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## Poor You Will Have With You Always

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# The Poor You Will Have with You Always

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by Beryl Hugen

To advocate for the poor in the context of the current welfare reform debate is not particularly popular. In fact, it can be quite an intimidating task. Daniel Boorstin's latest book *The Creators: A History of Heroes of the Imagination*, on the artistic history of Western civilization, makes it clear that this is not a new development. He states that with the birth of rhetoric, it became customary in learning the art to take as a topic the defense of the poor. This was done, he says, because it was considered an excellent, if not the best, test of an orator's skill. It has apparently always been difficult and somewhat unpopular to defend the poor.

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More striking than the difficulty in defending the poor, however, is the implied assumption that there will always be the poor to defend. This, too is not a new idea, however. The writer of Deuteronomy said, "The poor shall not cease out of the land." Every Western society since that time has had within it people who cannot or do not support themselves and are dependent on others for help. While no accurate count of the poor can be made since definitions of poverty vary, probably in most societies the number of all adults who depend on others has never fallen below five percent. The estimates of poverty in the 1930s—even those that showed fifty percent of the people below the poverty line—also do not appear particularly large in historical or international perspective. In the 1930s America was a phenomenally rich country by world standards. When Russians viewed the film *The Grapes of Wrath*, they marveled that the Okies had cars. Will Rogers quipped that the United States was the only nation in history that went to the poorhouse in automobiles.

At certain times the percent of the population living in poverty has been very high, as for instance in the latter days of the Roman Empire, and it is at present probably not much higher or lower than the average over the years. Societies have also from time to time launched campaigns to eliminate poverty, the most recent being Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" in the 1960s. Although small gains may be made, the problem persists. Nor, as far as I am aware, has the problem ever been reduced to what might be thought of as its irreducible minimum: the handicapped, the sick, and the victims of disaster.

This article attempts to trace historically the motives, principles and values of Christians who have tried, over the centuries, to help, support, and sometimes to control or reform this unassimilated group in society. It is not an attempt to explain why the poor are poor. The causes of poverty are relevant only when what is perceived as the cause of poverty affects how the poor are treated.

For example, there have been many theological explanations. St. Ambrose thought that inequalities in possessions were a result of the Fall. St. John Chrysostom of the early church believed that God permitted poverty so that the well-to-do would have someone to give to, and therefore earn their reward in Heaven. Some Puritans, held that the poor were the non-elect who were deemed an insult to God.

Most common, historically, have been moral explanations. The poor have consistently been accused of laziness and intemperance. John Locke, the philosopher of liberty, wrote in 1696 that the increase of the poor could only be caused by "the relaxation of discipline and the corruption of manners." The Reverend Jerry Falwell alleges that material wealth is God's way of rewarding those who do his will, presumably, poverty is his way of punishing those who don't. Lack of thrift often has been charged to the poor. Occasionally, the moral onus has rested rather on the well-to-do, who were seen as exploiting the poor. This can be seen in most early twentieth century "social hymns," such as Walter Russell Bowie's *Holy City Seen of John* and Frank North's *Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life*, both of which speak of greed. But these are exceptions to the general rule.

There are also sociological and economic explanations, ranging from the effects of the Enclosure Acts in England to technological unemployment and economic maladjustments, such as the great depression of the 1930s, and disasters such as the Black Death in the 14th Century and the potato famine in Ireland in the 1840s. In the twentieth century there has also been some recognition that an economic system that favors the majority of the people may at the same time leave part of the population poor; so, for example, the battle against inflation may increase unemployment or a free market depress wages. But all these theories and explanations are only significant for our purposes as people come to believe in them.

So, I will not attempt to explain the causes of poverty, nor will I attempt to describe in detail the

various mechanisms and institutions humankind has devised to cope with the poor. These programs, mechanisms, and institutions, as well as the laws under which they were developed, also reflect the motives, values, and principles of Christians which are the subject of this article. Suffice it to say that in the course of the history I will survey—the history of Western civilization from Biblical times to the present day—society has used at least the following mechanisms: the hospice, the allocation of the tithe, settlement laws, overseers of the poor, the workhouse, subsidization of wages, work-relief, less-eligibility, social insurance, public assistance, public provision of certain benefits such as education or health care, graduated taxation, the distribution of surplus commodities, soup kitchens, and mutual aid societies. The complete list would be significantly longer.

### Drift and Revival

Crucial to understanding the historical development of Christian responses to poverty is the problem that programs or mechanisms may start with one set of ideals or motives and gradually become diverted from their original direction without changing too much in form. For example, this is certainly what has happened to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in the United States, the program most Americans refer to when they think about welfare reform today. It was originally conceived as a long-term income replacement program, strictly financial and enabling single parents to stay at home with their children. It very soon began to accumulate rehabilitative overtones, to demand that the single parent work if at all possible, and to urge recipients to exert every effort to become self-supporting as soon as they could.

This theme of a gradual change in direction or meaning in all human institutions, indeed in any principle or motive, though maintaining similar form or language, is one that is central. We have an almost infinite ability to distort our values and stated principles. Progress in dealing with poverty, therefore, is not continually upward, with perhaps a plateau or two on the way, or even a series of hills and valleys, but a series of new starts and a wandering away from the direction of that start. Progress, then, occurs only when a new idea is born, or when either a major happening (such as

the Reformation, a World War, a great Depression; or on a lesser scale, the welfare "client revolt" of the 1960s) or some person or theory (the impact of Freud is a good example) forces people to reconsider their assumptions. Then there is a return to the original direction and a new direction built on that. This is, it seems to me, the role played by the prophets in the Old Testament—to bring the people back to essentials: "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Indeed, the Old Testament can be read as a paradigm of the process of this drift and revival process. It is with this process in mind that I will explore the Christian impulse to help the poor and what has apparently happened to it.

### Why Help?

Societies have given a variety of reasons why human beings are willing to help those who cannot help themselves. There may have been human societies where the poor and the sick were simply left to starve or die of disease, and at times this has even been suggested, in theory at least, to be desirable, as in the works of the Social Darwinists and those who thought that in feeding the victims of famine we only contribute to the "population explosion," thus ensuring still greater famine. Sociobiologists ascribe the motive to help to an instinct for the preservation of the species, but have some problem explaining why certain species seem to care for the sick and the wounded, while other species clearly do not. Humanists believe helping the poor is somehow characteristic of humankind as we have evolved as social creatures. Christians believe that God commands it. There have been, however, in the course of Western history, at least four principles, or conscious motives, upon which Christians have based their efforts for helping the less fortunate.

From the Hebrew world came the ideal of justice, basically a religious concept. It held that every human being, as a child of God, had certain rights to a small part of God's blessings. No person or class of persons had the right to take everything. The entire concept was wider than this. It included the use of just weights and measures and prohibited using one's superior status or power to take advantage of the poor. The writer of Exodus commanded that fields not be gleaned "so that the poor may

eat." Proverbs praises the man "who knows the rights of the poor." The word "rights" is significant: it establishes something that personal judgment cannot deny. Micah puts justice before kindness, as does the Old Testament as a whole. There are numerous references to justice in the Old Testament, and although these do not all refer to the poor, the poor were certainly included, often specifically. It is not surprising that many of the strongest advocates of a strictly "rights" program of public assistance have been Jewish, or that nineteenth century Jewish writers were critical of Christian social welfare practice and the judgments it passed on the poor.

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*All interventions have consequences, the most important of which frequently turn out to be those not intended.*

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To the Jewish ideal of justice, early Christianity added love, or charity, which in its original meaning, included the concept of valuing, thinking well of its recipient. Love in its purest form is best described in 1 Corinthians 13, which emphasizes that love does not insist on its own way and has a capacity to endure. Love's mainspring is responding to God's love. Having been greatly loved by God, Christians could do little else than love in return. They also believed that one must love one's enemies as well as one's friends, and they accepted Paul's statement that "there is now no distinction since all have fallen short of the glory of God."

But Christianity early encountered both the Greek and the Roman world. The Greek's said that persons were self-fulfilled only if they were involved with others. Although this had largely to do with involvement in community affairs, it also referred to helping those in distress. From the Roman world came the idea that the more fortunate had a responsibility, even a duty, toward the poor. This sense of noblesse oblige was practiced so assiduously in Rome that one writer calculates that in the later days of the Roman Empire 580,000 people were receiving some sort of public subsidy and only 90,000 were self-sufficient, a ratio of more than six to one (Uhlhorn, 1883).

These four principles—justice, love, self-fulfillment, and responsibility—all arose initially

from noble sentiments. All have at times and to some extent been distorted. They have also had to compete with two other principles, in themselves basically good. One is that one's actions should produce some moral good, and the other the need for order in society. These two principles, in turn, have like the original four been at times distorted.

The need for order in society was strong in the Middle Ages, but was rarely argued for directly, perhaps because it was simply assumed. Uprisings of the poor and oppressed threatened stability, and, in general were thought to be inspired by persons or nations intent on destroying the existing economic or political system. Luther, for example, strongly disapproved of the Peasants' Revolt of his time. In its inception, the need for order was based on the belief that God had ordained the status quo. As the nineteenth century hymn *All Things Bright and Beautiful* puts it, in a verse rarely sung today, "The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate/God made them, high or lowly, and ordered their estate." Many Christians historically accepted society as it was and believed that it had been ordained as such.

### **The Directions of Diversion**

What has happened, at various times, to these original four principles?

Responsibility to help the poor, which had clearly become perverted even while it was still principally Roman, can very easily become paternalism and colonialism—the "White Man's Burden" or the company town. It can be used to justify intruding into the lives of those for whom it assumes responsibility in the name of "doing them good." It frequently has involved an elite who may see themselves as morally superior and wiser than the people they wish to help. It often has been used to exercise social control.

Self-fulfillment through helping others has been perverted in two directions. On the one hand, it often takes the form of a desire for gratitude from the person being helped, or to be loved and thanked by them. On the other hand, it may indulge in pity, an emotion that always involves a belief in one's own superior fortune or kindness. It is essentially patronizing and demeaning, less concerned with the real needs of the people it serves than with feeling good about serving. A peculiar turn that self-

fulfillment took, quite early in its history, was when self-fulfillment began to mean not feeling good in this world, but earning salvation in the next. This was not confined to the ancient church, although it was perhaps its major heresy, but is clearly evident in some of the philanthropies of the great industrialists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

But the principle perverted most was Christian love, or charity, as the debasement of the latter word testifies. The original impulse was apparently comparatively short-lived. It flourished for a while, as we know from the Book of Acts, and overcame distinctions of wealth, of citizenship, and of slave or free status. It greatly enhanced the status of women. Agapes, or love-feasts, persisted until the third century, when they were banned, having apparently gotten out of hand. But what was possible in the small closed community of the early church could not be carried out in the world at large and by the time of Constantine "the idea of equalizing social conditions for love's sake had pretty much disappeared" (Troeltsch, 1931, p. 37). Charity or love began to mean doing good by exhorting the poor to greater frugality or morality.

Of the four principles, the one perverted least is that of justice. What perversion occurred is found in rigid categorizing rules: the failure, that is, to temper justice with mercy. Or on the other hand, it is seen in the modern tendency to equate justice not with equality of opportunity but with equality of success. There is real debate today on how far commutative justice, that which is owed to persons simply by the fact of their existence or being children of God, should go. Does it include, for instance, the right to a minimum income or to free health care? Certainly commutative justice needs to be balanced to some degree by distributive justice, or that which is owed to persons in relation to their contribution to society. The problem has been that for most of history, commutative justice has had to take very much of a back seat to distributive justice.

These four principles, in pure or perverted form, have had periods of either great popularity or little influence. Yet they constitute the basic Christian motives for caring for and helping the poor.

### **A Historical Look**

How have these principles or motives been acted upon in history? In what specific ways have these principles or motives been distorted? What is the

Christian record regarding treatment of the poor?

As we have seen, the idea of equalizing social conditions for love's sake did not last long. The early church soon recognized that the poor would not "cease from the land" and would need individual assistance. This was accomplished by the rich giving alms and by distributing the tithes.

But immediately this question arose: Were these people really in need? Were not some of them, at least, merely pretending to be poor? And would they spend in immoral living what was given to them for their support? This was, and is, an important question that still preoccupies us today. Johnny Cash sings of the "Welfare Cadillac." Because there are a few who abuse the system, we tend to suspect all. The problem is two-fold. People are quick not only to judge others when they themselves have not been similarly tempted, but also to forgive sins to which they are themselves most liable—the sins of the poor and those of the rich are often very different.

The writers in the early church usually stressed helping the poor even at the risk of assisting some who were undeserving. Clement of Alexandria, at the beginning of the third century, said, "For by being fastidious and setting thyself to try who are fit for thy benevolence, and who are not, it is possible that thou mayest neglect some who are the friends of God." At the end of the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom, wrote, "And yet be we as large hearted as we may, we shall never be able to contribute such love towards man as we stand in need of at the hand of a God that loveth man." On the basis of this theology, Chrysostom asserted that "the poor have only one recommendation: their need. If he be the most perverse of all men, should he lack necessary food, we ought to appease his hunger," a sentiment that one can hardly find echoed until the twentieth century. He even had empathy for those who asked for alms unnecessarily, recognizing that the poor might be tempted more than the rich. Regarding the moral effect of giving on the recipient, Chrysostom said one could not and should not judge (Uhlhorn, 1883).

Notwithstanding Chrysostom's empathy with the supposed impostor, he was much more concerned with the hardness of heart of the giver than with the effects of his charity. And despite his understanding of the unmerited grace of God, Chrysostom was not free of the belief that man, through his own efforts, could win treasure in heaven. He believed

that the poor were "useful" to the rich so that the rich might get rid of their material excess and so win that treasure.

Gradually, love for one's neighbor drifted toward and was superseded by self-love, and charity became useful to earn salvation. So strongly was this believed that Augustine warns against the assumption that one might obtain a license to sin through giving alms. This assumption was a major heresy of the medieval church. It may be why virtually no writing, for a millennium or more, until the fifteenth century, at least, was concerned with the plight of the poor or recognized their problem. The writings emphasized self-fulfillment in this

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*Christians often have been  
diverted from their  
responsibility for the poor.*

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world or the next for the giver of alms. In general, however, private charity during the period was not highly successful. It is perhaps the reason why Ambrose, and later Aquinas, discussed the care of the poor under the heading of justice rather than that of charity.

Yet, in one respect at least, the medieval church protected the poor. Only the church was big enough and universal enough to speak for those who were outside the system. The feudal system, through its reciprocal responsibilities, could be counted on to take care of most people, even the poor, in some way or other. But it was not structured to take care of the sick, the migrant, or the fugitive. It is perhaps significant that the three services most typical of the church at that time were the hospital, the hospice, and sanctuary. With the fragmentation of the church following the Reformation, this safeguard was lost and did not appear, in America, at least, until the federal government assumed something of this role in the 1930s.

### **Toward Judgmentalism**

Nothing in the theology of the Reformation in itself should have led to a contempt for the poor, a desire to reform them or make life miserable for them so that they would reform themselves. But this attitude began to dominate the relationship between rich and poor for the next two centuries or more. A theology in which works were totally ineffectual

might have dried up the generosity of the rich, but it should not have led to the utter contempt for the poor. All men were sinners; there was now "no distinction," there was nothing a man could do to earn favor with God. The granting of grace is his prerogative and his alone. Some he chooses, others he denies, not according to any canon of human justice, but for purposes of his own. This would seem to be a breeding ground for humility and not for sweeping judgments on one's fellows. Yet it proved to be exactly the opposite. Not only were the poor despised, but they were treated as if each one of them had the characteristics of the least worthy.

There have been a number of explanations, theological and economic, for what happened. Some explain that Luther emphasized work as a necessity. Yet, Luther did not have in mind the necessity to engage in a gainful occupation at whatever wages were offered. He argued that a workman was fulfilling God's intention as well, or better, than the hermit or the man given to the contemplative life. But it took the needs of the new capitalist economy to translate this involvement in worldly affairs into a demand that the first duty of human beings was to earn their own living.

Those among the poor who either could not find work or were too sick to work were the natural victims of this demand. It has always been an inconsistent one. The demand has never been made of those who inherited money. Other writers ascribe the particular application of the work ethic in America, where it has certainly persisted longer and more forcefully than anywhere else, to the demands of a frontier economy and the fact that any reasonably competent person could scratch a living out of the wilderness. Consequently, those who could not or did not work were naturally seen as inferior or unfit.

But the new evaluation of work was not the sole factor operating. Max Weber (1930) believed that the crux of the matter was to be found in the doctrine of election and the "absolute duty" of the elect to "consider himself chosen, and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil, since lack of self-confidence is the result of insufficient faith." This, along with the emphasis on worldly activity, meant that one could be sure that one was one of the elect only if one was actively engaged in doing work and that, as a corollary, those who did not or could not work showed that they were not of the elect. This

led to a hatred of those who did not or could not work as being an insult to God.

But to look for evidences of election in human behavior was to deny the whole rationale of Calvin's doctrine. It meant that God chose those who pleased him through their activities, but it led to the identification of worldly success with election. It opened the door to the possibility that it was human beings and not God who determined their election. Sin, therefore, became not so much a state as a deed or a characteristic, and not so much the evil with which the whole social life and structure is infected, as the personal failure of the individual.

Few recognized what the apostle Paul makes so clear, that morality is a response to the love of God and not a means of earning that love, that Christ died for sinners, that we keep God's law out of gratitude to Him and not to achieve our own salvation. Christ can be held, in fact, to have brought into the world an entirely new relationship between love and morality. The Christian statement is not, behave and you will be loved, but, you are loved; therefore behave.

Apparently, the Puritans did not recognize this. Part of the problem also seemed to be that the Puritans had the lowest possible estimate of human nature. They believed that people not controlled by the Law will inevitably lie, cheat, and prefer to be cared for by others than put out effort on their own. In their natural state, people are utterly depraved.

### **The Poor and the Social Order**

In the period between the virtual end of the feudal system and the full establishment of market economies, most nations developed systems of public relief, in England called poor laws. It was a period of great hardship for the poor, many of whom were uprooted from the land and became destitute.

The measures that were set up as public relief were always accompanied by stricter and stricter laws against begging and leaving one's settlement or residence. One could be branded, enslaved, or even executed (on a third offense) for begging. It seems that public relief sprang not from compassion for the poor, but primarily to avert public disorder.

In 1601 the Poor Law declared that all the able-bodied poor must do some kind of work to earn their sustenance; the sustenance itself was provided by

the parish—the local unit of administration in England. This unit was obligated to provide relief and therefore had the powers to set local taxes, called rates in England. These were levied on all households in the parish and varied according to the value of the land or the houses they inhabited.

For some time both church-sponsored charity and public relief co-existed. In many communities, a public overseer of the poor was appointed. One of the most important duties of the overseers, especially after the Settlement Act in England of 1662, was removing strangers from the parish and even preventing them from entering it. Insisting on helping only those who were born or had lived a long time in the parish was a new law, instituted to try to control a population that was necessarily on the move, as agricultural land was converted to pasture and feudal bonds were dissolved. It persisted in America and is still the occasion for jurisdictional disputes today, although residence requirements for relief were finally declared unconstitutional in 1969.

By 1750, however, rural poverty began to rise dramatically, driven by an unprecedented occurrence—a permanent surplus in labor in the countryside accompanied by a boom in trade. To meet this great distress and encourage employers to hire more workers, the poor laws were modified to subsidize wages, creating a guaranteed minimum income of sorts. Under this new system a working man got relief, even if he was working, as soon as his wages fell below the family subsistence income granted by the scale. With his meager income now guaranteed whatever his wages—and with the added certainty that he could never make more than that guaranteed subsistence—the laborer had little motivation to satisfy his employer. Conversely, the agricultural employer could now obtain labor at minuscule wages; whatever he paid, the subsidy from the poor rates brought the laborer's income up to the guaranteed minimum scale. It followed inevitably that within a few years, as the productivity of labor dropped, the employers had no incentive to raise wages. There was no easy way out of this vicious cycle. Poverty had become very expensive.

The best minds in England at the time grappled with this problem of poverty. The general consensus was to abolish the Poor Laws (wage subsidies and outdoor relief) and replace them with workhouses (indoor relief), guided by the principle of less-

eligibility. According to this principle, if the living conditions and assistance rates of persons maintained at public expense were in general equal to or better than the lowest paid persons maintained at their own expense, then calamity would be inevitable. Living conditions and assistance should, therefore, be made *less* than the lowest paid *eligible* worker received. The only way things could work, therefore, was to make the conditions of relief so odious, humiliating, and forbidding that one would do anything short of starving to avoid it. When in 1834 the new Poor Law came into being, this was the rule that was essentially followed. The only thing worse than dependency would be death itself.

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*A living faith demonstrates  
compassion for those in  
need.*

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The law of 1834 was the most important piece of social legislation passed in the nineteenth century. Thus it was that the English poor were compelled to be “independent” and were forced into the competitive labor market. They were free and independent in a new and unheard of way. They were responsible for themselves, and no one, at least at this moment in the formation of a new society, was responsible for them.

When the new law went into effect it was greeted with great anger. No piece of legislation in English history has probably ever been so hated or despised. One of England's greatest writers was on hand to comment on this monumental development. In his novel *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens gives a blistering satire on the new Poor Law and on the principles that animated it, including the awareness that independence in the scheme of political economy was easily convertible into isolation and abandonment. What was learned, perhaps, was that it is possible to degrade people by caring for them and to degrade them by not caring for them. All interventions have consequences, and the most important consequences of any intervention frequently turn out to be those not intended.

### **Control of Pauperism**

The major thrust of welfare policy in the nineteenth century became, therefore, to control pauperism or dependency. In the public mind, being poor and being a pauper were different. Paupers



were characterized by their moral degeneracy, drunkenness, vice, and corruption. They were outcasts, no different than criminals. The dividing line between the poor and the paupers was the ability and willingness to work. Those who could support themselves, but didn't, crossed the line from being poor to being paupers.

The goal of welfare policy was to prevent the poor from crossing that line. The poor were seen as precariously balanced on the brink of moral disaster, and the one sure way to tip that balance and send the family downward into pauperism was the indiscriminate giving of aid. Therefore, the public policy was to reform those who applied for relief. Incentives for would-be applicants to reform were either a government's denying assistance or making the conditions of relief extremely onerous. To receive relief, a family was required to go to the poorhouse where humiliating conditions were designed to deter applications for relief. Deterrence was thought to be rehabilitative. This was the nineteenth century's attempt to reform the poor. To help take people out of poverty would not have made sense to this generation, for they truly believed in taking the poverty out of people.

The most serious result, however, of seeing morality as an antecedent to love rather than its consequence is that the agent of morality has no reason to be loving towards those whom he attempts to reform. The methods used to try to reform the poor and spur them to independence were nearly all negative. Kindness towards them was suspect. It would tempt the poor to be content with their state.

The belief that one can stop people from being or becoming poor by making them miserable is one that persists today. George Gilder (1981), believed by some to have provided the theological justification for the Reagan administration's economics, is quoted as saying that for the poor to succeed and cease to be poor, they "need most of all the spur of their poverty." He also holds that the "crucial goal should be to restrict the [welfare] system as much as possible, by making it unattractive and even a bit demeaning." He is a true nineteenth-century man.

### **Evangelical Revival**

The religious revivals of the middle eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries should have counteracted the rigidities of these capitalist-puritan

beliefs, but did not. Because evangelical revivalism emphasized love rather than justice and was essentially individualistic, it did not further an understanding of the plight of the poor. Evangelicalism was not, according to Niebuhr (1932), a true "religion of the disinherited." Although it appealed to all classes, it remained largely middle class. It was selective in its view of sin, emphasizing personal sins such as irreverence and intemperance rather than collective ones such as oppression and injustice. It was also more impressed by the vices to which the poor had succumbed than by the evils to which they had been subjected. The sins of which evangelicals convicted the rich and the poor were very different.

But evangelicalism did much to correct the notion that the well-to-do were especially favored by God. They were sinful, not in the same way as the poor, it is true, but sinful all the same. Many evangelicals took to heart the problem of the camel and the needle's eye and Charles Wesley's fear of riches.

But the main impact of the evangelical movement on the rich may have been to restore for a time the prominence of self-fulfillment as a motive for helping others. While not so blatant, perhaps, as in medieval times, the motive is obvious. The philanthropy of the wealthy during the first part of the nineteenth century was the bridge in many cases between their business dealings and their Christian conscience. Throughout the nineteenth century the charitable response of the American people was almost as generous as their pursuit of gain was selfish. Wesley's solution was to get all one can, save all one can, and give all one can.

The two streams of giving and getting converged at the end of the nineteenth century in the gospel of wealth. This doctrine harmonized with the major tenets of individualism and, through the idea of stewardship, endowed individualism with moral sanctity. It was Andrew Carnegie who in word and deed gave the gospel of wealth its classic expression. Believing that enormous differences in the economic conditions of men were normal and beneficial, Carnegie asserted that wealth was a sacred trust to be administered by the person possessing it for the welfare of the community. The aim of the millionaire, he declared, should be to die poor.

For all its undoubted romantic appeal the gospel of wealth did not solve or help understand poverty,

for Carnegie was not seeking to correct poverty but to justify wealth. He aimed to demonstrate, as convincingly as the case permitted, that socially irresponsible methods of acquiring riches could be abundantly compensated for by liberality in bestowing charity and spending. The weakness of this approach lay in its failing to recognize that the suffering the wealthy generously relieved with one hand was, in many instances, but the product of the ills that they sowed with the other.

### Science and Advice

Two new developments molded attitudes towards the poor for years to come. First, it was felt that poverty had to be examined scientifically, and second, intangible services, those that deal in some way with a person's psyche or spiritual side, were considered more important than material aid.

By the late-nineteenth century there was a great deal more interest in the conditions of the poor. This took various forms. One, which was primarily humanitarian but had a strong religious base, consisted largely in the founding of missions in poor neighborhoods. Part of the motive of these missions was a genuine concern to improve the conditions under which the poor were compelled to live and part was a desire to reform the character of the poor. Many social welfare organizations of this period had their origin in religious missions of this form.

Alongside these was another form, the scientific Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, with its concept of "friendly visiting." They operated with a conviction that what the poor needed was the "influence" (primarily moral advice) of the visitor and not material relief. Part of this feeling was religious, that spiritual things were much more important than material. Principles of the society were put forward as, "FIRST, the moral elevation of the poor; and SECOND, . . . the relief of their necessities" (Brown, 1855).

Jesus' use of Deuteronomy 8:3, or rather the partial statement, "Man does not live by bread alone," was often quoted in support of the primacy of intangible services, as if Jesus was condemning bread, despite his asking for it in the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew 25, also, the help given to "the least of these" was very practical: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . ." He did not say, "I was in need of

counseling . . . ." To elevate intangible services over the practical is poor theology, but it became the primary attitude of helpers during this period.

As social conditions for the poor worsened under the impact of the Industrial Revolution and America also had to contend with a vast influx of immigrants, social reformers turned to Charity Organization Societies. In many ways these organizations continued what the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor had done, favoring friendly visits over material relief. In fact, the detection of fraud is listed as the Society's first function, ahead of the adequate relief of the honest poor (Gurteen, 1882).

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*The presence of the poor is not a fact of life we should accept as unavoidable.*

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Applicants for assistance who could pass the rigid examinations to which COS agents subjected them were certified as worthy and referred to one of the cooperating agencies for the relief of their needs. Thus, when prospective contributors to the New York COS asked how much of their donation would go to the poor, the director was able to answer proudly, "Not one cent." It saw as the principal cause of pauperism the "misdirected charity of benevolent people" (Gurteen, 1882, p. 170).

### The Birth of Social Work

It did not take long before America, with its tradition of individual responsibility and its belief in technology, carried the scientific claims of the Charity Organization Society to their logical conclusion and developed a new science, that of social casework.

The person most responsible for establishing a social casework method and ethic and for developing this new "science" was Mary E. Richmond. She had been a Charity Organization Society worker; in fact, her first book was entitled *Friendly Visiting Among the Poor* (1899). Richmond greatly enlarged and enhanced the art of investigation. Her method was to ask literally hundreds of questions about an individual and his or her relationships.

There was, in fact, a wealth of diagnosis but very little treatment. In a later book Mary Richmond actually described as the most successful casework

policies a curious trio: "encouragement and stimulation, the fullest possible participation of the client in all plans, and the skillful use of repetition" (Richmond, 1922, p. 256).

It is the second of these that is significant. For the first time, the poor or deviant person being studied was given some part in his or her own treatment. Richmond elaborated on this principle and gave it the name by which it is still known: "self-determination." The next step was obvious, the training of professionals. In 1897 Richmond had already made the first plea for a School of Applied Philanthropy. Social casework and social work became almost synonymous.

The new profession of social work, in itself an American invention, was ready for Freud. Here was an acceptable scientific theory that explained much of what had puzzled caseworkers when clients had not responded to reason, and here was also an answer to the moralism of earlier social work practice which was beginning to fall out of favor.

It was not so much Freud's actual findings which changed American social work. It was his utterly new way of looking at people in trouble: (1) His emphasis on experiential determinism—that is, that people will behave in accordance with their biological inheritance and their early childhood experiences, no matter how unreasonable this behavior may seem; (2) The assertion of the common vulnerability of humanity. Psychosis and neurosis are not illnesses that strike some and not others. We are all a little neurotic, but some of us more so than others. This is the psychoanalytic analogue of the theological doctrine of original sin; (3) The practice of looking at the world through the eyes of the client—what he is thinking or feeling about it—rather than looking at him as the world sees him, from the outside; and (4) The importance of relationship in the helping process.

### **A New Definition of Justice**

Mary Richmond, as we have seen, had enunciated a pragmatic principle that she called self-determination. Freud gave scientific sanction to this principle. Finally, it became recognized as a philosophical and eventually a religious belief.

Self-determination as a principle certainly produced a much more humane treatment of the poor. At times it may have led to indulgence, to protecting

people from the law or the natural consequences of their actions. At times, in Freudian terms, it liberated the id at the expense of the superego. But it did much to counter the disregard for human dignity that had been taken for granted as part of the fate of anyone who asked for help—submission to the will of the helper and restrictions on his freedom to manage his own life. It was a great corrective to pride arising out of exercising social control.

Self-determination did more. Politically it helped to develop a welfare system that established, for the first time, a legal right to assistance. While social workers were developing their theories of self-determination, the government in the United States was reacting to the Depression with a system that for the first time in more than a thousand years seemed to promise some dignity to the poor. What appeared to promise this was not, however, the social insurance features of the Social Security Act, but its humbler public assistance features.

What was really new in the Social Security Act of 1935 were the categories of public assistance—at that time Old Age Assistance, Aid to the Needy Blind, and Aid to Dependent Children. These spelled out for the first time a legal and enforceable right to assistance if certain eligibility conditions were met. Set aside for a while was the goal of welfare reformers who had tried to change human nature, and it accepted matter-of-factly that government must always engage in spending for welfare. What was conceded was that the poor will always be with us.

It is true that the law did not guarantee how great or even sufficient the assistance should be. The principle of less eligibility could still be practiced. There was resistance from those who could not accept the right of the poor to live their own lives free from efforts to reform or rehabilitate them. Nevertheless, the moral right had now been given statutory form, and was protected by a system of appeals or fair hearings in which due process was to be observed. Money payments were interpreted to mean unrestricted payments which the recipient could spend as he or she wished, free from social control. With the passage of the Social Security Act, the federal government became, in fact, the protector of the rights of the poor and of the least popular among them—a role not unlike that of the medieval church.

## **Control Fights Back**

The public, however, found commutative justice hard to accept. Most of them still thought of assistance as a "dole" and were convinced that many of the recipients of public assistance were cheats. Less eligibility was still rife in the system. The grants rarely, if ever, were sufficient for more than minimum health and decency and many states paid only a fraction of their own estimate of minimum needs. Despite the federal government's insistence that clients should be the principal source of information about their situation, as they are, for instance, in paying income tax, they were subjected to a degrading and often rigorous investigation, which almost assumed that they intended to lie or to cheat.

As a result, by 1956, "services" became an integral part of these programs. Probably there is no clearer indication of the way in which the basic programs had changed than the revision made in the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program. This was the year in which the parents and other caretakers of dependent children were officially recognized as recipients, and the name of the program changed from Aid to Dependent Children to Aid to Families with Dependent Children. This change gave the parent or relative a stronger position, and the goals of the program were no longer simply to provide a parent with the money to care for her children. They became rehabilitative goals, incumbent on the parent. The "right to assistance" and the unrestricted money grant were still the law, but they had been modified in practice as well as in the announced purpose of the program. The public was nowhere nearly ready for a welfare system based on rights rather than charity or the effort to reform the poor.

## **The Services Solution: Rehabilitation**

At the beginning of the 1960s, social workers and others persuaded Congress that the answer to the rising costs of welfare was more social services to those in need. The outcome was President Johnson's "War on Poverty."

The "War on Poverty" did not abolish poverty. An assessment in 1976 estimated that there had been substantial progress in overcoming poverty, measured in absolute terms—that is, reaching a minimum level of well-being. However, there was

no progress either in the ability of people to do without government help or in the incidence of relative poverty. In other words, living standards had improved and the welfare system was more generous, but economic inequality remained (Plotnick, 1976). The "War on Poverty" more or less fizzled out. What was left was a means-tested, highly unpopular AFDC program, which had lost many of its rights features.

Nevertheless, by 1980, something of a floor had been placed beneath most of the poor—a somewhat shaky floor, perhaps, but some assurance that most had no need to be without adequate food or medical services.

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*The measure for sharing  
is not the surplus of  
the haves, but the need  
of the have-nots.*

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## **Back to the Poor Law**

The actions of the Reagan/Bush administration that came into power in 1980 were not simply an attempt to cut back on welfare programs in order to reduce federal spending or a shift from butter to guns as a national priority. They were an attempt to return America to the principles of controlling pauperism, principles that were current a hundred or two hundred years ago.

Clinton campaigned with the promise to "end welfare as we know it." Welfare reform has been the subject of enormous publicity during the past year. Identifying solutions to dependency has become high politics, with governors, legislators, and policy experts attempting to win public approval for their welfare reform proposals.

The proposals are all very similar. All emphasize that poor women, specifically AFDC recipients, must be coerced to break the habit of dependency on the state. Most solutions rely on market coercion, and a few rely on a combination of both market and state coercion. Charles Murray (1984) would simply abolish income supports, forcing poor mothers to expose themselves to the curative discipline of the labor market. Lawrence Mead (1985) is less optimistic about the ability of the poor to respond to market sanctions and calls instead for an "authoritative work policy" that would include systematic monitoring by government, along with

rewards and sanctions to force the poor to behave in socially-approved ways. Yet, ironically, even the government's own research studies indicate that while the range of tested pilot welfare-to-work programs modestly improved people's income, they proved unlikely to move most people out of poverty (Gueron & Pauly, 1991). In fact, for many, they will be worse off and without any lasting protection. This brief historical review highlighting the motives and attitudes of helpers has shown how easily our best motives, even our cherished Christian values, can become very easily diverted or distorted. As can be seen, we have frequently lost our direction or have been diverted from the goal of a proper care and responsibility for the poor.

### **Biblical Principles and Attitudes**

What are the biblical principles and attitudes related to poverty? First of all, one of the central, if not *the* central social concern of the Bible is the plight and suffering of the poor. Yet, interestingly enough, the Bible almost never addresses the poor themselves but the nonpoor. The Bible asks that the prosperous set right the condition of poor persons.

Psalms 146 is one among many passages that tells of God's concern for the hungry and the oppressed. Indeed, care for the poor is central to the nature of God. God not only acts in history to liberate the poor, but he identifies with the weak and destitute.

Amos saw firsthand the terrible oppression of the poor. He saw the rich "trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth" (2:7) and perceived that the lifestyle of the rich was built on the oppression of the poor (6:1-7). The primary cause of poverty in the Old Testament is oppression.

Many biblical texts assert that God lifts up the poor and disadvantaged. God aids the poor, but the rich he sends away empty. He actively opposes the rich because they oppress the poor and neglect the needy. Jesus clearly condemns the possession of wealth, and almost every time Jesus offers an opinion about riches, it is negative. Jesus' advice to the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30) calls for him to abandon his possessions and give them to the poor. Either God or wealth is one's master or "employer" (Matthew 6:24). In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man was found guilty for neglecting the poor man at his gate (Luke 16:19-31).

Luke pictures the Good News as a message of salvation for the poor, sick, sorrowful, weak, lowly, and outcast (4:18-19). The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the parable of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) are two of the better known sayings of Jesus on this subject. A living faith is one that demonstrates compassion for those in need: "If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" (James 2:15-16)

The Bible suggests that poverty exists among Christians because we try to serve both God and money and because the love of self is more important than love of neighbor. In short, then, the cause of social poverty is found in moral poverty, but not the morality of the have-nots. In the Bible, moral poverty is described as misplaced hope, distorted love, and perverted faith in money and in oneself, principally found with those who have.

Finally, just as early welfare reformers defined the culture of poverty, Christians would do better to develop a notion of the culture of wealth. We must analyze how it is to be pursued, what the psychological, spiritual, and behavioral consequences of this pursuit are, and why it is so difficult for us to share our wealth. A true Christian explanation of poverty in affluent America, therefore, is to be found not in the concept of the culture of poverty, but in the concept of the culture of wealth.

### **Concluding Reflections**

The God of the Bible is not a neutral God. The above biblical passages show how pervasive the topic of social justice is in the Bible. The Bible depicts God on the side of the poor, God biased in favor of the poor. This conclusion cannot be contested. Nevertheless, some questions and clarifications are in order.

First of all, one could say this: Granted that the Bible says many times that God is on the side of the poor and that Jesus identifies himself with the poor, what difference does this make? We should admit that as long we read these texts merely as if they were saying something beautiful about God, an additional attribute of God, they would make very little if any difference at all. But all true *theology*, that is, speaking about God, is also *anthropo-*

logy. These texts are not to be read as if they were speaking only about God in himself. The biblical authors always speak of God as he reveals himself to us, as he manifests himself to us, and challenges us. Therefore, every text that says that God is on the side of the poor should be read as a challenge addressed to us: you who say you believe in the God of the Covenant, who say you are on His side, should be where the Bible says that God is, namely on the side of the poor. To identify, to know, to meet the poor is to identify, to know, to meet God.

Secondly, it is clear from the whole biblical message that poverty has to be opposed and that its main causes, injustice and oppression, have to be counteracted. This calls for unrelenting work for justice. The concrete ways and means will have to be determined by all the people concerned in every given situation. But the biblical texts certainly suggest that this action for justice will include a concrete willingness to share what one has (Luke 3:11; 19:8). The true measure of this sharing is not the "surplus" of the haves, but the need of the have-nots.

Lastly, in the course of this study of the poor, the central place of the Covenant needs to be made very clear. Texts challenging God's people to do justice in the Old Testament are given as conditions of the Covenant. The prophets fiercely attack social injustice in order to recover the lost ideal of the Covenant. The reference point for all biblical texts on social justice is the Covenant community, a people equal among themselves and equal before God, among whom there shall be no poor.

The title of this article comes from a verse in Deuteronomy. The book comprises the so-called Deuteronomic Code of Law (Deut. 12-26) edited within the framework of two discourses attributed to Moses, represented as prophet and lawgiver. The central theme of Deuteronomy is the election of Israel as the people of God by means of the Covenant. Deuteronomy's prescriptions concerning the sabbatical year (Deut. 15:1-11) are as follows:

(1) At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. (2) And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed. (3) Of the foreigner you may exact it; but whatever of yours is with your brother your hand shall release. (4) *But there will be no poor among you . . .* (7) If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren, in any

of the towns within your land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, (8) but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. (10) You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him; because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. (11) *For the poor will never cease out of the land* (you will have the poor always with you); therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and the poor, in the land.

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*The central social concern  
of the Bible is the plight  
and suffering of the poor.*

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At the beginning of this biblical passage stands an old precept (verse 1), which is legally interpreted (verse 2), and then developed like a sermon (verses 3-11) which addresses personal aspect ethics. This sermon invites us to meet the poor at all times with an open hand and an open heart. The interest of the *law-giver* is satisfied when he has made an ordinance obligatory. But the *prophet* is concerned with the conscience of the people at whom the law is aimed. In this context, the covenant ideal of a people equal before God and equal among themselves is expressed: "there will be no poor among you" (verse 4). But, considering the way people are running things, the *prophet* sadly concedes that in reality "the poor will never cease out of the land" (verse 11). The presence of the poor, therefore, is not to be considered a fact of life which we should accept as unavoidable. On the contrary, it is to be considered a scandal, contradicting God's vision of the human community, and, therefore, must be counteracted by all means.

As Christians today we have a similar responsibility to respond to the problems of poverty and wealth in our communities and the world. With poverty rates rising and the gap between the haves and have-nots continuing to widen, do we as Christians respond obediently to God's Word? In present day welfare reform will we continue to distort biblical demands, perhaps even developing new distortions, which will lead us away from our

covenantal responsibility? Or will we advocate for the poor and work for God's ideal "that there will be no poor among you."

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