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St. John Chrysostom and St. Thomas Aquinas on Private Property

Św. Jan Chryzostom i św. Tomasz z Akwinu o własności prywatnej

Abstract. The theological reflection on private property in writings of two great theologians in Church history, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and his great predecessor St. John Chrysostom (347–407) helps us to make a fresh understanding of two types of Christian societies, in which they lived. Humanity always seeks a right answer to questions in socio-cultural sphere, which directly concerns human life. Thus, the reflection on wealth and poverty, social justice and the meaning of material resources and on other philosophical and religious issues gives a possibility to create a new kind of society and prioritize its values. Hence the representatives of two different periods, two philosophical and also exegetical traditions create their reflection in different ways: John Chrysostom as a prominent preacher and spiritual leader, who was very close to his flock's problems and Thomas Aquinas as a brilliant scholar and Dominican Friar; a Doctor of the Catholic Church, whose theology influenced the development of Society for many years. Their views on private property are different, but together they could create a great mosaic, based on Christ's teaching in the Bible. Their views on private property should lead us not only to a deep theoretical reflection, but also to a clear Christian answer to social and spiritual issues.

Streszczenie. Refleksja teologiczna na temat własności prywatnej w pismach dwóch wielkich teologów w historii Kościoła, św. Tomasza z Akwinu (1225–1274) i jego wielkiego poprzednika św. Jana Chryzostoma (347–407) pomaga nam zrozumieć na nowo dwa rodzaje chrześcijańskich społeczeństw, w których żyli ci dwaj święci. Ludzkość zawsze szukała właściwej odpowiedzi na pytania natury społeczno-kulturowej, która bezpośrednio dotyczy życia ludzkiego. Tak więc refleksja nad bogactwem i ubóstwem, sprawiedliwością społeczną i znaczeniem zasobów materialnych oraz innych kwestii filozoficznych i religijnych daje możliwość stworzenia nowego rodzaju społeczeństwa i nadania priorytetu jego wartościom. Stąd reprezentanci dwóch różnych okresów, dwóch tradycji filozoficznych i egzegetycznych tworzą swoje refleksje na różne sposoby: Jan Chryzostom jako wybitny kaznodzieja i przywódca duchowy, który był bardzo

bliski problemom wiernych i Tomasz z Akwinu jako znakomity uczyony, dominikanin, doktor Kościoła katolickiego, którego teologia przez wiele lat wpływała na rozwój społeczeństwa. Ich poglądy na temat własności prywatnej są różne, ale razem mogą stworzyć wielką mozaikę, opartą na nauczaniu Chrystusa w Biblii. Ich spojrzenie na własność prywatną powinno prowadzić nas nie tylko do głębokiej refleksji teoretycznej, ale także do jasnej chrześcijańskiej odpowiedzi na kwestie społeczne i duchowe.

Keywords: private property; individual possessions; material resources; social justice; St. John Chrysostom; St. Thomas Aquinas; Church Fathers.

Słowa kluczowe: własność prywatna; własność jednostkowa; zasoby materialne; sprawiedliwość społeczna; św. Jan Chryzostom; św. Tomasz z Akwinu; Ojcowie Kościoła.

1. The Biblical Background of the Church Fathers' Views on Private Property

The Christian views on material possessions and private property have a long history of development in the writings of prominent theologians in the early period of Christianity. Many of those theologians are representatives of Western and Eastern Churches.¹ Most of the Church Fathers in their teachings try to be faithful to the Holy Scriptures. For them, this fact signifies that the accurate interpretation of the New Testament introduces them to the teaching of Jesus Christ as a new lawgiver, whose rules are based on the law of love, which should be expressed towards God and neighbor as well (Mark 12:31).² The theme of private property is mostly rooted in the Holy Gospels because material things are strictly connected to human reality as something that explains the relation between divinity and humanity, God and human beings.³ This social issue derives from Jesus' teachings and is also visible in the lifestyle of the early Christian community, as described in many books of the New Testament.

¹ G.H. Smith, *Freethought and Freedom: The Christian Theory of Property*, (access: 18 March 2019), <https://www.libertarianism.org/columns/freethought-freedom-christian-theory-property>

² Р.Л. Вилкен, *У пошуках обличчя Божого: Введення у богослов'я ранньої Церкви*, pp. 291–297.

³ B. Littlejohn, *Private Property in the Bible*, (access: 10 June 2019), <https://politicaltheology.com/private-property-in-the-bible/>

The theme of private property is intrinsically linked with Jesus' teaching about the priority of the Kingdom of God (*Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ*).⁴ Seeing that the realization of this Kingdom "is not of this world" (John 18:36), early Christians paid attention not to the secular challenges, but to the *theo-basileutical goal* (Luke 13:18) because this was the main purpose for every disciple of Jesus, while living in the fragile and unjust world. Hence, the main criteria for creating the real friendship with Christ and reaching Paradise in Heaven is giving the priority to this Kingdom (Matthew 6:10).⁵ The realization of this reality requires one main thing – conversion (*μετάνοια*).⁶ If everyone repents and returns to God, the remaining elements of his life, for instance, money, economic system, material possessions, family budget, etc. mean little to him and the attitude to all aforementioned things should be characterized by a certain distance (Mark 9:23). Furthermore, all the secular affairs should be directed to the real enjoyment of brotherhood, true love of neighbor, because only in community is it possible to create this space of Heavenly Kingdom (Acts 4:32–35).⁷ Thus for the early Christian community the real following of Christ could be possible only by practicing the virtue of individual poverty.⁸ Christians kept in their memory that the message of Christ was addressed to the poor, therefore the accumulation of material possessions was treated as distancing from love of Christ: "For, has not God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which God has promised to those that love Him?" (James 2:5).⁹

Distancing from Christ was very dangerous for early Christians, because of *apocalyptic expectation* of the second coming of Jesus. The expectation of arrival of Christ (*παρουσία*) restrained the development of social views of believers, so everyone should keep faithfulness to the Savior in their spiritual life, avoiding every endeavor to establish their financial situation in this world,

⁴ H. Langkammer, *Królestwo Boże w przepowiadaniu Jezusa (Ewangelie synoptyczne)*, p. 136.

⁵ P. Гайдук, *Посланиці благовісті. Базовий курс проповідництва*, pp. 25–34.

⁶ H. Chroust, R.J. Affeldt, *The Problem of Private Property According to St. Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 152–153.

⁷ Acts 4:32–35: "Now the multitude of believers were of one heart and one soul; and not one said that anything he possessed was his own...; For those who owned lands or houses would sell them and bring the price of what they had sold, and laid it at the Apostle's feet; and distribution was made into every man, according as any one had need."

⁸ E.K. Hunt, *Property and Prophets: The Evolution of Economic Institutions and Ideologies*, Armonk–London 2003, p. 10.

⁹ H. Chroust, R.J. Affeldt, *The Problem of Private Property According to St. Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 154–155.

where time is short and the Universe comes very quickly to its end.¹⁰ Hence, early Christians (and representatives of early monastic movement as well) were afraid to be judged by Christ for the concentration of their minds on miserable material things, which mean nothing in comparison with such great salvation which would be achieved by every true spiritual man.¹¹ Thus, private property was considered rather as an obstacle in a process of salvation. This radicalism is described in the following New Testament text: “Your gold and silver are rusted, and their rust will be a witness against you, and will eat your flesh as it were fire” (James 5:3).

Therefore, the Roman and Greek theologians of the early period of Christianity such as Clement of Alexandria (150–216), Cyprian (200–258), Athanasius of Alexandria (295–373), Basil the Great (330–379), Gregory of Nyssa (333–394), Augustine (354–430) and others, who combined in their views both apostolic (i.e. biblical) and philosophical (i.e. Stoic and Platonic) traditions, had a very clear point of view on private property. On the one hand, they considered possessions in a Platonic category as the idealistic possibility to create a community of goods in a Christian society, but on the other hand, the Church Fathers insisted that material value was something secondary, which obstructed the spiritual growth for believers (the influence of Stoic philosophy), whose task was to remain faithful to Christ and to be flawless.¹² In time, this negative attitude toward all material possessions was modified and replaced by a charitable interpretation of the meaning of personal wealth and property.¹³

¹⁰ W.A. Clebsch, C.R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective*, New York–London 1975, p. 13.

¹¹ Г. Фроловский, *Восточные Отцы IV века*, pp. 290–291.

¹² I. Gabriel, *Private Property in the Christian tradition: Basic Concepts and Comment*, p. 5.

¹³ This change was caused by the fact that gradually wealthy people began to convert to the Christian faith after the implementation of the Edict of Toleration (313) within the Roman Empire, which treated Christians in a kinder manner. The new converts used their possessions to alleviate the poverty of their brethren. After that the wealth was not considered as a sign of paganism and the tolerance of private property was possible when somebody used it for the charitable goal (H. Chroust, R.J. Affeldt, *The Problem of Private Property According to St. Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 158–160).

2. St. John Chrysostom on Private Property

St. John Chrysostom as a preacher spoke very often on the topic of wealth and poverty,¹⁴ so his proclamation on private property is very informative and his reflection is profound, being strictly connected to the Holy Scriptures.¹⁵ Chrysostom delivered social sermons in two periods of his ministry: as a Deacon and a Priest at Antioch (386–398), and also as a Bishop in Constantinople (398–407). John Chrysostom's concern about social issues, is the predominantly moral and ethical commentary to the biblical books of the Old and New Testament.¹⁶ Delivering his sermons, which were the first source of his views on private property, St. John Chrysostom tried to change the social situation in his reality and to make his society more just for all, although he realized that his listeners were people of different social classes. His audience consisted of top level officials who entered the Church being accompanied by slaves, and also pilgrims and homeless people, ordinary peasants and soldiers.¹⁷ John Chrysostom's views on private property can be systemized in three short statements.

I am not a final owner of all my possessions. According to Chrysostom, God generously endowed the humanity with something more valuable than money or gold. These are natural resources, such as land, air, sun, water or fire. And it would be wrong to say that a rich person is more pleased with the sun or with the air. All these gifts are intentionally created for every human being without exception, so everyone has equal rights and opportunities to live and to develop on this earth, taking advantage of these benefits.¹⁸ Being connected to philosophy of Stoics, Chrysostom distinguishes between “things which are necessary for existence” (*αναγκαιότερα*) and “things which are exquisite (or fancy)” (*χρέματα*), that is acquired property, such as money, real estate or precious metals. Therefore, referring to the decisions of the early Christian Church, that no one said that “anything he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common” (Acts 4:32), St. John concludes that the class distinction inside the Christian society into the poor and the rich should be eliminated soon, as well as the possessive pronouns “my”, “mine” should disappear from

¹⁴ A. Олиунок, *Социально-этические взгляды и пастырское служение св. Иоанна Златоуста в условиях классового общественного антагонизма его эпохи*, p. 337.

¹⁵ C. Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching*, p. 83.

¹⁶ S. Zincone, *Ricchezza e povertà nelle omelie di Giovanni Crisostomo*, p. 8.

¹⁷ N.K. Gvozdev, *St. John Chrysostom and John Locke: An Orthodox Basis for the Social Contract?*, p. 151.

¹⁸ *Patrologia Graeca* (PG) 62, 561–564.

the vocabulary of believers in Christ.¹⁹ They should be replaced by “our” and “ours”. Such a social dream about total equality in having possessions means for Chrysostom that every exclusivism in a private property should be overcome in the Christian society because God sees everyone as equal human beings and treats us with dignity (PG 58, 617–626).²⁰

The people should not be conquered by their possessions. St. John Chrysostom was often criticized for his sharp homilies addressed to the rich. When delivering a sermon in a shrine, he sometimes directed his message to the wealthy people who were present there.²¹ However, St. John tried to explain that the purpose of his sharp words is not to insult the rich or to glorify the poor. Because the wealth itself is not the source of evil (or “unmitigated murder” PG 52, 392), but the way of its use. In addition, poverty itself is not good in itself, but its proper use brings good results. It is clear that the intention of John Chrysostom was not to “attack” the rich just because of their wealth as it is not ontologically connected with evil. Everything on earth which was created by God is ontologically good, including material possessions. In this sense, the “regulator” of the public division of wealth is state law, which does not allow to destroy the balance between rich and poor people. In his homilies Chrysostom often used the term “slave” (*δούλος*) describing the negative attitude of a person toward material things.²² This word appeals to the imagination of his listeners, creating a terrible image of a person limited in freedom of action and movement. To become a slave means to become the biggest loser and an unhappy person.²³ John Chrysostom convinced his audience that a person who falls into the temptation of consumerism tries to console himself with luxury, but at the same time walks away from the truth about himself, becoming a slave of material goods.²⁴ According to Chrysostom, this attitude defines the most dangerous slavery and resistance to the will of God: instead of being distanced to material things, a person starts to practice idolatry.²⁵

Private property can cause an antagonism between people. For St. John Chrysostom social equality and the fair distribution of material things among

¹⁹ A. Oliynyk, *Przepowiadanie Ewangelii w czasach patrystycznych na przykładzie działalności kaznodziejskiej Jana Chryzostoma*, pp. 141–142.

²⁰ C. Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching*, p. 87.

²¹ W. Mayer, P. Allen, *John Chrysostom*, p. 34.

²² A. Oliynyk, *Социально-этические взгляды и пастырское служение св. Иоанна Златоуста в условиях классового общественного антагонизма его эпохи*, p. 338.

²³ И. Попов, *Святой Иоанн Златоуст и его враги*, p. 814.

²⁴ PG 62, 561–564.

²⁵ C. Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching*, pp. 87–88.

people is something natural, commanded by God at the beginning in a process of the creation of the world.²⁶ If an individual person claims that he inherited a certain material things in a completely legal way, then St. John invites him to reflect more deeply and refer to the very origins of life. He should not only think about his ancestors from whom he inherited some material possession. His mental journey should be taken to the original Source, to the period of the creation of the world, where God “leases” the land to man and everything on the earth.²⁷ Undoubtedly, this will give him the corrected estimated panorama about the belonging of all the material possessions that he received. Thus, the Lord does not commit injustice, creating some people rich, and others poor. The evidence of this is the existence of so-called “common goods,” such as land, water, sky, sea, etc.²⁸ Therefore, it is completely wrong to assume that everything I received in a legal way (property), is given by God only to me. God’s natural law has primacy and therefore the state law about the property must be subordinate to it. However, it often does not work in practice – hence the antagonism between people arises.²⁹ We can assume that Chrysostom had prophetic eyes because the responsibility of a person for the actions of his predecessors is impossible. Therefore, state laws are often unfair and are in constant conflict with God’s commandments. Consumerism or longing for material things make the human being forget about their status towards the created world and the fact that they are only travelers and pilgrims on this earth.³⁰

3. St. Thomas Aquinas on Private Property

Reflecting on private property St. Thomas Aquinas intends to make synthesis between apostolic and patristic tradition³¹ (including the heritage of St. John Chrysostom) and Aristotelian philosophy, which is more practical and realistic. After more than a thousand years of Church history he rejects the conviction about quick coming of Jesus in glory and he is sure that humanity should be prepared to plan the future. St. Thomas shows the dynamics of his Exegeti-

²⁶ И. Попов, *Святой Иоанн Златоуст и его враги*, p. 814.

²⁷ PG 62, 561–564.

²⁸ C. Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching*, p. 84.

²⁹ PG 62, 594–595; 61, 136–137.

³⁰ A. Oliynyk, *Συγκριτική ἀνάσιν τὸ φαινόμενον. Interpretacja reguł kaznodziejskich św. Jana Chryzostoma w pismach Anthony’ego Coniarisa jako przykład współczesnej homiletyki prawosławnej*, p. 106.

³¹ P. Roszak, *Tomizm biblijny: metoda i perspektywy*, p. 123.

cal practice³² and understands that human beings should use material things in a proper way, because the personal possession is an essential and crucial component in the process of Christian growth or improvement in many virtues. Considering the subject of private property in the section of the *Summa Theologica* (ST) dedicated to the virtue of justice, Aquinas puts the issue of personal possessions in the larger context of “therapy” from theft and robbery (ST, II–II, 66). Therefore, St. Thomas “does argue that private property is legitimate, and not solely as a concession to fallen human nature,”³³ but affirms that individual possession is an auxiliary link to better understanding of the human being, who is *imago Dei*, i.e. created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). This applies to his attitude to God, other persons and himself.

My possessions help me in proper dominion over external goods. This statement of St. Thomas has its source in the biblical idea that God is the Creator of all things in the Universe (Genesis 1). He is the first owner, but the man as the “crown of creation” (Psalm 8:6) has a privilege to use it. Due to rationality, the man as *imago Dei* is more perfect and has the right to have dominion over non-rational goods.³⁴ External goods cannot be treated in an instrumental way by humans, so St. Thomas’ point of view does not invite people to despoil the planet or manipulate the forces of nature, but to be in right relations with its goods. This appeal of St. Thomas directed to human beings is only possible when we take into account human rationality.³⁵ Thus, the private property for St. Thomas means that it is the instrument given by God in order to realize the proper dominion over material things. It also could teach us to have wiser stewardship over creation and to have better administration over it. Aquinas convinces us that “with the property comes a sense of responsibility”³⁶ and gratitude as well. Hence, according to St. Thomas, the private property is not only permissible by God, but also necessary for every human being in his relation to all those external goods.

Property is “ascribed to the natural law”. It is necessary for self-development. The role which private property plays in the individual human life is not only positive and constructive as a value to keep all life priorities in order. It helps not only to communicate between rational and non-rational creations

³² Idem, *Between Dialectics and Metaphor: Dynamics of the Exegetical Practice of Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 507–509.

³³ M.L. Hirschfeld, *Aquinas and the Market: Toward a Humane Economy*, pp. 161–162.

³⁴ ST, I–II, 4, 7 responsio.

³⁵ H. Chroust, R.J. Affeldt, *The Problem of Private Property According to St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 177.

³⁶ M.L. Hirschfeld, *Aquinas and the Market: Toward a Humane Economy*, p. 164.

due to God's providence in a proper way, but it is also connected with the *lex naturalis (moralis)* "as an inclination to the good according to the nature of his (man's) reason, which is proper to him" (ST, II-II, q. 57, a. 3). Thus, private property "is fitting to human nature ... as an institution that is in accordance with natural law and not simply as a remedy for fallen human nature."³⁷ This statement leads St. Thomas to the conclusion that the private property facilitates the true love of self and launches the mechanism of self-realization. They serve the physical needs of all individuals. As a result, we focus more on our own possessions than that which belong of our neighbor (because of hard work to obtain them), so love of self prevails over love of other human beings.³⁸ Although the human priority in focusing on self-awareness seems strange for the Christian outlook, for Aquinas the most important is the love of God and His will, which can be read in the natural laws. If we try to love our neighbor more, the neighbor appears as an obstacle in our sufficient love of God. The situation with almsgiving illustrates it very well: "It is altogether wrong to give alms out of what is necessary to us."³⁹

Private property is the key to establish peace with others. According to St. Thomas, the importance of proper self-interest and also the obedient attitude to God do not mean that one human being should ignore others in their need. The disordered desires (especially the overconsumption) of a person are not the manifestation of self-love,⁴⁰ but only the expression that this person "is acting against their own interests and harming their neighbor at the same time."⁴¹ However, the right application of private property provides the readiness of every individual to help others in their needs by sharing with them everything that they possess, considers St. Thomas, turning to the Platonic altruistic tradition. Besides, the private property has also the inner "power" to preserve people in peace with others.⁴² St. Thomas Aquinas observes that quarrels and wars between individuals or societies start more frequently when the division of the material things does not exist,⁴³ "because a more peaceful state

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 167.

³⁸ I. Gabriel, *Private Property in the Christian tradition: Basic Concepts and Comment*, p. 6.

³⁹ ST, II-II, 32, 6.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 25, 7.

⁴¹ M.L. Hirschfeld, *Aquinas and the Market: Toward a Humane Economy*, p. 167.

⁴² I. Gabriel, *Private Property in the Christian tradition: Basic Concepts and Comment*, p. 6.

⁴³ ST, II-II, 66, 2.

is ensured to men if each one is contented with his own.”⁴⁴ So, the private property is better than common property as it provides to social peace, giving the opportunity to avoid conflicts as everybody is happy with property he cares for.

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The description of private property by two great theologians, St. John Chrysostom and St. Thomas Aquinas is very rich in philosophical arguments and originates from biblical tradition as well: they both convince us that God is the only Creator of all material goods and the private possessions are given to humanity as a gift to sustain human beings in their life. Views of both Church Fathers do not go along with eschatological expectations because they live in a Christian society, trying to build it up according to a model of Christ's teaching. Although St. John Chrysostom as a representative of the Eastern Church is a protagonist in idealistic philosophical tradition, he interprets the private property as a concession to failing human nature (because of the consequence of original sin), which should be treated with caution and with lack of confidence, paying more attention to those who are in need and working hard for the social justice. St. Thomas Aquinas, who lived eight hundred years later, in a scholastic period, in which the Western Church set a goal to create the new future for the next generations, relying in its missionary actions on the full approval of private property showed us his compromise position. On the one hand, he realized the necessity of solidarity between the rich and the poor, but on other hand, he justified private property as a positive phenomenon in society, which was protected by the natural law. Being a commentator of past tradition and not denying it, Aquinas gave priority to new and modern vision of society where private property is a cornerstone in building the Christian future.

Conclusion

The theological reflection on private property by two great theologians in Church history, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and his great predecessor St. John Chrysostom (347–407), differs greatly because of long chronological periods, different epochs they lived in and their varying pastoral and cultural experiences. The divergence of their exegesis and spiritual reflection is very noticeable as well. Furthermore, we can also see the contrast in their interior interpretation of verses of Holy Scripture which concern social issues because

⁴⁴ M.L. Hirschfeld, *Aquinas and the Market: Toward a Humane Economy*, p. 164.

of two different Church traditions – the Eastern and Western. The doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas on private property, presented in his *Summa Theologica*, is a consequence of his Aristotelian mentality and non-idealistic Patristic scholar system. On the contrary, St. John Chrysostom is mostly a representative of the Stoic philosophical school and apologetic style of theological discussion. He is a supporter of the idea of the communion of all property and all possessions. Nevertheless, the theological arguments of both theologians are prominent and their biblical exegesis on social issues was in high demand. The reflection on private property based on the teachings of St. John Chrysostom and St. Thomas Aquinas as well as the comparative analysis are strongly needed in our modern society, which experiences social challenges very similar to those in the ancient world: wealth and poverty which we are confronted with give rise to obligations of the righteous division of goods on earth. The problem of private property should lead us to a practical Christian answer in our global world.

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