

Beyond Wealth

Orthodoxy, Capitalism, and
the Gospel of Wealth



Christ driving the Moneychangers from the Temple
(From a fresco at the Dečani Monastery, Serbia)

Kyriakos Dounetas

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An Orthodox Christian of Greek descent, Mr. Dounetas has also done significant avocational study in Orthodox theology and the Church's Patristic and ascetical writing. He is a protégé of the distinguished scholar Dimitri Kitsikis, Professor of History *Emeritus* at the University of Ottawa and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

A promising and important young voice in Orthodox scholarship, Mr. Dounetas has contributed numerous essays to the celebrated Greek intellectual quarterly *Ενδιάμεση Περιοχή* (Intermediate Region), published in Athens by the Dimitri Kitsikis Public Foundation. *Beyond Wealth* is his first major book.

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Introduction

“THE RICH MAN dies only once, but the poor man dies every day.” To this contemporary Greek saying, Saint John Chrysostom would surely respond much as he did in the fourth century: “Despise riches, maintain the poor, and be ready to die every day for Christ.”¹

The disdain for riches is well known in almost all religious and philosophical traditions. Too often though, the matter is treated within an ethical or an ideological context, while neglecting its existential causes and effects. In reality, man rarely finds comfort in moral values and concepts when his survival is at stake, and when confronted by immediate needs, his noble aspirations quickly yield to his baser instincts. Even though the ancient Greeks viewed wealth as residing at an ethical level lower than that of philosophy, they fully acknowledged its practical value. According to Aristotle, when the poet Simonides was asked which is better, to be wise or to be rich, he replied: “Rich, for I often see the wise spending their time at the doors of the rich” (*Rhetoric* 2:16).

If, for the Orthodox Christian, the destiny of man is the perfection of his relationship with God in *deification* or *theosis* (θέωσις), then the critical issue must be how wealth and possessions affect this goal. Today, when we are influenced by countless philosophies and religions (mostly of western origin), we must carefully discern between Orthodox theology and that of western confessions, giving special attention to the existential character of necessity. We must also deal with the question of unbridled capitalism and greed, which have assumed an astonishingly pervasive character globally and has even infiltrated the life of Orthodox communities. As we shall see, the need for earthly security, manifested in the quest for riches, is but a symptom of the existential sickness from which mankind suf-

fers on account of sin and death. Its cure is found in the Tradition of the Orthodox Church, where one encounters the Risen Christ and where necessity is replaced by an immediate and loving relationship with God.

This essay draws from the teachings of the Holy Fathers, and especially from the numerous incisive and eloquent homilies of St. John Chrysostom. It attempts to describe the frame of mind or *phronema* of the Orthodox Church towards wealth and necessity. It attempts not to judge or condemn anyone for any particular opinion held or decision made, but rather to show a manner of living that befits one's dignity as a being made in God's image.

1. The Reign of Necessity

In Paradise, necessity did not exist and Adam reigned over creation without a thought concerning survival.² He reigned freely, but not independently. Adam's life, even his existence, depended on his immediate, personal relationship with God. This is realised through communion with God's divine energies, which permeate all of creation and sustain its existence.³ Although God is unknowable and incommunicable in essence, He can be experienced and known by man directly through His energies, which proceed naturally from His essence. St. Basil the Great writes: "But we say that we know our God from the energies, but we are unable to draw near to His essence. The energies descend toward us, but His essence remains unapproachable."⁴

The extent to which the energies are experienced determines the level of progress towards regaining one's freedom from the needs determined by his nature. The highest level is union with God, also known as *deification* or *theosis*. St. Maximos the Confessor writes:

This union presupposes a transcending of all that, by nature, is essentially limited by an origin and a consummation. Such transcendence is effected by the almighty and more than powerful energy of God, acting in a direct and infinite manner in the person worthy of this transcendence. The action of this divine energy bestows a more than ineffable pleasure and joy on him, in whom the unutterable and unfathomable union with the divine is accomplished. This, in the nature of things, cannot be perceived, conceived or expressed.⁵

The grace of God, so often mentioned in Scripture, is understood to refer to the divine energies.⁶

Man in communion with God does not realise death and necessity. Though dependent on God, he is in no way oppressed; rather, he is called to become by grace that which God is by nature: eternal,

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From the Introduction

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