

A review by Giacomo Costa of: Angelo Tosato, The Gospel and wealth: new exegetical perspectives, Dario Antiseri, Francesco D'Agostino, Angelo Petroni (Editors), in Markets and Morality, Vol.6, n.2, 2003, pp. 689-691.

This is an important collection of essays, or rather short, synthetic monographs, by a talented Italian Catholic biblical scholar, Angelo Tosato. (Some of his previous studies were published in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*). The author had planned a study on "The Gospel and freedom": after his untimely death in 1999, Messes Antiseri, D'Agostino and Petroni have made a careful selection some of his extant pertinent essays, which form a surprisingly coherent whole, albeit with some repetitions.

That the relationship between Gospel and wealth is of *prima facie* opposition should be the starting point of any serious discussion: "One may come across important books (such as *The spirit of democratic capitalism* by Michael Novak) or long magisterial documents (such as *Centesimus Annus*) devoted precisely to this subject, and specifically aiming at throwing a bridge between the two, only to find that not a word is spent on this basic problem."

This opposition is but an aspect of a more general one: "The Gospel proposes a religious liberation, to be achieved in a religious way. This way is different, and seemingly incompatible, with the liberation proposed by liberalism. On those who want to maintain the compatibility between the two lies the burden of facing the intimations to the contrary that seem to issue from the Christian canonical sources." As most contemporary Christian theologians, Tosato believes that the Gospel is relevant to our life in this world. As a liberal, he is convinced that in this world we have to tackle a multi-dimensional liberation task, one side of which is economic liberation, to be carried out by full participation to productive activities and markets.

Tosato distinguishes sharply between exegesis and hermeneutics. The dissolution of the supposed opposition between the Gospel and wealth should be accomplished by the former; the development of a Christian economic ethics is a task of the latter.

Tosato offers a classification of the anti-wealth sayings of Jesus in an order of increasing opposition: (a) blame on who cares only about material goods; (b) blame on who cares also about material goods; (c) exhortation to accumulate not earthly, but heavenly goods; (d) exhortation not to care about one's material needs; (e) threat of damnation to the wealthy; (f) promise of salvation to the poor; (g) exhortation to renounce to one's goods; (h) injunction to do so; (h) exaltation of poverty as a necessary condition for perfection.

The individual exegetical analyses offered by the author, although highly instructive, may or may not convince the reader that these verses have been badly misunderstood over the centuries. Tosato, however, is ready to face the general problem, as posed by Ludwig von Mises in his treatise on Socialism: "Mises argues that Jesus' attitude to the social order was completely negative: he acted for the destruction of the existing order, without giving a thought to the construction of the new...Mises traces this attitude to the expectation of the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God...Jesus' instructions...do not prefigure an ascetic ideal, nor a reform of the social order; rather, they represent provisional measures for the short time before the Kingdom." Tosato does not deny this. However, he challenges Mises on two points:

- (i) Jesus' attitude toward the Mosaic law, the basic constituent of the Israelites' social order;
- (ii) The nature of the awaited Kingdom.

What connects (i) and (ii) is the concept of conversion. The waiting for the Kingdom must be carried out by a return to the Law, properly understood and properly practised. This is why Jesus is so bent on arguing with and challenging the Scribes and the Pharisees: the Law is for Jesus, according to Tosato, the foundation not only of the present but also of the future social order.

As to the Kingdom, many of us were brought up in the belief that it was spiritual in nature: according to Jn XVIII:36 Jesus had said to Pilate “My Kingdom is not of this world”, and surely this statement is one of the key components of the Christian faith. As affiliates to God’s Kingdom, Christians cannot bow to the absolute rulings of any earthly power. Still, Jesus shared the beliefs of the apocalyptic wing of his people, and, according to Tosato, this very verse by John is better rendered as “My Kingdom is not from this world”, i.e., the initiative to establish it on this earth, by fighting and vanquishing the Roman Empire, will start from God and not from him. Thus the irresponsible, anarchistic aspect of Jesus’ social, political and economic attitude, that struck Austrian thinkers such as Ludwig von Mises and Hans Kelsen, can be seen as the outcome of incorrect exegesis.

One may doubt that the current anti-market convictions widespread in Christian circles are due to an exegetically erroneous reading of the Gospel. More likely, they are due to an ethical sensibility inspired by the event of the Cross and by the consequent sympathy for the victims. This circumstance underlines the importance of hermeneutical work. Here too Tosato has some interesting ideas. The first is his reading of the “signs of the times”: “The prevailing view in our Church is that the world looks upon the economy as an end, upon man as a means. There is some validity to this view. However... the main problem is the miserable economic condition in which lies a large part of the world population. Having grasped that deprivation is not

an unavoidable destiny, humanity aims at economic progress as a condition of human progress.”

The second idea is a “principle of fertility” enunciated in the Genesis. To Tosato, this has an application to a market economy and leads to a sort of “invisible hand”: “The (honest) profit making is by itself a solidaristic action. The cruel law of the market is essentially solidaristic... The synthesis of profit and solidarity lies in the outcome, transcends individual intentions.”

Many Christians and many liberals would find this misleading: the former would object that the Cross should put an end to all artificial cruelties, the latter that it is an essential feature of a market economy that it works without *caritas*. Tosato would answer by invoking a “principle of effectivity” derived from Mt XXV:31-46: “The criterion to which the Supreme Judge reveals He will keep is that of effectivity, not of religious motivation. Accordingly those virtues acquire relevance for Christians which make human activity truly useful for other people: inventiveness, professional competence, self-denial and rectitude.”

However an almost opposite principle of absolute trust in God and marvel at the overwhelming beauty of the creation is also a basic constituent of any Christian ethics. A theology of the Cross is needed for a synthesis of the two.

