

Editors' Note

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THE revelation of God with Christ as the center is the foundation of all Christian ethical seeking and thinking. The Bible as a book is not itself the revelation, but through it we know of the events and the persons and the teachings through which God is revealed. The Bible is not a law book or a book of rules which prescribe their application to all situations, but rather it is a book of words through which we confront the Word. There must be a very active dialogue between us in this century and what is given to us in the Bible. Our experience of life causes us to keep asking questions of it, and sometimes we believe that we receive new answers. The Bible has been interpreted and reinterpreted in every generation. Scholars study it minutely and provide materials for its reinterpretation, but the theological and ethical assumptions that have guided interpretation also must be kept under criticism in the light of new experiences and new questions.

We are now quite sure (I think I speak here for Mormons as well as Christians in general) that there have been ethical issues on which churches in the past have been wrong—or at least what they taught would be wrong for us. There are some extraordinary examples of this: slavery, for instance, religious persecution, cruel persecution, the tendency to regard women as inferior, the waging of holy wars, white supremacy. Often churches and theologians have sanctioned political tyranny or have refused to permit resistance to it. They have often encouraged anti-Judaism which has been a spiritual root of anti-Semitism.

We are not necessarily better persons or wiser thinkers than our predecessors—we should avoid a censorious self-righteousness as we think of many of the best of them. But it is a sobering thought that in this country Christian leaders and even quite renowned theologians did not all stop defending slavery until it ceased to exist—great secular changes create new alternatives for Christian thought. Also we are better able than our predecessors to listen to people who would in the past have been merely victims of the white, privileged males who often dominate the church and write the books on theology.

In 1907 Walter Rauschenbusch, who was the great prophet of the Protestant social gospel, wrote: "Eminent theologians, like other eminent thinkers, live in the social environment of wealth and to that extent are slow to see." Today this comfortable world has been broken into by all kinds of people who have had different experiences, and churches have been forced to take them seriously—they are often part of the church itself. They are articulate. They have often gained power to push those of us who are in charge of things. They have been able to displace us.

I have used the word dialogue for this process, but it is not always a conscious verbal dialogue. Sometimes it is that, but there is a broader process of interaction in which persons who have had new experiences, who have been changed by events, seek fresh guidance from the sources of Christian faith. I am sure that the description of the process would be different, but I wonder if there is not an analogy between what I am describing and the changes that have come recently in Mormon teaching about the status of black people in the Church.

FROM CHRISTIAN FAITH TO SOCIAL ETHICS

John C. Bennett

NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED
THEOLOGIAN ADVOCATES AN
ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL
WORLDVIEW BASED ON THE
TEACHINGS OF CHRIST

I shall take time to give one concrete illustration of the ways in which Christians often read their Bibles differently because of these new experiences. Readers of the Bible have always known that there are differences between the first and second chapters of Genesis. The new awareness that has come to many women and some men about the oppressive subordination of women in both church and society—with the church a major cause of the continuation of that subordination as it has always been a major source of its justification—this new awareness has caused many people to appeal from Genesis 2 to Genesis 1.

In Genesis 2 man as male is created alone, and I need not remind you of what happened. Woman was created almost as an afterthought and not for her own sake but as a helper for man as male. In Genesis 1 on the other hand it is said that God created man—this means humanity—in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. Here both male and female are created directly in the image of God—"directly" because some later theologians believed that the image of God in women was derivative from that in men. But here human beings as male and women were created together. There was no afterthought, no subordination.

As this dialogue with the Bible has proceeded, scholars have come up with the idea that the word that is translated helper is used only for superior help, often for divine help. In the New English Bible, scholars have reflected this movement away from the subordination of women by translating the word for helper as "partner." This implies mutuality and equality rather than subordination.

Notice this also: The spirit of Genesis 1 is more consistent with the attitude of Jesus toward women,

with his treatment of them. Jesus transcended his own culture and his own time by treating women as being equal with men. His church has generally sanctioned their subordination. This idea is more on the defensive than ever before.

There is a much broader change of emphasis in regard to Christian social ethics. This has come from the fresh discovery of the Old Testament prophets as men of their own time who brought to their own nation a message from God about the righteousness of God. Not only or chiefly were they mouthpieces of *predictive* prophecy, but they also loved the people of their nation and agonized over their sins. They were driven by God's spirit to condemn and often to prophesy disaster for their people. They had an extraordinary sensitivity to social wrong, to injustice. They identified themselves with the poor and the oppressed even though often their own associations were with the powerful.

They were the most eloquent critics of false religion: "Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly." "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1.) The series of condemnations in the first and second chapters of Amos for Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, the Ammonites, and Moab. Then all of a sudden he condemns Judah and Israel, which must have been a great shock. We can't exaggerate the contribution of the prophets in bringing to Christian ethics the dimension of social justice.

Latin American theologians who are seeking liberation from oppression for most of the people in their countries have come to emphasize Jeremiah 22. In that passage Jeremiah is speaking to the corrupt son of the good king, Josiah, and compares him with his father: "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages, who says, 'I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms,' and cuts windows for paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermillion. Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink, and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord."

Attention is called sometimes to that passage and also the First Epistle of John: "He who does not love does not know God; for God is love." Then those words are understood in the light of the words in the previous chapter already quoted: "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"

Now Christianity is far more than the teachings of Jesus. In fact, in many centuries the example of Jesus as a historical person and his teachings have been strangely neglected, and almost all of the teaching has been about Jesus as the Christ and God incarnate, mediator of salvation. Theologically, teaching about Jesus as the Christ remains central, but today there is among both Protestants and Catholics a new emphasis on the teaching of Jesus and on his example.

The teachings of Jesus can become for us a test of the validity of our ethical goals, of the criteria by which we

make judgments, and also of our deeper perceptions and sensitivity concerning the human situation. I realize that the teachings of Jesus are not simple and that Christians have had varied perceptions as to how his preaching about the Kingdom of God is related to what is believed to be possible for the institutions of society. Also there are many differences of opinion about what the meaning of the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about non-resistance for us in our sinful world in which forces of evil need to be resisted. It is hard to know how to relate them to the use of power—economic, political, or military power. Arguments about these questions will continue as long as there is a church.

At the heart of the ethics of Jesus, however, is the commandment of love for the neighbor. The neighbor belongs to an unlimited circle including enemies. Many neighbors as a practical matter are out of reach because of distance or because of sheer numbers. There are different degrees of responsibility for particular neighbors and this is a matter that calls for the comparison of the claims of near neighbors and those at a distance who may belong to other circles of prior responsibility. But there is no person who because of his or her race or nationality or other relationship might not come within our circle of neighbors for whom we have primary responsibility.

Love is not an emotion in this context. It involves caring and responsibility and will. Just as there is no limit in principle to the circle of our neighbors, so Christian love calls for self-spending that has no limit. One of the meanings of the cross is that it reveals the ultimate meaning of *agape*—sacrificial and forgiving love. Merely to state what *agape* means in these absolute terms is to reveal our own persistent self-serving ways of living. Certainly love that seeks the real welfare of neighbors, those affected by what we do or leave undone, is above specific injunctions such as those that call for non-resistance.

Indeed Jesus himself in his encounters with religious and political authorities was at times resistant. One example of this was his cleansing of the temple which even involved non-lethal use of force—in the accounts in the synoptic gospels we may say non-injurious use of force (I don't know about the whip in the Fourth Gospel). This episode can never be used as an example that justifies the use of lethal force—though the question of when such force may be the lesser evil is a question that will always divide Christians.

In addition to the cleansing of the temple, Jesus was involved in a succession of confrontations with the authorities which we find in the record. That episode in Nazareth when Jesus reminded his neighbors that God had shown favor to Gentiles ended in a confrontation with the prejudices of the community (Luke 4). On several occasions he confronted the religious establishment when he put compassion ahead of the law governing observance of the sabbath. One of these occasions gave rise to the great words: "The sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Are there more liberating words in scripture? These occasions led to the Cross.

There is the same spirit of confrontation when he says of Herod: "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.'" (Luke 13:32). Remember

the series of denunciations: "You are like whitewashed tombs." "You tithe mint, anise and cummin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith." "You blind guides, straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel." These diatribes do not suggest the spirit of non-resistance.

There is another aspect of both the teaching and behavior of Jesus which is central for Christian ethics: his compassionate concern for and identification with the poor, the neglected, those who are despised by others. Lifting up the despised Samaritan is an example. What would any one of us have thought if we had been in a respectable company in the first century and someone had come into the room and had said: "Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you" (Matthew 21:31). Probably we would not be inclined too kindly towards him. Many of our respectable groups would be shocked if someone were to come to them and say that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. (Probably not a popular text in Washington these days, or many other places as far as that goes.)

The story of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25 is perhaps the hardest of the sayings of Jesus for relatively prosperous Americans to take. Jesus there identifies himself and by implication he identifies God with the strangers, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and those in prison. Generally they were thought of then as the fringes of society, but now we know that they are a very substantial part of the human race.

One final word about guidance from Jesus himself. Jesus warns us time and again against pride, including

moral pride and self-righteousness. That great passage in Luke: "Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee and the other a publican. (Here I use the King James version because the Revised Standard Version uses tax collector and this is misleading—tax collecting among a subject people is not like tax collecting in a democracy. Often with us the tax collector provides a means by which we serve society.) The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even as this publican. And the publican, standing far off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other."

Herbert Butterfield, the British diplomatic historian and lay theologian, has written in what I think is one of the most interesting books on Christian ethics in recent decades—*Christians and History*—that the "crust of self-righteousness" is at the center of humanity's problems: "And though conflict might still be inevitable in history even if this particular evil did not exist, there can be no doubt that its presence multiplies the deadlocks and gravely deepens all the tragedies of all the centuries." I quote to show how this warning about self-righteousness is very important for social ethics.

In another place (*Christianity, Diplomacy, and War*), Butterfield says: "But the greatest menace to our civilization today is the conflict between giant organized systems of self-righteousness—each system only too delighted to find that the other is wicked—each only too glad that the sins give it the pretext for still deeper hatred and animosity." That is a good description of



GEORGES ROUAULT. *It is hard to live . . .*

THERE IS NO PERSON WHO BECAUSE OF HIS OR HER RACE OR NATIONALITY OR OTHER RELATIONSHIP MIGHT NOT COME WITHIN OUR CIRCLE OF NEIGHBORS.

American-Soviet relations. It was true when those words were written in the 1950s but unfortunately that description fits even better the situation today. Self criticism of one's own self-righteousness is the beginning of ethics when the gravest issues are at stake—and it is very difficult.

The sayings of Jesus are so radical in their implications that the question has been often raised whether he in his time was a political revolutionary. Books have been written by distinguished scholars—S. C. F. Brandon in *Jesus and the Zealots*, for example—to show that Jesus was the fellow traveler of the Zealots who were revolutionary terrorists in his time. Most scholars deny this as it would conflict so completely with the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount and much else. Oscar Cullman's *Jesus and the Revolutionaries* sorts this out in a helpful way. In his time Jesus and his followers were a minority within a subject minority in the Roman Empire, and they had no political power and no chance to influence public opinion or the policy of Rome. I believe that they were non-political.

The followers of Jesus in a democracy in which they have political power, in which they can influence public

opinion, must be political and sometimes revolutionary, however. The clearest implication of the teaching and behavior of Jesus for them is that they should see the world from the point of view of the poor and the oppressed. We cannot derive from this a Christian politics, a clear view of what policy should be. But that is the place where we should start.

Specifically I would like to address the issue of economic justice, especially in the context of the present direction of American domestic policy but always with the issue of global justice in mind. When I use the word "justice," I mean more than the fair application of existing rules and procedures. To me it includes "a transforming justice" which seeks to raise the level of life of those who are now disadvantaged by changing the rules and structures.

When we examine the issues involved very closely, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is a profound conflict in attitude and direction between ecumenical Christian social ethics, both Catholic and Protestant, and the present policies of our government and the present trends of opinion about economic affairs in our nation. One indication of the nature of the conflict to which I refer is that biblical and ecumenical Christian ethics—both Catholic and Protestant—is based upon the perceiving of the world as it appears to the most neglected and most disadvantaged people. Conversely, we in America are encouraged by government and many guides of opinion to see the world as it appears to the comfortable American middle classes and especially to the American rich.

One real problem for us is that the American middle class feels economically harrassed. It has a high standard of living, but it is in debt for it. It finds housing, higher education, medical care, and many other things too expensive. Indeed, many relatively well-to-do people are so preoccupied with their own economic constraints that they are unable to see the world as it is experienced by those who are really deprived in this country—not to speak of the hundreds of millions in poverty or hungry or malnourished on other continents.

(I realize that a person like myself on a secure pension with pleasant housing and many other advantages, is in no position to be self-righteous when he talks about the moral aspects of this situation. Take young people for example. They can't even find houses. They may have fairly high incomes as the world goes. I'm not condemning these people. I'm just saying we have to take into account the limits and perceptions of our people.)

Nonetheless, I cannot exaggerate the extent to which it is the ecumenical conviction that we should give priority in our thinking to the needs of neglected and poor people—who are in our country as numerous as the whole population of Canada or California.

There is time to give only two samples of many expressions of this conviction. One is from the Protestant theologian Karl Barth, who is probably the greatest of this century. His thinking was far removed from the optimistic social idealism of the American social gospel in the first part of this century. But he never moved away from the biblical teaching concerning justice for the disadvantaged. He wrote the following, which sounds rather severe: "God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this

side alone; against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy rights and privilege and in behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it" (Vol. II, Part 1, p. 286). (Now I would never say it quite that way. When I talk about these things I like to think about God's having a strategic concern—not suggesting that God loves the poor more than the rich and so on.)

Pope Paul VI in his great encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, translated "the development of the peoples," saw this issue of economic justice in global terms. He calls attention to the teachings of the fathers of the Church on wealth and poverty and quotes a famous statement by St. Ambrose, the mentor of St. Augustine, who lived in the fourth century. St. Ambrose said: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all and not only to the rich."

Those words today seem almost seditious; they are alien to what most Americans take for granted. But I have read a statement made by Joseph Smith in 1831 that has the same spirit and has the same idea that "every man may receive according as he stands in

THE GREATEST MENACE TO OUR CIVILIZATION TODAY IS THE CONFLICT BETWEEN GIANT ORGANIZED SYSTEMS OF SELF- RIGHTEOUSNESS.

need"—related to the law of consecration. This is so important in Mormon history. That may have been limited to a particular religious community but in principle it was an open community that might be extended indefinitely.

Now the Pope translates those words into an idea that is more limited but may be more readily grasped, which expresses Catholic teaching about the use of private property from many centuries: "Private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditional right. No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need when others lack necessities." Grudgingly and as a very subordinate idea, it would be accepted today by most of us but we wouldn't say it and certainly we wouldn't allow it to be the ground of our understanding of the economic system.

I have the impression that Mormons are like most Gentile Protestants. They have in their background strong teaching about the limitations of a person's use of property for which he or she is a steward under God. Unfortunately, there is serious tension between that idea and the economic individualism which is the dominant secular idea. This tension is probably reduced more in the case of Mormons than in the case of Gentile Protestants because of the LDS sense of responsibility for the economic welfare of their own community. And at least they have the reputation of doing more tithing. One common element, however, between Mormons



GEORGES ROUAULT. *Men of Justice.*

who share that communitarian concern and many Gentile Protestants who have a less focused communitarian concern is a rejection or a tendency to suspect the role of government as the agent of the community for the common economic welfare.

For me there is one clear conviction that has come out of theological and ethical discussions on a worldwide scale: There is no Christian economic system. Christians can expect to live with various economic systems, and they should be critics of all of them. There are Christian goals and criteria, Christian warnings against the temptations that are characteristic of all such systems. Economic life in general intensifies the usual temptations to be self-centered, callous concerning the needs of others, prideful because of material success and wealth, corrupted by the quest for power or domination which is present in both capitalism and in collectivistic systems.

This criticism and these warnings should not keep Christians from supporting the goals which their own people are seeking to realize whether these goals are of some form of capitalism or of some form of socialism or of some form of a mixed economy. Christians always find themselves opposed to the political and cultural totalitarian aspects of various forms of communism (and there are many forms), but they may cooperate with the economic institutions of communism or socialism. They will also find themselves opposed to capitalism that lacks

significant modifications in the interests of justice.

For example, Roman Catholics have long opposed in principle the ideology of Marxist communism and socialism, and until recently they sought to prevent their members from supporting even democratic socialism. Yet they have never been at home with capitalism either. Thus today Catholics very often in the same sentence condemn both Marxism and liberal capitalism.

Now, however, among our leaders there is a return to strongly ideological capitalist assumptions, and these seem to be accepted by most of our people, if only passively. Moreover, our leaders hold a doctrine that private enterprise generally is inherently good and that there is something at least suspicious about public enterprise. Why there should be such inhibitions about having the community as a whole take initiative for the sake of a clear common good and such acceptance of having the common good be the byproduct of a search by individuals or private corporations for profit is puzzling to me. This is the only industrialized and democratic country in the world in which the inherent superiority of private initiatives is so readily taken for granted.

In spite of this, the federal government with its range of concern and power has been responsible for most reforms in the interest of economic and social justice through the years—dramatically in the case of racial injustice. It has proved more responsive to the needs of the neglected and deprived people than state governments and local governments. Greater diversity in welfare policy from state to state would not be good for the morale of the nation.

Still, I do not doubt that all bureaucracies need trimming, even radical cut-backs. This is true of the federal government, of other units of government, of private corporations, of universities, and churches. (Even in the very good retirement center in which I live many of us think that the administration could well be reduced in size.) My only concern is that these cutbacks should not be implemented by those who reject the tested purposes of the institutions. I am not arguing that free enterprise does not have an important place in a good economy but rather that it is not morally self-sufficient.

To my mind there are three areas in which free enterprise needs correction or supplementation. First, we need to acknowledge that there are some things that need to be done for the public welfare that don't make a profit. We have generally agreed that education is such an area and have provided free public education for all children, even free higher education or at least higher education at minimum cost for all who can meet educational standards, especially in the West. And though there is eagerness in many circles today to have private elementary and secondary education as an available alternative, the reasons for this are cultural and religious and do not stem from basic economic principles. Our best public universities remain the nearest American equivalents of royal palaces and parks in older countries that are now open to the public.

Other areas of economic activity that are not profitable for private enterprise are low cost housing and the building of highways and mass transit. Highways are such a boon for private enterprise that

they have been richly supported. Only mass transit which provides competition for the automobile has been sorely neglected.

Private enterprise has also failed to make medical care available to the whole population without causing families to be bankrupted by serious illness. It used to be taken for granted that at least in the near future we would have national medical insurance that would protect people against catastrophic illness, but we no longer hear about that. It is shocking to learn how many hospitals are run for profit. Nursing homes run for profit have become notorious. A recent report of the California Health Facilities Commission reveals that a sizeable proportion of nursing homes make large profits while "often providing insufficient funds for food, laundry, housekeeping, and nursing care" (*L.A. Times*, 31 July 1981). Some argue that competition between private owners of nursing homes and hospitals may be the best way of getting better care. This would be true if the sick and the weak elderly were able to shop around, but often they are prisoners of the place where they happen to be. It is not like shopping around for automobiles or air fare. Why should our country be the only industrialized country in the world that has no national plan to make medical care available at reasonable cost to all of its people? I think the answer is that the principle of individualism is more deeply ingrained in us than it is in most other countries, even those that are primarily capitalistic in the structures of their economies. The medical systems in the United States and Canada provide the most striking contrast in this respect. I should prefer to be sick in Canada—especially if I were under 65 and had no Medicare benefits.

Another problem area for private enterprise is employment. The private sector should provide employment, but society as a whole has such a stake in overcoming unemployment that it should not be left to some speculative trickling down of the effects of investment a year from now. Unemployment is not only a source of poverty but it is also a destroyer of morale. It breeds alienation and a sense of not belonging to society. This is especially destructive in the case of young people who have never had continuous jobs and who see no hope of having jobs that have a future. Our government has merely trifled with this problem for many years, and we have as a result an underclass that may always be difficult to assimilate into the society. This unemployment is a major cause of crime, and any public figures who make crime or law and order their chief cause and do nothing about this unemployment of young people are not serious.

A second built-in moral defect of capitalism is that it tends to create private centers of economic power that are not accountable to the people and that are no longer sufficiently checked by competition. Capitalism fails to provide social discipline for these giants that have so much control over national destiny.

The great oil companies are a prime example today. When confronted with the problems of poor nations, President Reagan's only solution is to unleash private enterprise to create wealth for them. But unfortunately private enterprise financed by the wealth of industrialized countries is not accountable to the people

of developing countries. Often indigenous governments are controlled by oligarchies in league with multinational corporations which merely exploit native peoples and their natural resources.

Years ago, in 1931, Pius XI, who was more conservative than most recent popes, succinctly addressed this problem. In the middle of an attack on socialism, he said: "It is rightly contended that certain forms of property must be reserved to the state, since they carry with them an opportunity of domination too great to be left to private individuals without injury to the community at large" (*Quadragesimo Anno*, par. 114).

A third built-in defect of capitalism is that it tends to promote extreme economic inequality among people. In his book, *The Zero-Sum Society*, Professor Lester Thurow of MIT shows that the share of the national income possessed by the various quintiles or fifths of the population has remained almost the same between 1947 and 1977 and that there are reasons to think that in the future the shares of the lower quintiles will become less. It is sobering to realize that the share of the lowest quintile in 1977 was about one eighth that of the highest. The highest had 41 percent of the income of the nation. The lowest two quintiles, which now have 16.8 percent of the national income, will bear the burden of this administration's counterrevolution, and the highest quintile will receive the most benefits.

One of the most mistaken dogmas of this administration is that taxation should be used only for revenue and not to modify the distribution of wealth.



GEORGES ROUAULT. *Head of Christ.*

The use of taxation to modify the distribution of wealth has been essential to make capitalism morally tolerable.

I also want to say some neglected things now about the relation of equality to justice. I am here referring only to economic equality. And I am not thinking in terms of some dead level of economic equality. That would involve great regimentation, the loss of freedom and diversity, and it would deprive the economy of the incentives that are essential for initiate and growth. I think it is correct that such incentives come from the fact that a person can improve his or her condition. That doesn't mean that the sky is the limit for what one earns or receives, but it does mean that some variations are important for incentive.

Those who support capitalism very often say that they believe in equality of opportunity but not in equality of result. I can also say that, but I want to add one note of caution. Inequalities in the conditions from which people start may be so great that equality of opportunity is an illusion. When inequalities become too great there can be no economic justice.

Now these three potential defects in the capitalistic system are not generally considered in our current political discourse. President Reagan often emphasizes the idea that people should be able to keep what they earn but it is so seldom said that their opportunity to earn depends on many social circumstances and contributions of the community—the location of population for example—which are not their doing. Also, very large scale earning may be the result of

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monopolistic advantages of cunning rather than intelligence, or of sheer luck.

Consider one approach to the issue. It is not taken for granted that equality of opportunity is right as an objective or a criterion by which economic policies are to be judged? Our system of free public education is a symbol of this commitment to equality of opportunity. But equality of opportunity is unreal if the economic conditions are so unequal that some children go to school malnourished and if they come from an environment that is dehumanizing. Now obviously there are many handicapping conditions that cannot be overcome by economic policies or by structures or by law. For example, victims of child-abuse are less favored than children who have loving and responsible parents. Much is being said about the poor who are deserving and the poor who are undeserving (less is being said about the undeserving rich). A major test of policies and structures will be how far they provide equal opportunity for the deserving children of those thought to be "undeserving poor." Failure to lift this up as a test seems to me to be one of the failings in all discussion of who is to be in the so-called "safety net" and of what it is to do for them.

I used to talk this way in the 1930s. In fact my first article in *The Christian Century* in 1930 had as its title "The

Myth of Equal Opportunity." I did not suppose that points like this would have to be made in the 1980s. But already it is being seen by many leaders of the churches, both Protestant and Catholic, that there is a contradiction between what churches stand for in Christian social ethics and the present economic policies of our government. Father Robert Drinan, the former Congressman and now on the faculty of Georgetown University, recently wrote: "Virtually every religious body in the United States opposed what Reagan and Congress have done in the budget and tax initiatives. No one in Washington, to my knowledge, can recall any major domestic issue on which all of the religious groups were so unified" (*NCR*, August 14). An editorial in the *Washington Post* which is, of course, a secular voice calls attention to the moral issue involved. It uses the words "the economics of the Gilded Age" to suggest what is happening and says the following: "In the industrial world, most people currently seem to believe that very large differences in wealth from one family to another are not compatible with democratic stands. But opinion on this point has always been less firm in the United States than in most other rich countries. Americans are now going to press the accustomed limits of inequality a bit, and see what happens" (*The Manchester Guardian*, 9 August 1981).

Is it not likely that there will be a revulsion from what happens as both unjust and indecent? In May of this year the General Board of the National Council of Churches agreed on one of the most courageous statements that to my knowledge has come in decades from a responsible ecumenical body. Please remember that the General Board is not a few bureaucrats in New York but about 150 leaders of 32 denominations from all over the country. They took this action by a large majority. Their statement was a criticism of the current policies of our administration and even more of the doctrines that underlie them and of the vision of America expressed in them. Here are a few sentences: "In this vision of America the fittest survive and prosper and there is little room for public purpose since it interferes with private gain. Government is at best a necessary evil which must be strong enough to protect privilege from assault but kept too weak to impose public responsibility on private prerogative."

Obviously these words are far ahead of majority opinion in the churches and in the country, but I believe that they point to what will be commonly thought in a few years. I see them as setting the agenda for churches both Protestant and Catholic in the next period. The churches are called to monitor what is happening to people and to seek a reversal of present trends in social doctrine as much as in social policy. This reversal will come about as more and more people experience through sympathy with others or in their own deprivations—even in their own bodies—the results of present policies.



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