoccupation with the *means* by which riches can be acquired.”<sup>5</sup>

Society will not solve the particular problems of property until it reappraises its scale of values. The individuals who comprise society would have to be persuaded to surrender all gains which come about without any corresponding service because of the ill effects which this kind of practice has on community. Industry would have to be so organized that the instrumental character of economic activity will be made emphatic by its subordination to the social purpose for which it is carried on.

All who wish to see the transformation of society would have to be aware of the need for transforming the thought processes of the individuals who make up that society.

A society cannot be adequately changed by merely imposing upon it the instrumental means attending a particular political system. This, it seems to us, is where the revolutionist who advocates the violent overthrow of a particular government goes astray. Even if successful, the accomplishment of the overthrow of a particular government by force will not prepare the people for the new regime. The mind of man must be prepared. The external workings of a particular political system must, by and large, reflect the thoughts and desires of the people if it is to be at all successful.

Under the present conditions, it would seem that the Christian is to bring pressure of his thought to bear upon all instrumentalists who believe that the establishment of machinery is equal to social betterment.

The purpose of the society must be clear, then, and the economic system must be subordinate to it. There has not yet been developed a perfect economic system, nor absolute economic principles. Such claims to have this are made by those like the Red communists, but the proper reply to a regime that claims to possess the secret of the perfect economic system is not “to say, in effect, ‘You’re a liar, we’re the boys with the perfect economic system,’ but to explain quite clearly and decisively why the perfect economic system does not exist.”<sup>6</sup> The brief answer from the Christian philosopher might be that a system which is inherently consistent has not yet been developed, but in light of the established purpose of society, together with a Christian doctrine of the nature of man (See *Hardness of Heart* by E. La B. Cherbonnier), such a system is possible.

Since the purpose is (in our understanding of it) as we have defined it, to produce true community in which service is extolled above self-centeredness, service to both God and man, some system for the apportioning of wealth must be maintained. This is a prerequisite for social well being. The regulation of capital would prevent anarchy or confusion. The community, if it is not to be subordinate to the economic system but “superior” to it, would take charge of the regulation of the economy. The community as a whole would control the means of production. This does not mean, as some people seem to think, that all private property will become extinct. Socialism does not aim at the complete extinction of private property - only private capital. Socialism recognizes in the words of Rashdall: “That without some property or capacity for acquiring property, there can be no individual liberty, and that without some liberty there can be no proper development of character; and further that considerable leisure and liberty of action, such as is now secured by private capital and inheritance for *some persons*, must always be socially desirable.”<sup>7</sup> The exact form and system it should take, however, is not to be easily settled ahead of time. The form it should assume must be settled by the light which comes only through the gradual accumulation of experience.

The Christian community (not the established goal, but as it is today permeating American democracy here and there) could well use as its guide the basic guiding principle of *agape* in its attempt to gradually establish a Christian “state”. That principle must constantly be borne in mind as checks upon policy.

Regarding ownership and property, William Temple says that: “Every child should find itself a member of a family housed with decency and dignity so that it may grow up as a member of that basic community in a happy fellowship unspoiled by underfeeding or overcrowding, by dirty and drab

surroundings, or by mechanical monotony of environment.” “Every citizen should be secure in possession of such income as will enable him to maintain a home and bring up children in such conditions as are described --- above”<sup>8</sup>

The community must regulate. The claims of the individual must be subordinate to the well being of the community as a whole. The means of production would be controlled by the community, and private ownership would be determined by the community in light of experience concerning its own well being. In our opinion, only in communal regulation in accordance with the will of God (*agape*) lies the most available correction of the apparent paradox that the absolute nature of the individual and private property has confined the value which comes from property within a limited circle. {Instructor’s comment: Who interprets?}

The community, like the individual that makes it up, must refer itself to Him who is the Absolute owner of all. A community which fails to do this will most likely be arbitrary and absolute in its demand upon those which make it up.

As does the individual, so must the community face the unavoidable and inescapable issue of a framework in which to live, that is, the choosing of a standard or standards for the distinction between good and evil. “The experiment (discussed in passages not being quoted in this paper) suppressing value judgments, though a failure, does disclose something about human nature which refuses to be concealed. Man is that creature who must have some criterion of the good. No man can wish to jump out of this situation without first judging that it would be ‘good’ to do so. This means that the true realist is the man who acknowledges the distinction between good and evil and with it the category of sin.”<sup>9</sup>

The community like the individual must acknowledge its contingency and draw its strength of purpose from Him who is not contingent.

The writers recognize the fact that probably all systems run by mortal man will not create a utopia. There will most likely be problems rising from any system. But it is far better to work on problems created by an attempt to live out the implications of Christianity which finds its life in a love (*agape*) relationship, than to be busy ironing out problems created by a way of life foreign to the very purpose for which man was created. Sharing with our fellows is not a matter of beneficent charity either; it is a corollary or derived principle of *agape*.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Property; its duties and rights: historically, philosophically and religiously regarded/essays by various writers; with an introduction by the Bishop of Oxford. Ch. VIII.*

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Fletcher (ed.), *Christianity and Property*, Ch. 2, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>*Property; its Duties and Rights*, Ch. VII, p. 187.

<sup>4</sup>R. H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society*, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup>Tawney, *opus cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>6</sup>J. V. L. Casserley, *The Bent World*, p. 166.

<sup>7</sup>*Property; Its Duties and Rights*, Ch II, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup>William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, p. 105.

<sup>9</sup>E. La B. Cherbonnier, *Hardness of Heart*, p. 25.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

*The Holy Bible*, RSV

Casserley, J. *The Bent World* (Oxford U. Press, N.Y. 1955)

Cherbonnier, E. L. *Hardness of Heart* (Doubleday, N.Y. 1955)

Fletcher, J. ed *Christianity & Property* (Westminster, Philadelphia)

*Property Its Duties And Rights*, Gore, ed. (MacMillan, London, 1913)

Schlatter, R. *Private Property*, (Rutgers U. Press., N.J., 1951)

Tawney, R.H. *The Acquisitive Society* (Harcourt, Brace & Co, NY, 1920)

Temple, W. *Christianity & Social. Order* (SCM Press, London 1942)

[Grade on the essay was 85.]