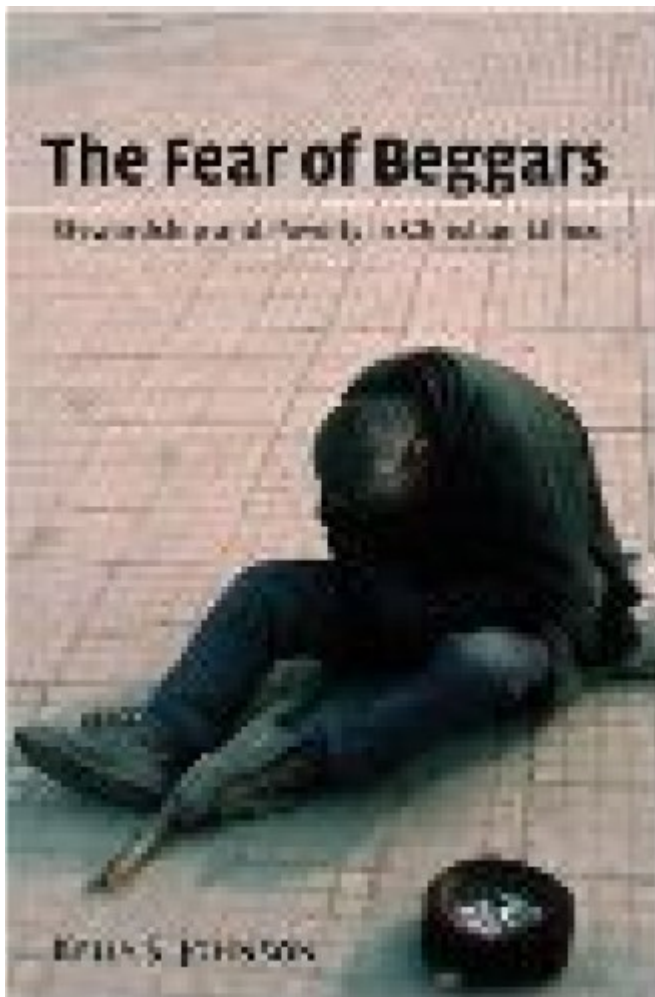


The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics

reviewed by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics

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Eerdmans

Why is that man holding a sign, Daddy?” “He wants us to give him some money.” “Why does he want money, Daddy?” “Because he doesn’t have any and he’s hungry.” “Why aren’t you giving him any money, Daddy?” “Because I’m not sure he’s really going to spend it on food . . . errr . . . because we’re tied into an economic system that forces people into poverty if they’re not able or willing to work . . . errr . . . because I’m overwhelmed by the cocktail of need, shame, fear, greed, sickness, race relations and despair crammed into the 20 seconds until the lights change . . . errr . . . can we have this conversation again after I’ve read Kelly Johnson’s book and before you discover that Luke 6:30 says ‘Give to everyone who begs from you?’”

Kelly Johnson makes things worse, it turns out. There’s not just begging, that lowest rung on the ladder of poverty: there’s voluntary poverty—choosing to live a life without property or secure income, dependent on the mercy of others. That life, from St. Francis to today, takes us to the heart of discipleship, the heart of economics and the heart of God.

Francis is a pivotal figure in the Christian imagination, and Johnson devotes to him and the challenge presented by his mendicant movement a third of her book. And rightly so: he’s about as close to Jesus as you can get. Or so it seems. Francis’s renunciation of property meant he could never be drawn into the most common form of social conflict: the kind that arises when one person defends property rights against another’s. His poverty was, in Johnson’s felicitous phrasing, “a form of economic unilateral disarmament.” It was a radical alternative to the rights-based economy of market exchange, a economy that in the 13th century was coming to replace one based on assumptions about the common good and resting on customary mutual obligations. Contracts were beginning to replace reciprocal charity in a world learning to regard itself as an aggregate of strangers.

However, Francis’s model was poisoned by its own popularity: if godly poverty was the highest status, all worldly (and especially churchly) hierarchies were under threat; if the world was awash with voluntary beggars, not only were economic beggars displaced, but begging became a new marketplace of rhetoric and deceit. This was a realm not of God but of anarchy and scandalous abuse, as the 14th-century poem *Piers Plowman* exposes. The church’s gifts, notably confession, had become a racket.

The Reformation's answer to this, Johnson suggests, was slow to emerge and yet has a disturbingly contemporary dimension. It is stewardship. *Stewardship* is a word peculiar to the English language. In many ways it is a distinctly American word, intrinsically related to the laicization and democratization of the church. But its use began with the notion of the English sovereign being God's chief steward, the protector of commerce and church alike. Crucially, stewardship "takes as the normative ethical agent a layperson who owns disposable wealth and most likely is engaged in profitable business," assumes that "all things belong to God but must be administered by individual humans to honor God" and considers growth or increase characteristic of effective care for human needs. Thus holiness in the management of wealth remains possible, but renunciation and voluntary poverty become unnecessary and excessive. The best account of stewardship comes from John Wesley, who, unlike many of his successors, insisted that wealth must be gained justly.

Later in the book Johnson mercilessly dismantles the attempts of Catholics (especially the National Council of Catholic Bishops in its 1992 pastoral letter on stewardship) and Protestants (especially as stated in the influential work of Douglas John Hall) to bring these issues into the 20th century. The Catholic bishops couldn't bring themselves to harmonize discipleship and money, and Hall makes following Christ no more than "a cipher for self-sacrifice" and orients Christians away from the church and toward liberal and left-leaning Western democracies. This is sobering reading for those whose energies peak around Stewardship Sunday.

It is difficult to determine whether *The Fear of Beggars* is a sequential historical narrative (with major hiatuses between significant eras) or a cross-section through a series of alternative models for envisaging discipleship within the economic order of the gospel. Yet Johnson writes beautifully and blends assertion and critique with disarming equanimity. The most absorbing part of the book to dip into is the part that deals with the economic theology of Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus—perhaps because their theology is still very much with us. For Smith, sharing was impossible. He considered beggars' behavior a form of extortion and regarded beggars as beyond the limits of sympathy. He had no time for worship because he saw devotion to God rather than cultivation of human well-being as an attempt to bribe the judge.

Malthus meanwhile saw beggars as disqualified from conventional charity because they forced benevolence and thus seemed to make it a matter of rights. Malthus compared indiscriminate almsgiving to promiscuous sex: "Goodness which shirks the

responsibility of prudent severity is only cowardice and weakness.” For these figures God is nowhere to be found amid poverty: the poor must simply be made more like the rich, and making them so constitutes good stewardship.

Johnson is most at home narrating the lives of two latter-day Francis figures. The one who stands in contrast to the 18th-century economic theologians is their contemporary Benoît-Joseph Labre, a pilgrim to Rome from France. In Labre his admirers saw Christ, the rejected stranger walking as an alien in his own world, united to God in prayer. The community around Labre was one of “mutual need and mutual care in which dependence, even that of a beggar, is not the manipulation of pity in a world of scarcity. It is the vulnerability of confident hope.”

Johnson’s 20th-century Francis is Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day’s mentor. Maurin was deeply thoughtful yet personally present, economically well-read yet fiercely sacramental; in many ways his life sums up the book.

“The opposite of poverty is not plenty, but friendship,” Johnson concludes. I heartily agree. I do wonder how the book would look if this were the starting point rather than the conclusion. Johnson presents us with maverick and eccentric beggars, complacent and clumsy stewards, and bureaucratic and merciless economists—a bleak menu. But all of them are somehow reaching for a society of mutual trust and cherished relations, something approaching the kingdom of God. Johnson’s persuasive book demonstrates, by example rather than by argument, that beggars—more than stewards or economists—are the unlikely prophets of this unsettling kingdom.