Kelly Johnson’s agenda is the meaning and practice of godly stewardship today—a virtue, she notes, not provided by contemporary economics. Her quest into the intellectual history and theology surrounding stewardship begins (and, in effect, ends) by observing the disciplines of simple living mixed with occasional begging (what she calls “joyful begging”) embraced by Christian mendicants in the thirteenth century. These disciplines arose, she argues, to protest the socio-economic dangers lurking in an economic system structured upon private property and the use of markets. Joyful begging, then, serves two purposes, in the thirteenth century and today: (1) it joins Christian devotion to a critique of private property; (2) it challenges the life of the Church regarding ownership and stewardship.

Stewardship, properly understood, encompasses far more than annual pledges to one’s local church (and other gifts of time and funds) as commonly understood today. A true steward stands willing to sacrifice her or his personal and communal (re one’s church community) well-being, to assist those within the world community who are weak/poor/vulnerable—a necessary part of which involves working for economic arrangements that are personal and social rather than impersonal and individualistic. Johnson states: “the tradition of holy poverty, so esteemed among Christians, will have to be rehabilitated somehow, so that respect for beggar saints can be reconciled to a world in which property, impersonal exchange, and individual rights have become the building blocks of economic morality” (p. 69).

So it must be that Adam Smith’s attempt (and, by proxy, work in mainstream economics to the present) to both explain and justify morally an economic system built primarily upon privately-assigned property rights and the systematic use of markets, cannot stand. To Johnson’s credit she has read Smith (especially his comments on beggars). Economics fails in part because it does not appreciate the morally necessary role of joyful begging to help humanize an economy. Similarly, Smith’s influential conception (Johnson’s characterization) of a comprehensive network of markets for handling allocation and distribution problems within and across societies fails to observe how markets depersonalize and objectify
the various individuals who comprise an economy. The mendicant leaders of the thirteenth century presciently discerned these potentials several centuries before the rise of modern economics and market economies, and by their protests made clear that morally pleasing socio-economic structures must treat individuals in personal rather than impersonal ways.

Johnson resolves the “Adam Smith problem” (reconciling the self-interested and competitive individual of the Wealth of Nations [WN] with the individual who sympathizes with others in the Theory of Moral Sentiments [TMS]) in an interesting way—by finding no conflict. As I read her, Smith’s encouragement to empathize with others in effect serves as a clever ploy for winning general political support for the argument offered in WN; a truly empathetic person could not embrace the argument provided in WN. The very notion of an impartial spectator as a means for discerning moral obligation (Smith’s construct in TMS) must offend the God who calls us to fellowship and partiality for those who suffer, not to an impersonal individualism.

Johnson’s detailed examination of the etymology and changing meanings of stewardship offered the most helpful information to this reviewer. Her initial treatment grows out of the struggle within the mendicant orders over the ownership and use of property as the hard-working and simple-living brothers experienced economic success. The modern understanding of stewardship, however, comes not from the thirteenth century, but from the spread of Christianity to North America and the disestablished relationship between state and church—practically forcing church members to fund churches and para-church initiatives by their own efforts. Using Douglas John Hall’s theologically-oriented history, she notes that North American Christians have been given the gift of stewardship to act as stewards/servants (not owners) of our considerable wealth.

Taking issue with Hall’s historical rendering, however, she attributes the contemporary meaning of stewardship to those who possessed wealth—and who then developed teachings on stewardship to justify or rationalize their ownership of private property (a process, she acknowledges, that occurred in the mendicant orders as well). Johnson declares, “‘Stewardship’ [as understood and practiced today] signifies a turn from the material and political presence of the church as an economic community capable of material sharing toward the church as a spiritual association of individual property holders with primarily motivational rather than organizational impact” (p. 73). The theological father of this transformation is John Wesley, who viewed stewardship as money management dressed up in church language (and fully consistent with the private ownership of wealth and property), rather than the sacrificial behavior found in the
early mendicant orders. Johnson elaborates on the changing meaning of stewardship:

Stewardship, earlier in its history [The early face of the mendicant orders of the thirteenth century], was an appeal made by those who hoped to purify and/or impoverish the church. [By the 1960’s] it is used as an attempt to build up that institution. It emerged as part of a justification of a claim against the wealth of the church: lay stewards have an obligation to care for the goods of the earth on behalf of God’s work. Now it is turned into a claim the church makes on others: lay stewards have an obligation to use those goods on behalf of God’s work (pp. 159–160).

I learned a good deal from Johnson’s labors. At the same time, my questions abound. To argue that the Christian mendicants of the thirteenth century were protesting something akin to a modern market economy required remarkable powers of discernment on their part to anticipate at that very early date the socio-economic consequences of an economic arrangement put into practice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If their actions represented protest (which seems plausible), the target far more likely was a political-economic system in which the wealthy few used their political privilege to limit economic opportunities for the masses the feudalistic reality which was undermined by the slow spread of markets, ultimately enabling the masses to grasp economic opportunity and escape from poverty in a way not possible before the widespread embrace of a comprehensive market system (as Adam Smith usefully described).

In this otherwise informative pursuit of the qualities of proper stewardship, she dismisses too casually the discipline of economics. Grounded upon the presumption that scarcity constrains all aspects of reality, economics offers the bedrock norm of efficiency—suitably described as waste not—which is indeed a virtue. We should allocate scarce resources and construct systems of allocation (variations of capitalism and socialism from roughly 1800 to the present) to achieve efficient (that is, less wasteful) outcomes. Other norms, such as a “preferential option” for the poor, are required for a society seeking to walk in the ways of the Lord, but a waste-not ethic must be one of the crucial norms a good (God-pleasing) society pursues in a world beset by scarce time and resources.

Johnson claims that little insight into moral obligation flows from formal description or definition (whether of stewardship or the preferred economic system): “Christian ethics, I contend, cannot be a matter of acts or virtues apart from a form of life and the unfolding of histories as pilgrimage…. attempting to understand the good life through abstract categories is likely to lead to distorted conclusions.” (p. 6) Embedded within her discussions
in intellectual history is a presumption, however, that an improved system of resource allocation exists other than that achieved through the use of markets premised upon private property. As much as she commits herself to the out-workings of a pilgrimage engaged in by devoted Christian women and men as the means of making the social order more sensitive to the needs of the poor, she rules out in a priori fashion the possibility that the pilgrimage could lead to a practical embrace of private property and markets (appropriately constrained) as the most effective instrument to assist the poor.

In rejecting these economic mechanisms, she implicitly embraces an abstraction—the presumption that an alternative form of workable personalized economic arrangements exists to coordinate the economic activities of an entire society (arrangements that somehow have been overlooked or denied over the past several centuries by socially-concerned students of allocation systems). It would have been very helpful, accordingly, for her to provide some evidence of the workability of this abstraction, lest we reach distorted conclusions. Her embrace of the life and teachings of Peter Maurin begins an answer to this question. Maurin was neither a collectivist nor a union activist; he offered as an alternative to the industrialized, union-infused contemporary set of market arrangements a system of economic personalism.

The social body with its common end is composed of persons, each created by God, creative and fundamentally free within her or his own calling. The well-being of the whole body depends upon the personal action of each of these souls as inspired by God, and that personal action can in turn flourish or suffer under the influence of other members. Therefore the shared goal of all is not in conflict with the good of each individual, rightly understood as the soul’s own union with God through worship and charity, particularly the works of mercy. As each flourishes, the whole will prosper (p. 185).

Maurin called for widely-distributed small-scale ownership of production, where workers personally invested in their labor could do better and more enjoyable work; given its inherently alienating and depersonalizing potential, industrialized work simply would not be allowed.

There is a risk in asking Christian social ethicists and economists to review work in the other’s area. My reasonably substantial experience participating in dialogue among these two camps generally finds the two sets of scholars operating on very different epistemological plains, with the ethicists speaking almost entirely to normative questions of what should be (if only we were more obedient Christians) and the economists
questioning the feasibility or workability of the ethicists’ proposals. Here we are again! For example, I have struggled over the past few decades to discern the likely impact upon productive efficiency of a society mandating its producers to adopt workplace democracy (the way leading radical economists would redefine socialism, and one piece of a personalist economic order I presume). My reading of the relevant literature finds this otherwise compelling policy to create higher production costs, which then would leave that society more vulnerable to foreign competitors (and, thus, loss of the otherwise meaningful jobs). Is there not a better way to the same end? I submit that a policy providing all of a society’s workers with good-quality education could achieve this desired end with a much less wasteful (inefficient) use of resources.

The question I returned to time and again as I worked through the chapters is whether she really commends the disciplines of the early mendicants to entire families today. Her answer—yes—comes in the penultimate chapter with an irresponsibly limited discussion of how this could happen practically, and how we might avoid the potentially severe implications of committing entire families to the disciplines of joyful begging. Another abstraction! Ah, but Mason is an economist and stuck in the mud of testing the claims of moral obligation by the standard of feasibility, asking whether the posited new ways would in fact make life better or worse.

On a plane ride home from an encounter between Christian economists and social ethicists some years ago I sat with a social ethicist friend. I posed to him my emerging insight into the awkwardness of the dialogue. His response was that he should not be bound in his work by a standard of feasibility; applying that standard was my job. My reply to him was that his moral pronouncements would receive little support among fellow Christians if they were not viewed as workable or feasible. Sadly, this is my reply to Ms. Johnson’s work as well.

References