The Medieval Economy of Salvation
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When the thirteenth-century cardinal and moralist Jacques de Vitry singled out the hospital of Provins as one of only a few exemplary hospitals that he considered “hospitals of piety” and “houses of good reputation,” one wonders how well acquainted he was with this institution and its practices. Since the brethren of the Provinois hospital followed the Augustinian Rule and took vows, it appeared to be the type of religious community that Jacques favored. Yet as noted in chapter 5, at least some of the hospital sisters were receiving life annuities from family and friends, something Jacques surely would have frowned upon. Other brethren were making entry gifts. There were tensions between the religious ideals articulated by churchmen like Jacques de Vitry about the way that hospitals were expected to be run and the pragmatic realities of administering these complex charitable institutions, with their manifold functions and diverse residents and personnel all living under the same roof. Reformers like Jacques criticized hospitals for accepting *donati*, who were permitted to receive room and board without taking vows. The reality, however, was that the *donati* at times brought in valuable resources that could be used

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to serve the poor and sick. Some of the donati were married couples, and some hospital administrators were also married. Recognizing the advantages in allowing married couples to manage hospitals, Robert of Courson argued that married couples could enter a hospital together but had to remain chaste and live in separate quarters. Other churchmen, however, viewed marriage as fundamentally incompatible with the expectation that members of a hospital community should take religious vows and follow the Augustinian Rule.

There were also divergent visions on where hospitals would find the resources to support their mission and how they should use those resources. Jacques de Vitry castigated as wicked those hospitals that were founded by merchants ("mercatores") and artisans ("caupones"). Yet the hospital of Provins, a comital foundation that Jacques praised, was very much the beneficiary of the patronage of shopkeepers, artisans, drapers, and merchants. The hospital owned a number of houses in Provins that were used for commercial purposes and served as a powerful landlord and creditor in the region, with hundreds of tenants and serfs who cultivated its landed properties. As it was located just a stone’s throw away from the town’s bustling commercial market, the site of commercial transactions and moneylending, much of the hospital’s ability to carry out its charitable function rested on the privileges it received from the counts and the income generated from commerce. Jacques de Vitry opposed hospitals’ practice of “investing” alms, which he viewed as a form of hoarding. Instead, he argued that hospitals should immediately distribute any alms they received directly to the poor. Yet as chapter 4 demonstrated, several of Champagne’s larger hospitals, including the hospital at Provins, were powerful landlords and major players in the urban economy, managing their assets with an eye toward long-term economic growth.

In addition to the manifold ways that charitable institutions benefited from commerce—whether from their own commercial activities or those of their patrons—the increased commercialization of late twelfth- and thirteenth-century society, particularly in a region like Champagne, may have contributed to the idea of a moral economy, including the obligation of charitable

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5. In this regard, Jacques’s critique anticipated some of the criticisms in our own day of some U.S. hospitals’ multi-billion-dollar endowments; investments in high-risk stocks, emerging markets, and venture capital; and in the case of some for-profit hospitals, the payment of large dividends to shareholders while charging patients ever more for rooms, diagnostic tests, and medical treatments.
giving and service. As Lawrin Armstrong has shown in his study of Gerard of Siena, the Augustinian master of theology at Paris, the scholastic preoccupation with economic questions during this period very much centered on justice, charity, and the common good. Moreover, the starting premise for medieval scholastic discussions of the economic order was a moral one, namely that “human needs take precedence over profit.”6 Already in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, Peter the Chanter and members of his circle, which included Jacques de Vitry, were taking up the same types of questions that Gerard of Siena would address a century later, including the moral status of usury and whether charitable giving constituted an appropriate restitution for usurious profits. As part of this notion of a Christian moral economy, it was often pointed out that commerce could (and did) result in the social and economic exploitation of others, creating greater social and economic divisions and inequalities. Medieval moralists who denounced accepting tainted or illicit profits as charitable gifts pointed to the irony that exploitative business practices were harming the poor only for the perpetrators to then give alms derived from those very business practices to the same poor they had just harmed.7 This medieval critique of the use of almsgiving as an expiatory tool has echoes in some of the modern critiques of philanthrocapitalism as philanthropic posturing, with the stated desire “to do well and do good” merely serving as “an apparatus of justification.”8

The twelfth- and thirteenth-century social conditions that created a conducive environment for the flourishing of commerce were also advantageous for fostering charity and pious giving more generally. Moreover, some scholars have argued that a key ingredient to the success of Champagne’s

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7. In his Summa (XI.II), Robert of Courson addressed what a cleric ought to do if he discovered that a church had been built with the profits from usury. See Kennedy, “Content of Courson’s Summa,” 90.

8. In his examination of the dark underbelly of philanthrocapitalism, Anand Giridharadas sought to uncover “the connection between these elites’ social concern and predation, between the extraordinary helping and the extraordinary hoarding.” One of the many examples of this “apparatus of justification” cited by Anand Giridharadas are the millions of dollars that the Sackler family has donated to universities and art museums based on revenues deriving from the opioid industry. See Anand Giridharadas, Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World (New York: Knopf, 2018), 7, 176–83, 268.
international trade fairs was the creation of a climate of trust through the law merchant courts, which enforced contracts and maintained social cohesion by publicizing the names of merchants known to have violated their word. These courts sought to ensure that merchants knew about each other’s past behavior, and this served as a deterrent against the temptation to cheat. The trade fairs could not have functioned efficiently without this trust, which the sociologist Robert Putnam has called the essence of social capital. Social networks and relationships that were marked by trust, cooperation, and reciprocity were as vital to commerce as they were to the dynamic relationships between hospitals and their personnel, their donors, and their sick and poor guests. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, that climate of trust and sense of community had largely been replaced by a heightened suspicion of vagrants and beggars. As a result of the economic downturn of the early fourteenth century, there was less surplus capital to be used for charitable provision. In addition, there seems to have been a decline in confidence that religious institutions would actually use the alms they received to help the poor. Consequently, as Francine Michaud has noted for Provence, testators increasingly channeled bequests directly to the poor themselves.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, the traditional notion of an economy of salvation took on new meaning in an increasingly commercial context. The works of mercy were cast as the virtuous antidote to the vice of avarice. Jessalynn Bird has noted that even Jacques de Vitry, who otherwise denounced any hint of a hospital or other religious institution being corrupted or secularized, employed “mercantilistic imagery familiar to the artisan, burgher and noble classes” in his sermons to hospitalers so as to reassure them that “their charitable work converts transitory riches into heavenly treasure and earns them participation in the Church’s prayers and masses and eternal life, in contrast to the merciless, whom Christ will condemn at the last judgment.” The medieval Franciscan embrace of religious poverty (one of many medieval religious movements to do so) represented a radical rejection of the love of money and the inexorable desire for gain. Yet over the course of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Franciscans,

Dominicans, and Augustinians paradoxically took a leading role in justifying questionable economic practices by arguing that almsgiving was a way to render wealth virtuous. The concept of a Christian moral economy, dedicated to the common good as opposed to private profit, thus in some ways emerged as an outgrowth of the new profit economy, helping foster greater charitable giving and service. Thirteenth-century preaching, vernacular treatises on the virtues and vices, penitential and confessional texts, and visual imagery all served to teach the Christian laity and clergy how to perform the works of mercy properly, underlining the enormous salvific power of these works and how they could function as a form of penance. Helping the stranger or needy neighbor was regarded as a pious, penitential act that earned one spiritual redemption, thereby potentially shortening one’s time in Purgatory. Religious ambivalence about the new profit economy, in other words, in fact stimulated almsgiving and charitable service.

Historically, the dynamic interplay between charity and commerce, including the idea of charity as restitution, has by no means been confined to medieval Europe. In American history, for instance, there has long been a tradition of charitable activity and the market being intertwined.¹³ Nineteenth-century charitable society relied on commercial activity to raise funds, with Bible societies, for example, innovating with mass-market techniques. During the Civil War, the Sanitary Commission, which was established to support sick and wounded Union soldiers, set up and staffed hospitals. Unlike the older Christian Commission, which represented an older, evangelical tradition that catered to wounded soldiers’ spiritual needs, relied on unpaid volunteers, and encouraged sentimental attachments between gift-givers and individual soldiers, the Sanitary Commission was highly bureaucratic, favoring a professionalized, salaried staff and a more disciplined environment within its hospitals. Anticipating the scientific charity movement that emerged later in the decade, the Sanitary Commission was enormously successful in raising funds through the fairs that it sponsored.¹⁴ Later in the nineteenth century, the business magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie laid out a new doctrine of benevolence in “The Gospel of Wealth” (1889), which criticized the kind of indiscriminate charity long associated with the Catholic Middle Ages while taking up the question of how to ensure, in an


age of industrialization and growing economic inequalities, that one’s private wealth would have the maximum impact in advancing the public good. The Standard Oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, who was much reviled in his day, committed himself early on to the principles of Christian stewardship, accumulating as much property and wealth as he could in order to give it away. As Peter Dobkin Hall has written, “Big business and private wealth underwrote the growth of universities, libraries, hospitals, museums, social-welfare organizations, professional societies, and private clubs.”

In this regard, there was even a direct link between both Rockefeller and Carnegie and the region of Champagne, which has been the focus of this book. When the city of Reims lay in ruins following World War I, Rockefeller contributed a significant sum for the restoration of the city’s famed Gothic cathedral. Today, the street leading up to the parvis of the cathedral and the former site of the medieval hôtel-Dieu is named “rue Rockefeller.” It was the Carnegie Endowment, meanwhile, that put up the funds during the 1920s for the city of Reims to build a new municipal library, which to this day bears the Carnegie name.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American philanthropy was not just the beneficiary of economic development; it also helped fuel that economic development. Kathleen McCarthy has shown that from the early nineteenth century, American philanthropic nonprofit organizations, in which women often played a formative role, engaged in commercial activities, provided mechanisms for the accumulation and liquification of capital in a cash-scarce economy, and served as employers and “engines for economic development.” Evangelical churches also played a pronounced role in promoting market values, and these churches “created a nonprofit machinery that provided a foundation for the economic success of their adherents.” It was no coincidence that the regions of the United States that experienced the most robust economic growth, namely the northeast and the mid-Atlantic, were also the ones with the most extensive voluntarist institutions.

The evidence from medieval Europe (or the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States) by no means suggests that profit economies, by themselves, spur greater social cohesion and altruistic behavior. Indeed, as modern and particularly contemporary history has borne out, it is very often

an unrestrained “free market” that is responsible for the widening of social and economic inequalities, resulting in greater social dislocation, desperation, and material want. Premodern religious charity, however, was far more intricately connected to economic developments than is generally acknowledged. At various points during the last five hundred years, “traditional charity,” often associated with the Middle Ages, has come under assault, whether from Enlightenment philosophes or Gilded Age benefactors, who promoted “scientific charity” or philanthropy, which they regarded as more effective, rational (in being targeted to specific groups and causes), and impersonal (and thereby less paternalistic). 18 Even in today’s new Gilded Age, the nonprofit sector has become increasingly commercialized and business practices have been fully incorporated into the charitable realm. Philanthrocapitalism, meanwhile, is premised on the notion that philanthropy must harness the profit motive and the power of the market to achieve social good, in contrast to traditional charitable giving, long maligned for being intrinsically anti-market. 19 This book has challenged some of these long-held assumptions about how premodern charity differed from modern philanthropy by elucidating the ways that charity was becoming commercialized, both in practice and in the religious imagination during the first great age of European commerce.

Whether in the context of medieval Christian hospitals or nonprofit hospitals in the twenty-first century United States, the mixing of commercial and charitable imperatives can have an effect on the essential nature of institutions. For decades, regulatory stipulations in the United States required nonprofit hospitals to devote a certain percentage of their spending on the poor and the public good in the form of “charity care.” Since the passage of the Affordable Care Act, however, the number of uninsured patients in the United States has dropped significantly, and as a result, hospitals are responsible for paying for far less free and reduced-cost care. How much “charity


19. On philanthrocapitalism, see Matthew Bishop and Michael Green, Philanthrocapitalism: How Giving Can Save the World (London: A & C Black, 2010). Critics of philanthrocapitalism almost seem to echo Jacques de Vitry in casting doubt on the sincerity of philanthrocapitalists’ motives, arguing that they are “using giving as a fig leaf to hide embarrassing or dodgy business activities, to exploiting tax loop holes, to boosting social status out of overweening vanity.” See Bishop and Green, Philanthrocapitalism, 31.
care” are hospitals now providing as a condition for their tax-exempt status? And what constitutes that “charity care”? Long before hospitals became coopted by “big business,” becoming the embodiment of the “for-profit” sector, including those hospitals that are ostensibly “not-for-profit,” indeed from the time of their medieval origins as Christian charitable and religious institutions, hospitals were inextricably tied to markets and the expanding profit economy while also serving as sites of evangelical devotion and discipline. During a period of urban transformation, which created greater prosperity for some but also increasing poverty and insecurity for many others, the medieval hospital opened up new opportunities for social reciprocity and mutual assistance. For those with various kinds of needs, the hospital served as a source of physical, social, and material support in this earthly world, with all of its vagaries and vulnerabilities. In addition, though, the medieval hospital held out the promise of spiritual redemption in the world to come.