



# Value and the Market's (Dis)Order: Market Prices as a Theological Problem in Patristic Thought and the Value Theory of Peter of John Olivi

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*Abstract.* This article analyzes prices and value as constituting a theological problem in early and medieval Christian thought. First, it looks at the patristic critique of wealth and market prices and shows that such critique was rooted in a concern with a disordered world. Next, it moves on to medieval just price theory and particularly the value theory of Franciscan theologian Peter of John Olivi (1247/8–1298). While Olivi's legacy in the history of economic thought is well known, the problem of value as such has not been theologically analyzed. By relating Olivi's concept of value to the older patristic critique of wealth, the article sheds new light on the problem of value: the historical treatment of market prices has cosmological and theological implications. This way, the article contributes to theological and historical analyses of the relationship between the Christian tradition and the market economy.

*Keywords:* economic theology, political theology, value theory, Franciscan theology, market economy

## 1. Introduction

Scholarly attention is increasingly paid to the Christian genealogy of the market economy. One influential voice is Giorgio Agamben, who traced how the concept of “economy” migrated from the theological sphere to the mundane and brought with it its intrinsic theo-logic of immanent ordering (Agamben 2007). Agamben has influenced a broad range of interdisciplinary studies in the field of “economic theology” (Schwarzkopf 2020). But the question of value and its solution, value theory, is an underexposed theme in the explorations of the relationship between the market economy and the Christian tradition (see, however, Hengstmengel 2019 and 2021; Simonsson 2021).

In this article I analyze prices and value as theological concepts, focusing first on the patristic period and then, against the backdrop of the patristic critique of wealth, on Peter of John Olivi's (1247/8–1298) notion of value. Olivi was a central figure among the Spiritual Franciscans, a group that developed a radical theology of poverty that led them into a

confrontation with the papacy. Because of Olivi's role in that conflict, he was often cited anonymously, which meant that his significance in theological and economic thought was soon forgotten (Burr 1989 and 2001). However, the reception of his value theory has been traced to the hands of Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith's teacher at the University of Glasgow (Langholm 2009). Olivi's thought in particular—as well as Franciscan thought more generally—have been shown to be significant in the subsequent development of concepts central to the market economy (e.g. Todeschini 2009). But Olivi's economic thought is less known in the discipline of systematic theology. That also goes for the treatment of market prices in patristic thought. The present paper seeks to analyze the problem of value in those historical contexts from a theological standpoint.

The method is a theological analysis of a strain of the Christian tradition that has been ignored in contemporary theology but is well known in the history of economic thought. This method involves understanding a historical figure with the help of historical research, but also treating him as a thinker, drawing out theological implications of arguments (see Ekstrand 2018). Concretely, the method implies two aspects. First, this article draws on historical research on texts that engage the problem of value. Researchers in the history of economic thought will be my guides, but I will turn directly to historical sources to clarify theological points that may otherwise go unnoticed. Second, my intention is to interpret the results of historical research theologically. In what way is the question of what drives market prices a theological problem, as it was for many historical theologians—and what are the conceptual premises for it to cease to be a theological problem?<sup>1</sup> Such a theological analysis can also contribute to the historiography of value theory, but the main purpose of the analysis is conceptual: to understand how value has functioned as a simultaneously theological and economic problem.

## **2. Value and Cosmology in Patristic Thought**

In this section, I will focus on the way that the early Christian treatment of prices on markets is often connected to a critique of wealth. In approaching the question of how value was perceived by the church fathers, I follow Hengstmengel's (2021) account of the treatment of the so-called "value paradox" in antiquity, but reinterpret his results theologically.<sup>2</sup> The value paradox is commonly thought to be invented by the famous portal figure of economics, Adam Smith, who expressed it as follows: "Nothing is more useful than water: but it will purchase

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<sup>1</sup> Since the theme is interdisciplinary, though analyzed from a theological perspective, it will be necessary to explain elementary aspects of value theory as well as Christian theology along the way to accommodate readers from different fields.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Hengstmengel here because of his important recognition that the church fathers treated the value paradox in their critique of wealth, and here I focus explicitly on value as a theological problem. For further reading regarding patristic economic considerations and their influence on medieval economic thought, see Todeschini (2002).

scarce any thing; scarce any thing can be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the contrary, has scarce any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it.” (Smith 1904 [1776], 30) If Smith is credited with having formulated this paradox, the solution is often attributed to the intellectual breakthrough that is called the “marginal revolution.”<sup>3</sup> The key to the marginalist explanation was that value is not a property inherent to a commodity, but a relationship between the scarcity of a commodity and the demand for it. That realization means that market price is an information signal that sits at the heart of the market mechanism: agents make economic decisions based on calculations in relation to the current market price. Simplifying, the marginalist discovery enabled the construction of an economic theory and system that could rely on the market for organizing production and distribution.

This summarizes the common conception of the history of value and its significance for economic thought. But Hengstmengel points out that the value paradox was well known in ancient thought, discussed by Plato, Philo of Alexandria, and the church fathers. Not only was it discussed: Hengstmengel shows that the church fathers were aware that scarcity and demand were important factors in the determination of prices. However, the patristic theologians did not develop a theory of value that could solve the paradox. Instead, the value paradox served what Hengstmengel calls “a moralising purpose. They instructed Christians not to pursue luxury goods but to content themselves with what is really necessary in life.” Hengstmengel continues: “It is in their analyses of subjective value and the underlying psychology that, economically speaking, the Church Fathers were at their best” (Hengstmengel 2021, 705).

Hengstmengel reads the church fathers as though they asked a question: how expensive diamonds are, and why. Theologically, however, I would argue that the paradox reads as a statement expressing a cosmological problem: the disorder of sinful human reason versus the good order of God’s creation. Let us take a concrete example. Hengstmengel shows that Augustine of Hippo (354–430) thought that there is a rational value hierarchy in the world as created by God that runs contrary to prices in markets. The question of value “becomes a paradox when Augustine observes that this reasonable order of nature is overthrown if people in their valuations are ‘driven by want or drawn by passion’” (Hengstmengel 2021, 704). For a theologian, the contradiction that Augustine perceives between the “reasonable order of

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<sup>3</sup> The protagonists of this revolution, the marginalists, argued that price does not depend on a commodity’s total utility, but on what is called its marginal utility—hence the name of their revolution. The total utility of food is that it keeps one alive. The marginal utility is the utility of the last “unit” of food, which will fall sharply as you are increasingly satiated. The marginalists claimed that fresh water is cheap or free despite of being essential to life because it exists in abundance, and one only wants a limited quantity of it. We rarely think of the marginal utility of fresh water (though, unfortunately, that circumstance is increasingly changing). Diamonds, on the contrary, are expensive because you can never get “too many” diamonds, and being scarce, they will be in high demand. The relationship between supply and demand is the key to understanding price formation and thus to understanding value.

nature” and people being “driven by want or drawn by passion” is nothing less the problem of creation, sin and salvation that is the very motor of Christian theology to begin with.

A few summarizing words on the theological dilemmas of the early church and the role of sin in Christian theology may help illuminate what goes on here. The early followers of Jesus understood him to have saved them—but they did not always agree on who he was, how he had saved them, and from what. It was not uncommon to see him as a new savior God that had delivered the immortal souls of humans from the material world full of suffering and death, created by an evil demiurge. This was the position that has been polemically called “Gnosticism” by those who were later deemed as orthodox. The problem with the “Gnostic” faith from the orthodox perspective was that the Hebrew bible claimed that a good God had created the cosmos including its material aspects. According to those that saw Jesus as sent by the biblical creator God, salvation could not have been from the material world. Salvation had to be from something else. This is where sin becomes a critical Christian concept, taking on a cosmological significance. Sin meant not only wrong behavior for which people could be held responsible, but a state of the world that even affected the non-human world—as Paul famously saw it, the whole creation groans and awaits liberation from its slavery under the forces of destruction (Romans 8:21-2). However, the full concept of original sin as an inherited human state was not developed until Augustine. The concept of sin today is often understood in modern individualistic and therefore moralizing terms. But in patristic and medieval thought, “sin” denoted as much an over-individual force or disease from which humanity needed liberation, as the single human acts this cosmic condition helped causing.

This, in brief, is the problem of creation, sin and salvation upon which Christian doctrine pivots. So, why is this fundamental Christian narrative important in order to understand why church fathers opined about market prices? It is well known that critique of wealth and even property was commonplace in early Christian theology, and a connection was more often than not made between wealth and sin (Avila 1983).<sup>4</sup> Augustine was not alone in that regard. Neither was Augustine alone in assuming that the order of nature is overthrown if people are driven by irrational desire. In Christian theology, desire has always been viewed as ambiguous (see e.g. Shults and Henriksen 2011). On the one hand, one’s desire for material things could potentially bespeak love for the creator that was the source of the material world. On the other hand, if desire was for the things themselves, people were caught up in the power of sin, led astray and their desire became death-dealing.

This distinction between principal *teloi* of human desire is the relevant theological explanation of the patristic treatment of the value paradox. According to the church fathers,

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<sup>4</sup> Not all church fathers were unambiguously critical of wealth, see e.g. Todeschini (2002). But the fact that even Eusebius of Caesarea in his *In Praise of Constantine* had to address the emperor’s wealth as a potential theological problem at the very moment of legitimizing his rule theologically (Eusebius 1976, 90, verses 5.7-8) tells us something of the ubiquitous presence of the suspicion of wealth in early Christianity.

there was a contradiction between the rational cosmic order of God's creation ("objective value order," if you will) and the irrational way that the order in markets unfolded. Market prices were influenced by sin's effects on people's desires ("subjective" factors). Market prices, stones being valued over living beings, was a sign of the disorder that the Fall had caused. Morality and the question of price are thus connected as two aspects of one and the same problem of a disordered world.

Value theory responds to the value paradox. Recognizing that the value paradox is a way to put a problem of order may provide a fresh perspective on what kind of *solution* a value theory is. Let us move on from the church fathers to their heirs in the European Middle Ages as they developed the just price doctrine. By then, the main infrastructure of education and intellectual life in Europe was the church. Commerce was developing—and rapidly so. Critique of wealth had to give way to pragmatic considerations of trade. Yet, the medieval theologians could not leave behind the earlier theological condemnations of avarice. The question was how to reconcile the responsibility for the souls of the masses, including the merchants, with the responsibility for their bodily well-being. Theology and canon law had to provide the proper space for trade.

### 3. Just price

For quite some time, specialists in medieval economic thought have known that just price doctrine was a quite sophisticated analytical framework (de Roover 1955).<sup>5</sup> That insight has been corroborated thoroughly in a number of studies. Langholm states: "The just price was the current, competitive market price ..." (Langholm 2006, 395). However, "competitive market price" did not mean what it does today. Langholm notes that the late scholastics articulated something approaching a modern market analysis, but that they worked in vastly different circumstances. Modern economists work with a general market law of supply and demand, whereas "[m]edieval authors had no very clear idea of the self-regulating market of equilibrium and the long run. They were faced with ubiquitous disequilibrium and the need to arrest exploitation then and there" (Langholm 2006, 409).<sup>6</sup>

In the context of just price doctrine, theologians were staking out the path by which trade could be conducted without sin. This weighing of the problem of sin against the

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<sup>5</sup> Note that considerations of just price not only evolved with time but also that its treatment in common law, canon law, and theology differed—although they certainly influenced one another. Generally speaking, more was legal than the theologians approved of. In this context, I only give an overview of the principles of just price and some important theological implications of it as a treatment of the problem of value.

<sup>6</sup> Langholm is one of the more cautious historians in this regard. Contra Langholm, Joel Kaye sees more systemic similarities between the two theoretical frameworks regarding the idea of equilibrium, and he also finds it an unwarranted premise to assume that "there is one point (and place) in history when a 'true' market price can be said to exist and that all others are unworthy of the name" (Kaye 2014, 79).

necessity of trade directed the doctrinal development toward principles of justice—a process in which the problem of avarice, increasingly defined as a sin against love rather than justice, gradually receded into the background of considerations of what was licit in trade. Focusing on justice, the definition was the one already known to the ancient Greeks and transmitted through Roman law: “No injury nor fraud is done to him who knows and consents” (Langholm 2003, 237). Knowledge is crucial for a contract to be considered voluntary, including the consideration that both parties of the contract must be able to understand the relevant information. Furthermore, consent excludes any kind of force, including the force of need alone—it is not lawful to charge a higher price of a desperate person, or to lower a hungry person’s salary. Such coercion is sometimes called being “forced to choose,” and is not understood as real consent (Langholm 2003, 242).

Given this definition of justice as consent, an important corollary follows: for a contract to be freely entered there must be alternatives to unjust deals. Just price, as Langholm explains, is therefore intimately connected with competitive markets:

Casting aside all modern notions, the current competitive market price served as a standard of justice in the confessional handbooks insofar as it offered protection against economic coercion. In such a market, no one can force the price of individual transactions above or below the just market value, because there will be better alternatives. Competition between sellers will protect buyers, and vice versa (Langholm 2003, 247).

But sometimes markets did not function so well, and exchanges often occurred outside marketplaces. To judge the functioning of the market, and to estimate the restoration sums when fraud or coercion was discovered, one needed a hypothetical market price. The doctrine of just price needed a theory of value.

Connecting Langholm’s argument to mine: in the context of just price, competitive market price had the explicit function to maintain order, and a germinating value theory was a key analytical tool in that process. Just as in patristic theology, the question of prices and the problem of sin and virtue are connected to a fundamental concern with order. However, the concept of just price, where prices on competitive markets enable order, is miles away from the patristic understanding of prices as symptomatic of disorder. The two seem to be in an inverted relationship to one another. What shift enabled the medieval notion of the market as a social form for safeguarding justice in trade? Part of the answer can be found in the subtle but critical definitional process whereby justice became the norm in trade and avarice was increasingly understood to be a problem in relation to the theological virtue of love—not in relation to justice. The problem of avarice took a few steps back from the trading situation

itself. A connected part of the answer may be found in Olivi's concept of value and his theology of poverty.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Divine perfection and value: Peter of John Olivi

Olivi was deeply rooted in the patristic critique of wealth, and he took part in the conflicts around the interpretation of poverty that culminated in the Spiritual Franciscans full confrontation with the notion of papal plenitude of power. The controversies centered on Olivi's interpretation of the Franciscan poverty vow. Already before him, Franciscans had argued that evangelical perfection meant poverty—individual and collective—not only in terms of property but also in use. However, Olivi took this to be part of the Franciscan vow itself. More moderate Franciscans feared that this would make the rule less clear-cut, and would cause brothers to stumble: Olivi's interpretation was thus censured. Olivi, in turn, defended his view and had followers: this is the *usus pauper* controversy (Burr 1989). The controversy soon turned from an internal Franciscan dispute to a much larger conflict with the papacy. At this time, the concept of property was tied up with jurisdiction. Poverty meant having no power over earthly things, neither in ownership nor in jurisdiction. While Olivi himself did not set out to dismantle the organization of the church, his ideas were so controversial that they led the Spirituals into full confrontation with the papal *plenitudo potestatis*.<sup>8</sup> This latter conflict involved the nature of church authority, and its theological basis was in essence that according to the Franciscan theology of poverty it was contradictory to Jesus's nature as God incarnated to exercise the kind of power that property included. Hence, the conflicts were theological in the narrowest sense of the word. That theology was only fully developed when William of Ockham later took up the cause of the Spirituals in relation to Pope John XXII's attack on that very core issue: the Franciscans' connection between poverty and *caritas*, the theological virtue of love that came from God and was perfectly instantiated in Jesus Christ (Shogimen 2007).

Let us now take a look at Olivi's notion of divine poverty as it comes to the fore in his commentary on Philippians 2:5, "On the Seven Sentiments of Christ Jesus." Then, we will turn to his value theory. Philippians 2:5 goes: "let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." In the context of the biblical letter, that admonition is not a general statement but related to the belief that although Christ existed in the form of God, he not only became a human being but was also crucified, allowing himself to be treated in the most humiliating way possible, before being raised up to his full lordship (Philippians 2:5-11). There is, then, a

<sup>7</sup> The reader is reminded that this is not a paper in intellectual history. I'm making no claims of my own as to Olivi's originality in relation to different concepts—Olivi functions in this paper as a focal point for analyzing the problem of value *theologically*.

<sup>8</sup> For rich and nuanced introductions to those political-theological debates, see Shogimen (2001) and Kempshall (2001).

close connection between divine power and what humans would call powerlessness in Paul's letter. Olivi concentrates on explaining to his readers what the biblical admonition to share Christ's mindset would mean for them. The commentary circles seven aspects of Christ's mind, sometimes called virtues, sometimes sentiments: ineffable emptiness or humility, compassion, gentleness, patience, suffering, poverty, and love.

Let us focus on the sixth: poverty. To begin with, poverty is a concrete state: "Sixth is the abyss of the highest poverty since he didn't have a scrap of clothing to cover his body or at least part of his body. He was denied what any criminal was given. Nor was he offered a drop of water in his most severe thirst after enduring such great torments" (Olivi 2012, 83). But this perfected poverty becomes its opposite; Christ is not bereft of all riches but freed from attachment to them. His poverty elevates him above all. This is "the highest poverty which tramples down earthly matters and places human beings in heaven as lords of all things ..." (Olivi 2012, 89). Olivi combines in the concept of the highest poverty that ultimate loss of all power and all esteem with lifting the human being to heaven; he sees a connection between poverty and true lordship—and a connection between how that plays out in Christ and how it may play out for Christ's followers. Furthermore, that which distracts from the seven virtues or sentiments of Christ must be driven out: "If you are to have the mind 'in you which was also in Christ Jesus,' then in no way must you have the mind 'in you' which is in the supreme enemy of Christ Jesus" (Olivi 2012, 57). The vice that corresponds to the virtue of poverty is described as follows: "Sixth is it not the pit of cupidity and avarice that he does all these things out of self-love and earthly glory?" (Olivi 2012, 63).

The purpose of discussing Olivi's spiritually oriented commentary on Philippians 2:5 before turning to his economic thought is to suggest two different things that connects to the question of value as a theological problem. First, it seems likely that Olivi retained the patristic critique of wealth, where wealth is seen as a spiritual danger that lures the Christian into the trap of the enemy himself. Second, Olivi sees a connection between absolute poverty and the divine power that also humans can partake in, drawing them up to heaven, insofar as they refuse "earthly" forms of power. Given this theology of poverty that goes for both Godself and the most devoted believers, how can we theologically make sense of Olivi's economic thought? Let us turn to some of his economic ideas.

As Kaye (2014) shows, by the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century, canon lawyers began to apply the practice of monetary penalty when the creditor incurred economic loss due to a breach of contract, called "*interesse*." Up until Olivi, *interesse* could be included as an appendix to a lending contract, but if it was part of the contract itself it would be deemed usury. But Olivi argued that it could be included in the contract; not only as a protection against accidental loss, but against the hypothetical loss the lender incurred by not being able to invest his money. For Olivi, if the lender would have invested the money, he may demand "*the equivalent of the profit he would likely have gained*, had he retained the

use of his money” (Kaye 2014, 66–7, italics in the original).<sup>9</sup> *Interesse* begins to look like what we know as “interest.” For Olivi to make this argument, he had to take another innovative step: to show that money when invested can fructify. Olivi distinguished between money as sterile, “*pecunia numerata*,” and money in the hands of a skilled merchant: “*capitale*.”

Olivi argued that “the probability of commercial profit possesses a real and ‘appreciable’ value (*appreciabilis valor probabilitatis*) that can be estimated and measured by money price,” and that the buying and selling of *capitale* by merchants was licit (Olivi, quoted in Kaye 2014, 71). A crucial question arises: how does such an estimation come about? Olivi assigned this central task “to the conjoined judgments of the individual merchant exchangers themselves” (Kaye 2014, 71). To Olivi, the value of money is determined on the aggregate level of the market as a social process. Another of Kaye’s arguments is that probability underwent a change in epistemological status during the period he describes. Olivi was, he claims, one of the first to recognize that probability was a valid form of knowledge. To Olivi, when interest was demanded in lending contracts, merchants may have correctly estimated the real value at stake—and value may change with time.

The apparent tension between Olivi’s trade-friendly ideas and his sharp theological critique of wealth has been noted by many.<sup>10</sup> Piron argues that the solution is quite simple: Olivi distinguished between the evangelical perfection to which the Spiritual Franciscans held, and the imperfect state of other human realms, including market exchange. “Olivi affirms that the imperfect can be known in itself, without being compared to the perfect,” and, furthermore, that imperfections such as owning property may “contain a certain good in themselves, on the condition that good use is made of them” (Piron, in Olivi 2016, xxxi and xxxii). That is a plausible explanation. But what are the preconditions for such a distinction between perfect and imperfect realms? How should we understand the imperfect theologically, given the spiritual dangers Olivi saw in wealth and property?

## 5. A reformulation of the problem of value and its solution

To connect the pieces of this puzzle, we need to retrace our steps a bit in terms of this history of value. Piron argues that one of the truly groundbreaking aspects of Olivi’s treatise is that it poses value as a problem. Piron begins his account of the history of value with Aristotle. Aristotle once defined justice in trade in terms of proportion related to the trading individuals’ status. Aristotle was rediscovered in medieval Christian theology, and as Robert Grosseteste’s full translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* was completed it was followed by Albert the Great’s

<sup>9</sup> This argument of Olivi concerns debt relations between city and citizens—it was not uncommon for citizens to be forced to lend money to the city. However, Kaye (2014, 68–9) argues that the same goes for Olivi’s view on other forms of lending contracts.

<sup>10</sup> However, there is one not uncommon reading that simply disregards that tension and sees Olivi as a market enthusiast (for example, Kaye (2014, 57)). From a theological perspective that seems unlikely.

commentary. There Albert inserted the term “value” into the Aristotelian line of reasoning. Thomas Aquinas in turn retained that concept of value but distinguished between the value inherent in creatures, and value as matter of social utility. Thomas thought that justice in exchange, to which the latter kind of value pertained, was a matter of adhering to a static social utility, or value. He accepted a certain degree of mobility around that static value, but not much. Olivi, instead, allowed for significantly greater “latitude” and argued that the factors that made value fluctuate needed to be analyzed (Piron in Olivi 2016, xl–xli).

But a historiography of value that follows this Aristotelian line can be complemented by Hengstmengel’s research and my own theological interpretation of the problem of value: value did pose a theological problem for theologians (unaware of Aristotle) long before Olivi. And long before Thomas Aquinas, it was a Christian commonplace to pit the objective value of creatures against prices on markets. What singles Thomas out in relation to the patristic authors is that he conceived of prices as mirroring legitimate values as well. Why? Following Aristotle’s mathematical understanding of exchange processes, the values in exchange were understood by both Albert and Thomas as proportional. Prices measured proportion. This makes price a matter of relative value, something altogether different from God’s value hierarchy: “Aquinas recognized that within the system of market exchange, essences and hierarchies have no place. ... The market is, therefore, a system organized on principles in large part contradictory to the principles understood to govern natural law and Christian society” (Kaye 1998, 70).

The rediscovery of Aristotle helped scholastic thinkers begin to recognize that what was earlier theologically understood as the disorder of markets may in fact be orderly. But the question was how to reconcile the two types of orders. As explained above, markets were understood to protect justice, which was an acceptable form of order under the conditions after the Fall. In a formulation from his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas states:

Divine law leaves nothing unpunished that is contrary to virtue. [...] he who has received more than he ought must make compensation to him that has suffered loss, if the loss be considerable. I add this condition, because the just price of things is not fixed with mathematical precision, but depends on a kind of estimate, so that a slight addition or subtraction would not seem to destroy the equality of justice (*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 77, a. 1, ad. 1).

Thomas imagined two distinct value orders, one is the divinely ordered hierarchy of things, the other the relative value in exchange. Thomas also feared that exchange processes may often contradict virtue. But God will ultimately protect the order of justice also in relation to value in exchange. Thus, the shifts in exchange value that Thomas accepts within the parameters set by justice in the *Summa* are, as he says, “slight.”

As Kaye points out, Thomas did not fully accept market price as the just price and did not offer any other solution for how to estimate true equality in exchange (Kaye 1998, 95–8). Like Kaye, I interpret this “failure” in terms of the contradiction Thomas’ perceives between his theology and practices in markets. “One of the most important metaphysical principles for Aquinas is that order always implies the existence of an active, intelligent orderer,” a principle in considerable tension with the notion of market order arising accidentally out of contradicting individual wills (Kaye 1998, 98). From a theological perspective, the tension Kaye points out is correctly perceived, but what might be called Thomas’ theological intellectualism could be differently phrased. Doubtlessly, God is the source of all order for Thomas, but a difference in emphasis in the interpretation of that might help illuminate a crucial theological distinction between Thomas and Olivi—I will return to this point after having turned to Olivi’s concept of just price.

Like Thomas, Olivi too asserts that the value of things can be taken in two ways: “First, according to the real goodness of its nature,” where living things are worth more than inert matter, and second, “with respect to our use,” where inert matter may indeed be more valuable (Olivi 2016, 3). Olivi is clear about the legitimacy also of the second meaning of value and immediately continues: “the value of things for sale is consequently understood and measured in the second way, not the first.” He then goes on to explore how that second value is measured. He mentions the quality of the good in question, its scarcity, and its subjectively perceived utility. Those factors together explain why the elements, such as water, “have a lower price among us ... than gold” (Olivi 2016, 3). In brief, Olivi here considers the value paradox as a question regarding prices.

Olivi also argues that the second type of value cannot, because of how it is constituted, be fixed. Its measurement “can hardly or never be made by us except by means of a conjectural or probable opinion: and this [measurement is made] not at an exact point or within a calculation ... but within some appropriate latitude about which, indeed, persons and judgments differ in their estimation” (Olivi 2016, 4). As Kaye explains, according to Olivi just price shifts, value can only be estimated on the aggregate level of market processes, and must constantly be estimated anew. Olivi’s last words before moving on from the first to the second question hammers home the point: “commutative justice does not consist in a real equivalence of things measured according to the absolute value of their natures, but only in an equivalence with respect to our use and utility ...” (Olivi 2016, 6). This emphasis is significant, and is connected to Kaye’s argument referenced above, that Olivi’s value theory mirrors central epistemological assumptions: this is not only a matter of slight shifts or estimation substituting for real knowledge; this kind of value itself shifts so just price cannot be absolutely determined. But to the medieval theological mindset, order usually meant stability since order usually originates in God, and God is perfect and not subject to change. This tendency is what we saw in Thomas’ attitude to market prices. So, what are the

conceptual preconditions for a Christian theologian such as Olivi to argue that an order can fluctuate substantially, yet still be orderly?

The theological difference that surfaces in the difference between Thomas' and Olivi's understanding of market prices becomes clearer if we return to the question of usury. For Thomas, what we would now call interest is "to sell what does not exist," hence it is usury (*Summa theologiae* II-11, q. 78, a. 1, responsio). For Olivi, money in the hands of a skilled merchant has a real potential to fructify, and this potentiality has a real value, as seen above. Since Olivi distinguishes between *pecunia numerata* and *capitale*, it is clear this potentiality is not inherent in money itself but belongs to the situation as a whole: a skilled merchant possessing money and investing it. Thus, to me this difference seems less a matter of differing views on money, and more of differing views of the nature of reality: it is a revaluation of the potential in relation to the actual.

The differences in theological outlook between the theologians discussed in this article are tangible in their different views on market prices. We have seen that in patristic theology, the value paradox functioned as a cosmological statement, claiming that there is a contradiction between God's rational value hierarchy and the disorder of human desire that is reflected in prices. Thomas instead sees the two orders as separate but both legitimate, although he is reluctant to admit that the current market price by itself can be fully just. The market's value order is connected to the divine through the way that the former is nevertheless considered a moral issue: justice must and will be protected. And justice is part of a cosmic moral order flowing from and moving towards Godself—hence, a stable order. That seems consistent with his overall metaphysical construct of a Christian form of Aristotelian realism, where legitimate orders anchored in the divine need to be relatively stable. Olivi, by contrast, sees the fluctuating market prices as revealing a dynamic order of its own, and the dynamics mean that potential future changes have to be considered as in some sense real.

One might be able to further illuminate the theological meaning of these principally different concepts of value by returning to the question of the rationality of God and the world so important to Thomas. This view can be contrasted with the theological position in which the Franciscans were highly profiled: Olivi was voluntarist, and his voluntarism affected his economic theory (Toivanen 2016). Also Kaye discusses the Franciscans' voluntarism in relation to the fact that so many of the important medieval economic thinkers were Franciscan (Kaye 1998, 130-1). Both Toivanen and Kaye approach the issue in terms of anthropology, where voluntarism can help explain the view of the economic agent. However, Franciscan voluntarism principally privileges will over reason also in theology proper—also in God. Again, the contrast with Thomas is illuminating. For Thomas, the world is the way it is with a certain necessity since it follows from the order of reason. God is that order of reason, and the source of all reason and order. Hence, from a theological perspective, Thomas's view reads less as God actively willing order (as in an "intelligent active orderer"), and more on a cosmic rational

order that is a necessary consequence of God being God. A voluntarist, on the other hand, has no rational reason to assume a rational cosmic order. If the world is orderly it is so because God wanted it to be orderly. Thus, the divine order is disconnected from whatever order one might perceive in the world. Generally speaking, the voluntarist disconnects the way God has ordered the world out of God's sovereign will from the divine nature itself. This critical distinction in turn is linked to the medieval debates on universals and the nature of reality and the capacity of language—there too Franciscans were profiled. If Thomas had defended a conceptual realism of an Aristotelian kind, critique of such realism led thinkers such as William of Ockham to the position known as “nominalism.”<sup>11</sup>

My claim here is not that Olivi had all this in mind, crafting a waterproof system of thought where his concept of value was playing a part—it is safe to say that that was hardly the case. Rather, I want to point out the theological and metaphysical texture of an issue that today is rarely considered in theological terms at all: market prices. The theological side of voluntarism illuminates Olivi's value theory in a very different sense than the anthropological side of it, and the way it does so points to metaphysical debates that have been extremely influential in the subsequent development of Christian theology. Furthermore, the theological side of voluntarism reconciles conceptually Olivi's magnificent theology of poverty with his view on markets. Returning to Piron's (2016) assessment of Olivi's innovation to pose the problem of value as such: I agree with Piron, but with a different emphasis: Olivi posed the problem of value in a theologically innovative way, as a question regarding prices. Because of a shift in metaphysics underway, value was, to Olivi, no longer a cosmological problem, but a riddle that could be solved and given the kind of answer that we would now recognize as a value theory.

Thus, from a theological perspective, Olivi seems to complete an ongoing separation of the metaphysical connection between God's cosmic hierarchy and prices on markets. As a result, the two orders no longer contradict one another. That is why just price can fluctuate and interest can be charged: such phenomena belong to human affairs. Those affairs can be orderly and contribute to the relative good of human society in terms of production and distribution of resources, without mirroring a divine order. Indeed, just price and interest cannot mirror a divine order—the divine order has shown itself in the highest poverty of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, upon which his most devote followers should model their lives.

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<sup>11</sup> Note, however, that Olivi was not a nominalist, and furthermore, that the category “nominalism” is sometimes used to signify a broad range of philosophical positions and that many would claim that Ockham is more accurately called a “conceptualist.”

## 6. Concluding remarks

In the last instance, the aim with this article is to show what kind of theological problem that the question of prices has been historically: namely, a problem of order and disorder, of divine perfection versus fallen human nature. Further, it is to argue that the problem of value and the development of value theory—where Olivi's contributions were critical—is a central component in how Christian theology has helped shape the market as a form of ordering mechanism.

The article interprets the problem of value in relation to Christian cosmology, with a particular focus on Olivi's concept of value. First, I showed that the value paradox in patristic thought theologically reads as a statement on the fallen world's disorder. A bipolar construct of a rational created order versus the irrationality of price is the theo-logical fundament of the value paradox. Second, I discussed how in medieval just price doctrine, competitive market price was on the contrary seen as safe-guarding order. Then I moved on to Olivi. On the surface, he seems to have done something theologically impossible: sharpening the patristic critique of wealth to an extreme, while legitimizing the market order. The conclusion is that in Olivi's thought, the patristic polarization between God's good order and the imperfection of markets is stretched to the point where the magnetic field that held them together in the value paradox collapsed. Prices were now free from comparison with the perfect yet followed an order of their own in the human realm. But the question of prices and value remained a theologically charged issue—at least until the marginal revolution (Hengstmengel 2019, 111-32; Simonsson 2021, 48-62). The question of whether the price mechanism still has cosmological implications is at least worth raising.

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