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Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life

William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes, editors. 2004. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. ISBN 0-8028-2484-6. \$36.00 (paper).

Reviewed by Andy Hartropp, Anglican minister in Watford, UK, and Head of Economics at The Henrietta Barnett School, London.

This book comprises a set of essays, by a wide range of (primarily North American) contributors, on issues to do with ownership, possession and abundance. The writers are from the fields of theology, ethics, economics and biblical studies, and they seek to explore both how people find value in having things, and also how having things—in turn—gives value to life in community and society. In the editors' phrase, the goal is to develop a "material hermeneutics of culture"—focusing especially on affluent middle-class America (with a particular eye upon Christians within that class) and their relationship with others across the globe. This is a somewhat wide-ranging and imprecise brief, and it is perhaps not surprising that the essays are of varying quality and relevance.

Following an introduction by the editors, Part 1 explores various aspects of biblical texts and "trajectories" with regard to questions of property and possession. Patrick Miller (an Old Testament scholar) discusses the Ten Commandments, and argues that they do *not* "effect a simple trajectory of things that one does and does not do, even though that is the traditional and catechetical way of explicating the Commandments." Rather—and especially when viewed in the light of the detail of the Mosaic Law—these commandments "serve to define the moral topography of the culture... In the process, the very character of property and possessions is seen to be complex and inclusive of material and nonmaterial goods, land and the means of living, honor and reputation, familial relationships and the nurturing of a way of life" (pp. 49–50).

Similarly, Andreas Schuele argues that Leviticus chapter 19, with its call to love one's neighbor, requires that behavior with regard to acquisition and ownership of material things cannot be a self-centered matter. Love will have a transforming effect. There is at least an implicit critique here of the atomistic approach to "consumption" adopted in much of the economics literature.

Claudia Camp claims—based on an analysis of Sirach (an apocryphal book)—that biblical thought tends to reduce women to property. This is scarcely a rigorous argument, but in any case it is evident that Camp has little time for those who wish to use the Bible as a resource for modern values. The final page of her chapter, nevertheless, raises a serious challenge to popular middle-class Christianity. "Radical monotheism in an unjust world raises serious questions about the claim of divine justice."

And yet, she argues, belief in a just and powerful God can easily lead by contrast to a justification for what we have in material terms, and “as a security blanket covering our fear of losing it” (p. 87).

Michael Welker (a theologian) concludes Part 1 with a powerful critique of “subjectivist” faith—yet this chapter is strangely lacking in reference to the book’s theme of “having.”

Part 2 of the book is entitled “Having and Using the Body and Material Meanings.” Again the chapters are somewhat disparate, and it is often not clear how they can impact upon contemporary questions regarding possessions. Jean Bethke Elshtain (a political ethicist) examines the theme of the “body” in today’s political discourse and suggests that increasingly the body is seen as a matter of disposable property. Her chapter raises the question of how to determine when (in material terms) enough is enough, and the Roman Catholic social ethicist Christine Firer Hinze takes up that question in her piece. Economists might regard such a question as irrelevant, even foolish, but Hinze’s examination of Roman Catholic social teaching should give such economists—or at least Christian economists—pause for thought. The New Testament, after all, exhorts us to be content with what we have, to shun greed (which is idolatry) and to seek moderation or temperance in all things. Hinze also observes that “ordinary people” sometimes themselves claim that they want to avoid “excess.”

Hinze reaches a number of conclusions regarding moral and religious dangers arising from contemporary market economies, including the following: this market culture generates “an *intemperate* culture of work and play that siphons attention and energy primarily into the labor-consumption cycle.” This has pernicious results. In particular: “Consumerist and economic relations, values, and practices override and threaten to replace nonmarket social relations and values. And the ideological features of consumer culture conspire to naturalize these processes, *thereby deterring participants from even noticing them*” (pp.186–7; emphasis added). However keen we economists might be on GDP growth and its benefits, these costs must be taken seriously.

Charles Mathewes goes a level deeper and seeks to restate (within the Augustinian tradition) what it means, in Christian terms, to “use” the world and its material things. He concludes—and this seems a thoroughly biblical conclusion—that *joy* and *enjoyment* are very different from the secular world’s view of material things. The latter, he argues, amounts ultimately only to amusement and frivolity. Joy differs from these, Mathewes suggests, “as love does from despair and sloth. The aesthete’s frivolity is finally self-referential; but the joyous soul roots its happiness elsewhere, in the love that is God.” He thus differs from Hinze, in that joy “does not seek ‘enough;’” that is its point. Joy is always excessive: “...To enjoy the world is to *not* expect it to meet our needs; it is to *play* with,

by playing *in*, the world...And we play with the world because God [its Creator] plays with it" (pp. 215–6). Mathewes here cites Proverbs 8:30–31, to good effect.

The relevance of all these discussions to contemporary economic life, however, all seems rather limited. The same could be said of several contributions in Part 3 of the book, where the focus moves more to the contrast between “greed” and “grace” in commercial and consumer behavior. William Schweiker reconsiders what is meant by “greed,” and suggests that it should be seen as

a human craving informed by social conceptions of ‘wealth’... [We] need to understand property in terms not simply of its use or exchange value, but also of...the ‘sign value’ of commodities...A teenager, for instance, may crave a pair of GAP jeans not because of [their] exchange or market value but, more importantly, because the jeans have ‘sign value’ among his friends, a value pertaining to status and social acceptance (p. 267).

Schweiker proceeds (as does Hinze) to claim that this greed is dangerous:

the odd dynamics of the passion called greed are such that it feeds on cultural values, especially sign values, while simultaneously endangering the tranquility and justice of social life...Traditional Christian thought was right on this point: greed is a capital vice because it gathers around it other forms of viciousness that undercut the possibility of sustainable social existence (p. 268).

Schweiker’s final point goes further, by claiming a “surprising contribution” that Christian discourse has to make here: “In the formation of human desires, the believer is bid to love a reality that shatters sign value. One is to love God with heart and soul and mind, but God is precisely that reality which cannot be inscribed within any system of signs” (p. 269).

Much of the material in the book implies that middle-class Christian believers ought to be consuming at least a little less than they are. Yet none of the authors ever quite says as much! If they did, of course, then it would not be long before some economist (or even non-economist) responded along the lines of “lower economic growth will cause higher unemployment” or “if the West spends less, then less developed countries will export less and so will suffer.” In addition, suggestions would be made that market economies would be undermined by “too much religion or ethics.” To such (imagined) retorts, however, the book suddenly produces perhaps its best chapter. Deirdre McCloskey (an economic historian)

argues powerfully that “Economics without God” is woefully inadequate. Far from the notion of the self-centered “rational economic man” (who might raise the criticisms suggested earlier in this paragraph), she argues that “most of the purchases in the marketplace and a great deal of income-earning are said to be for the benefit of someone other than the purchaser or earner... Something like a half of the marketed portion of national income is gotten on behalf of someone else” (p. 316).

McCloskey argues that this “moral economy” is very much in line with a proper understanding of the writings of Adam Smith. “But in any case the realm of grace is wider than secular economists believe” (p. 316). In addition, she argues, the virtue of *prudence* (a proper care for oneself)—in partnership with all the other virtues, such as courage, justice, love and faith—is a vital part of economic life.

She then considers the counter-argument that avarice is necessary to keep the wheels of commerce turning. Suppose that Christians suddenly, without warning,

begin to follow Jesus in what we buy. No doubt such a conversion would be a shock to General Motors. But...people in the Christian Economy would find other employment, and would choose more nonwork activity... ‘In equilibrium’... [people] would buy Bibles and spirit-enhancing trips to Yosemite instead of *The Monica Story* and trips to Disney World, but we would still value high-speed presses for the books and airplanes for the trips (pp. 321–2).

Readers of this journal will see the point.

McCloskey also argues strongly that the ethical wholeness of actors in a capitalist marketplace is *not* a minor, supplementary matter. Thus “real economies depend on real virtues” (p. 324).

Having said things that are unpopular with economists, McCloskey finally turns the tables and questions the assumption of many *Christians* that prudence and self-interest—which help to generate economic growth—are somehow unworthy. Far from it, she says. And not only do markets produce growth, and material benefits for so many, but she concludes (p. 329): “Modern economic growth has transformed the *ethical* universe for its beneficiaries, who are everyone involved” (emphasis added). For example, it was the first *industrial* nation which was the first to abolish slavery.

Christian economists might struggle with some of the earlier chapters in the book, but if their general drift (as suggested in this review) can be combined with the practical wisdom of McCloskey’s argument, then progress towards a more biblical attitude to “having” can be made. ■