

## **A Christian Understanding of Property: Spiritual themes underlying Western property**

**Garrick Small, PhD**  
University of Technology, Sydney  
[Garrick.small@uts.edu.au](mailto:Garrick.small@uts.edu.au)

### ***Abstract:***

*Interest in customary title has raised awareness of the cultural dependence of property and its relationship to spirituality. Western culture has a historical connection with Christian spirituality, yet its property institution is seldom related to it. Property is found within Christian thought from the very beginning of the Old Testament and shares several important commonalities with customary peoples. The notion of property is evident in the gospels along with repeated comments on the correct application of riches. Early Christianity can be viewed as a development of the Old Testament property institution consistent with other aspects of Christian moral thought. Changes in the institution of property through the Christian era can be seen to parallel changes in Christian thought eventually leading to present day property. Overall, property can be linked to the spiritual roots of Western culture in a manner that has the capacity to inform the development of dialogue with customary peoples in their endeavours to assert the validity of their property conventions.*

**Keywords:** property theory, customary title, moral theology, social economics, property and culture

### **Introduction**

The current institution of property was initiated in the sixteenth century as the former conditional notion of private property was replaced by absolute property (Anderson 1979). That century also saw radical changes in other human institutions. Modernity began with Machiavelli's (d.1527) option to replace classical realism with empiricism in political science<sup>1</sup> (Machiavelli and Mansfield 1985). The Christian religion that had provided the metaphysical foundation for European culture was also redirected as a result of the successes of Luther, Calvin and Henry VIII. The interplay between these various changes is not inconsiderable, and their net effect has been to create a culture that is fundamentally different to that which preceded it. The pre-modern understanding of property is essentially different to that which currently prevails in the West, just as the meaning of Christianity is fundamentally different for the Protestant compared to the Christianity of the preceding centuries.

Today, the legal and economic institutions of Western societies, such as USA, Great Britain and Australia are formally secular. This makes it difficult to claim

---

<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli's advice to his monarch in *The Prince* was based on observations of the pragmatic successes of historical rulers, not notions of justice. In doing so he made appearance more important than form, and justice subservient to expediency. In so doing he earned himself the title of being the father of modern thought.

that they represent a Christian approach to property at all, even if many people within them happen to be Christian and some use the language of Christianity in public discourse. The formulation of property in the West is best expressed in the Enlightenment theories of Adam Smith (d.1790) who was a deist, that is one who accepts the existence of God, but denies God any active role in the doings of humanity. Although a deist can use the language of Christianity, the position falls considerably short of what Christians believe is the relationship between humanity and God. Smith illustrated this by being able to exist within a Christian culture while not holding key elements of that position. This difference is evident in his economics and theory of property. To speak of a Christian approach to property is therefore complicated by the question of what exactly is meant by Christianity and Christian culture. This paper sets out to firstly establish a conceptual framework within which political institutions such as economics and property relate to spiritual fundamentals, then to explore the major Christian traditions with respect to property in order to draw conclusions regarding the location of Christian thought within the wider debate regarding property within society.

## **The foundations of economics**

Small (2003) argued that the economic systems of all societies are fundamentally grounded in the deep metaphysical beliefs that underpin each culture. The discipline of economics is concerned with the study of commercial relationships between persons in order to shed light on optimum commercial institutions. The community expects from economists insights into principles for appropriate relations between persons with respect to material goods and services. In practice, the primary focus of economics is trade, which largely reduces to the mechanics of prices and exchange.

Trade relies on title to the things traded, and hence economics rests on the institution of property, and perhaps other social institutions. The institution of property is not fundamental, it is determined by the legal and governmental institutions or customs of the society that upholds it. Adam Smith claimed that property was simply that arrangement of possession that was upheld by the state (Reeve 1986). While Smith's view is arguably an oversimplification of what can be understood about property, it states a basic truth – property is a cultural artefact unique to the cultural beliefs of a particular society.

Culture is not the ultimate positive bedrock for a society's institutions, culture is built on underlying beliefs regarding the human person, that is, the culture's anthropology<sup>2</sup>. Typically societies hold beliefs regarding who has the full status of personhood, deserving the full respect of human dignity, and who may be treated as a lesser creature. For customary people this will often mean that rights of inclusion will only extend to blood relatives (however remote), or others ritually adopted into the tribe or clan. Other instances abound, the Nazi treatment of non-Aryans, the Jewish disdain for gentiles, the Islamic selective taxation of infidels and the Christian persecution of heretics demonstrate how widespread the tendency for human communities to discriminate against outsiders actually is.

---

<sup>2</sup> In this context anthropology does not refer to the social science, but to a theory of what constitutes a human person.

The much-quoted classical defence of the market by Adam Smith began with a description of what people were like and how they related. Hence Smith outlined the human dynamics of commercial trade when he claimed that “*It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages*” (Smith 1910, 13). Smith’s construction of human nature, his anthropology, is radically individualistic and self-interested, but it is an accurate articulation of the understanding of the human person adopted in Enlightenment Britain. For a customary person this would be offensive. Material trade between tribesmen expects a sense of community, at least within the tribe, that reflects an overarching sense of contribution to the good of the community that is unseen in Smith’s economic actor. This is a different anthropology and different anthropologies will result in different political and economic institutions. The sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (d. 1936) identified two distinct classes of anthropology into which most societies fell: *Gesellschaft* societies that are similar to the modern view articulated by Smith and *Gemeinschaft* communities that tend to better describe customary societies (Tönnies 1957). Sociology now accepts these classifications as they are useful in understanding many aspects of particular cultures and their commonalities (Robinson 1987).

The dominant theory of humanity held by a culture is usually the result of an underlying belief in the origin and purpose of creation. Formally, this is the dominant system of metaphysical belief, or the theory of existence. It is most commonly supplied via a religious, spiritual or philosophical belief system. The Modern West is philosophically secular and seeks to explain the existence of the world through natural explanations requiring no conscious intervention from an intelligent, non-material creator. This is the position developed through modern empirical science, through thinkers including John Locke, Isaac Newton and David Hume, none of whom were Christian in the usual sense of the term. By contrast, most cultures have creation stories involving powerful primeval supernatural beings. These usually create the world, and humanity, and have a special relationship with the community who believe in them, including setting out their laws or moral principles.

Christianity has such a creation story and it dominated Christian thought well into the modern period. Modernity has tended to dilute the significance of the Christian creation story and its moral implications and property has been caught up in this process. To understand the Christian perspective on property, it is therefore necessary to understand the Christian metaphysic, its expression as a distinctive anthropology and the resulting development of political and economic institutions, including property. The Holy Bible may be used as the starting point for this study, however it has been developed over time through the development of theology, which Christians believe is guided by the Holy Spirit.

The Christian Bible consists of two parts. The first part, or Old Testament, describes the revelation of God to His<sup>3</sup> people and His leadership of them. The first mention of property is Genesis (1:26) where it is written: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’” The elegance of this transfer of property to humanity is that it follows immediately after the description of God’s creation of the world, and so it implicitly recognises that property as naturally the right of the maker of a thing. The text does not explicitly imply private ownership as we understand it, but rather dominion. In particular, the text does not infer private ownership of any one person, and suggests that the gift of property was given to man as humanity, rather than man as a particular individual.

Private property was first systematically treated in the Law of the Old Testament. In setting out the rules for property, God linked His authority to the origin of title to property, when He said: “*The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me*” (Lev 25: 23). This is part of a section in Leviticus (Lev. 25: 8-34), devoted to commerce and ownership in land property. In it, God gave his people a permanent inheritance, tempered by the right to sell property. The Jubilee was to include the return of land to the families that owned it, making property sales more like a leasehold sale with reversion at the following jubilee. Pricing the interest sold is included in the text making it clear that while private ownership could be transferred, the people could never be alienated from their land. Walter Kaiser concluded that the effect of the Law was to give owners private property while maintaining the permanent common inheritance of the people of God (1983). In economic terms Christopher Wright argued that the Law ensured long term economic independence (1990; 1995). What emerges from the Old Testament is a plan for property that includes the gift of property to people, but not the opportunity for it to be privately accumulated.

The New Testament consists of the direct revelations of Jesus as Second Person of the Blessed Trinity and the writings of the very early Christians. The relationship between God and humanity is different in the New Testament and is referred to as a *new covenant*, or family bond. This new relationship was prefigured by the prophet Ezekiel when he prophesied in the name of God: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” (Ezekiel 36: 26). In the Old Covenant God prescriptively directed his people through direct positive laws illuminated with limited insights into His nature and plan for creation. In the New Covenant, God tended to communicate fundamental principles for human life that his people could freely choose to apply to the practical questions of life and society. The Acts of the Apostles contains references to the early Christians freely choosing to apply their land wealth to the good of the community (E.g. Acts 2:44-45 & Acts 4:32), though there is no indication of the compulsion found in Leviticus. Christianity focuses on free moral action, rather than prescriptive regulation as found in the Old Testament.

---

<sup>3</sup> The use of “His” as the possessive pronoun is a longstanding tradition in Christian writing that is continued in this paper out of respect for that tradition and continuity with it. It is not intended to denote gender to God in the narrow sense

Despite the superficial appearance of socialism, the situation described in Acts was also an instance of private ownership and common use. The individual Christians freely willed to sell their private property and apply it for the common good. In no place in the New Testament is private property prohibited, nor is there evidence in the early Church of the conditions that are described in Acts 2 & 4 being the expectation. Socialism relies on limiting freedom through public sanction against private property. By contrast, it appears that in their zeal the earliest Christians would freely adopt an approach to property that was only occasionally taken up by later Christians, such as the desert fathers or St. Francis of Assisi.

The more robust advice regarding property is found in Luke's gospel: "*And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails you they may receive you into the eternal habitations*" (Luke 16,9). This appears to have been the way that several of the wealthy followers of Jesus chose to behave without necessarily impoverishing themselves in the process. In Luke (16:19-31) Jesus gave the parable of a rich man who ignored a poor man who lived outside his door. The rich man was damned, not for his riches, but for failing to use them to help the poor man. Likewise, Matthew (19: 16-24) relates the occasion when a rich young man approached Jesus for advice for salvation (see also Luke 18 and Mark 10). Jesus first recommended that he keep the commandments of Moses, but when the young man pressed for additional direction Jesus advised him: "*If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.*" The implications here are that Christian salvation is available to the rich if they follow the commandments, but spiritual perfection comes from cultivating a spirit of detachment from worldly possessions, especially by applying them to the needs of the poor. The implication of these Bible passages is that although Jesus did not sanction private property, He did advocate that it should not be used solely for oneself, but rather for the community to some degree. This also makes sense of the Christian virtue of magnanimity.

There is also a caution found in Holy Scripture regarding property. After the rich man left Jesus, He said: "*Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt. 19:23-24). In Christ's beatitudes found in Matthew (5) is found: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (5:3) and later: "*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*" (5:5). While being poor in spirit can refer to the virtue of humility, it also relates to a spirit of poverty that was taken up later by St. Francis of Assisi. The spirit of poverty enables the rich person to retain dominion over great wealth, while being mindful living according to Christian submission to the will of God. In St. Francis's time this was embodied in Br. Jacoba, a wealthy Roman lady who lived a simple and holy life despite her wealth. Louis XIV of France and Elizabeth of Hungary are other outstanding examples of persons of great wealth who followed this gospel precept.

The relevance of Scripture in contributing to contemporary economics has been criticized since Scripture is an account of happenings in biblical times, some of which involved property and commerce, all of which were embedded in a

foreign culture and economic environment. Bruce Malina argued that Scripture was valid as an account of particular events but it did not supply a warrant for prescribing economic principles (1997). This line of arguments has been used to negate many other Christian moral prescriptions. There are several problems with this approach, some of which were dealt with by Clive Beed who concluded *"There exist normative socio-economic principles, ethics purposes and designs underlying the multi-century texts of the Christian Bible relevant to modern societies."* (2003: 36).

A related problem is the question of whether biblical references to the treatment of property are merely suggestions for fulfilling the Christian virtue of charity, or moral absolutes pertaining to just relations. It is difficult to determine if the condition of common use is drawn from the order of justice or the order of charity. The fact of human mortal dependence on the external world leads to common use from justice. The Bible appears to appeal to charity and freedom. In one sense it appears to be supported by both, though in the practical order the compulsion of justice tends to be more reliable than the personal appeal for liberal charity. Odd Langholm recounted that St. Bonaventure summarized the practical issue from the Christian perspective when he advised that *"If one does not love one's neighbour, it is not easy to do him justice"* (1992: 155) implying that charity was anterior to just action for the free person. Illia Delio expanded on this showing that St. Bonaventure's whole moral theology was set on the premise that *"The more we are in union with Christ, the more truthful we become as human persons. ... To be restored in the image of Christ is to become ...truthful in love"* (2001: 124) The Christian, as the most complete expression of human nature is primarily motivated by love that is manifest in free self-giving, modelled on the imitation of Christ who is a perfect reflection of the infinite love of God the Father. This sentiment is consistent with the focus on the importance of love in the thinking of St. John the Evangelist.

Early Christian communities upheld this dual approach to riches—the right of persons to hold property qualified by the demand of charity to use it for the common good. Property in late Rome tended to concentrate into the hands of wealthy families, which caused hardship for many Romans and eventually led to the unemployment relief that has come down to us as the *"bread and circuses"* of Rome. When the empire disintegrated it tended to be taken over by barbarian warlords who generally had been invited into the empire as mercenary military leaders. Significantly, these Germanic tribesmen brought with them notions of property that resonate with tribal people today and eventually formed the foundations of the European feudal system of property that become a key element in the re-civilisation of the Western Empire.

Feudal land ownership, at its best, is a complex balance of rights and obligations focused on land property. At its simplest, all land ownership in the feudal system is a combination of three elements: firstly the private right to some property, secondly an economic or political obligation to others, and thirdly, an expectation of personal leadership. As Christianity spread to these Germanic peoples, these elements were developed and perfected.

The king had the nominal ownership of all land in a realm, but with that ownership came the obligation to use at least part of the income from that land wealth for the common good. This was primarily for defence, but later

expanded to include various infrastructure items (roads and bridges) and domestic law and order. In this way the private ownership was linked to material obligations to the community. In addition, the king was obliged to be the moral exemplar for the community and the source of law and order. The king's tenants who typically held considerable estates had the obligation to pay the king rent as well as act as moral exemplars and the source of law and order within their estates. This bi-directional cascade of rights and obligations extended down to those who actually worked the land. Their occupation of it gave them the right to a livelihood from the land but the obligation to pay rent to their immediate lord.

The practical reality was not always successful, consonant with the frailties of human nature, especially when given the opportunity for the exploitation of the less powerful. This is not to say that it did not accord a level of peace and prosperity sufficient to re-civilise Western Europe. To some extent, the success of Christianity could be gauged by the degree to which most lords did discharge their property obligations morally, in comparison to other instances of similar systems, such as in China, Japan, or India. One of the curiosities of the feudal system is its occurrence in geographically remote locations virtually all over the globe.

Christmas day 800AD saw the coronation of Charlemagne and marked the transition from the Dark Ages into the Middle Ages. Charlemagne was Christian and perceived his political role to be in part an extension of his religious life. Within this understanding of political leadership, the secular lord has as his model Christ, who demonstrated leadership through humility (see John 13:13).

Materially, in the following three centuries culture and technology developed rapidly. Atack (1995) found that net agricultural productivity increased about threefold between 800 and 1100 and a further thirty percent through the Medieval period to 1500. Rogers (1949) found that worker's wages were about four times the cost of living by the end of the fifteenth century compared with scant subsistence at the time of Charlemagne.

The Middle ages may be split into two distinct eras by the intellectual contribution of St. Anslem of Canterbury. St. Anslem concluded that since God was all-perfect, He would not be irrational, as irrationality is inferior to rationality. From this observation it follows that creation would also be rational and the use of reason would be appropriate as a tool to better know God and His creation. This position, proposed about the year 1100 marked the beginning of an entirely new approach to Christianity and culture; it marks the beginning of the High Middle Ages, or the Medieval era.

Within this intellectual milieu science was begun as well as investigations into systematic development of theology and morals. It has been said that the way a culture thinks about its religion determines the way it thinks about everything. It is no co-incidence that the West has emerged as the world leader in the physical sciences, since it now has almost a millennia of fundamental confidence that the world is orderly and can be understood using systematic investigation and logical deduction. Within this climate scholarship was fostered due to the relatively high standard of economic productivity and the supportive intellectual spirit. The Islamic world, that at the time was a world

leader in science, was engaged and eventually surpassed. From the Arabs, the West re-learned its intellectual heritage since the classical learning of the Greeks had been maintained and fostered by the Islamic scholars. The project was to take the best of what was reasonable from the non-Christian world with the view to developing it both for its own sake and in order to better understand its place in God's plan of salvation. The *Itinerarium* of St. Bonaventure sets six steps in the progressive awareness of God, the first is observing creation and seeing it as a testament to the truth, beauty and goodness of God, and the second is contemplation of the human sciences as evidence of the perfection of God. These lower levels of contemplation comprise what are now the methods and content of the natural sciences.

Property was very much a part of this renewed development of learning. Aristotle was translated from Arabic into Latin by St. Albert the Great and used by St. Thomas Aquinas to inform his theological system. In his *Politics*, Aristotle argued that property should be privately owned and used in common. This apparent contradiction is exactly what comes from Holy Scripture. In practice, it means that property may be privately allocated and worked, but that part of its product that is not due to human agency is in some way the inalienable patrimony of all God's people. Islamic scholars had already recognised this aspect of property as it is a theme that is clearly evident in the Koran (Nomani and Rahnema 1994). St. Thomas developed Aristotle into a crisp and philosophically sound statement of the nature of property that reiterated the basic principle of property as most suitably owned (possessed) privately, but used in common. While St. Thomas used Aristotle as the intellectual framework for his position, his conclusion resonated with medieval practice and belief since his contemporary St. Bonaventure came to the same conclusion despite generally being a critic of Aristotle (Langholm 1992).

The common right of all persons can be deduced merely from our mortality. All people come into the world needing its resources: food, air, space, etc. for life. Also, at birth, people have no necessary right to any particular property--that is entirely the result of human convention. This means that on one hand we all need the use of the resources of the world for life, yet we have no intrinsic right to any particular part of it. To lose access to these things means we risk losing our life, which is a gift of God. Consequently, common use of the natural resources of the world is a natural part of our mortal life and its denial cannot be risked without harm.

On the other hand, these conclusions are not unique to Christianity, but can be deduced from traditions of many other cultures, both ancient and customary. The unique contribution of Christianity is its insistence on the universal dignity of human persons. Unlike cultures that discriminate between tribe members and outsiders, Christianity extends the charity customary peoples show to their tribal brothers to all humanity. For this reason, property Christianity resonates with the common title character of contemporary customary people, while eliminating the tendency to exclude outsiders from inclusion.

Central to property is the economic and political power that attaches to it. Christianity is unlike the Jewish religion that preceded it because it requires free moral action, rather than containing a definitive positive code of behaviour. Christians exercise the practical dimension of their religion by actively

choosing to treat others as their loving God would. This means that persons holding political or economic power are not simply denied that power, rather they are entreated to freely use it morally. Laws in Christian thought are necessary as an aid in overcoming human frailty, that is, where the matter is grave, or the temptation great, explicit public sanctions are useful moral teachers, but in a sense thwart genuine moral action. Some people do not rob banks because they freely chose to avoid harming their neighbour, others restrain themselves only out of fear of prison—only the former are genuinely moral people. Aristotle said that laws do not restrict the actions of moral people.

For property, this means that in general Christianity is comfortable with allowing people to own property privately, so long as they freely choose to allow the community reasonable use of it. St. Thomas said:

*"In like manner a rich man does not act unlawfully if he anticipates someone in taking possession of something which at first was common property, and gives others a share: but he sins if he excludes others indiscriminantly from using it."* (Aquinas 1981), Pt II-II Q66 art.2, 1471]

By this he recognizes that that land property is originally common, though it is often privatised, but includes the moral obligation that those disenfranchised by the privatisation should not be excluded from reasonable benefit from it. As a moral principle it is not a particular institutional form, but rather supplies a criterion for acceptable institutions. This approach to property harmonises well with the admonitions found in the New Testament and also the positive institution found in the Old Testament. This means that Christianity supports the dual theory of property, even though it was first articulated by the pagan, Aristotle. Holy Scripture supports the acceptance that pagans can have knowledge of the moral law when St. Paul wrote: *"They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts,..."* (Rom 2:15). To some extent it is consistent with the rationality first suggested by St. Anslem.

The European feudal system contained this dual aspect of property at all levels, though the provision of the commons was a unique instance. Ordinary people had rights to the land that included personal rights to land for farming and dwellings, but also tracts of land that were under the jurisdiction of the lord, but not allocated to any person in particular. This meant that even if a person did not have the resources to obtain a livelihood from private property, they could use the commons. This meant that any capable person had a base level of resources and implicitly put a floor to wages and made unemployment as we know it impossible.

In modern terms, all land was leasehold, and even the king at the top of the feudal ladder, despite formally holding the title to all land, held it with understood obligations to the people. In addition to this, the church held considerable land. This had come to it as a result of two distinct processes. Europe at the time consisted of relatively small domesticated areas of land cut out of the original forests. When men left society to seek a life of prayer they frequently went into the forest wilderness and established small gardens. Often these expanded as more men joined them and eventually monasteries grew up surrounded by extensive husbanded lands where once there had been wilderness. In addition, landed persons sometimes donated property to the

Church, which once granted became its permanent property and accumulated. By the end of the Medieval period the Church owned over 30% of the useful land of Europe. The monasteries often had tenants and abbots were sometimes responsible for extensive land holdings, rivalling the secular lords. When operating responsibly, the monasteries served a variety of social purposes in addition to being places of prayer and peace. The monastery schools formed the backbone of Medieval education and they also provided care of the poor, sick and homeless. If the obligations of the secular lords and the hospitality and education of the monasteries are combined, one sees, at least in nascent form, all the essential service of modern governments. Curiously, they were all funded by property income—taxation of the direct sort was relatively minor.

Leasehold title is not an attractive form to the owner. To control land wealth, but having to surrender a substantial amount of its benefit to others requires a level of selflessness that is often difficult. Christ had alluded to this with His references to camels and needles. In practice, while most masters of property followed sound Christian morals, some did not, and these included both secular and ecclesial landlords. Beginning with William I, lands were granted without feudal obligations. At first these often reverted to the king on the death of the owner, but later were passed on through inheritance. As more land was alienated from the feudal system, the royal incomes were compromised and eventually taxes become necessary.

From the point of view of the secular lords, the system of property had two shortcomings, the first was the obligation of property, and the second was the amount of valuable land that did not contribute to royal income because it belonged to the Church. Luther overcame some of the problems of property in a manner that is intimately linked to his theology. Luther advocated two novel doctrines usually known by their classical Latin names: *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) and *sola fides* (faith alone). *Sola scriptura* meant that the individual would be guided by scripture alone in living the Christian life, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This meant that each individual Christian was free to interpret Holy Scripture without any necessary recourse to the teaching of other, or earlier Christians. Effectively this cut individuals free of the moral guidance of the Christian Church of the time and its developed system of thought. Thomas Aquinas and his ideas on property could be dispensed with and the individual was free to decide what was a reasonable way to behave. *Sola fides* complimented this belief by positing that it was by faith alone that persons reached salvation, not works. Luther was very clear that the references to charitable work, as found in the letter of St. James, had no place in the Christian life and once described it as epistle of straw. From Luther's perspective, humans were contemptible sinners who were never forgiven by God, only justified by the saving power of Christ's death. He likened people to lumps on filthy dung on the forest floor that in winter is covered by pure snow and made beautiful—despite being made attractive, they are still corrupt inside.

For property this meant that using property benevolently was unnecessary for salvation, all that was necessary was civil peace. Further, he supported the transfer of religious property to the secular powers. This recommendation was attractive to the German princes who in turn gave Luther considerable support. Hughes (1957) outlined the way that the reformation succeeded in all places

where it received the support of the secular powers, and usually this entailed the privatisation of Church property.

In England, Henry VIII followed this pattern of disbanding the monasteries and granted most of the lands to his supporters as freehold. The net result was that following his death, the crown was little wealthier, but a powerful precedent for freehold was established (Cobbett 1988).

Calvin added predestination to the Protestant system of beliefs and produced a more cohesive overall theological system. Predestination impacted on property by implying that those who found themselves with property could consider it a sign of God's approval of them, and the benefits of ownership were then justifiably deserved (Weber 2001). Calvin's practical advice was for privatised land ownership, not necessarily by the king. While more equitable, its end result was not much different to Luther's, since the owners still absorbed the benefits of property, neither benefiting those above or below them in the social hierarchy. This aspect of Calvin's theology, together with other propositions have been shown to be largely responsible for the initiation of capitalism (Fanfani 1939; Weber 2001). Historically, it is difficult to make an absolute case for this causal relationship as elements of capitalism predated Calvin by up to a century (Ray 1987). What is more likely is that the Protestant revision of Christian faith and morals provided a welcome justification for elements within Medieval society who had laboured under the former moral regime. Ray also noted that several Protestant authors have made the point that the more liberal approach to private property is associated with superior economic performance. This tends to the conclusion that God's blessings not only manifest in riches and property, but also flow to the community as ongoing superior economic success.

The contemporary institution of property bears little direct connection to Christian thought, though it proceeds as a consistent development of the thought of Luther and Calvin. Reeve (1986) noted that Adam Smith's theory of property was simply that property was that situation of possession that was supported by state sanction. Smith's approach adequately describes the institution as it currently exists and reflects the absence of any necessary expectation for common use that was implicit in pre-modern property. While it may be that the God of the Christians blesses though who own and use property within this system, it is less clear that there is a clear awareness of how those blessings are to be dispensed, or if, indeed, there are obligations attached to them.

## **Conclusions**

There are at least four discernable epochs in Christian thought regarding property. The Old Testament conveyed a specific institutional and valuation system. The ancient Hebrews handled land in a way that resonates with contemporary indigenous people, though it contains the radical departure in that it allowed for sale, albeit of a terminating interest. Consistent with the Old Law, property dealings are prescriptive, but do ensure long-term support of the people.

The New Testament, including the Gospels contains admonitions regarding property and riches that emphasises the voluntary use of property for the good

of others. While it has as its end the support of the community, and this is evident in references in the Acts of the Apostles, it is not achieved using explicit laws but rather an appeal to the active willing of persons in possession of property and riches to freely choose the good of neighbour.

Early Christian communities appeared to live by these Gospel precepts, though they were progressively developed into a moral understanding of property that could be summarised as *private ownership with common use*. The early medieval feudal system of property may be interpreted as a manifestation of this dual principle of property.

The fourth approach to Christian property was introduced following theological developments of the sixteenth century that recast property more as a sign of God's divine approval than as a moral encumbrance. The positive evidence of riches and subsequent economic superiority has been said to indicate Divine approval. While this approach differs in principle from much of what is found in Holy Scripture, it has found considerable support and largely forms the foundation for contemporary Western property.

Overall, there can be seen to be more than one approach to property claiming to represent the Christian perspective. The scriptural approach perhaps holds the strongest claim to represent the authentic connection between Christian principles and practice, and resonates with the practices of many ancient and indigenous cultures. It is less clear if contemporary property can be correctly labelled as Christian since it does not include evident principles for Christian action through the use of property. In terms of the developing dialogue between Western people and indigenous cultures, there is considerable common ground between early Christian thought regarding property and the customary approach. In many ways customary peoples are arguing approaches to property that resonate more closely to the Christian scriptures than does contemporary Western practice.

- Anderson, P. (1979). Lineages of the Absolutist State. London, Verso.
- Aquinas, T. (1981). Summa Theologica. Westminster, Maryland, USA, Christian Classics.
- Atack, J. (1995). Long-Term Trends in Productivity. The State of Humanity. J. Simon. Cambridge Mass., Blackwell: 161-170.
- Beed, C. (2003). "The Relevance of Christian Fictive Domestic Economy." Forum for Social Economics 32(2): 23-40.
- Cobbett, W. (1988). A History of the Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland. Rockford, Illinois, Tan.
- Delio, I. (2001). Simply Bonaventure. New York, New City Press.
- Fanfani, A. (1939). Catholicism Protestantism and Capitalism. London, Sheed and Ward.
- Hughes, P. (1957). A popular history of the Reformation. London :, Blitus & Cates,.
- Kaiser, W. (1983). Towards Old Testament Ethics. Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan.

- Langholm, O. (1992). Economics in the Medieval Schools: Wealth, Exchange, Value, Money and Usury According to the Paris Theological Tradition. New York, Brill.
- Machiavelli, N. and H. C. Mansfield (1985). The prince. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Malina, B. (1997). "The Relevance of Christian Fictive Domestic Economy." Forum for Social Economics 26(2): 23-40.
- Nomani, F. and A. Rahnema (1994). Islamic Economic Systems. London, Zed.
- Ray, L. (1987). The Protestant Ethic Debate. Classic Disputes in Sociology. R. A. e. al: 97-125.
- Reeve, A. (1986). Property. Houndsmills, Hampshire, England, Macmillan.
- Robinson, I. (1987). Sociology. NY, Worth.
- Rogers, J. T. (1949). Six Centuries of Work and Wages. London, George Allen & Unwin.
- Small, G. (2003). "Human action and Property." Pacific Rim Property Research Journal 9(4): 348-60.
- Smith, A. (1910). The Wealth of Nations. London, J. M. Dent.
- Tönnies, F. (1957). Community and Society. East Lansing, Mich, Michigan State University.
- Weber, M. (2001). The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Florence, KY, USA:, Routledge.
- Wright, C. (1990). God's People in God's Land. Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans.
- Wright, C. (1995). Walking in the Ways of the Lord. Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press.