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**THE BIBLE AND POLITICAL ECONOMY: A COMPARATIVE
SURVEY OF THE USE OF SCRIPTURE IN
CHRISTIAN ECONOMIC ETHICS**

**A dissertation submitted to the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies
Drew University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Philosophy**

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With gratitude and affection, this dissertation is dedicated
to the memory of my grandfather

William J. Irwin
(1905-1988)

and in honor of my grandmother

Esther M. Irwin

*"But we will praise these godly people,
whose righteous deeds have never been forgotten.
Their reputations will be passed on to their descendents,
and this will be their inheritance.
Their descendents continue to keep the covenant
and always will because of what their ancestors did."
--Sirach 44:10-12*

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Among the beliefs that my studies in social ethics have reinforced is the firm conviction that any human undertaking, including academic endeavors, is a collective enterprise, nurtured and sustained by the community contexts in which it develops. For that reason, I gratefully acknowledge some of the institutional settings and personal relationships that have left an indelible mark on this project.

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And finally. . .

SOLI DEO GLORIA

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INTRODUCTION

From Brahmins chanting Vedas to yeshiva students debating Talmud, Protestant preachers expounding the Bible, and imams reciting Quranic suras at the start of noontime prayers, members of diverse religious communities engage their respective traditions through the medium of the sacred text. Yet despite its ubiquitous presence on the religious landscape, the phenomenon of the sacred text is one that has only recently begun to receive serious scholarly attention. Historical-critical studies of individual sacred books have, of course, long been a matter of academic interest. But the broader issue of how a particular oral or literary collection acquires an authoritative place within a given community and the ways in which communities are shaped by their contact with these texts has yet to be fully explored.¹

This topic has special importance for students of the Western monotheistic religions in light of the formidable role that the written word plays in the overall ethos of these communities. As William A. Graham notes in the Encyclopedia of Religion, "the quintessential 'book religions' are those that trace their lineage in some fashion to the

¹Wilfred Cantwell Smith is largely responsible for the renewed attention paid to this subject. See his What is Scripture: A Comparative Approach (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1993); and an earlier collection of essays by his former students, Miriam Levering, ed., Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

Hebrews, the prototypical 'people of the book'.² Among the implications of this devotion to the written text is a style of religious ethics that involves the interpretation and application of morally relevant sacred literature. Consequently, techniques must be fashioned to enable communities in succeeding generations to appropriate and implement the moral paradigms contained within a sacred canon. In some traditions, this has involved elaborate commentary projects (such as the Talmud), the development of schools of jurisprudence (as in Islam), or the emergence of definitive interpreters (the papal magisterium in Catholic Christianity, or the issuing of fatwas by the Islamic ulama).

Christians have related biblical themes to the moral life in a variety of ways, corresponding to the diversity of relevant scriptural motifs and images. Underlying all these efforts is the conviction that ethical reflection, if it is to be authentically Christian, must be guided on some level by biblical standards.³ This dissertation examines how Christian ethicists have attempted to bring biblical insights to bear upon one important dimension of the modern world: the organization of economic life. Focusing on this issue raises yet another distinctive of the Western monotheistic faiths--the notion that the social order should somehow reflect a transcendent vision of God's purposes in human history.

²William A. Graham, "Scripture," in Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. by Mircea Eliade, 13:135.

³One important distinction that must be noted at this point is that while Christians share with Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs a devotion to a sacred canon, they consider God's paramount revelation to have come in the form of an incarnate person. Christianity is thus in some sense both a book religion and an avatar religion. While some Protestant fundamentalists ascribe qualities to the Bible comparable to Muslim understandings of Qur'an or Orthodox Jewish views of Torah, for many Christians the significance of Scripture lies in its authoritative witness to the Christ-event.

There is, of course, a sectarian impulse within some of these religious traditions that often expresses itself in a strategy of creating alternative communities outside the social mainstream. But the dominant tendency has been to develop a religious ethic that has at least a limited degree of relevance to the wider institutions of society. Within the Christian tradition, this endeavor has taken a variety of forms--from the medieval quest to erect a unified Christian civilization, through the Social Gospel program to build the Kingdom of God on earth, and the contemporary aspirations of liberation theologians. To some extent, the different economic orientations examined in the present work reflect the diverse legacies of these past and present experiments. At the deepest level, however, all of them are responding, in their own way, to the ancient prophetic call to "do justice" which has continually reverberated in the faith communities that share this heritage.

The Use of the Bible in Christian
Ethics: A Review of the
Literature[†]

This dissertation builds upon, and hopefully contributes to, a growing body of literature examining the use of the Bible in Christian ethics. One of the cardinal features of this area of study is its interdisciplinary character, insofar as it endeavors to overcome a perceived rift between the fields of religious ethics and biblical studies. The metaphor of 'bridging the gap' separating biblical studies from ethics is, in fact, one that is

[†]Although now somewhat dated, Allen Verhey provides a useful guide to the literature in his "The Use of Scripture in Ethics," Religious Studies Review 4 (1978): 29-39. See also Kenneth R. Himes, "Scripture and Ethics: A Review Essay," Biblical Theology Bulletin 15 (1985): 65-73.

repeatedly encountered in this literature.⁵ As proponents of a rapprochement see it, specialists in biblical studies often delve into philological and historical issues, oblivious to the text's contemporary relevance. Simultaneously, Christian ethicists frequently offer social scientific commentary without engaging biblical resources in any meaningful or adequate way.

Some of the earliest attempts to overcome this cleavage were conducted under the auspices of the fledgling World Council of Churches. Coinciding with the heyday of the biblical theology movement, the Council's initial consultations on relating the Bible to contemporary socio-political realities enlisted the participation of leading figures in the world of biblical scholarship such as C. H. Dodd, Walther Eichrodt, Alan Richardson, and G. Ernest Wright. While remaining somewhat preliminary and general in scope, the resulting study documents were marked by an optimistic assessment of the church's ability to draw concrete guidance from what was perceived to be a unified biblical message.⁶

⁵The metaphor evidently originated with John Howard Yoder, The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 13-14; see also Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), p. 18 et passim; Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 4; and Thomas W. Ogletree, The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. xi.

⁶Among the works originating with colloquia sponsored by the Council were From the Bible to the Modern World: Two Conference Reports, ed. by the Study Department of the World Council of Churches (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1947); Biblical Authority for Today, ed. by Alan Richardson and Wolfgang Schweitzer (London: SCM Press, 1951); and Hendrik Kraemer, The Bible and Social Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965). For an overview of the Council's evolving hermeneutical stance, see Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, "Biblical Interpretation in the World Council of Churches," Study Encounter 8, no. 2 (1972): article 22.

Notwithstanding this promising beginning, cross-disciplinary explorations of the Bible's role in shaping social ethics remained sporadic. In his 1970 appraisal of the biblical theology movement's legacy, Brevard Childs ventured an oft-quoted assessment of the situation: "In spite of the great interest in ethics, to our knowledge, there is no outstanding modern work written in English that even attempts to deal adequately with the Biblical material as it relates to ethics."⁷ Six years later, Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen began their noteworthy text on Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life with a chapter on "The Divergence of Biblical Studies and Christian Ethics," again calling attention to the lack of scholarly materials linking these two disciplines in any sort of systematic, methodologically self-conscious manner.⁸

Taken as a whole, the writings surveyed here---some of which preceded and some of which followed Birch and Rasmussen's work--have served to, at least partially, remedy the deficiency that they described and to bridge the notorious gap. In reviewing the results of the past quarter century of work in this area, one does not find a sharply defined field of study with a uniform set of questions and methods. Instead, there is a rather loose configuration of writings with a wide variety of themes and approaches. Despite this diversity, the various contributions to this discussion can be loosely organized under four general categories. Needless to say, these are rather artificial divisions, but they provide a framework for exploring the basic contours of the field.

⁷Brevard S. Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 124.

⁸Birch and Rasmussen, pp. 15-44.

Biblical Surveys

One unifying element linking the materials under review here is that they have primarily been written by ethicists and are concerned with analyzing how the Bible operates as a moral resource for the contemporary Christian community. This area of research is often differentiated from the related, albeit discrete, discipline of biblical ethics, which encompasses efforts to clarify, often in a purely descriptive fashion, the moral perspectives expressed within the text itself.⁹

There is, however, one group of writings that straddles this distinction. These are works that correlate a rendition of the biblical narrative with categories or questions drawn from the field of ethical inquiry. A prime example of this approach is Thomas W. Ogletree's The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics, a text which surveys a range of biblical materials with a view toward advancing a particular methodological discussion involving alternative formulations of the moral life. The bulk of the book is devoted to exploring morally relevant themes in biblical legal literature, prophetic oracles, gospel accounts, and Pauline epistles. But as a preliminary step in this interpretive process, Ogletree spells out the preunderstandings of the moral life which self-consciously shape his engagement with the text. The book's underlying premise is that the initial formulation of this topic put forward in the opening chapter--basically an historical-contextual model of doing ethics which synthesizes the standard teleological, deontological, and perfectionist approaches--represents a refined version of a perspective

⁹Among others, James Gustafson makes this distinction in his "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study" in Theology and Christian Ethics (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1974), p. 121. (This essay originally appeared in Interpretation 24 [1970]:430-55.)

which can be discerned on a precritical level in the biblical writings.¹⁰ The biblical survey is therefore designed to develop and validate this hypothesis.

A slightly different method is followed by Stephen Charles Mott in his Biblical Ethics and Social Change.¹¹ Rather than reviewing the biblical text sequentially, Mott arranges the material around a series of ethical themes. The primary organizing principle in this treatment is the element of justice implicit in the biblical understanding of the Reign of God. The first part of the argument focuses on the Reign of God as a motivation for social involvement, while the second part explores strategies--such as evangelism, political reform, and revolution--for implementing justice in the world.

The diversity of biblical perspectives and their capacity to engender a "tutored responsiveness" is accented by Edward LeRoy Long in his To Liberate and Redeem: Moral Reflections on the Biblical Narrative.¹² Viewing the Bible as a cohesive drama, this text covers the full range of biblical materials, exploring in chronological order, the sequential movement from Exodus liberation through covenant obligation, creation themes, and the experience of exile. The New Testament then offers models for responding to the Jesus story--ranging from the multicultural openness of the Pauline communities to the eschatological hope of the apocalypse. Rather than furnishing solutions to problems, the Bible, according to Prof. Long's treatment, serves mainly to illumine the tensions that mark the moral life. These polarities include the conflict

¹⁰This thesis is expressly stated on p. 47.

¹¹New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

¹²Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1997.

between promise and risk, between freedom and obligation, and between institutional and charismatic leadership styles. But the central tension is between an Exodus-inspired ethic that responds to oppression and an ethic of the exile that addresses guilt. One overarching theme unifying all these diverse components of the narrative is the affirmation that moral obligation represents a response of gratitude to the experience of divine grace--a point that was anticipated in the Exodus-Sinai sequence and is underscored in the New Testament Sermon on the Mount.

Overall, the common ingredient in this first group of writings is the effort to engage the biblical text on the basis of issues raised by ethicists. The notorious gap between biblical studies and ethics is bridged by identifying points of contact in the Bible that connect with the concerns relevant to ethical inquiry. Works in the remaining three categories all focus, not on the Bible itself, but on the individuals and communities that use the Bible and how they do so.

Comparative Studies

To begin with, there have been several comparative studies outlining alternative strategies for appropriating Scripture and organizing these options into some sort of typology. Prof. Long pioneered this line of inquiry with a 1965 article delineating three patterns for relating the Bible to ethics.¹³ His first category includes ethicists--generally holding to a propositional view of biblical revelation--who regard the Bible as a law book providing definitive normative guidance in prescriptive terms. Secondly, according to

¹³Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., "The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics: A Look at Basic Options," *Interpretation* 19 (1965):149-162.

Prof. Long, there have been ethicists who have looked to the Bible for some guiding principle or ideal, such as love or justice. Finally, there are those who follow a contextual or situational approach, which uses the Bible to discern the contours of a fitting response to God's initiative.

Another influential essay by James Gustafson¹⁴ distinguished between using the Bible as the source of a revealed morality and using it as the source of a revealed theology. The former category was further broken down into positions that treat the Bible as a basis for moral laws, moral ideals, moral analogies, and a "great variety approach" (an eclectic option that recognizes a diversity of morally relevant biblical materials). In the alternative perspective, where the Bible provides a revealed theology, the emphasis is on using the Bible's characterization of God's nature and activities as a framework for moral analysis.

More recently, William C. Spohn has suggested that among contemporary ethicists, Scripture functions in six different ways: as a command of God, a moral reminder, a call to liberation, a set of images which elicit a response, a call to discipleship, and a basis for responding love.¹⁵ Another article by John Brunt and Gerald Winslow described five different models for relating the Bible and ethics. At opposite ends of the spectrum are extreme positions that either equate the two completely (a tendency the writers attribute to some conservative evangelicals) or divorce them entirely (a rarely-chosen, but not unheard-of, option). In between, there are mediating positions

¹⁴Gustafson, "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics."

¹⁵William C. Spohn, S.J., What Are They Saying about Scripture and Ethics? (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

that view the Bible as either a guide for discerning the direct, personal command of God, an influence that shapes Christian character, or a resource for moral reflection.¹⁶

The notable contribution these survey treatments make to the analysis of the interplay between the Bible and ethics is their reminder that Scripture can be utilized in a variety of ways. Recognizing this diversity minimizes the tendency to regard one particular pattern as normative or universal. Typologies also provide a useful set of categories for assessing the role of Scripture within one particular argument.

Case Studies

A third category of writings in the Bible and ethics field is made up of case studies illustrating various methodological options. One approach has been to explore the way a significant figure in the history of Christian ethics cited Scripture. This procedure is illustrated by three dissertations--Benjamin Thomas Jordan's study of H. Richard Niebuhr,¹⁷ Anthony J. Tambasco on Luis Segundo,¹⁸ and Allen D. Verhey on Walter Rauschenbusch.¹⁹ The most comprehensive survey along these lines is Jeffrey S. Siker's

¹⁶John Brunt and Gerald Winslow, "The Bible's Role in Christian Ethics," Andrews University Seminary Studies 20 (1982): 3-21.

¹⁷Benjamin Thomas Jordan, "The Use of Scripture in the Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr" (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1974).

¹⁸Anthony J. Tambasco, The Bible for Ethics: Juan Luis Segundo and First-World Ethics (Washington: University Press of America, 1981).

¹⁹Allen Dale Verhey, "The Use of Scripture in Moral Discourse: A Case Study of Walter Rauschenbusch" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1975). Also, on Rauschenbusch's use of Scripture, see James Gustafson, "From Scripture to Social Action and Social Policy," Andover Newton Quarterly 61 (1969):160-9.

Scripture in Ethics: Twentieth Century Portraits.²⁰ This in-depth consideration of eight twentieth century Protestant and Catholic theologians focuses on five key variables: (1) what biblical themes or texts are emphasized by each figure, (2) what role the Bible plays in their moral or theological reasoning, (3) how biblical authority is envisioned, (4) what kind of hermeneutic is employed, and (5) what relationship is developed between the Bible and Christian ethics.

Other studies have analyzed appeals to Scripture within the context of some moral debate. Conflicts over the ordination of women to church office prompted Krister Stendahl's The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics²¹ and Mary Hayter's The New Eve in Christ: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in the Debate about Women in the Church.²² Anthony Tambasco examined the arguments of one particular book about nuclear weapons in his article, "The Bible and Nuclear War: A Case Study in Methodology for Christian Biblical Ethics."²³ More recently, the use of Scripture in divergent moral assessments of homosexuality has elicited some scholarly attention.²⁴

By far the most comprehensive example of this approach has been Willard

²⁰New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. (The theologians treated are Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, Bernard Häring, Paul Ramsey, Stanley Hauerwas, Gustavo Gutiérrez, James Cone, and Rosemary Radford Ruether.)

²¹E.T., Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966.

²²Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.

²³Biblical Theology Bulletin 13 (1983):75-81.

²⁴A good illustration was the panel presentation, "Homosexuality: A Case Issue in the Use of Biblical Authority," 1992 Annual Meeting, Society of Biblical Literature.

Swartley's Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation.²⁵

Beginning with the antebellum conflict over Southern slavery and continuing with subsequent arguments over Sabbath observance, Christian participation in warfare, and the ordination of woman, Swartley analyzes the alternative biblical rationales marshalled by both sides. This synopsis of the counterpoising positions is followed by a hermeneutical commentary reflecting upon the wider implications of the debate and often revealing the hidden assumptions on each side. Finally, Swartley concludes with a chapter surveying alternative ways to relate the Bible to social ethics and offering a prescriptive set of principles to insure proper interpretation.

Methodological Works

A final area of concentration within this field is represented by methodological works that either advance a particular proposal for relating the Bible to Christian ethics or venture a framework for considering alternative approaches. The basic starting point for all these writings is the presumption that the Bible must be a primary, definitive resource in any formulation of Christian ethics. Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen describe a two-fold consensus that undergirds discussions of the Bible's role among Christian ethicists, the second part of which is the conviction

that for Christian ethics the Bible is somehow normative. In what way normative is a question with many proposed answers; but there is agreement that the Bible is the charter document that holds a place more authoritative than any other source. . . . Christian ethics is not Christian ethics unless the Bible is normative in some important way for the

²⁵Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983.

Christian life.²⁶

It is in specifying precisely what role the Bible either does or should play in the moral life that ethicists part company.²⁷ To a large extent, different interpretations of the Bible's function reflect broader methodological approaches to ethics in general. Scholars inclined to view ethics as a rational, deliberative process governed by rules and principles and directed toward choosing correct actions usually interpret the Bible as a source of concrete guidance in decision-making contexts. Their methodological studies, accordingly, are oriented toward giving a descriptive account of how individuals, or believing communities, relate biblical materials to real life dilemmas on the personal or corporate level.

Gustafson illustrated his 1970 article with a case study on ways to incorporate biblical insights into an ethical assessment of the American military incursion into Cambodia.²⁸ Freeman Sleeper's analysis of the Bible and ethics similarly presupposes a decision-making situation. His basic premise is that contemporary moral problems provide a relevant context for biblical study and reflection. Elaborating on this thesis, he discusses how ethical questions can frame each step in the interpretive process--from the development of one's initial perspective, through the exegetical and communication stages. This model is then illustrated by showing how one could engage the biblical text

²⁶Birch and Rasmussen, pp. 46-47.

²⁷It should be noted that in these methodological studies, the descriptive and the prescriptive questions--i.e., what role the Bible actually does play and what role it should play--frequently overlap and are rarely carefully distinguished.

²⁸Gustafson, pp. 138-44.

from the standpoint of issues raised by the Black power movement.²⁹

As a source of guidance in decision-making contexts, the Bible can operate on several levels. For some writers, such as Sleeper, the Bible is primarily a repository of symbols, myths, and images that shape the reader's self-understanding. Others, such as James Childress would go further and insist that the Bible also furnishes directives. "I would propose," writes Childress, "that we think about some of Scripture's moral statements in terms of principles and rules, especially in terms of principles that establish presumptions and burdens of proof for the moral life."³⁰

Allen Verhey's various methodological essays³¹ provide a useful analytical grid for comparing different styles of appealing to Scripture. Drawing upon Henry David Aiken's distinction between various levels of moral discourse, Verhey first shows that Scripture can be introduced either at the moral-rule, ethical-principle, or post-ethical levels. The other recurrent theme in Verhey's treatment of this subject is the need to differentiate between the authority of Scripture and the authorizations that enable one to move from the biblical text to a particular moral claim. Using Stephen Toulmin's

²⁹C. Freeman Sleeper, "Ethics as a Context for Biblical Interpretation," Interpretation 22 (1968):443-60.

³⁰James F. Childress, "Scripture and Christian Ethics: Some Reflections on the Role of Scripture in Moral Deliberation and Justification," Interpretation 34(1980):378.

³¹Verhey's approach is best illustrated by his unpublished dissertation--a case study using Walter Rauschenbusch as the principal subject and Carl F. H. Henry as a comparison figure. ("The Use of Scripture in Moral Discourse: A Case Study of Walter Rauschenbusch"). See also his bibliographic essay, "The Use of Scripture in Ethics"; The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), esp. pp. 153-97; and his article, "Bible in Christian Ethics," Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics, rev. ed. (1986).

technique for diagramming the structure of an informal argument, Verhey shows that when moral claims are supported with biblical data, an implicit warrant is used to license the inference being made.

What most of these proposals and ways of analyzing the Bible's use have in common is a focus on a rational, decision-making process. Prompted, however, by the renewed interest in the ethics of virtue and narrative theology, attention is increasingly being given to the Bible's role in forming moral character within particular faith communities. Rather than dealing with how the Bible would address specific issues, methodological studies that share this basic orientation are replete with discussions of how moral agency is shaped by one's social loyalties, and how a shared sense of identity is nurtured by a common story. Narrative images become the primary medium of moral instruction, in place of rules or principles.

Birch and Rasmussen's work offers a prime example of this approach.³² Although both character and decision-making are identified as indispensable ingredients in a comprehensive account of the moral life, the accent clearly falls on the former component. One of the book's central themes is the claim that one's actions and decisions reflect one's underlying character, and that this disposition of character develops within a community context. This means that in a Christian setting, the Church, as a community of moral discourse and the bearer of a moral tradition, functions as the primary instrument for creating Christian identity.

This model has important implications for the use of Scripture as an ethical

³²This theme is evident in the 1976 edition (cited previously) and becomes even more pronounced in the extensively revised 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989).

resource. Summarizing their position at one point, the authors state: "Our contention is that the most effective and crucial impact of the Bible in Christian ethics is that of shaping the moral identity of the Christian and of the church."³³ The Bible performs this task by presenting an array of images--such as its portrait of Jesus--which help to engender in the life of the readers certain motives, attitudes, and intentions.³⁴

A more recent collaborative effort by Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones³⁵ echoes the theme that interpreting Scripture is a collective enterprise. The goal of the interpretive process, in their view, is to shape the readers into a community that embodies the moral claims of Scripture within a particular social context. To this end, they stress the two-fold task of reading the text and reading the world, as well as the need to listen to the voices of outsiders. In these ways, Scripture becomes both a "word-for-us" as well as a "word-over-against-ourselves."

Cognate Fields

These methodological writings that venture some constructive proposal for considering the relationship between Christian ethics and the Bible round out the wide-ranging conversation revolving around this topic. But before drawing this review of the literature to a close, mention should briefly be made of a few other productive areas of study that have relevance for the issue of the Bible and ethics, even though they fall outside of the parameters of the subject proper.

³³Birch and Rasmussen (1976), p. 104.

³⁴On this point, see especially Birch and Rasmussen (1989), pp. 190-91.

³⁵Fowl and Jones.

First, there is the extensive field of biblical ethics, encompassing works that examine the ethical content of various sections of scripture. The ethics of the New Testament in general³⁶ and the Pauline epistles in particular³⁷ have received rather ample coverage. Four recent monographs have augmented the relatively more neglected field of Old Testament ethics.³⁸

Secondly, there are treatments of the Bible's role in Christian theological discourse. Paralleling the typologies that classify ways of using the Bible in ethics, there have been a couple of noteworthy attempts to catalogue various theological perspectives on Scripture.³⁹ Under the rubric of theological method, there are also works that assess how theologians employ the Bible in formulating their proposals. Particularly notable in

³⁶A sampling of this literature would include Richard B. Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); Willi Marxsen, New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics, trans. by O. C. Dean, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Wolfgang Schrage, The Ethics of the New Testament, trans. by David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Allen Verhey, The Great Reversal; and R. E. O. White, Biblical Ethics (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979).

³⁷See, for example, Victor Paul Furnish's Theology and Ethics in Paul (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), and The Moral Teachings of Paul: Selected Issues, 2nd rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).

³⁸Bruce C. Birch, Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991); Waldemar Janzen, Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Walter Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); and Christopher J. H. Wright, An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983).

³⁹For example, Robert Gnuse, The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation, and the Canon of Scripture (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985); and Donald K. McKim, The Bible in Theology and Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, rev. ed. of What Christians Believe About the Bible, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985).

this regard is David Kelsey's The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology.⁴⁰ In addition to surveying alternative schemes for construing the function of Scripture, Kelsey also develops a morphology of the concept of biblical authority. One of his principal contentions is that the way Scripture is used in theological proposals reflects a prior understanding of the Bible's overall message, based ultimately on how God's presence within the community of faith is imaginatively depicted.

Thirdly, any comprehensive discussion of the Bible and ethics must enter into dialogue with contemporary hermeneutical theory. The affinity between these two areas of study is reflected even in the similar images that are employed. While ethicists speak of "bridging the gap" between the biblical world (reconstructed through historical-critical studies) and discussions about contemporary moral issues, specialists in hermeneutics talk of "fusing the horizons" between the ancient text and the modern reader.

In considering biblical justifications offered on behalf of some social option, hermeneutical perspectives emanating from liberation theology are of particular importance. Rudolf Bultmann laid the groundwork for subsequent developments in biblical hermeneutics by applying the concept of the "hermeneutical circle" (inherited from Schliermacher, Heidegger, and others) to New Testament interpretation and accenting the role of the reader's preunderstandings in the interpretive process. For Bultmann, "preunderstanding" referred to the reader's life relationship to the subject matter of the text--an existential connection that makes genuine comprehension

⁴⁰Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.

possible.⁴¹ But for liberation theologians, this idea has been translated into a category of social analysis, encompassing the interpreter's circumstances of time, culture, and class. According to this model, readings of the text are never neutral, but are always rooted in some concrete historical praxis.⁴² This has given rise to a so-called hermeneutics of suspicion, whereby, as Jose Miguez Bonino puts it:

Every interpretation of the texts which is offered to us (whether as exegesis or as systematic or as ethical interpretation) must be investigated in relation to the praxis out of which it comes. . . . Very concretely, we cannot receive the theological interpretation coming from the rich world without suspecting it and, therefore, asking what kind of praxis it supports, reflects, or legitimizes.⁴³

Regardless of how one assesses the validity of this approach, the liberationist critique is one that must be reckoned with.

Design, Definitions, and Delimitations

Objectives and Design

The purpose of this dissertation is to build upon the body of literature discussed above by examining how Christian ethicists have used the Bible to support various economic systems. The dissertation is designed, therefore, to illustrate different

⁴¹Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 149. See also Anthony C. Thiselton, The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 205-92.

⁴²See Thiselton, pp. 110-13; Robert McAfee Brown, Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), pp. 75-88.

⁴³Jose Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 91.

techniques of appealing to Scripture using a case study approach that is informed by the methodological and hermeneutical issues addressed in much of the existing literature. Testing theoretical observations and conclusions against an assortment of materials dealing with one subject offers the opportunity to add concrete substance to the discussion and generate new insights. This dissertation will also extend the case study model by proposing a grid for analyzing the factors that influence how the Bible operates in moral deliberations. One of the key contributions of this line of inquiry will be to demonstrate the role that prior commitments--especially ideological ones--play in the interpretation of the biblical text.

Needless to say, this type of study has limited application. By design, it is issue-oriented and focused on a debate reflecting decisions for or against particular social options. Consequently, what is under review here is ethical argumentation, in which the Bible is primarily introduced to provide justifications for a given position. Since any consideration of how the Bible might have shaped the subjects' moral sensibilities or instilled character traits in them would be purely speculative, the whole aspect of moral formation and the Bible's role in this process is bracketed. This omission is not meant to minimize the importance of this dimension of the Bible's moral application; it merely reflects the limits inherent in the dissertation's subject matter.

The debate over which pattern of economic life most closely approximates the biblical ideal provides a unique framework for the kind of study being undertaken here. In recent decades, there has been a remarkable increase both in the quantity of literature dealing with economic themes from a biblically-informed perspective, as well as in the diversity of viewpoints claiming scriptural sanction. This renewed interest in the

morality of the marketplace reflects, in large measure, the extent to which economic issues have emerged at the forefront of the political agenda in much of the Western world. The wrenching transition from an industrialized economy based on manufactured goods to a globalized information age propelled by high technology has carried in its wake severe dislocations that have generated a great deal of anxiety among affected segments of society.⁴⁴ Moreover, throughout the decade spanning the late 1970's and early 1980's, parties of the Right came to power in several Western countries, including Britain, the United States, Canada, and Germany, often on a platform of revamping the welfare state and scaling back social services. In the same way that Michael Harrington's The Other America⁴⁵ heralded the Great Society's War on Poverty in the 1960's, the tone for the 1980's was set by works such as George Gilder's Wealth and Poverty⁴⁶ and Charles Murray's Losing Ground.⁴⁷ Another important development was the demise of the liberal social democratic consensus that had largely held sway in ecclesiastical circles throughout the post-war era. What had been a longstanding liberal hegemony in Christian ethics and religiously based social activism was challenged in the 1980's by the rise of the Religious Right and a neo-conservative intellectual renaissance.

All these trends precipitated an avalanche of literature in the field of economic

⁴⁴A popular treatment of this phenomenon can be found in John Naisbitt, Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming our Lives (New York: Warner, 1982), pp. 11-38, 55-77.

⁴⁵Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963.

⁴⁶New York: Basic Books, 1981.

⁴⁷Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

ethics, much of it drawing heavily upon Scriptural texts. At one end of the spectrum, the Religious Right, basking in the glow of electoral successes and energized by secular conservative thinking, produced a body of literature intended to defend free market capitalism using the Bible. This position found institutional expression in organizations such as the Institute for Christian Economics in Tyler, Texas; the Contemporary Economics and Business Association at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia; and the Coalition on Revival. Meanwhile, mainline Protestant churches and the U.S. Catholic Conference challenged the conservative economic policies of the Reagan administration, citing the same Bible. The quantity of official statements caused Audrey Chapman to comment in the journal Theology and Public Policy that "the 1980's may be remembered as the decade of the economic pastorals."⁴⁸ Without repudiating capitalism entirely, these statements generally called for a renewed commitment to alleviating the plight of the poor and marginalized. Finally, Latin American Liberation theology, spawned in earlier decades by the Medellin Conference of Catholic bishops and the publication of Gustavo Gutierrez's landmark text, emerged as a major paradigm for doing theological ethics. Although its precise economic prescriptions were often vague and ambiguous, this movement--at least in its more strident forms--tended to lend legitimacy to the idea that a revolutionary brand of socialism was mandated by the gospel.

The question, then, being addressed in this dissertation--one which has thus far

⁴⁸Audrey R. Chapman, "Economic Pastorals and Public Policy," Theology and Public Policy 2 (Summer 1990):36. In addition to the widely acclaimed pastoral letter by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, significant statements were issued by the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Lutheran Church in America.

eluded any sustained analysis--is how to account for these contrary ways of reading the Bible. How, in other words, can the same book be cited by everyone from libertarian defenders of the free market to socialists fomenting revolution?

Having framed the issue in this manner, one caveat is in order. Merely raising this question need not imply that it is intrinsically problematic for contrary conclusions to be inferred from the same sacred text. It may well be the case that different themes and emphases within the biblical tradition are consonant with a variety of economic models. At one conference sponsored by the Fundamentalisms Project, economist Timur Kuran observed that "all major religions are capable of supporting both pro-market and anti-market ideologies."⁴⁹ The goal of this study, therefore, is not primarily to weigh the merits of these conflicting claims or to propose guidelines for eliciting the one correct view from the Bible. Instead, the purpose is to develop better insights into the interpretive process, the role of sacred texts in ethical discourse, and ultimately into the way social ethical prescriptions are formulated, through a critical analysis of one series of perspectives on a particular issue.

Not surprisingly, the search for variables to account for these different readings of the Bible points in the direction of factors extrinsic to the text itself. If the same collection of writings is cited in support of conflicting viewpoints, it stands to reason that prior assumptions are affecting the interpretation. Even if the text is ambiguous and capable of being construed in various ways, it will ultimately be the outside influences on the interpreters that predispose them to choose one option rather than another. An

⁴⁹quoted by Peter Steinfels, "Fundamentalism: Last Spasm of the 20th Century?" New York Times, 6 April 1993, p. A21.

Anglican study document quoted by Anthony Thiselton sums this point up well: "No one expounds the Bible to himself or to anyone else without bringing to the task his own prior frame of reference, his own pattern of assumptions which derives from sources outside the Bible."⁵⁰

These influences could be broken down any number of ways. The scheme adopted here will focus on four factors--ideology, theology, ethical methodology, and social location.⁵¹ Each of these categories warrants a brief explanation.

Ideology: One of the primary contributions of this study will be to highlight the decisive role ideological factors play in the process of biblical interpretation. Before developing this theme, however, it is important to clarify the use of the term "ideology," particularly in view of the negative images it often evokes.

In common parlance, "ideology" generally conveys the sense of a rigid, doctrinaire orthodoxy, implacable in the face of contrary evidence or experience (hence the label "ideologue" for someone manifesting these traits). As a characteristic of political leaders, it is sometimes contrasted with pragmatism--usually viewed as a more favorable quality.

The term often has similarly pejorative connotations as a category of social analysis. In Marxism, it denotes a form of false consciousness--one facet of the whole

⁵⁰Thiselton, p. 114.

⁵¹It should be noted that these categories are somewhat similar to ones that were used by Ralph Potter in a well-known study of moral reasoning in the context of debates about the Vietnam War. The elements in Potter's so-called "box" were an empirical definition of the situation, affirmations of loyalty, mode of moral reasoning, and quasi-theological beliefs. (Ralph Potter, War and Moral Discourse [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1969], p. 23.)

superstructure of ideas generated by the prevailing economic mode of production. It enables the dominant class to rationalize its own self-interest and, when internalized by the masses, becomes a useful tool in their subjugation. Ideology thus masks the true nature of social reality.⁵²

Historians of political theory use the term ideology to describe the distinctively modern fusion of political power or revolutionary fervor with abstract ideals (such as liberty, equality, and fraternity)--a potent combination that has often bred disastrous consequences. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the so-called "Age of Ideology" has witnessed the rise of fascism, nationalism, socialism, and a host of other '-ism's' that function as a kind of secular faith.⁵³ Using the term in this sense, Daniel Bell heralded the "end of ideology" in the late-1950's--a social prognosis that achieved added significance with the effectual demise of communism and the conclusion of the Cold War.⁵⁴

The same deprecation of ideology surfaces in theology, especially in the tradition associated with Karl Barth. Because of the absolute transcendence of the Word of God, Barthians posit a fundamental discontinuity between faith and any ideological construct.

⁵²Marx's own expression of his view can be found in his "The German Ideology," in The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd ed., ed. by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), esp. pp. 154-5, 164-5. See also chapt. 9 ("The Marxist Critique of Ideology") in Jon Elster's An Introduction to Karl Marx (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.168-85.

⁵³Brian R. Nelson, for example, uses the term this way in his Western Political Thought from Socrates to the Age of Ideology (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982), esp. Chapt. 14: "The Age of Ideology," pp. 325-33.

⁵⁴Daniel Bell, The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties (2nd rev.ed., New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 393-407.

Hendrik Kraemer aptly summed up the spirit of this position, declaring, "The rock of offense in the biblical message. . . is that it abhors every kind of ideology."⁵⁵ Donald Bloesch takes a similar stance. In a chapter of an ethics text entitled "The Ideological Temptation," he warns against the "spell of ideology" which subverts faith, demands "blind adherence to particular assumptions about man and society," and basically functions as a substitute salvation.⁵⁶

But the concept of ideology need not carry all these negative overtones. In the broadest sense, an ideology simply denotes a set of ideas about the social process. Roger L. Shinn schematizes these different levels of meaning by distinguishing between what he characterizes as Ideology A and Ideology B. The former category signifies the Marxian notion of rationalized self-interest. Ideology B, while invariably shaded by self-interest, is defined more broadly as the conception of society that guides one's actions in the world. In this latter sense, ideology is the permanent grid through which information is filtered and around which it is organized. One's ideological predilections may undergo revision in the light of new information or fresh insights derived from one's faith tradition, but ideology itself is an inevitable and ineradicable component of one's interaction with the world.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Kraemer, p. 11.

⁵⁶Donald G. Bloesch, Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987). The chapter on ideology comprises pp. 248-86; the quotations are from the critique of ideologies on pp. 248-50. It should be noted that Bloesch defines ideology as "an orientation toward life and the world that seeks to advance the interests of a particular class or group in society" (p. 250).

⁵⁷Roger Lincoln Shinn, Forced Options: Social Decisions for the 21st Century, 2nd ed. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985), pp. 230-3.

This view of ideology has affinities with the perspective developed by Juan Luis Segundo in his Faith and Ideologies.⁵⁸ Reversing the Barthian antithesis between faith and ideology, Segundo stresses their complementary roles. Ideologies, in his system, become the medium by which faith addresses concrete historical circumstances. Because every faith-encounter takes place in a changing and relative context, "Christians cannot evade the necessity of inserting something to fill the void between their faith and their options in history. In short, they cannot avoid the risk of ideologies."⁵⁹

This dissertation will use the term ideology in the broader, neutral sense. It will, in other words, refer to any pattern of assumptions, expressed or implicit, about how the social process operates. One uses these understandings both to interpret the economic and political realities that one encounters, as well as to render normative judgments about how things ought to be. Ideological formulations thus presuppose a basic value orientation that is often reflected in their appeal to abstract qualities such as freedom, equality, or law and order. In this sense, everyone consciously or unconsciously subscribes to certain tenets that might be characterized as ideological, although their degree of refinement and the consistency with which they are held may vary. As Shinn points out, the most prevalent forms of ideological expression are the slogans and platitudes that dominate popular political discourse.⁶⁰

⁵⁸Juan Luis Segundo, Faith and Ideologies, trans. by John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984).

⁵⁹idem, "Faith and Ideologies in Biblical Revelation," in The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics, ed. by Norman K. Gottwald (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), p. 484.

⁶⁰Shinn, p. 231.

Ideology intersects with biblical interpretation on a couple of levels. First of all, the technique of ideological criticism has highlighted the extent to which ideologies are embedded within the biblical text itself. The David-Zion motif in the Hebrew Bible, for example is frequently cited as a counterpart to the ancient near eastern ideology of kingship. Secondly, in the same way that ideologies filter data from other sources, they also furnish a framework for synthesizing biblical materials. Readers, in other words, have an inevitable predilection to construe the text's implications for societal issues in terms of a preconceived pattern of assumptions about how the social process operates.

Theology: In its strictist meaning, theology may be largely a byproduct of those Western monotheistic religious traditions that stress the importance of credal orthodoxy. But in a broader sense, theology is, like ideology, a universal human phenomenon. The form in which various theologies are expressed may range from random ruminations to elaborate bodies of dogma. But theological speculation is arguably taking place whenever persons reflect on the mystery of human existence or attempt to give a reasoned account of whatever functions for them as an object of ultimate concern. The basic components of theological discourse are the images and symbols that point beyond themselves and mediate some sense of the sacred. Formalized theology, then, is the discipline of synthesizing and arranging these symbols into a meaningful pattern.

Whenever theological reflection is guided by a sacred text, the role of this scripture has to be carefully defined. In the case of Christian theology, the nomenclature that is employed in this definitional process includes such concepts as revelation, biblical inspiration, canonicity, and authority. Depending on how these categories are developed, the Bible can be viewed in different ways.

In his landmark study of the Bible's use in Christian theology, David Kelsey argues that the factor which ultimately determines how the text is construed is the theologian's central theological motif, which draws upon the Bible's repository of images and symbols to imaginatively fashion a way of representing the mode of God's presence among the faithful. As Kelsey explains:

just how a theologian does finally construe and use scripture is decisively determined, not by the texts as texts, nor by the texts as scripture, but by the logically prior imaginative judgment. For it yields something like a "gestalt" of the richly complex but utterly singular mode in which God is present among the faithful as they use scripture in certain ways. And that "gestalt" determines what he takes theological proposals to be about, how that "subject matter" is related to scripture, and therewith how scripture is to be construed and used.⁶¹

This prior judgment about the way in which God is manifested to the community of faith, with its corollary suppositions about the nature of Scripture, has important implications for the text's application to ethics. Whether, for example, one views the Bible as a compendium of divinely revealed propositions, or a witness to God's mighty acts, or a series of narratives that shape Christian identity, would all entail different consequences for its ethical appropriation.

Ethics: Ethics, again, responds to a constitutive feature of the human person--the quest for the good. But despite the universal existence of some moral intuition, and even a fair degree of uniformity concerning basic behavioral norms, attempts to give a reasoned account of the moral life--the task of ethics--take many approaches. One classic distinction, arising out of philosophical ethics, differentiates between systems which define the good in terms of an inherent duty to perform certain acts (deontology), and

⁶¹Kelsey, p. 206.

others which define the good in terms of the action's calculable consequences (teleology). Edward LeRoy Long has devised a more elaborate typology for classifying systems of religious ethics, based on how the moral norm is devised and how it is implemented. According to this scheme, the moral norm may be the product of reasoned deliberation, a prescriptive code, or a relational encounter. In addition, the social context in which ethical activity takes place may be variously construed as a stable configuration of established orders (institutional motif), an arena of power conflicts (operational motif), or a sectarian community (intentional motif).⁶²

But however one catalogues the options, it is clear that there is a broad spectrum of opinion among ethicists over basic methodological issues. In the case of Christian ethicists, these differences translate into contrasting techniques of utilizing Scripture. Depending on one's overall ethical perspective, the Bible's morally relevant content may be alternatively understood as a timeless moral code, a vision of goals to be sought after, or theological images that evoke a response. In addition, analytical categories derived from ethical theory can provide a useful framework for assessing moral themes within the biblical text. As Thomas Ogletree demonstrated, traces of various types of moral reasoning are discernible, albeit in an inchoate form, in the biblical writings.

Social Location: One need not accept the reductionistic dictum that all theoretical formulations are merely expressions of class interest to acknowledge that ideology, theology, and ethics are rooted in social experiences. All of these conceptual frameworks are part of the social enterprise of constructing a world of meaning through

⁶²Edward LeRoy Long, A Survey of Christian Ethics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

the medium of a shared discourse. Moreover, as social constructs, they are inevitably affected by variables of cultural and religious heritage, economic class, race, and gender. These group identities often give rise to distinctive perceptions of the world, grounded in similar patterns of experience, common interests, or a shared history. They also serve as reference groups, reinforcing particular interpretations of reality.

Last, but by no means least in significance, they frequently determine one's status in the social hierarchy (or multiple hierarchies). Given the fact that ideational constructs can both legitimize positions of power or critique conditions of exclusion, one's place in the social order can have profound ramifications on how the system is perceived. As Robert McAfee Brown has observed, "What we see depends on where we are standing."⁶³ Obviously, the same social process would be viewed differently by its beneficiaries than by those who consider themselves to be its victims.

These general observations have specific implications for the way a written text is read. Particularly in the case of a religious scripture, with multivalent images, various levels of meaning, and different interpretive traditions, readers will gravitate toward themes that resonate with their life experiences. Consequently, the text will appear to confirm the view of reality that is rooted in their social location. At the same time, readings of the text that represent a dominant consensus may be called into question by others who seem marginalized by the mainstream community promulgating the interpretation. In addition, the social location of the text's community of origin or its destination audience is a critical interpretive consideration. The application of

⁶³Brown, p. 84.

sociological methods to biblical interpretation is demonstrating this point.⁶⁴

Scope of the Inquiry

In light of the diversity of economic models that have been justified using the Bible, this dissertation has an intentionally broad focus. This sort of comprehensive design carries with it the risk of superficiality, but offers the opportunity to test conclusions against a wide-ranging array of materials. Nevertheless, to keep this project within manageable proportions, some predetermined parameters must be set. Accordingly, the scope of this study has been defined by the following criteria.

First, the study will be limited to works that offer an ethical assessment of the economic system as a whole. Literature dealing with the ethical implications of matters such as personal finance, corporate social responsibility, and managerial practices is therefore excluded. Donald G. Jones once differentiated three levels on which business ethics operates: the macro-economics of a market economy, business and society, and managerial ethics.⁶⁵ In terms of this set of categories, this dissertation deals only with the first level.

The twentieth century has witnessed a vigorous debate between proponents of

⁶⁴Prominent example of the literature utilizing this technique would include Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979); and Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). An overview of the field can be found in Gottwald, ed. *The Bible and Liberation*.

⁶⁵Donald G. Jones, "The Promise of Business Ethics: An Intersection Between Religion and Business" in *Business, Religion, and Ethics: Inquiry and Encounter*, ed. by Donald G. Jones (Cambridge: Oelgeschlager, Gunn, and Hain, 1982), pp. 211-218.

competing patterns of economic organization--each of which is generally wedded to a whole constellation of cultural values, ideological symbols, and political institutions.⁶⁶ Religious appeals have been a vital component in this configuration, sometimes as a legitimizing force, other times as a tool of criticism. The literature that falls within the purview of this dissertation has ventured into the debate either by defending or critiquing one of these models.

Secondly, this study is limited to writings which directly reference the Bible as a moral authority. Options for using the Bible actually fall along a continuum with varying degrees of direct citation. There are some longstanding traditions of Christian ethical reflection in which the Bible's moral content has only incidental significance. For example, the succession of papal encyclicals beginning with Rerum novarum, that form the basis for Catholic economic ethics, rely heavily on natural law principles, with only sporadic use of Scripture. Similarly, among contemporary Protestant ethicists, J. Philip Wogaman's method of seeking theological entry points through which to engage economic realities makes use of Scripture only in an indirect fashion.⁶⁷

By way of contrast, the writings under consideration here are ones in which specific texts, or an explicit theme from the Bible, are introduced into the argument. In light of this limitation, it is important to underscore the fact that the writings considered in the main body of this work do not necessarily constitute the most cogent moral appeals

⁶⁶The exploration of these issues is encompassed within the field of comparative economic systems. A useful survey treatment is Frederic L. Pryor, A Guidebook to the Comparative Study of Economic Systems (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985).

⁶⁷This method is spelled out most clearly in his Economics and Ethics: A Christian Inquiry (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), esp. pp. 32-44.

on behalf of their respective points of view. Instead, representative texts were selected primarily on the basis of the extent to which they made direct use of biblical materials. While this criterion often favored writings with less scholarly merit, the corresponding advantage of dealing with references to identifiable units of Scripture is the fact that exegetical data can be marshalled to assess the validity of the inferences being made.

Thirdly, the literature surveyed in this dissertation will be limited to works that have appeared in the past three decades. Equally appropriate examples of the phenomena in question could undoubtedly be found in the writings of the Reformers, Puritans, Social Gospel figures, and others. But the primary focus of this study is on recent works.

Outline of the Contents

The format of this dissertation revolves around three heuristic categories into which the economic prescriptions of various Christian ethicists have been organized. Undoubtedly some of the figures surveyed here would be uncomfortable with the label assigned to them. Moreover, defending a comprehensive economic system is not always their avowed objective. Nevertheless, these categories reflect rather pronounced differences in the way economic issues are approached--differences that clearly outweigh whatever variations may exist within each group.

Chapter One will look at biblical arguments for free market capitalism put forward by conservative evangelical Protestants and figures in the New Religious Right. Under the rubric of the social market system, Chapter Two will consider the biblical rationale undergirding the policy prescriptions in the pastoral letter of the U. S. Catholic bishops, the statements of various mainline Protestant church bodies, and the writings of

a few progressive evangelicals. A third chapter will examine the biblical themes used in theologies of liberation to foster a revolutionary style socialism. Finally, a concluding chapter will summarize the findings and reflect upon their implications for the wider academic discussion over the use of the Bible in Christian ethics.

The categories used to encompass these economic proposals are intentionally broad, but they can be described more fully.⁶⁸ Free market capitalism will refer to the various contemporary economic perspectives that stand in direct continuity with the nineteenth century tradition of classical political economy. Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations is generally regarded as the fountainhead of this tradition. But the impulses that found expression in this school of economic thought are deeply rooted in Western political theory, especially as it was formulated by John Locke. The view of society as an artificial entity held together by the rational pursuit of individual self-interest and the designation of private property as the cornerstone of political liberty both set the stage for classical economics. In the contemporary context, notable examples of professional economists somehow working within the classical paradigm would include monetarists associated with the University of Chicago, followers of the neoclassical Austrian school, and advocates of the supply-side economic policies that achieved prominence during the 1980's.

⁶⁸This discussion draws upon several historical surveys of economic thought. Most notable among these is Barry Clark's Political Economy: A Comparative Approach (New York: Praeger, 1991). Clark traces the historical development of the classical, radical, conservative, and modern liberal economic perspectives, then applies these paradigms to a range of contemporary issues. The various essays in the collection What is Political Economy?, ed. by David Whyntes (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984) are also helpful; as is the older history of the discipline, Edmund Whittaker, Schools and Streams of Economic Thought (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1960).

Despite differences in nuance, these approaches all share a common economic orientation, shaped by a few key ideas. These guiding principles include a commitment to private ownership of capital assets, an aversion toward government intervention into the economic arena, and an unwavering confidence in the ability of a free market of voluntary exchanges to allocate resources with maximum efficiency and to achieve the optimum distribution pattern. Although its ideals have never been fully implemented in any functioning economy--even in its nineteenth century heyday, the abiding significance of the free market philosophy lies in the persuasive appeal of its simple logic and the powerful rhetorical sanction it provides for efforts to curb the welfare state.

The term 'social market system' will designate the various forms of a mixed economy that have emerged throughout the industrialized world during the past century. This arrangement combines private ownership of capital assets with the regulatory apparatus and income redistribution mechanisms of a bureaucratic welfare state. Proponents of this perspective endorse incremental change through democratic processes to expand opportunity and achieve a greater measure of economic equality.

Precedents for this kind of government intervention were established at the very dawn of industrial capitalism with measures such as Britain's Poor Laws and Factory Acts. But the trend clearly accelerated in the twentieth century with the U.S. New Deal program and the comprehensive welfare state policies of various post-war European governments.

Theoretical justifications for these developments can be found in many quarters. The neoliberal tradition of political theory, exemplified by the work of T. H. Green and his school, reinterpreted the principles of classical liberalism in a manner consistent with

a more activist government. In economic thought, the analysis of market failures and externalities, principally associated with the Cambridge School, also laid important groundwork. But the pivotal figure in economics was John Maynard Keynes, whose landmark text, The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money⁶⁹ laid the foundation for modern macroeconomic analysis.

Given Milton Friedman's acknowledgement that "we are all Keynesians now,"⁷⁰ the lingering debate revolves around degrees of government intervention. In general, the writings classified under this category in the dissertation call for expanded welfare measures, short of socializing the basic means of production.

Revolutionary socialism represents the most radical economic alternative. Revolutionary movements have been a perennial occurrence throughout the history of Western Europe, often infused with the apocalyptic fervor of millenarian expectations and fed by lingering class resentments.⁷¹ Karl Marx's legacy was to translate this perpetual impulse into a systematic, ostensibly scientific economic theory, framed in categories shaped by the tradition of classical political economy. While religious

⁶⁹rep. ed., New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964.

⁷⁰This, at least, is the popular version of the quotation. Friedman claims to have actually said, "In one sense, we are all Keynesians now; in another, nobody is any longer a Keynesian" (The Macmillan Book of Social Science Quotations: Who Said What, When, and Where, ed. by David L. Sills and Robert K. Merton [New York: Macmillan, 1991], p. 71).

⁷¹Two standard treatments of this phenomenon are Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages (rev. ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); and Rosemary Ruether, The Radical Kingdom: The Western Experience of Messianic Hope (New York: Paulist Press, 1970).

ethicists may disavow certain aspects of Marx's thought--such as his dialectical materialism--there are distinct continuities between standard elements of Marxism and some themes in religiously based movements of radical social criticism.

The distinguishing feature of this approach is its focus on the inequitable power dynamics inherent in any economic order that is predicated on private property rights. Consequently, the economic process is viewed, not as an impartial mechanism for allocating resources to their most efficient use, but as an arena of clashing interests. A corollary of this mode of class conflict analysis is a profound awareness of how various ideational constructs--in religion, politics, and general social mores--function as an ideological facade to mask the vested interests of economic elites.

In light of this analysis of the existing situation, the paramount goal of socialism is to achieve collective ownership of the means of production (exercised either through the state or some type of worker cooperatives). What distinguishes the more revolutionary strands of this tradition is a tendency to dismiss efforts aimed at reforming capitalism and to call instead for a radical restructuring of the economic order--by violent means if necessary.

Although the spectrum of views included here is a fairly representative cross section of economic thinking, this scheme is not intended to be an exhaustive typology of all available alternatives--comparable, for example, to J. Philip Wogaman's catalog of options in The Great Economic Debate.⁷² There are, in fact, a couple of conspicuous omissions. The small-scale, decentralized economic model popularized by E. F.

⁷²Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977.

Schumacher's Small is Beautiful does not have a sufficient body of supporting literature to warrant separate treatment.⁷³ Democratic socialism is also overlooked in this study. Partly, this is because there is little difference between the biblical rationale that would be offered for this position and the rationale for welfare capitalism.⁷⁴ In addition, the short-range policy recommendations that would be endorsed by most democratic socialists do not differ appreciably from what proponents of an expanded welfare state would advocate.⁷⁵

These three categories may not be either precise or exhaustive, but for

⁷³E. F. Schumacher, Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered (New York: Perennial Library, 1973). One of the few extended arguments for this kind of model on biblical grounds is Art Gish's "Decentralist Economics," in Wealth and Poverty: Four Christian Views of Economics, ed. by Robert Clouse (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1984), pp. 131-160.

⁷⁴It is significant, for example, that a study document adopted by the Presbyterian Church (USA) begins with a single biblical/theological perspective, but then presents "democratic capitalism" and "democratic socialism" as two possible contexts for working out the implications of this foundation ("Christian Faith and Economic Justice" [Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (USA), 1989]. Warren R. Copeland claims that "those who plumb the scriptural material find a fundamental commitment to community with a submerged individualism. When they apply this position to economic policy, they find themselves somewhere between left-wing capitalists and democratic socialists" (Economic Justice: The Social Ethics of U.S. Economic Policy [Nashville: Abingdon, 1988], p. 112). In a similar vein, J. Philip Wogaman concludes that the ideological presumptions corresponding to his theological entry points "might conceivably be developed either under democratic socialism or welfare-state (or 'social market') capitalism" (Christian Moral Judgment [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989], p. 167).

⁷⁵For instance, in a chapter entitled "Beyond the Welfare State," Michael Harrington argues that "socialists . . . must be in the forefront of every fight to defend, and extend, the welfare state even as they criticize its inability to solve fundamental problems and propose alternatives to it." According to Harrington, advocates of the welfare state will inevitably realize that their deepest aspirations can only be realized under socialism. See Michael Harrington, Socialism (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), p. 272.

comparative purposes they provide a useful framework. They first of all represent conflicting assessments of the market economy. The free enterprise school believes that an unregulated market naturally tends toward equilibrium. Welfare capitalists would view the market as a flawed instrument for achieving social objectives, which can be perfected through government initiated fine-tuning. Revolutionary socialism views it as inherently oppressive and headed for a cataclysmic collapse.

Consequently, the avowed objectives differ. For free enterprise capitalists, the goal would be to preserve, to the greatest extent possible, the institutions of a free market. For welfare capitalists, it would be reforming capitalism through incremental change. For revolutionary socialists it would be overturning capitalism through revolutionary struggle. To address the problem of poverty, the most lingering indictment of capitalism, free enterprise proponents would generally focus on voluntary philanthropy, welfare capitalists on government entitlements, and revolutionary socialists on the proletarian expropriation of the means of production.

The Possibility of a Biblical Economic Ethic

Before embarking on an extended treatment of the topic being explored in this dissertation, one issue that must be addressed at the outset is whether biblical economic ethics is even a viable concept. However else they may differ on matters of substance, the writers slated for consideration here would all agree that ethical criteria are somehow relevant in assessing economic alternatives and that the testimony of the Bible is germane in formulating these criteria. Yet neither of these premises is wholly incontrovertible.

In the history of Western social theory, economic analysis and ethical reflection

have had a rather precarious relationship. The dominant tradition of classical antiquity, perpetuated throughout the Middle Ages by Scholastic casuistry, dealt with economic matters in patently moral terms. Ethical norms such as the Just Price, Just Wage, and a prohibition on usury, along with a general aversion toward avarice, shaped the prevailing economic ethos. As society's integrating institution, the medieval church articulated these principles and served as the chief agency of enforcement. An equally important characteristic of this period was the almost complete lack of any systematic attempt to explain the mechanisms of an economy. In fact, the whole conceptual apparatus of economic analysis--even the term "economy" itself (with its present connotation)--is of recent vintage.

Generally speaking, it would therefore be fair to say that to whatever extent economic life was addressed by pre-modern thinkers, the focus was on what could be characterized as commercial morality. This situation, however, subsequently reversed itself. When economic theory finally emerged as a distinct discipline, it was shaped not only by the budding spirit of industrial enterprise, but also by the Enlightenment project and the secularizing tendencies it unleashed. As a result, economics came to be widely regarded as an objective quest to discover principles of economic behavior from a neutral, value-free perspective.

In light of this overall inclination, a perennial concern has been to define the proper scope of economic inquiry and to specify whether or not it encompasses ethical considerations. Although there is no universal consensus on this question, Lionel Robbins style of thoroughgoing positivism represents at least one dominant point of view. Speaking of the relationship between economics and ethics, Robbins states,

Unfortunately it does not seem logically possible to associate the two studies in any form but mere juxtaposition. Economics deals with ascertainable facts; ethics with valuations and obligations. The two fields of inquiry are not on the same plane of discourse. Between the generalizations of positive and normative studies there is a logical gulf which no ingenuity can disguise and no juxtaposition in space or time bridge over.⁷⁶

This unwillingness to entertain normative questions reflects a couple of operating assumptions widely shared in the economics profession. The first is an avowed commitment to the scientific method and empirical analysis. From its cultural milieu at the dawn of the Scientific Revolution, classical economic theory inherited a mechanistic view of social reality that regarded the economy as something akin to Newton's conception of the universe. Principles of economic behavior were thought to be embedded in the very structure of the world and the innate features of human behavior. Hence they are discovered, not invented. The goal of the discipline was therefore descriptive rather than prescriptive.

A passage from John Kenneth Galbraith's Economics in Perspective sums up the implications of this attempt to claim the mantle of scientific objectivity:

Things may be less than good, less than fair, even less than tolerable; that is not the business of the economist as an economist. Because of the claim of economics that it should be considered a science, it must separate itself from the justice or injustice, the pain and hardship, of the system. The economist's task is to stand apart, analyze, describe and where possible reduce to mathematical formulae, but not to pass moral judgment or be otherwise involved.⁷⁷

⁷⁶An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science (1932), p. 148, quoted by Joseph F. Flubacher, The Concept of Ethics in the History of Economics (New York: Vantage Press, 1950), p. 410.

⁷⁷John Kenneth Galbraith, Economics in Perspective: A Critical History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 124.

The continuing legacy of this approach is reflected in Milton Friedman's influential 1953 essay, "The Methodology of Positive Economics." Drawing upon a distinction earlier proposed by John Maynard Keynes, Friedman sharply differentiates positive economics from normative economics. The former, he says, is an "objective science," comparable to any of the physical sciences and "in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgment." Its preoccupation is with "what is" rather than "what ought to be."⁷⁸

In keeping with this distinction, Friedman's methodological proposal entails a purely empirical procedure for venturing hypotheses and testing their validity based upon their ability to yield accurate predictions. The normative dimension of the discipline is tacitly acknowledged but pointedly downplayed in this model. Largely this is because, in Friedman's estimation, there exists a widespread consensus in the Western world around a core set of values. To the extent that policy differences persist, he believes they reflect disagreements, not over the ends to be achieved, but over the means to be used--a disagreement which theoretically can be adjudicated by more precise methods of prediction.

Despite the rather formidable gulf that separates the tradition of classical economics represented by Friedman from the theories of Karl Marx, Marx's quest for a scientific socialism evinces the same empirical commitment. This attempt to place socialism on a scientific footing represented a marked departure from previous socialist

⁷⁸Milton Friedman, "The Methodology of Positive Economics," in his Essays in Positive Economics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 4.

critiques, which were generally rife with the rhetoric of moral indignation. By contrast, Marx ridiculed what he dubbed "sentimental, utopian, mutton-headed socialism."⁷⁹ His interpretation of economic history purported to demonstrate the certainty of the socialist revolution and the realization of the communist order from a scientific analysis of the existing dynamics at work in the historical process. Rather than making a prescriptive value judgment, therefore, communists were simply forecasting the inevitable. Marx also reversed any attempt to subordinate economic activity to ethical standards by making ethics contingent on the prevailing economic system. According to his dialectical materialism, ethics--along with all other abstract thoughtforms--is part of the ideological superstructure that reflects and reinforces the existing pattern of production. Ethics is merely a dependent variable of a social system driven by economic forces.

Its claims of scientific neutrality--a feature that transcends ideological divisions--is therefore one factor that undermines normative appeals in the field of economics. A second factor is the thoroughgoing methodological individualism that has often held sway in the discipline. This concept has been used to nullify any moral assessment of outcomes generated by the economy as a whole. Friedrich von Hayek made the classic argument for this premise in the second volume of his Law, Legislation and Liberty trilogy, subtitled "The Mirage of Social Justice." According to Hayek, since the allocation of resources in a market economy results from a myriad of random,

⁷⁹Karl Marx, "Society and Economy in History," in Tucker, p. 142. The entire selection from which this phrase is taken constitutes a critique by Marx of the socialism of Proudhon. See also the discussion of reactionary socialism, bourgeois socialism, and critical-utopian socialism in the "Manifesto of the Communist Party," pp. 491-499, as well as Friedrich Engels' "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," pp. 683-717.

spontaneous interactions among individual actors, the final outcome cannot be evaluated as though it represented a conscious design. Concepts such as justice or injustice, that may be legitimately applied to individual conduct, are vacuous when ascribed to society as a whole. "Our whole system of morals," Hayek insists,

is a system of rules of individual conduct, and in a Great Society no conduct guided by such rules, or by decisions of the individuals guided by such rules, could produce for the individuals results which would appear to us as just in the sense in which we regard designed rewards as just or unjust. . . .⁸⁰

Even the normative dimension of economic theory is permeated by individualistic tendencies. As the terms are generally used, normative economics is virtually interchangeable with welfare economics, a branch of the discipline which largely follows a utilitarian methodology. Individual preferences, expressed through the medium of market exchanges, are regarded as the basic unit of value. The optimal state of affairs is therefore one in which individual preferences are fulfilled to the maximum possible extent. The most widely used formula to measure social welfare is the so-called Pareto optimal (first proposed by the Italian economist Vincento Pareto), a condition that is said to prevail if no one's individual welfare can be increased without a corresponding individual loss. So the basic point to be made here is that the standard approach to normative economics considers aggregate social welfare to be simply a function of the sum total of individual welfares.⁸¹

⁸⁰Friedrich von Hayek, Law, Legislation and Liberty, vol. 2: The Mirage of Social Justice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 83-84.

⁸¹Whittaker, pp. 308-12; Ezra J. Mishan, Introduction to Normative Economics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), see esp. the overview in the preface and pp. 3-9. Critiques of the standard normative approach can be found in Donald A. Hay, Economics Today: A Christian Critique (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1989), pp. 124-43;

Critics of economic theory's scientific pretenses and value neutral orientation raise a number of objections. To begin with, it is not at all evident that the policy recommendations offered by theorists who profess to be following a value-free methodology are entirely free of values. The rhetoric of moral discourse can be discerned even the writings of the most ardent proponents of scientific positivism.⁸² If moral sentiments are a basic constituent feature of what it means to be human, they are inescapable in any human undertaking.

Marx's ambivalent stance toward morality is a prime case in point. On the one hand, he disparaged moral considerations in the interests of erecting a value free scientific socialism predicated on supposedly objective historical analysis. Yet his writings are replete with passages excoriating industrial capitalism in what are clearly value laden terms. Even Das Kapital, his most technical treatise, has strong overtones of moral indignation in many places.⁸³

Among libertarian theorists, the high premium that is placed on an individualistic notion of freedom--generally conceived of in negative terms as freedom from political coercion--represents a basic value orientation that exists independent of any technical

and John P. Tiemstra, ed. Reforming Economics: Calvinist Studies on Methods and Institutions (Lewistown, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990), pp. 21-2.

⁸²The most ambitious effort to demonstrate this point is Flubacher's The Concept of Ethics in the History of Economics. Flubacher recounts the entire history of economic theory, beginning in classical antiquity and continuing through the major schools of modern economic thought, illustrating at each stage the role of ethics.

⁸³Steven Lukes makes this point in his Marxism and Morality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 1-26. Marx's description of the conditions of English factory workers in "Capital, Volume One" (Tucker, pp. 367-73) is a relevant case in point.

economic analysis. As even the titles imply, this theme shapes the economic proposals propounded in works such as Hayek's Road to Serfdom⁸⁴ and The Constitution of Liberty⁸⁵ or Friedman's Capitalism and Freedom⁸⁶ and Free to Choose.⁸⁷

In his discussion of three leading economic thinkers--Milton Friedman, Lester Thurow, and Michael Harrington-- Warren Copeland convincingly demonstrates the way in which a core ethical principle--some guiding vision of the good--undergirds each of their ideological systems. For Friedman, the cardinal value is liberty, for Thurow, equality, and for Harrington, solidarity. In Copeland's view, these prior commitments even have quasi-religious overtones. According to this line of reasoning, each economist's view of the world is integrated around some "primordial valuation" that reflects a basic understanding of life's meaning and purpose. Assuming that the basic task of religion is to "provide a symbolic and valuative framework within which life makes sense and has meaning," these economic ideologies can be characterized as rival *faiths competing for adherents and becoming institutionalized in various supporting structures*.⁸⁸

But regardless of whether one would go so far as to identify this core ethical impulse as an ersatz religion, the key point to be made here is that ethical factors are

⁸⁴Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944.

⁸⁵Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960; Henry Regnery Gateway Edition, 1972.

⁸⁶Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

⁸⁷Milton and Rose Friedman, Free To Choose (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980; Avon Books, 1981).

⁸⁸Copeland, pp. 110-11.

indispensable. The danger in failing to recognize this fact is that a facade of objective analysis, fortified by impressive graphs and statistics, may be used to disguise what are essentially value judgements.

In addition to the apparent inevitability of value judgements in economic proposals, claims of scientific neutrality can also be critiqued on a more fundamental level. Underlying the entire effort to circumvent ethical issues by limiting the scope of economic inquiry to objectively verifiable hypotheses is an assumed dichotomy between facts and values that translates into a distinction between positive and normative economics.⁸⁹ But this assumption itself is open to question. It basically envisions an autonomous realm of uninterpreted data or brute facts about which all fair-minded observers are apt to agree.

One example can be cited to illustrate this point. Both Milton Friedman and Lester Thurow have referred to the dispute over minimum wage legislation in methodological essays. Friedman contends that there is widespread agreement on the desirable ends that the minimum wage seeks to achieve (e.g., a sufficient income for everyone), but that disagreements persist because of an inadequate body of data on the law's effects. Once this factual issue is resolved, presumably a consensus among economists will emerge.⁹⁰ Thurow, in one sense, takes the opposite approach. He lists a myriad of items about which ostensibly everyone agrees--ranging from the impact on

⁸⁹This point is made by Larry Dwyer, "'Value Freedom' and the Scope of Economic Inquiry: II. The Fact/Value Continuum and the Basis for Scientific and Humanistic Policy," American Journal of Economics and Sociology 42 (1983):353-8.

⁹⁰Friedman, "Methodology," pp. 5-6.

unemployment to the efficiency of enforcement techniques. The controversy continues, he believes, because of conflicting value commitments. Thus, he concludes, "The minimum wage dispute is not about economics, but a political dispute as to whether governments should or should not interfere in the labor market to alter market incomes. . . ." ⁹¹

What both assessments have in common--despite attributing the dispute to different factors--is a tendency to divorce the realm of positive economics from the exercise of normative judgments. But in reality, economic data are always interpreted through an evaluative framework. By failing to adequately recognize this phenomenon, both writers exaggerate the degree of consensus that exists. Friedman underestimates the extent to which basic assumptions about the legitimate role of government shape the debate. Thurow similarly overstates the amount of factual agreement that exists. During Congressional hearings on the most recent minimum wage increase, various economists supplied estimates for the number of jobs that would be lost ranging anywhere from 100,000 to 882,000--a fairly substantial difference.⁹² Reversing conventional wisdom, more recent studies have suggested that the unemployment effects of modest increases may be negligible.⁹³ Much of this statistical disagreement results from differing

⁹¹Lester Thurow, "Why Do Economists Disagree?" Dissent 29 (1982):177.

⁹²U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Labor and Human Resources, Minimum Wage Restoration Act of 1987, Hearings on S. 837. 100th Cong., 1st sess., 1987. The low figure comes from the testimony of F. Gerald Adams, pp. 184-218; the high figure from that of John R. Glennie, pp. 246-59 (both of which were presented on the same day).

⁹³Sylvia Nasar, "High New Jersey Minimum Wage Doesn't Seem to Deter Fast-Food Hiring, Study Finds," New York Times, 20 May 1993, p. B7; Tony Horwitz, "The Effect of Minimum Wage on Jobs is an Issue that Stirs Endless Debate," Wall Street Journal, 12

econometric models, reflecting different built-in assumptions.

What is true in the case of minimum wage laws is true of technical economic issues in general. All the ostensibly neutral pieces of factual data that are adduced in support of competing economic systems--data attempting to demonstrate, for instance, the deleterious effects of government regulations, or the extent to which developed countries exploit the Third World--are invariably selectively assembled, arbitrarily arranged, and interpreted in accordance with preconceived models. So although technical and normative dimensions of the field of economics may be distinguished for analytical purposes, they are too intertwined to be clearly demarcated.⁹⁴

But even if value judgments are inevitable in economic deliberations, it is still not a foregone conclusion that the Bible should be the primary source of those values--even for Christian ethicists. The Bible unquestionably deals with economic matters--one survey claimed that one in sixteen New Testament verses deals directly with issues of wealth and poverty.⁹⁵ Yet this fact alone does not necessarily mean that the Bible furnishes appropriate criteria for evaluating competing economic systems.

Various schools of Christian ethics have utilized diverse sources of moral

November 1993, p. A4.

⁹⁴It should be pointed out that this perspective concurs with a lot of recent work in the philosophy of science, particularly in the wake of Thomas S. Kuhn's influential study of scientific paradigms (The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed., enlarged [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970]). In effect, economists who attempted to cloak their writings with an aura of scientific neutrality were generally assuming an empirical model of scientific inquiry that is no longer widely held.

⁹⁵Danny Collum, "Economics: The Way America Does Business," Sojourners, November 1985, p. 15.

guidance, and assigned different degrees of weight to them. In Catholic moral theology, for example, biblical exegesis was traditionally eclipsed in favor of a style of reasoning rooted in principles of natural law. This tendency is clearly reflected in many of the Catholic Church's economic pronouncements. The use of categories such as the just wage and just price illustrates this tradition of analysis. Protestant sects influenced by pietistic impulses generally confine the relevance of the Bible to matters of personal conduct. Traces of this tendency are evident among some segments of American fundamentalism.

One of the major obstacles to applying biblical insights to contemporary economic problems is the extent to which the biblical outlook is so thoroughly shaped by pre-modern assumptions about society. The fact that the small-scale, subsistence, peasant economy of the Bible is radically different from a global, industrialized economy scarcely needs mentioning. Yet this observation has far-reaching consequences. Not only does the Bible pre-date the emergence of economics as a distinct discipline by a few millennia, it shares with the rest of the ancient world an orientation toward economic life that John Dominic Crossan has dubbed an 'anti-economic ideology.'⁹⁶ Whereas persons in the modern world view the economy as a dynamic process driven by the entrepreneurial spirit of innovation, governed by the quest for rational efficiency, and capable of limitless expansion; the ancient world conceived of the economic arena as a static zero-sum game, bound by tradition and hierarchical roles. Transporting an ethic developed in this environment into the contemporary world therefore not only involves bridging a

⁹⁶John Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pp. 50-3.

formidable technological gap, it also must take into account this monumental shift in the prevailing economic mindset.

Although the writers surveyed in this dissertation differ markedly in the degree to which they apply biblical insights directly to contemporary social realities, most would undoubtedly acknowledge at least some discontinuity between the situation in which the text was written and the modern world. Max Stackhouse sums the point up well when he writes

It is no more possible to derive a contemporary, normative economics directly from the pages of Scripture than it is to derive a biology from Genesis, a platform for democratic politics from Amos, a medical ethic from Luke, or a university curriculum from the letters of Paul.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, Stackhouse and others continue to maintain that the Bible has relevance for the formulation of a Christian economic ethic. For Stackhouse, the challenge is to identify a "cross-cultural, cross-contextual, trans-interest set of principles" to guide economic life.⁹⁸ Engaging in this process requires a "double hermeneutic" that analyzes both the ancient text as well as the contingent elements of the contemporary context.⁹⁹

In one of the most thoughtful methodological studies on the use of the Bible in economic ethics, Stephen Charles Mott outlined a procedure for identifying normative, transcultural principles in the Bible and locating contemporary analogies. The key, in

⁹⁷Max L. Stackhouse, "What Then Shall We Do? On Using Scripture in Economic Ethics," Interpretation 41 (1987):382.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 388.

⁹⁹Ibid., pp. 390-1.

Mott's view, is to determine, through anthropological research, the way in which a particular biblical institution functioned within the context of its overall cultural framework. Using the case of land, for example, Mott argues that it functions in an agrarian society as the primary form of productive power, analogous to a modern factory. The laws of ancient Israel should therefore be viewed as attempts to circumscribe elitist control over productive property.¹⁰⁰

What these and similar proposals have in common is the conviction that abiding principles can be elicited in some fashion from the Bible and used as a foundation for normative reflection on patterns of economic life. Establishing this point does not, of course, automatically lead to any one particular set of conclusions about how the Bible should be used, or which contemporary economic strategies most closely approximate its ideals. But defending the Bible's relevance to the economic problems of the present does lend support to the basic, underlying premise tacitly acknowledged by all the writers surveyed in this dissertation.

Conclusion

One of the goals of this introductory chapter has been to place the topic at hand within the context of a wider frame of reference. The issue of how an ancient document can provide moral guidance to persons in the contemporary world presents itself whenever a religious community is shaped, to some extent, through its interaction with an authoritative scripture. Among Christian ethicists, this problem has prompted a wide-

¹⁰⁰Stephen Charles Mott, "How Should Christian Economists Use the Bible? A Study in Hermeneutics," Bulletin: Association of Christian Economists, issue 13 (Spring 1989):11-13.

ranging discussion seeking to articulate the relationship between the Bible and the moral life. Included within the parameters of this discussion have been biblical surveys, typologies, methodological proposals, and case studies. Although each of these approaches will contribute to the present work, this dissertation primarily seeks to extend the case study model by examining conflicting biblical perspectives on the legitimacy of a market economy. The aim of this study will be to elucidate the factors that account for different readings of the biblical text.

Whatever differences may exist among its various practitioners, the entire field of economic ethics is predicated on the premise that ethical norms are somehow relevant in the realm of economic inquiry. Despite the widespread reluctance of professional economists to acknowledge the role of ethical considerations, this premise was shown to be reasonable in view of the inevitability of value judgments.

There is, in fact, a common thread linking this argument with the whole approach to biblical interpretation being developed in this dissertation. The underlying theme in both instances is that whenever any creative synthesis of some body of information is proposed--whether it be texts of scripture or economic data--the role of the interpreter is crucial. There are, in other words, no brute facts or neutral, disinterested observers. The observer is always a participant in the phenomenon being observed and analyzed. This interpretive process is therefore inevitably influenced by the interpreter's values and prior commitments.

CHAPTER I

FREE MARKET CAPITALISM

"The Bible calls for a free market in which the state does not intervene."
--David Chilton¹

The affinity between the ideological underpinnings of capitalism and the ethos of various strands of Protestantism has been the subject of innumerable inquiries. Max Weber made the classic case for the existence of such a connection in his landmark sociology of religion study, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Essentially, Weber argued that the ascetic form of Protestantism, exemplified by Calvinism, facilitated the rise of capitalism in the West by engendering a sense of work as a sacred calling and by sanctioning the disciplined pursuit of worldly gain. The cultural values and character traits instilled by this religious ethic furnished an indispensable precondition for the development of an economic system predicated on rationalized efficiency.²

Irrespective of whether Weber's thesis has merit as an explanation for its

¹David Chilton, Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1981), p. 8.

²Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. by Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribners, 1958).

emergence, capitalism historically has had no shortage of defenders among the Protestant faithful. At the peak of the Gilded Age in the mid-nineteenth century, Protestants in the United States, virtually with one accord, pronounced the Church's benediction over the economic status quo. A free enterprise system seemed to naturally complement traditional Protestant virtues of thrift, industry, and self-reliance. Popular discourses like Andrew Carnegie's Gospel of Wealth and Russell Conwell's Acres of Diamonds, along with the celebrations of success in the oratory of such notable pulpiteers as Phillips Brooks and Henry Ward Beecher, eloquently captured the spirit of the age. Even religious reformers dedicated to ameliorating some of capitalism's deleterious side-effects tended not to attribute these vices to any inherent flaws in the system itself.³

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, however, this consensus began to unravel, partly as a result of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. Although this conflict ostensibly revolved around theological issues, there was also a political and economic dimension. Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, the ecumenical wing of Protestantism, at least at the leadership level, increasingly embraced the vision of the Social Gospel movement. In contrast, Fundamentalist Protestants largely distanced themselves from the social reform impulses that had characterized their earlier revivalistic forbearers and assumed instead a posture that combined general indifference toward

³This historical situation is summarized in a section on "The Churches and the Economic Order" in Winthrop S. Hudson, Religion in America, 3rd ed. (New York: Scribners, 1981), pp. 304-9; and by Craig M. Gay, With Liberty and Justice for Whom?: The Recent Evangelical Debate over Capitalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 9-10.

social conditions with an instinctive predilection for politically conservative causes.⁴

There were many factors contributing to this reversal--among them a reactionary response to the Social Gospel movement, a pessimistic eschatology, and the intellectual leadership of Old School Presbyterians. But whatever its origins, the legacy of this development was to continue throughout the twentieth century--beginning with The Fundamentals (published between 1910 and 1915) and culminating in the New Religious Right. Social issues were, for the most part, conspicuously absent from view in The Fundamentals--the series of 90 tractates on various themes from whence the term "fundamentalist" was derived. The sole exception was an essay on Socialism, which basically argues that since the mission of the church is one of individual regeneration, it should adopt a neutral stance toward economic systems.⁵

Given this background, fundamentalist reactions to the New Deal program followed a predictable course. On the revival circuit, evangelist Billy Sunday condemned the trio of ills afflicting the country: evolution, modernism, and communism--the last of

⁴On this period, see Douglas W. Frank, Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). In the late twentieth century, the theme of the "great reversal" became a staple element in the writings of radical evangelicals. (Two noteworthy examples of this genre are Donald W. Dayton, Discovering an Evangelical Heritage [new ed., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988] and David Moberg, The Great Reversal: Evangelism versus Social Concern [Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972].)

⁵R. A. Torrey, A. C. Dixon, et. al., eds., The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth (rep. ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970). The article "The Church and Socialism," by Charles Erdman is found in vol. 4, pp. 97-108. Despite its professed neutrality as to the merits of socialism, it is significant that this essay is included in a volume of essays intended to refute alternative belief systems, including Darwinism, Mormonism, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. The only other essay with an economic theme is A. T. Pierson's "Our Lord's Teaching About Money" (vol. 4, pp. 255-63), which deals exclusively with supporting the Church's work financially.

which he associated with the Roosevelt administration.⁶ In a more scholarly vein, J. Gresham Machen, foremost intellectual apologist for fundamentalism displayed similar misgivings. One perennial sub-text in his writings is the virtue of "Anglo-Saxon individualism" and the threat posed to it by socialism. His last work, based on a series of radio addresses delivered in 1935, warned of "the spectre of the hopeless treadmill of a collectivistic state" looming on the horizon in the United States.⁷

In the era following the second world war, two strands emerged from this fundamentalist coalition. On the one side, militant, separatistic fundamentalists such as Carl McIntire and Billy James Hargis pursued a social agenda animated in large measure by a virulent anti-communism.⁸ Although support for free enterprise capitalism is not an inevitable byproduct of opposition to communism, the two frequently became synonymous. As one critic has summed up the argument:

Collectivism, whether manifested in the form of government involvement in social welfare or in a more highly developed socialist order, leads--we are assured--inexorably to communism. Schemes such as urban renewal, public housing, Medicare, and Social Security are part of a gigantic conspiracy to undermine the free institutions of the United States. Because the collectivist movement is materialistic and basically Marxian, it aims at the establishment of a full-blown communist order; hence

⁶James Davison Hunter, American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p. 40.

⁷J. Gresham Machen, The Christian View of Man (rep. ed., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), p. 13.

⁸A couple of primary texts reflecting the mindset of this strand of fundamentalism are Carl McIntire, Author of Liberty (Collingwood, NJ: Christian Beacon Press, 1946), esp. pp. 119-34; See also Gary Clabaugh, Thunder on the Right (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1974) and Erling Jorstad, The Politics of Doomsday (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970).

Christians should resist all 'socialist tendencies'.⁹

On the other side of the fundamentalist divide, a new generation of self-styled "evangelicals" or "neo-evangelicals" began to move in a more progressive, tolerant, and socially responsible direction in the post-war era. Yet an examination of the record reveals that while their rhetoric may have been somewhat less strident, their socio-economic conservatism was no less pronounced than that of their more militant compatriots.

Billy Graham, whose evangelistic campaigns helped galvanize the neo-evangelical movement, is a prime case in point. While remaining nominally apolitical, Graham frequently targeted communism, particularly in his early preaching, and displayed a marked aversion toward labor organizations and European style socialism in off-the-cuff remarks.¹⁰ Next to Graham, the other key figure in the neo-evangelical renaissance was Carl F. H. Henry, widely regarded as the movement's preeminent theologian. One of Henry's most important legacies was reinvigorating a sense of social responsibility within the evangelical community. But his clarion calls for social engagement were not to be confused with the aims and agenda of the Social Gospel movement. Henry sought to chart a new course, based on the conviction that individual regeneration, rather than political reforms, was the key to social transformation. In

⁹Richard V. Pierard, The Unequal Yoke: Evangelical Christianity and Political Conservatism (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), pp. 87-88.

¹⁰George M. Marsden, Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 155. On Graham's subsequent evolution, see Robert Booth Fowler, A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), chapt. 3: "The Perspective of Billy Graham."

economic affairs, he consistently championed the free enterprise system--albeit with the important qualification that the system needed to be infused with a Christian spirit.¹¹ One of the key themes in his principal work on social ethics was the way the Christian doctrine of vocation could rescue capitalism from the onslaught of communism.¹² Interspersed throughout the text were warnings about the tendency of labor unions to promote "featherbedding"¹³ and of welfare state programs to undermine personal initiative,¹⁴ both of which contravene Protestantism's work ethic.

Another important barometer of mainstream neo-evangelical opinion was the editorial stance of Christianity Today, the movement's flagship publication founded by Graham and edited by Henry. Based on a comprehensive survey of the magazine's first twenty years, Dennis P. Hollinger concluded: "The marriage of Evangelicalism to laissez-faire capitalism is evidenced by the fact that in Christianity Today from 1956 to 1976 there were at least sixteen articles and editorials explicitly supporting classical capitalism and none supporting welfare capitalism or any form of socialism."¹⁵

¹¹The primary source for Henry's social ethic is his Aspects of Christian Social Ethics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964; rep. ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980). See also Augustus Cerillo, Jr. and Murray W. Dempster, "Carl F. H. Henry's Early Apologetic for an Evangelical Social Ethic, 1942-1956," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 34 (1991):365-79; Fowler, chapt. 5: "Carl F. H. Henry: Pioneering Moderate"; Gay, pp. 118-21.

¹²Henry, pp. 31-71.

¹³Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 161.

¹⁵Dennis P. Hollinger, "American Individualism and Evangelical Social Ethics: A Study of Christianity Today, 1956-1976 (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1981), p. 196. On Christianity Today, see also Gay, pp. 121-5; and Fowler, chapt. 2: "Christianity

One formidable, behind-the-scenes influence on evangelical social attitudes throughout the 1950's and 1960's was the philanthropic activities of oil executive J. Howard Pew. Pew exercised leverage in evangelical circles and gained support for his ultraconservative views through his patronage of such institutional establishments as Christianity Today and Fuller Theological Seminary.¹⁶ A principal beneficiary of his largess was the Christian Freedom Foundation and its fortnightly newspaper Christian Economics. Sent free of charge to 200,000 members of the clergy, this paper proclaimed on its masthead: "We stand for the free market--the economic system with the least amount of government and the greatest amount of Christianity."¹⁷ It regularly condemned everything it regarded as threats to freedom, including labor unions, Social Security, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the United Nations, and the Peace Corps.

In light of this longstanding alliance between free market capitalism and American evangelical Protestantism, it should be clear that the more recent literature surveyed in this chapter is by no means unprecedented. It stands in direct continuity with a style of economic reasoning reaching back at least into the nineteenth century. Economic individualism has historically gone hand-in-hand with a religion of personal conversion.

Today and the Evangelical Mainstream," esp. the section on "Capitalism, Freedom, and Order," pp. 26-30.

¹⁶Marsden, pp. 155-7, 259-60; Dictionary of Christianity in America, ed. by Daniel G. Reid, et. al., s.v. "Pew, John Howard," by R. L. Petersen. One indication of the extent of Pew's influence was the role he played in instigating Henry's termination as editor of Christianity Today.

¹⁷The superscription actually changed periodically. The version quoted here appeared throughout the period of 1959-1960.

Among contemporary evangelicals, support for the free market has come from several quarters.¹⁸ First of all, some mainstream evangelical scholars such as Harold Lindsell, John Jefferson Davis, Clark Pinnock, and Ronald Nash have weighed in on the side of capitalism in recent years. These are basically establishment figures, associated with longstanding institutional fixtures on the evangelical landscape, and recognized on the basis of other writings as influential spokespersons for the evangelical perspective.¹⁹ Along with these theologians, there is also a coterie of evangelical economists, who contribute to the Christian defense of the free market system. These include Hans Sennholz, of Grove City College; James Gwartney, of Florida State University; P. J. Hill,

¹⁸Craig M. Gay's With Liberty and Justice for Whom?: The Recent Evangelical Debate over Capitalism is the most thorough and comprehensive treatment of contemporary evangelical economic thought. Gay surveys conflicting assessments of the market economy emanating from what he calls the evangelical left, right, and center; offers his own sociological interpretation of the debate; and concludes with a proposed framework for constructing an evangelical economic ethic. Other useful sources include Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Heirs to the Protestant Ethic?: The Economics of American Fundamentalism," in Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economics, and Militance, the Fundamentalism Project, vol 3, ed. by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 342-66; Michael Lienesch, Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), esp chapt. 3: "Economy" (pp. 94-138); and Thomas E. Van Dahm, "The Christian Far Right and the Economic Role of the State," Christian Scholar's Review 12 (1982):17-36. For a bibliographic guide to primary sources, see John P. Tiemstra, "Christianity and Economics: A Review of the Recent Literature," Christian Scholar's Review 22 (1993):227-47.

¹⁹Harold Lindsell was a founding member of the faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary and second editor (succeeding Carl F. H. Henry) of Christianity Today. John Jefferson Davis is Professor of Theology at Gordon-Conwell Divinity School (an institution founded, in part, by Russell Conwell). Clark Pinnock is has taught at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Regents College, and McMaster Divinity School. Ronald Nash is presently on the faculty of Reformed Seminary, after teaching for several years at Western Kentucky State University.

of Wheaton College; and Brian Griffiths, onetime dean of the City University Business School in London and former economic advisor to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Economic concerns were also encompassed within the New Religious Right's crusade for national moral renewal. Echoing a standard theme in fundamentalist political causes, this latest campaign espoused a militant anti-communism that easily translated into an ardently pro-military stance and strong support for free enterprise.²⁰ Even with the Religious Right's retrenchment from the national political scene, its economic views continue to be expressed through programs such as the Contemporary Economics and Business Association at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University.²¹

A final source from which a particularly spirited defence of capitalism has been emanating in recent years is the movement known alternately as Theonomy or Christian Reconstructionism.²² Inspired by a doctrinaire version of Calvinism, this movement's

²⁰These themes are linked, for example, in Jerry Falwell's Listen, America! (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 1-13. Falwell provides a succinct statement of his economic philosophy on p. 13: "The free-enterprise system is clearly outlined in the Book of Proverbs in the Bible. Jesus Christ made it clear that the work ethic was a part of His plan for man. Ownership of property is biblical. Competition in business is biblical. Ambitious and successful business management is clearly outlined as a part of God's plan for His people." Throughout the book, most of Falwell's economic analysis is dependent on Milton Friedman's Capitalism and Freedom and Free to Choose. See also Edgar Norton, "Is Capitalism Christian?" Liberty Report, October 1987, p. 36. (This newspaper was the official publication of the Moral Majority Foundation).

²¹The ongoing work of this organization is documented in its journal, Christian Perspectives: A Journal of Free Enterprise.

²²Although the terms Christian Reconstructionism and Theonomy are used interchangeably, the former seems to have specific reference to the movement's overall social agenda, the latter to its underlying theory of ethics (spelled out in Greg L. Bahnsen's Theonomy in Christian Ethics, expanded ed. [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984]). Another less common designation is Dominion Theology, referring to the movement's triumphalistic version of postmillennial eschatology. There

avowed objective is to reconstruct society on the basis of a strict, literal reading of Old Testament law codes. Among evangelical social activists, adherents to this philosophy represent a small fringe element, but their voluminous literary output, aggressive posture, and comprehensive worldview gives them a measure of influence vastly disproportionate to their numerical strength.

The principal outpost for disseminating Reconstructionist economic thought is the Institute for Christian Economics in Tyler, Texas. The director of this center, Gary North, holds a Ph.D. in economics from the University of California at Riverside, and has authored over 30 books, many of which have a clear economic focus. Other figures connected with this movement include David Chilton, the author of a biting satirical

is a virtually boundless supply of primary source materials reflecting this perspective. A good summary statement may be found in Bahnsen's essay on "The Theonomic Position" in God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government, ed. by Gary Scott Smith (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989), pp. 21-53 (cf. also the essays by the respondents to this position, and the responses to alternative viewpoints by theologians Carl Bogue, Gary DeMar, and Bahnsen). The most thorough overview of the Reconstructionist movement is Bruce Barron's Heaven On Earth?: The Social and Political Agendas of Dominion Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). Under the broad rubric of Dominion Theology, Barron discusses what he regards as a common impulse guiding theologians in the Reformed tradition, certain charismatic groups, and some conservative Christian constitutional scholars. For other critical treatments of the Reconstructionist movement, see William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, eds., Theonomy: A Reformed Critique (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); James W. Skillen, The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), chapt. 8: "Theonomic Reconstructionists," pp. 163-79; Rodney Clapp, "Democracy as Heresy," Christianity Today, 20 February 1987, pp. 17-23; Richard John Neuhaus, "Why Wait for the Kingdom?: The Theonomist Temptation," First Things, no. 3 (May 1990):13-21; David A. Rausch and Douglas E. Chismar, "The New Puritans and Their Theonomic Paradise," Christian Century, 3/10 August 1983, pp. 712-5 (note also the partial retraction in Douglas Chismar, "A Correction," Christian Century, 9 November 1983, p. 1007); and Anson Shupe, "The Reconstructionist Movement on the New Christian Right," Christian Century, 4 October 1989, pp. 880-2.

parody of Ronald J. Sider's influential Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger,²³ and E. Calvin Beisner, chairman of the Economics Committee of the Coalition on Revival.

The Biblical Rationale for Free Market Capitalism

Although the ethicists included in this chapter all defend the free market system using the Bible, they are by no means a monolithic lot. To begin with, they would disagree somewhat over what constitutes a free market and how the government's proper role should be defined. They also differ over the extent to which the Bible directly sanctions capitalism. One of the strongest assertions is made by Gary North, who maintains that: "The Bible sets forth social requirements that can only produce a capitalist economy. It is not simply that Christian ethics agree with capitalism's ethics; rather it is that Biblical Christianity can lead only to a society which is necessarily capitalistic."²⁴ David Chilton concurs in this thoroughgoing identification of Christianity with capitalism, arguing that "the Bible calls for a free market where the government doesn't interfere."²⁵ A glossary appended to his book defines "capitalism" as "the Marxist term for Christian Society."²⁶ John Jefferson Davis makes the slightly more modest claim that

²³David Chilton, Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald J. Sider, revised and expanded edition (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985).

²⁴Gary North, Inherit the Earth: Biblical Principles for Economics, Biblical Blueprints series (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 134.

²⁵Ibid., p. 8.

²⁶Ibid., p. 378 (emphasis in original). Conversely, a cross-reference following the entry for "Socialism" directs the reader to "see Sin," p. 396.

"biblical principles favor a free market."²⁷

Brian Griffiths stakes out an even more moderate position in comparison with these other figures. In a summary statement of his thesis he writes: "Our conclusion is not that capitalism is Christian. Neither is it that the market economy is the only economic system compatible with Christianity. It is simply that wealth creation within a market economy bounded by a concern for justice is compatible with Christian faith."²⁸

Corresponding to these somewhat different ways of defining the basic proposition being defended, the writings grouped together in this chapter also vary in tone (ranging from the relatively irenic to the harshly polemical), organizational structure, and areas of emphasis. Despite this diversity, however, a few basic ideas emerge. This section, therefore, is designed to focus on the recurrent themes that form the foundation of the biblical case for capitalism.

Free Market Capitalism Protects Biblically-Sanctioned Property Rights

The Argument

The centerpiece of the free market argument is the claim that the Bible regards private property as inviolable. From this premise, the conclusion is reached that in an industrial society, capital assets should be privately controlled. The scriptural case for private property draws upon a variety of texts throughout the biblical corpus. A typical

²⁷John Jefferson Davis, Your Wealth in God's World: Does the Bible Support the Free Market? (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1984), p. 73 (emphasis added).

²⁸Brian Griffiths, The Creation of Wealth: A Christian's Case for Capitalism (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 117.

starting point is the prohibition in the Decalogue against stealing (the eighth commandment, according to the usual Protestant enumeration). Since it would be meaningless to characterize an act of appropriation as theft unless the object in question is regarded as another person's property, a recognition of private property is taken to be implicit in the commandment. Harold Lindsell therefore concludes, "'Thou shalt not steal' validated and enforced the right to private property" and made this right "imprescriptible and inalienable."²⁹

Interpreted in this manner, this commandment has far-reaching implications, especially when it is construed on an institutional level. The prohibition against stealing, free market proponents are wont to point out, applies to the state as well as to individuals. The basic principle followed is that any confiscation of private property, aside from taxes levied to finance a very minimal set of permissible government functions (discussed below), constitutes theft.³⁰ This applies even if the program enjoys widespread popular support and is implemented through the democratic process, since voting to tax someone else is merely "theft by the ballot box."³¹

The list of government activities that fall under this indictment is nearly endless.

²⁹Harold Lindsell, Free Enterprise: A Judeo-Christian Defense (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1982), p. 54; On this same point, see also E. Calvin Beisner, Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), p. 156; John Eidsmoe, God and Caesar: Christian Faith and Political Action (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), p. 94; Griffiths, p. 79.

³⁰Chilton, p. 9; Beisner, p. 156; Davis, p. 41.

³¹Gary North, Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. 221; Inherit, p. 14.

Land reform programs and the nationalization of industries are obvious cases in point.³²

E. Calvin Beisner claims that "the Eighth Commandment, against theft, prohibits state sponsored, coercive programs to transfer income to the poor."³³ Redistributive mechanisms such as the graduated income tax and Social Security are consequently condemned on this basis.³⁴ Tariffs, subsidies, and commodity agreements are also regarded as theft because they increase the cost of products to consumers.³⁵ Moreover, anyone who benefits from such programs becomes a partner in the government's legalized thievery. For this reason, Beisner recommends that Christians refuse to accept AFDC payments, state or federal student grants, farm subsidies, or Social Security income (beyond what they have paid into the system). He even suggests that attending public schools, using a public library, or having one's trash collected by a municipal sanitation department could all entail complicity in theft.³⁶

Outside of the Decalogue, other pieces of Old Testament legislation are similarly regarded as endorsements of private property. The ancient Israelite system of land tenure is the primary example. Writes Brian Griffiths:

If there was ever a situation in which one might imagine some form of common ownership--comparable to Nyerere's Ujaama policy in Tanzania--it would have been when the Jews entered the Promised Land. Yet each family received a parcel of land and their rights to it were absolute. This

³²Chilton, p. 143; Davis, p. 41.

³³Beisner, p. 252.

³⁴North, Tools, pp. 47, 77-8.

³⁵Beisner, p. 181; Chilton, pp. 101, 104; North, Tools, p. 155.

³⁶Beisner, pp. 159, 255.

meant that in terms of the Mosaic law they had total and unconditional use of their property.³⁷

Harold Lindsell also attaches great significance to the fact that families in ancient Israel supposedly owned their land and had sole discretion over its use. He concludes, "Wherever there is private land ownership, free enterprise, or capitalism, is at work."³⁸

One indication of the ancient Hebrews' concern for protecting landed property rights was the seriousness with which the crime of moving established boundary stones was taken (Deut. 19:14, 27:17; Job 24:2-4; Prov. 23:10-11; Hos. 5:10).³⁹ Other provisions of the law designed to safeguard property include the requirement of multiple restitution imposed on thieves (Exod. 22:1ff), the permission to use lethal force to protect one's property (Exod. 22:2,3), and the duty to return a straying animal to its owner (Exod. 23:4).⁴⁰ Concerning the last requirement, North writes:

When someone who discovers another person's property is required by God to return it to its owner, there can be no doubt concerning the Bible's commitment to the private ownership of the means of production. Biblical law undergirds a capitalist economic order. Socialism is anti-biblical.⁴¹

A couple of New Testament texts are also marshalled in support of property rights. One standard passage is Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-15). The central figure in the parable is a landowner who pays all of the day laborers in

³⁷Griffiths, p. 56.

³⁸Lindsell, p. 68.

³⁹Chilton, p. 143.

⁴⁰Beisner, p. 66, cites all these examples.

⁴¹North, Tools, p. 776.

his vineyard an equivalent sum of money, even though they were hired at different intervals throughout the day. When the laborers who had worked the longest complain about this ostensibly unfair arrangement, the landowner replies, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" (vs. 15)--a rhetorical question that functions almost as a slogan for proponents of unbridled property rights.⁴²

In an ironic reversal, free market supporters also appeal to a passage that initially appears to undermine their position--the description of how members of the early church in Jerusalem pooled their possessions (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32). The crucial feature in this account, from the capitalist perspective, is the fact that this sharing arrangement was optional and voluntary. When one of the early believers secretly withheld some of the proceeds from the sale of his property, the Apostle Peter rebuked him for lying, but conceded that he had the prerogative to use his property as he saw fit (Acts 5:4). Hence, Lindsell concludes, "No one can find support for socialism in this section of the New Testament. The incident does the opposite. It places the imprimatur of the apostles on free enterprise."⁴³

Analysis

The extent to which various ideological assumptions and historically conditioned factors color this reading of the biblical text becomes apparent if the inferences that supporters of free market capitalism draw from the text are compared with the data about

⁴²Beisner, pp. 155, 165, et passim. According to Beisner, this verse establishes the principle that "people are free to use their property as they wish so long as they do not harm others" (p. 165). See also North, Inherit, p. 13.

⁴³Lindsell, p. 64. cf. also North, Inherit, p. 14; Beisner, pp. 68-9, et. passim; Eidsmoe, p. 96.

property in the Bible that can be established on the basis of generally accepted canons of biblical criticism. Clearly some concept of ownership is logically implied by passages such as the commandment against stealing. It should come as no surprise that the ancient Hebrews had such a notion. Anthropologists have observed that personal belongings of some sort exist in every human culture ever documented. The phenomenon of property evidently springs from a basic human instinct.⁴⁴

But while property itself is a universal institution, the rules which govern its acquisition and use, as well as the categories of items which can be classified as personal property, vary widely. In some tribal societies, objects such as tools, articles of clothing, and other personal effects are considered to be private property, whereas subsistence goods such as land, captured game, and agricultural produce are pooled and distributed evenly.⁴⁵ Throughout history, other human beings (slaves or dependent family members) have often been relegated to the status of chattel--a practice which is reflected in many of the Bible's property laws. Certain property rights in modern societies--particularly over intangibles such as patents and copyrights--are arbitrarily defined by social and legal convention. The current debate, for example, over whether patents should be granted for genetically-engineered forms of life is probing the boundaries of legitimate proprietary

⁴⁴Melvin J. Herskovits, Economic Anthropology: The Economic Life of Primitive Peoples (New York: W. W. Norton, 1952) p. 326-7.

⁴⁵This practice is documented with copious examples by Daryll Forde and Mary Douglas, "Primitive Economics," in Tribal and Peasant Economies, ed. by George Dalton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), pp. 17-21; Richard Thurnwald, Economics in Primitive Communities (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 186-94; Manning Nash, Primitive and Peasant Economic Systems (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1966), pp. 47-53.

claims. As all these examples demonstrate, a recognition of property rights is compatible with a wide variety of property-holding arrangements.

A prohibition against stealing simply protects whatever pattern of property ownership is in place within a given cultural context, but it does not presuppose any particular system. To someone living in an Israeli kibbutz or on a Soviet-style collective farm, it would forbid pilfering the communal assets of the operation. Robert Gnuse has, in fact, argued that given its original setting in a code regulating life among nomadic tribes, the eighth commandment was designed to prohibit private individuals from appropriating for personal use resources that were shared collectively. In an interesting reversal of the free market argument, he contends on this basis that, rather than safeguarding bastions of economic privilege, the commandment's basic import is to prevent accumulations of wealth that constitute a theft from society as a whole.⁴⁶

The crux of the case for capitalism, therefore, does not rest with a defense of property in the abstract, or with a proscription against stealing. Even the Communist Manifesto disavows any attempt to eliminate property that is truly personal (as opposed to capital, which, it argues, is a social creation).⁴⁷ In fact, Marx's condemnation of the

⁴⁶Robert Gnuse, You Shall Not Steal: Community and Property in the Biblical Tradition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985). The basic thesis is summed up in the preface (pp. vii-ix) and in chapt. 1, pp. 3-9. The same interpretation is given by Walter Harrelson, The Ten Commandments and Human Rights (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 135-42. Alone among free market supporters, Eidsmoe concedes this view as a theoretical possibility, but immediately discounts it, based on the claim that "state property or communal property did not exist in Israel at that time" (p. 94).

⁴⁷"Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Tucker, pp. 484-486. See also James O. Grunebaum, Private Ownership (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 128-39; Andrew Reeve, Property, Issues in Political Theory series (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1986), p. 2.

process by which bourgeois capitalists expropriate the surplus value of the workers' labor assumes that theft is wrong. (It also, incidentally, presupposes a Lockean view of property entitlement based on one's contribution of labor.)

Two things are really at stake for free market capitalists: private control over the means of production and virtually unlimited discretion over the use of property (i.e., "all innocent uses," in the technical parlance of property theorists). In the biblical argument, the paradigm for private ownership of capital is the ownership of land in ancient Israel. On the surface, this analogy between land and capital has some merit, insofar as land is the primary productive resource in an agricultural society. The key difference is that in a small-scale, subsistence, peasant economy like that of ancient Israel, agriculture primarily exists in order to meet the immediate needs of the producers, not to gain commodities for commercial trade.⁴⁸ But the major problem with this argument is that it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from the available evidence about the exact nature of land tenure in ancient Israel.⁴⁹ The biblical literature bears abundant testimony to the importance of a family's landed inheritance in the traditional Israelite social structure.

⁴⁸Forde and Douglas, in Dalton, Tribal and Peasant, p. 17.

⁴⁹Some of the standard sources dealing with this issue include Stephen Herbert Bess, "Systems of Land Tenure in Ancient Israel" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1963); Walter Brueggemann, "Reflections on Biblical Understandings of Property," International Review of Mission 64 (1975):354-61; John Andrew Dearman, Property Rights in the Eighth-Century Prophets: The Conflict and Its Background, SBL Dissertation Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Gnuse, esp. pp. 53-65; K. H. Henrey, "Land Tenure in the Old Testament," Palestine Exploration Quarterly 86 (Jan-Apr. 1954):5-15; Robert G. North, Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1954), pp. 158-74; Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel, vol 1: Social Institutions (E.T., New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), pp. 164-77; Christopher J. H. Wright, God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

Holding claim to a piece of land in Israel was the basic cornerstone for every other avenue of participation in the life of the community, ranging from military service to cultic obligations and civic functions. On the theological plane, as Christopher J. H. Wright has aptly demonstrated, the land functioned as the concrete symbol of Yahweh's covenantal bond to the nation.⁵⁰

It is also evident that by the eighth century BCE, this system of family patrimonies was threatened by a process of land consolidation and the development of latifundia controlled by an emerging aristocracy. The prophetic critique of this development alleged that the process was being facilitated by manipulative legal maneuvers and bribery.⁵¹

Some disagreement exists over the nature of the sociological dynamics propelling this situation. One thesis, first propounded by Albrecht Alt⁵² and articulated more recently by Norman Gottwald,⁵³ views the conflict in terms of a tension between the egalitarian ethos of Israel's pastoral nomadic traditions and the stratified social structure of the indigenous, sedentary Canaanite population. On the other hand, J. A. Dearman, in

⁵⁰The social and theological significance of land is treated in part 1 (pp. 3-114) of Wright, summarized on pp. 104-9.

⁵¹Dearman offers the most extensive treatment of this phenomenon, examining it from a number of angles.

⁵²The Alt thesis is summarized by Dearman, pp. 12-14.

⁵³Norman K. Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), esp. pp. 394-8 and Part IX ("A New Egalitarian Canaanite Society: Liberated Israel vis-a-vis Indigenous Peoples"), pp. 489-587. This view is also adopted by Gnuse, chapt. 4: "Canaanite Ethos versus Israelite Ethos," pp. 53-66.

his comprehensive treatment of prophetic references to property, attributed the roots of the controversy, not to an ethnic distinction, but to the divergent interests of the evolving commercial class versus those of the agricultural population.⁵⁴

But whatever the cause, the biblical text clearly reflects a sharp disparity between what the prophetic movement regarded as a traditional Israelite ideal and the economic realities taking shape in the monarchical period. Whether this traditional ideal can be characterized as a system of private property, however, is debatable. To begin with, landed property, strictly speaking, was not vested in individual owners. According to Wright, the basic landholding unit in Israel was the "father's house" (bet-ab), an extended family clan consisting of a patriarch, along with his adult sons and their wives and children.⁵⁵ In addition, there is some question as to whether land could be permanently alienated in ancient Israel. Property theorists commonly refer to a standard "bundle of rights" implied in the concept of private property--including the unrestricted right to possess, use, manage, or derive income from an object, as well as to sell it at one's pleasure, or bequeath it to whomever one chooses.⁵⁶ Thus, it is significant that, at

⁵⁴Dearman, pp. 74-7.

⁵⁵Wright, pp. 53-5. See also Gottwald, pp. 285-92. According to Gottwald, this social unit comprised "all the generations living at any one time in a given lineage, which means that as many as five generations of Israelites might be encompassed in a single beth-av" (p. 285).

⁵⁶Reeve, pp. 14-19. cf. also Alan Ryan, Property, Concepts in Social Thought series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 54; Reeve, p. 19; Grunebaum, p. 10. Of particular relevance to the point at hand is this statement by Grunebaum: "Also, private owners have the right to bequeath what they own or any part of it to whomever they please and with whatever conditions they please. . . . Ownables bequeathed to a family in perpetuity are not privately owned because the family does not have the right to use them as they please" (p. 10).

the very minimum, the weight of custom and convention strongly militated against the sale of one's family patrimony. In what they concede is an argument from silence (albeit, in their opinion, a compelling one), Bess and Wright both point out that there is not a single recorded instance in the Hebrew Bible of landed property being purchased by one Israelite family from another.⁵⁷

The explanation for this restriction is summed up in the words that the Holiness Code attributes to Yahweh: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev. 25:23).⁵⁸ This statement represents a theological reformulation of an attitude toward land prevalent throughout the ancient near east and amongst traditional societies universally.⁵⁹

Economic historians have observed that it is primarily in conjunction with the emergence of capitalism that land comes to be regarded as a marketable commodity--one of the 'factors of production'. Robert Heilbroner once commented that it would have been as inconceivable for a medieval feudal lord to sell a portion of his estate as it would be for the Governor of Connecticut to sell a few of that state's counties to the Governor of

⁵⁷Bess, p. 91; Wright, p. 55.

⁵⁸Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁵⁹A clear parallel can be found, for example, in a Native American text cited by Reeve: "As long as the sun shines and the waters flow, this land will be here to give life to man and animals. We cannot sell the lives of men and animals; therefore, we cannot sell this land. It was put here for us by the Great Spirit and we cannot sell it because it does not belong to us" (p. 52).

Rhode Island.⁶⁰ In traditional societies, one's claim to a plot of land is based on one's place within the kinship order. Hence, George Nash writes, "land tenure is merely the geographical expression of social structure. . . . Part of being a member in the tribe or community, in the family or lineage, in the clan or phrantry is to have access to specified pieces of land."⁶¹ Under such a system, land is acquired as a status prerogative in accordance with laws of inheritance or distribution and only rarely as a result of purchase.⁶² This arrangement has the double effect of both guaranteeing a family's stake in a piece of property, as well as circumscribing their ability to convert their real estate holdings into cash, were they inclined to do so.

The basic feature of traditional peasant societies--a category which, on the basis of all available evidence, includes ancient Israel--is that families have particular parcels of land at their disposal, but not the full rights of ownership vested in highly developed capitalist societies. In some cases, the land actually belongs to the tribe collectively, and is periodically redistributed among the various clans and families. Some scholars have argued that such a custom existed in ancient Israel, but the scarcity of biblical evidence makes this a highly conjectural proposal.⁶³

⁶⁰Robert L. Heilbroner, The Worldly Philosophers, 4th ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 26.

⁶¹Nash, p. 34.

⁶²This point is made by George Dalton, based on several case studies in Africa ("Traditional Production in Primitive African Economies," in Dalton, pp. 66-7).

⁶³This theory is supported, for example, by Henrey, pp. 9-10; and de Vaux, pp. 164-5. It is rejected by North, Sociology, pp. 158-72; Wright, pp. 66-70; Dearman, p. 47; and Bess, p. 58.

What this discussion reflects is the fact that 'property' is not a univocal concept across time and between cultures. The rights implied by ownership claims and the kinds of items over which they can be exercised vary widely. Reasoning analogically from one cultural setting to another is therefore a precarious maneuver, and using the prevailing practices in a peasant society to establish ownership rights over capital in an industrial society is highly problematic.

Free Market Capitalism Respects Biblically-Imposed Limitations on Government

The Argument

A second line of reasoning typically advanced in support of free market capitalism revolves around the notion that the Bible envisages a limited state with clearly demarcated functions--which do not include regulating the economy. As David Chilton expresses it: "The biblical form of government is extremely limited. . . . The state has no biblical right to intervene in the market system or to interfere with trade."⁶⁴

There are two interrelated facets to this argument. On the one hand, the Bible is said to enumerate certain activities that constitute the legitimate province of government; on the other hand, it supposedly forbids tyrannical attempts to exceed these limits. North gives a succinct summary of the state's permissible functions (complete with supporting texts): "The officials of the State legally represent the community in Biblically limited ways: they offer protection of life and property (Exodus 22), trials by jury (Exodus 18; Romans 13:1-7), national defense (Judges), medical quarantine (Leviticus 13, 14), and

⁶⁴Chilton, pp. 99, 100-101.

public safety (Exodus 21:28-36)."⁶⁵

Beisner develops this same theme more extensively in a chapter on limited government in his Prosperity and Poverty. The key biblical text for this discussion is Romans 13:1-6, which describes the civil magistrate as God's minister for commending good actions and executing wrath against evildoers. As Beisner construes the text, this means that the state should foster civic virtue and benevolence only through the non-coercive use of encouragement. Retribution against wrongdoers is the only legitimate pretext for the exercise of coercive force. Moreover, the category of offenses subject to civil punishment is limited to actions which violate one of the stipulations in the second table of the Decalogue--either directly or by extension. The seventh commandment against adultery, for example, warrants the criminalization of marital infidelity, as well as rape, incest, distributing pornography, and exacting sexual favors from one's employees. Similarly, the commandment against bearing false witness would encompass activities such as deceptive advertizing.⁶⁶

But beyond the narrow task of applying sanctions against this limited range of criminal activities, the state has no legitimate role to play in society. Specifically, this means that the state's jurisdiction over the economic arena is limited to protecting property rights and preventing fraudulent commercial practices (ensuring "honest weights and measures," in biblical parlance).

Attacks against government initiatives regarded as unwarranted intrusions into the

⁶⁵North, Inherit, p. 15.

⁶⁶Beisner, pp. 149-56.

marketplace are therefore a standard feature of the free enterprise literature. In one passage, for instance, Lindsell recites a typical litany of conservative targets, inveighing against the Medicare/Medicaid programs, food stamps, student loans, civil rights legislation, bussing school children to achieve racial integration, affirmative action, and what he calls "overexpansion of the money supply."⁶⁷

Other free market defenders, particularly those associated with the Reconstructionist movement, carry this indictment of government intervention even further. The modern welfare state has become, in their estimation, a "Savior State" with messianic pretenses, and a "bastard pretender," which seizes the children's lawful inheritance (through estate taxes) whilst usurping their role as custodian of elderly parents (through Social Security).⁶⁸ By mandating transfers of wealth to impoverished persons, it is attempting to compel the virtue of charity, rather than simply punishing public vices. All this is contrary to the divine design. As one writer warns, "Men should not seek to make the State an agency of social salvation. It is supposed to enforce biblical civil law--no more, no less. The State is not supposed to make men righteous; its God-assigned task is to restrain certain specified acts of public evil."⁶⁹ North even opposes public education, declaring that "[God] is the enemy of the public schools. They are His enemy. God wants them all shut down. . . ." ⁷⁰ Another proposal that has widespread appeal in

⁶⁷Lindsell, p. 107.

⁶⁸North, Inherit, pp. 70-1.

⁶⁹North, Tools, p. 540.

⁷⁰North, Inherit, p. 161.

Reconstructionist circles calls for a return to the use of precious metals as a medium of exchange and the elimination of government-issued currency. As North reasons, "In the Old Testament, the State did not control money. The State protected money, because it enforced the Biblical law concerning honest weights and measures, but the State did not issue money. Money consisted of gold and silver bars of particular weight, shape, and fineness."⁷¹

Two biblical texts figure prominently in these denunciations of the welfare state. The first is the warning against kingship in I Samuel 8, said to have been delivered by the last judge prior to the institution of the Israelite monarchy. Among the impending abuses of royal power, according to this indictment, would be the confiscation of 10% (a tithe) of the country's agricultural produce (vs. 15).⁷² Since the public sector in the United States economy presently consumes 40% of the GNP, it is alleged that the modern welfare state exacts a levy four times what the Bible regards as excessive.⁷³ Even the pharaoh of Egypt, the biblical archetype of tyranny, only imposed a tribute of 20% (Gen. 47:26).⁷⁴

⁷¹Ibid., p. 93. Technically speaking, North is correct on this point. Standardized coins were not introduced into Palestine until the period of the Persian empire. The earliest coins with Hebrew inscriptions appeared under the Hasmonean Dynasty (see International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, rev. ed. [1986], s.v. "Money," by H. W. Perkin, pp. 404-6). Following the innovation of coinage, however, minting was always an exclusive state prerogative. M. I. Finley comments: "One monopoly which all ancient states retained, city or empire, was the right to coin" (The Ancient Economy [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973], p. 166).

⁷²This passage is cited by North, Inherit, p. 148; Davis, pp. 44-5; and Chilton, pp. 34, 42-3.

⁷³North, Inherit, p. 148.

⁷⁴North, Tools, p. 203.

Free market supporters frequently assert that if God only requires a tithe of one's income, the state should be entitled to no more. Hence, the first step in rolling back the welfare state would be to replace the graduated income tax with a flat tax of no more than 10%.⁷⁵

Another passage which is raised in these contexts is the story of King Ahab's seizure of Naboth's vineyard (I Kings 21). In this episode, Ahab, ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel and principal antagonist of the prophet Elijah, attempted to purchase a piece of property belonging to Naboth. When Naboth refused to sell his ancestral inheritance, the queen conspired to have him falsely accused of a capital offense and executed, leaving his land to be expropriated by the crown. Free market supporters see in this incident a premonition of the modern welfare state, in which the property of honest, law abiding citizens is confiscated by their fellow citizens abusing the democratic process.⁷⁶

Analysis

Taken as a whole, the Bible displays a marked ambivalence toward political authority. One of the central theological affirmations of the Hebrew Bible is the sole kingship of Yahweh over Israel. Yet two seemingly opposed inferences were derived from this claim. The perspective reflected in 1 Samuel 8 maintains that Yahweh's exclusive kingship precluded a human ruler and regarded the Israelite monarchy as a

⁷⁵North, Tools, p. 54; Inherit, p. 46. See also I. E. Howard, "Tithing, Taxes, and Totalitarians," Christian Economics 6 March 1962, p. 4. Daniel Lapin traces this idea to Jewish rabbinic commentary on 1 Samuel 8 in "A Higher Authority on Taxes," Wall Street Journal 31 August 1993, p. A10.

⁷⁶North, Inherit, p. 39.

threat to Israel's religious identity. At the same time, other passages reconcile human kingship with the traditional theocratic ideal by depicting the king as Yahweh's regent.⁷⁷ The Chronicler's history of the monarchy, the enthronement psalms, the messianic prophecies of Isaiah, and other occurrences of the David-Zion motif all illustrate this latter tendency. Some commentators depreciate this theme, regarding it as a corruption of Israel's egalitarian, pastoral nomadic traditions under the influence of ancient near eastern kingship ideologies. But the Hebrew Bible seems to hold these emphases in tension.⁷⁸ In fact, the deuteronomistic redactor evidently intentionally juxtaposed the unfavorable treatment of kingship in 1 Samuel 8 and 10 with the favorable assessment in chapters 9 and 11, thereby accenting both the perils and possibilities of monarchical government.⁷⁹

The same sensitivity to the ambiguities of political power shapes the New Testament outlook. Oscar Cullmann organizes the New Testament view of the state around the tension between Romans 13 and Revelation 13.⁸⁰ The former perspective regards civil authority as an instrument of God for establishing peace and order in the world. The Luke-Acts work supports this contention, generally portraying Roman rule as a benign force serving the interests of the Christian mission by providing an environment

⁷⁷de Vaux, pp. 98-9.

⁷⁸On this whole theological issue, see Bruce C. Birch, Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and the Christian Life (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 198-228.

⁷⁹idem, The Rise of the Israelite Monarchy: The Growth and Development of 1 Samuel 7-15, SBL Dissertation series, no. 27 (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1976).

⁸⁰Oscar Cullmann, The State in the New Testament (New York: Scribner's, 1956).

of security.⁸¹ On the other hand, the apocalyptic perspective sees the political order as a beast (symbolizing the Roman empire) animated by the demonic element.

Not surprisingly, proponents of limited government primarily stress the negative dimensions of this portrayal. What they have basically done, therefore, is to single out one dimension of the biblical appraisal of government and treat it as uniquely normative. But the contemporary notion of limited government can be applied to the biblical materials only in very qualified sense. According to some discussions of the data, the modern system of institutional checks and balances is vaguely anticipated in the sharp demarcation between the duties of religious and political functionaries in the Hebrew Bible.⁸² Similarly, the king is often viewed as being accountable to the body of legal traditions that come to constitute Torah--an idea that foreshadows constitutionalism and the rule of law.⁸³

⁸¹P. W. Walaskay, And So We Came to Rome: The Political Perspective of St. Luke, Society of New Testament Studies monogram series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁸²On biblical precedents for the separation of powers doctrine, see Robert Duncan Culver, Toward a Biblical View of Civil Government (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), pp. 104-5; and John Eidsmoe, God and Caesar: Christian Faith and Political Action (Westchester, Ill: Crossway Books, 1984), pp. 11-12.

⁸³The parallel between the biblical idea of covenant and constitutionalism is developed, for example, by Neal Riemer, The Future of the Democratic Revolution: Toward A More Prophetic Politics (New York: Praeger, 1984). On the general theme that the rule of law circumscribed political power in the biblical tradition, see Doug Bandow, Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics (Westchester, Ill: Crossway Books, 1988), p. 79; Paul Marshall, Thine is the Kingdom: A Biblical Perspective on the Nature of Government and Politics Today (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 56-8. This is, in fact, an argument with a long and distinguished pedigree. It is, for instance, a central theme in the 16th century Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos, widely regarded as one of the earliest statements of the social contract theory of government and the right of popular resistance (reprinted as A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants

At the same time, limited government, in the contemporary liberal democratic sense, would have been alien to the ancient world, and attempts to find it in the Bible represent something of an anachronism. In the context of discussions over economic policy, the idea of limited government is generally invoked by those who favor a virtually autonomous economic realm in which political intervention is kept to a minimum. This theory of government, first enunciated by Enlightenment era theorists such as John Locke, embodied the aspirations of a rising class of entrepreneurs seeking to topple the ancien regim and repeal the economic constraints of mercantilism. It achieved its maximum degree of influence in the Anglo-American world at the peak of the Gilded Age.⁸⁴

But proponents of this philosophy often fail to appreciate the extent to which this nineteenth century experiment in *laissez faire* was an historical anomaly. In the words of the well-known phrase coined by Karl Polanyi, the economies of traditional societies are "embedded within the social order."⁸⁵ Rather than operating independently, the economic sphere is enmeshed in the fabric of political and kinship structures. Hence, in the tributary economies of archaic nation-states, political and economic power were coterminous. Mastery over economic resources was regarded as a royal prerogative and economic rewards were dispensed with calculated favoritism as an instrument of political

[Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1989]; see esp. pp. 1-21).

⁸⁴This is the basic thesis in Karl Polanyi's The Great Transformation (New York: Rinehart, 1944). For a summary, see George Dalton, "Introduction," in Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies: The Essays of Karl Polanyi, ed. by George Dalton (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1968), pp. xii-xvii.

⁸⁵"Aristotle Discovers the Economy," in Dalton, pp. 81-3.

control. There is every indication that, at least in the period of the monarchy, ancient Israel operated according to this model.⁸⁶

The free market argument actually takes advantage of a certain degree of ambiguity in the term "limited government." The idea that the arbitrary discretion of rulers is limited by natural law, tribal custom, or some other standard, is an ancient one. It is a time-honored safeguard against tyranny and it has antecedents both in the Bible and in classical literature. At the same time, the attempt to demarcate the legitimate province of the political sphere from that of the economic, or religious is a modern notion.⁸⁷ It would, in fact, be inconceivable apart from the whole process of institutional differentiation that is one of the hallmarks of modernity.

Another facet of the biblical rationale for limited government that merits some comment is the specification of allowable functions based on biblical precedents. There is, to begin with, an obvious issue of selectivity. North, for example, uses the military campaigns in the book of Judges as the warrant for government's war-making power.⁸⁸ But if finding a narrative account in the Bible is sufficient grounds for establishing a legitimate prerogative of government, one might ask whether the campaign against the

⁸⁶de Vaux, p. 139; John Bright, A History of Israel, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 214.

⁸⁷Karl Polanyi "The Self-Regulating Market and the Fictitious Commodities: Land, Labor, and Money," in Dalton, p. 30; and "Our Obsolete Market Mentality," in Dalton, p. 62. Finley summarizes the situation in antiquity well in a chapter entitled "The State and the Economy" (pp. 150-76). He notes that "the authority of the state was total" and no "specific instance of non-interference in the economy [can] be explained by a theory of laissez faire. Neither that doctrine nor any other can exist without the prior concept of 'the economy'" (pp. 154-5).

⁸⁸North, Inherit, p. 15.

Canaanites, as it is depicted in Joshua 1-12 (cf. also Deut. 20:16-18), gives modern governments the right to engage in acts of genocide. Solomon evidently pressed Israelites into service in the corvee (1 Kings 5:13f), an uncomfortable precedent for proponents of limited government.

In actuality, delineating permissible functions of government is a staple feature of free market theory. The tradition goes back at least as far as Smith's Wealth of Nations, where three legitimate tasks of government are specified⁸⁹--a list which reappears in contemporary works by writers like Milton Friedman.⁹⁰ Naturally, it would be tempting to conclude that those who consult the Bible on this issue simply begin with a set of functions and then track down biblical texts that refer to these activities.

In any case, the implicit premise governing this particular use of the Bible is that it should operate as an exhaustive compendium of governmental responsibilities. The likely source of this assumption is the modern notion of constitutionalism. According to the so-called enumerated powers doctrine of American constitutional law, the federal government possesses only those powers expressly delegated to it in the specific provisions of the Constitution. All other powers are reserved to the states or to the

⁸⁹Adam Smith, An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Modern Library edition, ed. by Edwin Cannan (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 651. Included in Smith's list of the sovereign's three duties are national defense, the administration of a criminal justice system, and certain public works which a free market would be ill-suited to provide.

⁹⁰Milton and Rose Friedman, Free to Choose: A Personal Statement (New York: Avon, 1981), pp. 20-5.

citizenry individually (Amendment X).⁹¹ What the Christian Reconstructionists have basically done is to interpret the Bible as though it corresponded to the power granting clauses of the Constitution (the only difference being that in the Reconstructionist scheme, it is God, rather than the citizens, who is doing the delegating).

In addition to the fact that this methodology constitutes a rather tenuous criteria both for interpreting the Bible, as well as for assessing the activities of modern governments, it also runs contrary to the pattern of ancient near eastern law codes. It is generally recognized that in these societies, codified law functioned paradigmatically, as a supplement to oral tradition. Casuistic laws, in other words, furnished representative models as a guide for adjudicating similar cases and as a device for imposing uniformity on disparate tribal customs. But this body of statutory law was never intended to comprehend all possible exigencies or to set predetermined limits on the exercise of political authority.⁹²

Free Market Capitalism Corresponds to Biblical Descriptions of Economic Life

The Argument

In the free enterprise model, the counterpart to the philosophy of limited government is the conviction that an autonomous market of voluntary exchanges will invariably produce the optimal economic conditions. Christian defenders of capitalism

⁹¹ Edwin S. Corwin, The Constitution and What it Means Today, 14th ed., rev. by Harold W. Chase and Craig R. Ducat (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 5-6.

⁹²On these points, and on the comparison between biblical law and ancient near eastern law codes in general, see Gnuse, pp. 10-12.

echo this theme with their assertion that the Bible renders a favorable depiction of the institutions and mechanisms of a market economy. In support of this contention, they point to a variety of texts--ranging from the book of Proverbs to the parables of Jesus--that allegedly illustrate market principles and portray commercial activity positively. These biblical antecedents to capitalism, then, form a third plank in the case for the free enterprise system.

One way this point is made is by attempting to demonstrate that various key concepts in classical economic analysis are somehow adumbrated in the Bible. For example, 2 Kings 6:25, recounting the famine conditions in a besieged city where "a donkey's head sold for eighty shekels of silver and a fourth of a cab of seed pods for five shekels," is said to illustrate the law of supply and demand at work. From this text, Beisner infers that the Bible supports the subjective theory of value (a cardinal tenet of the Austrian school of economics), wherein the value of an item is considered to be an incidental function of consumer demand rather than some inherent property of the commodity.⁹³ The division of labor principle, one of the cornerstones of industrialization and the springboard for Smith's discussion of the free market in his Wealth of Nations,⁹⁴ is often compared to Paul's concept of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12.⁹⁵ In the biblical metaphor, the members of the Christian church are likened to various organs of

⁹³Beisner, pp. 106-7.

⁹⁴Smith, pp. 3-21. (This section comprises the first three chapters of Book 1, which describe the division of labor principle, trace its history, and identify its limitations. Included in this discussion is Smith's famous description of the Scottish pin factory.)

⁹⁵Beisner, pp. 89-91; North Inherit, pp. 112-13.

the body, each with a separate, yet complementary function to perform. To supporters of capitalism, this suggests an obvious parallel to the modern pattern of industrial production, in which the labor force is segmented into increasingly specialized tasks in order to multiply its productive capacity.

In yet another example of this procedure, Beisner claims that in Proverbs 27:7 ("a sated man loathes honey, but to a famished man any bitter thing is sweet"), "Solomon expressed the principle of marginal utility. . . ,"⁹⁶ thereby anticipating by nearly 3000 years W. Stanley Jevons' groundbreaking work in this form of analysis. But however tenuous this biblical foundation may be, Beisner goes on to draw out the implications: "According to this understanding of value and price, there is no such thing as a 'just price' or a 'fair wage' among people acting freely in the marketplace. . . ."⁹⁷ This is, in fact, one of the standard inferences from the use of marginalist analysis. As the principle is expressed in the so-called marginal productivity theory of income distribution, in a competitive market, each factor (i.e., units of labor and capital) will be compensated strictly in accordance with the contribution it makes to the productive process. On this basis, it is often argued that introducing extrinsic standards of fairness to assess the

⁹⁶Beisner, p. 112; cf. also p. 114, which cites as a comparable illustration of marginal utility Prov. 26:16: "Have you found honey? Eat only what you need, lest you have it in excess and vomit it." According to the standard histories of economics, W. Stanley Jevons and Karl Menger, independent of one another, both articulated what came to be known as the principle of marginal utility in 1871. As Galbraith encapsulates it, what this proposition affirms is that "the utility of any good or service diminishes, all else equal, with increasing availability; it is the utility of the last and least wanted—the utility of the marginal unit—that sets the value of all" (p. 108).

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 115.

outcome is unwarranted.⁹⁸

Along with these intimations of market principles, the Bible also supposedly regards the operation of market forces favorably. According to some accounts, the market system is presupposed throughout the biblical narrative. Under the paragraph heading "Free enterprise is practiced in the Bible," John Eidsmoe writes:

The Bible does not contain precise commands concerning an economic system, but assumes free enterprise to be the natural order. Men buy and sell vineyards, raise and sell livestock and grain, enter into business arrangements by themselves or with others, and prosper if they're successful and don't prosper if they fail. We see Lydia as a seller of purple cloth, Peter as a commercial fisherman, and others engaged in free enterprise activities. As a youth Jesus probably worked as an apprentice in his father's carpentry shop.⁹⁹

The frequent references to business transactions in the parables of Jesus are the pre-eminent example of this theme. The basic assumption underlying this use of the parables is summed up by Lindsell (at the outset of a section he entitles "Jesus and Free Enterprise") when he claims that "for Jesus to tell a story, the details of which were incongruent with his views about property is unthinkable and unreasonable."¹⁰⁰ Thus, by incorporating allusions to various commercial ventures into the storyline of his parables, Jesus implicitly endorsed such activity.

⁹⁸On this point, see the discussion of "Marginal Productivity and Justice" in Robert L. Heilbroner and James K. Galbraith, The Economic Problem, 9th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), p. 602 (cf. also the following chapter, "How Incomes are Distributed in Fact." pp. 608-19, which spells out the limitations of marginal utility theory in accounting for the actual distribution of incomes under less than competitive conditions).

⁹⁹Eidsmoe, p. 107.

¹⁰⁰Lindsell, p. 61.

The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30, cf. Luke 19:11-27) is probably the most widely cited passage in this regard. In this parable, a certain nobleman entrusted varying amounts of money (enumerated in talents, a unit of currency) to different servants before embarking on a journey. Upon his return, he demanded an accounting of how they had managed his assets. The servants who had invested the funds wisely and yielded a favorable return were rewarded, whereas their one colleague who hoarded the money and gained nothing from it was severely chastised.

Free market supporters draw several lessons from this narrative. To begin with, in the words of Davis, this parable "presupposes the legitimacy of lawful business endeavors."¹⁰¹ The resourcefulness of the shrewd investors seems to emerge as a commendable attribute and banking transactions are viewed favorably. Lindsell concurs in this conclusion, pointing out that "Jesus said nothing by way of indictment against the wealthy nobleman, nor did he suggest he acquired his wealth illicitly."¹⁰² In other words, if Jesus had disapproved of the master's actions or of his expectations concerning the servants, he presumably would have said so. It is, moreover, regarded as significant that private property is affirmed here, albeit with the crucial qualification that it is to be viewed as a stewardship from God.¹⁰³ Distributing the talents to different servants is also said to show the wisdom of portfolio diversification.¹⁰⁴ Finally, the servant who failed to

¹⁰¹Davis, p. 19.

¹⁰²Lindsell, p. 62.

¹⁰³Griffiths, pp. 43, 47-8.

¹⁰⁴North, Tools, pp. 747, 752.

invest the funds is regarded by North as an "incipient Marxist," whose allegation that the master reaps where he has not sown (Mt. 25:24) echoes the Marxian critique of capitalist exploitation.¹⁰⁵

In similar fashion, North regards the Parable of the Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44) as a model of entrepreneurship. This story compares God's Reign to a treasure which a person finds hidden in a field. In order to acquire the treasure, he sells all his belongings to purchase the field. According to North's interpretation, this demonstrates several important entrepreneurial traits: forecasting the economic future, planning efficiently in light of the forecast, and risk taking (i.e., someone else could have removed the treasure before the sale was consummated). Socialists, he suggests, would be outraged, both by the fact that the field containing the treasure was privately owned, as well as by the finder's use of privileged information to take advantage of the original owner. To penalize this display of initiative, he speculates that they would want to impose a 50% windfall profits tax or a capital gains tax on his proceeds.¹⁰⁶

Analysis

The use of the Bible to illustrate or identify economic principles once again corresponds to a standard feature in purely secular arguments for the free enterprise system. Influenced by Isaac Newton's revolutionary discoveries in physics, the early classical economists purported to be elucidating immutable laws in the social realm

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 747.

¹⁰⁶North, Tools, p. 699-700. (Note that North mistakenly entitles this parable "The Pearl of Great Price" [which is actually the following parable, vs. 45], and twice refers to the treasure as a pearl.)

comparable to the operation of gravity. Despite the wide variety in patterns of economic behavior that anthropologists and historians have chronicled, supporters of capitalism often claim that this system uniquely accords with the basic structure of reality. Free of outside interference, the market supposedly operates according to self-regulating principles, inexorably shifting resources to their most productive use and maintaining a balanced state of equilibrium. This image of a well-ordered artifice, performing predictably and rationally, in accordance with perceptible laws, matches precisely the paradigm of the universe that accompanied the rise of modern science.¹⁰⁷

Not only are traces of this scientific analogy distinctly discernable in the literature of Christian free market adherents, the parallel is enhanced with theological underpinnings. David Chilton provides an excellent case in point, writing:

What we call physical laws (such as gravity, photosynthesis and the principles of thermodynamics) are simply the outworking of God's eternal decree and continual providence. And the same is true of economic laws. . . . [T]he same God who is Lord of the physical universe has established laws in justice and economics that are as absolute and irrevocable as the laws of physics; and . . . to 'get along' in His world, you may engage in economic fraud with the same assurance of success you would have in jumping from a plane without a parachute.¹⁰⁸

Approached from this perspective, comments in the Bible that the casual reader

¹⁰⁷Among others, this connection is noted by Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 25-32; and Kenneth Lux, Adam Smith's Mistake: How A Moral Philosopher Invented Economics and Ended Morality (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), p. 139. Daly and Cobb think it is particularly significant that economists have been influenced by the model of physics rather than biology, since the former discipline tends to be formal and deductive. Whereas biology is concerned with evolutionary changes, physics is directed at discerning static laws.

¹⁰⁸Chilton, pp. 20, 21.

might regard as commonplace observations (e.g., that food grows more expensive under famine conditions) become expressions of fixed and unalterable economic laws.

Moreover since these laws are ordained by God, economic prosperity is dependent upon enabling them to operate untrammelled.

This line of reasoning raises a couple of problems. First, purely from an economic standpoint, it should be noted that the classical image of a self-regulating market, operating uniformly in accordance with immutable laws, is increasingly viewed as incomplete picture of reality. Just as some laws of physics apply only in a vacuum, principles such as marginal utility apply only under conditions of pure competition. In markets that are dominated by a few firms, price structures usually follow the benchmark set by a price leader. Similarly, factors such as worker immobility, accumulated expectations (i.e., of some measure of job security with incremental wage increases), and union bargaining pressure interrupt the functioning of a purely competitive labor market. The clockwork image of the economy that expositions of economic law tend to convey is therefore not entirely apposite.¹⁰⁹

In addition, using the Bible to elucidate these principles is equally problematic.

The concept of economic laws is only meaningful within the context of a modern

¹⁰⁹Its inapplicability to real world conditions is, of course, the crux of John Maynard Keynes' critique of classical economics in his The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money (rep. ed., New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), see esp. pp. 3-22. It should be noted that even economists predominantly working within the classical paradigm do not entirely dispute this point. Milton Friedman, for example, concedes that the idealized model of classical economics is not a precise depiction of reality, but he contends that it is a close enough approximation to serve as the basis for rendering accurate predictions ("The Methodology of Positive Economics," in Essays in Positive Economics [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953], pp. 14-21).

understanding of the economy. Apart from this framework, statements about economic phenomena are merely routine observations. What Joseph Schumpeter once said about attempts to discern economic reasoning in texts from classical antiquity is equally applicable to comparable uses of the Bible: "The layman's knowledge that rich harvests are associated with low prices of foodstuffs or that division of labor increases the efficiency of the productive process are obviously prescientific and it is absurd to point to such statements in old writings as if they embodied discoveries."¹¹⁰

When it comes to interpreting parables, free market supporters cleverly take advantage of one of the distinctive features of parabolic discourse--namely their open-ended nature. Parables intentionally employ multivalent images and are capable of being read on several levels.¹¹¹ The basic pattern involves using techniques of parody, exaggeration (sometimes in comic proportions), or some startling twist in the storyline to engage the hearers' attention and stimulate further reflection on some paradoxical aspect of life.¹¹² It is because of this imaginative quality that they can evoke a variety of responses.

Even allowing, however, for the ambiguities of interpretation that this medium of discourse opens up, the capitalist argument involves some rather dubious moves. Rather than grappling with the central message of the story, the interpreters who use the parables

¹¹⁰Joseph A. Schumpeter, A History of Economic Analysis, ed. by Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 9.

¹¹¹Mary Ann Tolbert, Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

¹¹²C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (New York: Scribners, 1936), p. 16.

to make a point about economics seem fixated on what appear to be incidental features of the plot. This methodology, whatever its merits, is at variance with the prevailing tendency in critical scholarship. In contrast to the longstanding tradition of allegorical expositions of the parables, more recent treatments have emphasized their purpose in conveying one overriding claim about the impending Reign of God.

C. H. Dodd's classic work, for example, states that "the typical parable. . . presents one single point of comparison. The details are not intended to have independent significance." Instead, he continues, the details simply build up to the final image of sudden crisis on which the parable hinges.¹¹³

Beyond the question of whether the details of the narrative are important, a more central issue is whether the conduct of the characters is represented as a moral archetype. John Dominic Crossan, for one, thinks otherwise. In his treatment of a collection of gospel parables he dubs the "Servant Parables" (a category which includes the Parable of the Talents), Crossan comments, "There is no presumption in this group of parables that general morality is under discussion. Such terms as 'good and bad', 'reward or punishment' pertain exclusively within the world of the parable and within the master-servant relationship which forms the thematic parameter of the series."¹¹⁴ In keeping with this approach, for example, Christian commentators have not generally regarded the conduct of the so-called "unjust steward" (Luke 16:1-9) as commendable, even though Jesus pays tribute to his craftiness.

¹¹³Ibid., pp. 18-9.

¹¹⁴John Dominic Crossan, In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 103.

This situation illustrates one of the difficulties in using narrative literature to establish an ethical principle: the narrative is not self-interpreting. The way in which the characters' behaviors are assessed is dependent upon the framework of values that are brought to the text. In the case of the Parable of the Talents, readers predisposed to viewing capitalism favorably will assess the figures in the story accordingly. On the other hand, Richard L. Rohrbaugh argued in one journal article that a peasant audience in first century Palestine would have had the reverse impression. He speculates that they would have identified with the hapless servant who buried the talents, and recognized in the figure of the master a stereotypical representation of their oppressive overlords.¹¹⁵

Another issue that must be addressed is whether the market activities depicted in the parables (and other biblical accounts) are comparable to the market system operating in modern capitalist societies. According to most economic historians, there is a major element of discontinuity between markets in antiquity and those of modern times in terms of their scale and scope.¹¹⁶ Clearly, some market activity has existed since the dawn of recorded history. In ancient civilizations, there was invariably a merchant class plying their wares on the periphery of society. Likewise among tribal groups (up to the present),

¹¹⁵Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?" Biblical Theology Bulletin 23 (Spring 1993):32-9.

¹¹⁶Max Weber is generally credited with being among the first scholars to appreciate the uniqueness of the modern market system. See his "The Meaning and Presuppositions of Modern Capitalism," in Dalton, Tribal and Peasant Economies, pp. 438-40. In the mid-twentieth century, Karl Polanyi emerged as the leading proponent of this thesis. An overview of his approach can be gleaned from the collection, Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies: Essays of Karl Polanyi, edited by George Dalton.

trading takes place on a limited basis--often confined to luxury items.¹¹⁷ One key factor is that in small-scale, agricultural societies, goods exchanged in the market come from a fortuitous surplus of subsistence production, rather than as a result of a deliberate planning process.¹¹⁸ Presumably, therefore, when the Bible mentions commercial dealings, what it has in view is this sort of marginal activity on the fringes of society. This pattern stands in marked contrast to a modern capitalist economy, where markets perform the central integrating function, allocating resources almost exclusively on the basis of competitive bidding. In this system, land, labor, and capital are all treated as commodities, distributed on the basis of market price signals. This represents an unprecedented development in cultural history.¹¹⁹ Throughout most periods of history, households (rather than firms) have been the primary productive unit, and there has accordingly been virtually no free wage labor market. Similarly, restrictions on money-lending have tended to stifle the development of financial and capital markets.¹²⁰ So while one could legitimately argue that the Bible does not disparage the practice of commerce, it must always be with the awareness that the biblical writers were unacquainted with a comprehensive market mechanism for producing and allocating the

¹¹⁷George Dalton, "Traditional Production in Primitive African Economies," in Dalton, Tribal and Peasant Economies, p. 75. See also the case study recounted by Nash, pp. 48-50.

¹¹⁸Forde and Douglas in Dalton, Tribal and Peasant, p. 18.

¹¹⁹George Dalton, "Introduction," in Dalton, Tribal and Peasant Economies, p. 7; Dalton, "Introduction," in Dalton, Essays, p. xii; Nash, p. 33.

¹²⁰These factors are cited by T. F. Carney, The Economies of Antiquity: Controls, Gifts, and Trade (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973), pp. 30-5; and Finley, p. 23.

bulk of society's economic resources.

Free Market Capitalism Accords With the Biblical Depiction of Human Nature

The Argument

A final aspect of the biblical case for free enterprise capitalism is the notion that this economic system is uniquely compatible with a biblical view of human nature. Indeed for some writers, this is the linchpin of the argument. As Davis puts it, "It is the biblical teaching concerning human nature that tips the balance in favor of the free market."¹²¹ Similarly, Michael Novak makes theological anthropology one of the centerpieces of his brief for democratic capitalism, based on the premise that "political economy must deal with humans as they are."¹²²

When it comes to actually describing "humans as they are," much of this market-oriented literature paints a fairly bleak picture. According to the various authors in this camp, people are naturally prone to be self-centered,¹²³ rebellious,¹²⁴ lazy,¹²⁵ and irresponsible.¹²⁶ Only punitive sanctions, or the threat of negative consequences can

¹²¹Davis, p. 74.

¹²²Michael Novak, The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982; rep. ed., Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1991), p. 82. (It should be noted that Novak, while not an evangelical Protestant himself, is influential within this movement. Christianity Today, for example, lists him as an "Advisory Editor.")

¹²³North, Inherit, pp. 56, 112-4.

¹²⁴North, Tools, p. 441.

¹²⁵Chilton, p. 117.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 59.

produce any beneficial results.

Three implications germane to the choice of an economic model flow from this outlook. First, capitalism is presented as the system that most adequately takes account of humanity's self-centered impulse. Socialism, according to North, relies on altruism or political coercion to achieve its economic goals. Capitalism, on the other hand, assumes a more realistic picture.

The defender of the free market's private property system. . . acknowledges the depravity and lusts of man, and the necessity of appealing to men's self-interest in order to create a productive voluntary society. The capitalist doesn't say that all men are by nature good or altruistic. The defender of capitalism says instead that men are self interested, but that a system of legally protected private property enables society to gain the very best services and the very best efforts from men who otherwise would be selfish, hungry for power, and basically lovers of theft and lovers of destruction.¹²⁷

It appears evident from North's rhetoric that he regards the self-interested behavior of the marketplace as a moral vice, symptomatic of humanity's fallen condition. Griffiths gives a more carefully nuanced treatment of this theme, differentiating between self-interest and selfishness. He regards the former as a fundamental human characteristic, implicit in the capacity to make choices and included within the divine image that human beings bear. Selfishness, on the other hand, is the sinful distortion of self-interest and is a consequence of the Fall. But given the fact that both of these elements are features of the world as it is, the economic system must reckon with them--a requirement that Griffiths believes is best fulfilled by Adam Smith's version of a

¹²⁷North, Inherit, p. 56.

competitive market.¹²⁸

Novak's view of human nature is considerably more sanguine than that of these predominantly Calvinistic Protestants, allowing, as it does, for manifestations of benevolent and humanitarian impulses. Nevertheless, he regards a sinful disposition as an ineradicable element of the human character, concomitant with the exercise of freedom. What the market system does, in his estimation, is to utilize this propensity toward self-interested behavior creatively in order to achieve a higher level of social good. Rather than following the futile strategies of attempting to purge the human heart of sin or impose virtue by force, capitalism transforms self-interest into an agent of social progress, through the exercise of a "doctrine of unintended consequences." Hence, capitalism "is a system designed for sinners, in the hope of achieving as much moral good as individuals and communities can generate under conditions of ample liberty."¹²⁹

A second corollary of the Bible's perspective on human nature, according to free market proponents, is the necessity to avoid institutional concentrations of power.¹³⁰ Because of the factor of original sin, unbridled accumulations of power are said to lead invariably to tyranny (based on texts such as 1 Samuel 8). The optimum situation would therefore be one in which power is dispersed among many competing centers of control. According to Davis, it was "because of an understanding of human nature, influenced by the teachings of the Bible" that the founders of the United States created a system of

¹²⁸Griffiths, pp. 68-9.

¹²⁹Novak, p. 95. The entire discussion is contained in Chapt. IV: "Sin," pp. 81-95.

¹³⁰Gary North, "A Free Market Response," in Wealth and Poverty, ed. by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), p. 202; Davis, pp. 8-9.

limited government.¹³¹

On the other hand, one of the "fatal flaws" of socialism is alleged to be the fact that it entails a fusion of political and economic power.¹³² Enabling the state to dictate economic policy is an irresistible invitation to abuse, in light of a biblically informed theological anthropology. When political coercion replaces market forces, tyranny is the inevitable result--a conclusion that free market proponents believe is borne out by the record of socialist societies. As Griffiths puts it, "the Gulag Archipelago is the logical end of any red-blooded form of socialism."¹³³

A third relevant feature of human nature, in the free market argument, is humanity's limited degree of knowledge. God's exclusive claim to omniscience--based on texts such as Deuteronomy 29:29, Romans 11:33, and James 4:14--is said to preclude any comparable claim on the part of mortal creatures.¹³⁴ This recognition of human finitude is used to undercut the feasibility of a centrally planned economy. Despite the limitations of human knowledge, socialists supposedly harbor the illusion that a bureaucratic corps of central planners can allocate society's resources in an efficient

¹³¹Davis, p. 9.

¹³²Ibid., p. 84. (For an earlier--and more carefully nuanced--version of this argument, see Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness [New York: Scribner's, 1944]. Niebuhr used the factor of human sinfulness to critique both socialism and the sort of laissez faire capitalism that Davis and the other figures in this chapter espouse. As he points out in one place: "Bourgeois property theory has no safeguard against the power of individual property; and Marxist theory has no protection against the excessive power of those who manipulate a socialized economic process or who combine the control of both the economic and the political process" [pp. 112-3].)

¹³³Griffiths, p. 90.

¹³⁴Davis, pp. 82-3; North, Inherit, p. 19.

manner--a feat that would require a vast body of information and an intricate comprehension of every consumer's fluctuating preferences. A planned economy virtually assumes that the state possesses the omniscience of the Almighty. In North's view, "if men pretend that a committee of experts can plan for an entire economy, they have denied God's exclusive omnipotence and omniscience."¹³⁵ Elsewhere he charges that "what the socialist-redistributionist objects to, in the final analysis, is mankind's lack of omniscience."¹³⁶

The free market compensates for humanity's limited knowledge through the pricing mechanism. Under competitive conditions where the interplay of supply and demand establishes the price for a given commodity, producers and investors have an automatic source of feedback to direct allocation decisions. When increased consumer demand generates higher prices, this signals producers to boost output and attracts capital into the enterprise. Falling demand triggers the opposite effect. The market's pricing mechanism therefore translates a vast myriad of information about consumer tastes and preferences into allocation decisions through a decentralized process without the need for one all-knowing mind to comprehend the master plan.

To sum it all up, then, the argument from human nature maintains that capitalism uniquely accords with several salient features of the biblical testimony concerning humanity's creaturely existence. According to this line of reasoning, only the free market system adequately takes account of humanity's acquisitiveness, greed for power, and

¹³⁵North, Tools, p. 398.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 700.

finite intellect.

Analysis

Despite the frequency with which the framers of the above argument invoke generalizations about "the biblical view of human nature," specific biblical texts are rarely cited. Presumably, these claims are intended to represent a distillation of the entire scope of the biblical witness. Moreover, since these characterizations of human nature would be regarded as almost axiomatic in the religious constituency to which this literature is addressed, a detailed exposition of the rationale would probably be superfluous.

In one place, Davis does make reference to two verses--Romans 3:23 and Ephesians 2:3.¹³⁷ This choice of texts is not surprising. Christian theologizing about the Fall, original sin, and total depravity, particularly in the Augustinian and Reformed tradition, has generally drawn heavily on the Pauline epistles and their penetrating analysis of the human condition.

At the same time, it needs to be emphasized that in Pauline soteriology, the concept of sin refers first and foremost to a state of alienation from God. This situation results from the perennial human quest for autonomy and the subsequent failure to depend upon divine grace, preeminently displayed in humanity's lack of gratitude for God's beneficence, and vainglorious attempts to achieve salvation through human effort alone. Although this condition of estrangement from God may lead to a range of deviant behaviors and anti-social forms of conduct, these effects are secondary. Sin is equally

¹³⁷Davis, p. 84.

evident in the efforts of upstanding individuals to gain security apart from God's grace.¹³⁸

In addition, regardless of the extent to which capitalism's assumptions about human nature may coincide with certain readings of the biblical text, it is clear that classical political economy appropriated a longstanding tradition in social philosophy that had been formulated and articulated independent of any religious foundation. The history of Western social and political thought has sometimes been interpreted in terms of the interplay between two conflicting perspectives. On the one hand, the dominant tendency among ancient and medieval thinkers was to regard society as a natural community, aiming at the cultivation of virtue. On the other hand, there has been a tradition of social egoism that views society as a conventional artifice, bound together by mutual self-interest, and seeking merely to preserve peace and order.¹³⁹ As early as Plato's Republic, these conflicting orientations are reflected in the respective dialogue positions of Socrates and Thrasymachus.

Beginning with Machiavelli, generally considered to be the watershed figure in Western political philosophy, the latter viewpoint increasingly came to the fore. Rather than an innately social creature seeking perfectibility in the polis, the human person is viewed as an isolated, self-regarding, and calculating being. On this basis, society is regarded as an artificial contrivance, created by contractual accord, and existing solely for

¹³⁸See Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "hamartano," by Walter Grundmann, 1 (1964):308-13, 16; Herman Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, trans. by John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 93-107.

¹³⁹The interplay between these perspectives is the central organizing principle in Brian R. Nelson's Western Political Thought: From Socrates to the Age of Ideology (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982), see esp. pp. 1-8.

the instrumental purpose of promoting mutually advantageous objectives.

This is the basic model which was incorporated into classical political economy and provided the theoretical framework for capitalism. Starting with Adam Smith, self-interest was elevated to the status of humanity's cardinal trait and singled out as the primary incentive for economic activity.¹⁴⁰ This idea is encapsulated in Smith's oft-quoted verdict that: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages."¹⁴¹ The insight that through the operation of an 'invisible hand' disparate pursuits of individual self-interest converge into a harmonious pattern of exchanges is generally regarded as Smith's principal contribution to the field of political economy.

This pattern of assumptions and expectations about human behavior in the economic realm eventually crystallized into the theoretical model of homo economicus--the economic person. In the economic arena, individual actors are expected to behave rationally, and rational behavior is taken to be synonymous with maximizing personal utility and pursuing self-interest.¹⁴² Every expression of this idea does not take the crass form of Ayn Rand's odes to selfishness or the dictum that "greed is good." Milton

¹⁴⁰On the role of self-interest in Smith's political economy, see Lux.

¹⁴¹Smith, p. 14.

¹⁴²For a discussion and critique of the concept of homo economicus, see Daly and Cobb, pp. 85-96. It is worth noting that these writers attribute this view of human nature in economics, at least in part, to the influence of Calvinism (p. 6).

Friedman even attempts to argue that self-interested behavior may encompass altruistic deeds if a particular individual finds fulfillment in this manner.¹⁴³ For predictive purposes, however, economic forecasters invariably assume that 'self-interest' translates into purely self-serving activity.

In terms of the biblical rationale for capitalism, what all this means is that the argument from human nature has, in effect, equated the New Testament image of the person-as-sinner with the representation of homo economicus in economic theory. But whether or not this is a valid correlation is open to question. It is true that theologians have often defined the essence of sin as pride or inordinate love of self, a trait which manifests itself, among other ways, in the vice of greed (what Reinhold Niebuhr called "the besetting sin of a bourgeois culture"¹⁴⁴). At the same time, it is equally important to point out that this is not necessarily a completely comprehensive depiction of the human condition. Donald Hay sums up the dual aspect of biblical anthropology as it relates to economics:

The theological principle that the image of God in man was marred, but not destroyed, by the fall, suggests that our analysis of human behavior needs to encompass both the aspect of creation and the aspect of fallen man. For example, an analysis based solely on the latter will emphasize self-interested behavior, and will ignore or explain away genuinely altruistic behavior. It will see work as toil, and fail to note that work is also good. The concept of rational economic man is economic theory is

¹⁴³Friedman, pp. 18-9. Lux, however, argues that this distinction between self-interest and selfishness is a piece of clever sophistry, at variance with the general tenor of classical economics (pp. 152-66).

¹⁴⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 1: Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribner, 1941), p. 191. The extended discussion of sin as pride is found on pp. 186-203. The fountainhead for this whole line of analysis is Augustine's City of God, bk. XIV, ch. 13.

not inconsistent with this biblical view of fallen man, which may explain why the concept has proved so enduring in the history of economic analysis. It also explains the discomfiture of those who see aspects of human behavior that are not consistent with the concept. Some of these, like the capacity for altruism, and the desire to work, come from the creation aspect.¹⁴⁵

But even if a proclivity to pursue one's own narrow self-interest is a corollary to the New Testament idea of universal human sinfulness, the issue of how economic institutions should respond to this aspect of human nature is still not settled. During the Middle Ages, at the peak of Christendom's cultural hegemony, the predominant tendency was to stifle the pursuit of lucrative gain in the economic arena. Canon law prohibited collecting interest on loans. Profit-seeking of all kinds was inhibited by custom and religious stricture. To this end, medieval guilds regulated prices and the allocation of products. Moral philosophers debated the circumstances under which a merchant may legitimately realize a profit from commercial transactions, generally concluding that profits were only justified insofar as they compensated the merchant for his labors.¹⁴⁶

Far from being an inevitable by-product of humanity's fallen condition, therefore, an economic system propelled in large measure by the pursuit of individual gain is a fairly recent innovation.¹⁴⁷ It may well be the case that the profit motive stimulates a

¹⁴⁵Hay, pp. 122-3. For a similar treatment of the two-dimensional aspect of human nature as it relates to economics, see Richard C. Chewning, "Human Nature and Economic Exchange," in Biblical Principles and Economics: The Foundations, ed. by Richard C. Chewning (Colorado Springs, Col.: Navpress, 1989), pp. 11-22.

¹⁴⁶Galbraith, pp. 22-7; Lux, pp. 16-17.

¹⁴⁷There is, for example, ample data on the prevalence of non-economic incentives (such as the threat of social ostracism) for productive activity in pre-industrial societies (see Karl Polanyi, "Societies and Economic Systems," in Dalton, Essays, p. 7; and

higher level of productivity and prompts technological advances. Conversely, cultural and religious attitudes that suppress individual initiative or restrict the possibilities for personal advantage (examples of which may be found not only in the medieval system, but also in many contemporary underdeveloped societies) may retard economic progress.¹⁴⁸ But if these considerations are incorporated into the case for capitalism, then they need to be acknowledged as implicit values. The argument, in other words, presupposes that achieving the maximum degree of productivity or economic efficiency is the prime objective to be sought after. Then, assuming an innate human propensity to behave selfishly, it reasons that the best way to induce the highest level of performance is to exploit this tendency.

The second inference that supporters of the free market draw from the doctrine of human sinfulness is the danger of consolidating political and economic power in the same hands. At the outset, a couple of points about the cogency of this argument itself are warranted. In the first place, it is by no means self-evident that combining political and economic control is the sine quo non of socialism. Public ownership of the means of production need not imply state control. Some socialist schemes favor worker cooperatives.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, capitalists who advance this argument must discount the

Thurnwald, p. 61).

¹⁴⁸On this point, see Lawrence E. Harrison, Who Prospers?: How Cultural Values Shape Economic and Political Success (New York: Basic Books, 1992). On the role of social and cultural value systems in either facilitating or impeding the process of economic development in contemporary underdeveloped countries, see also chapter 7: "Changing Primitive and Peasant Economies" in Nash.

¹⁴⁹Robert Dahl, A Preface to Economic Democracy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Michael Walzer, Radical Principles: Reflections of an Unreconstructed

possibility that some form of democratic accountability in a socialist society could forestall the development of totalitarian tendencies. Nor is it the case that socialist societies are uniquely susceptible to the abuses that result from political and economic collusion. In situations (such as the ones that exist in some Latin American countries) where there are extreme disparities in the distribution of wealth, even the protection of property rights--one of the minimal functions of government according to laissez faire theory--requires a virtual police state. It also should be noted that critics of socialism pursuing this angle are highly selective in their choice of data. Seldom does one find in this literature any expressions of alarm about the power that corporate entities wield. When some multinational corporations have revenues that exceed the GNP of most nations in the world,¹⁵⁰ or when decisions affecting the economic well-being of an entire community are made by a single company, there is certainly cause for concern over the dangers of unfettered economic power.

But regardless of its theoretical shortcomings, the actual historical record of full-fledged socialist societies lends a considerable degree of credence to this argument. Governments presiding over command economies have tended to act in a totalitarian fashion. The theological rationale simply extends this historical observation by arguing that this result is inevitable, given what the Bible reveals about human nature. For free-market proponents, the corollary to this principle is that an economic system with

Democrat (New York: Basic Books, 1980), pp. 273-90.

¹⁵⁰The 1980 gross revenues of Exxon Corporation, the world's largest multinational conglomerate, surpassed the GNP's of all but 20 countries and were roughly equivalent to the GNP's of Switzerland and Yugoslavia (John Charles Pool, Ross M. LaRoe, The Instant Economist [Reading, Mass: Wesley Publishing Co., 1985], p. 59).

minimal government intervention is the optimal arrangement.

This whole line of reasoning hinges on the connection between a pessimistic view of human nature and liberal democratic institutions. But the argument can actually cut both ways. One perspective says that if individuals are inherently selfish and driven by passions, strong authoritarian government is necessary to prevent chaos. Hobbes' Leviathan is a classic statement of this position. Based on the premise that human beings are fundamentally anti-social and motivated solely by self-interest, as well as on a thoroughly dismal picture of the anarchy that would prevail in a world without government, Hobbes inferred the need for an absolute sovereign. Yet, the opposite conclusion is also possible. The other position maintains that since those who wield control are also inherently self-regarding and driven by forceful ambitions, power must be dispersed among many competing centers of influence. Madison's argument for a government of checks and balances in The Federalist Papers, based on the observation that neither the citizens nor public officials are angels, reflects this point of view.¹⁵¹ The case for free market capitalism simply carries this idea one step further by insisting that political and economic power remain separate.

The factor that accounts for these disparate conclusions from the same image of human nature is the implicit value assumptions informing the discussion. Whereas defenders of the Hobbesian position are preoccupied with the need for order and security, those who reach the liberal democratic conclusion place the highest premium on personal

¹⁵¹Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, The Federalist Papers, ed. by Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library Mentor Book, 1961), No. 51, pp. 322.

liberty. For the latter group, the basic question is how personal liberty can be guaranteed in a world where individuals are prone to abuse power. The answer is various institutional arrangements for dispersing power--within government and between various spheres of activity (i.e., between economic and political arenas).

However compelling this process of reasoning may be, it needs to be recognized that it is distinctly modern in a couple of respects. In the first place, the Bible clearly does not place the same priority on personal freedom--at least in the political realm--that this position does. Secondly, although the biblical writers are sensitive to the threat of tyranny, there is little indication that they foresaw the development of institutionalized safeguards to prevent it. Despite a few precedents for the notion of checks and balances in the classical tradition (e.g., Aristotle's idea of a mixed constitution, or Polybius' theory of Roman law¹⁵²), for the ancients in general, the moral character of the sovereign was the decisive consideration. Plato's philosopher-kings and the Stoic ideal of an enlightened ruler were the dominant paradigms in antiquity. When one turns to the biblical materials, the influence of this perspective is clearly evident. Throughout the Hebrew Bible's historical narratives, a recurrent motif is the direct correlation between the king's religious virtue and the measure of national prosperity. In similar fashion, hopes for the future frequently hinged on the emergence of an ideal ruler (e.g., the vision of Isa. 11). One of the few explicit New Testament directives on civil responsibility once again links the well-being of the Christian community to the character of their rulers (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Whatever confidence the biblical writers had, therefore, that government could function

¹⁵²George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 4th ed, revised by Thomas Landon Thorson (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1973), pp. 115, 152-3.

properly appeared to depend more on the personal qualities of persons exercising power than on institutional mechanisms to circumscribe their area of jurisdiction.

Finally, the third conclusion from human nature that free market supporters often draw is that a centrally planned economy is incompatible with finite human comprehension. There is nothing distinctly theological about this argument. It has, in fact, long been at the core of the critique of socialism emanating from the Austrian school of economics.¹⁵³ In this tradition, the basic data about human nature is derived, not from a contrast between God's omniscience and human finitude, but rather from a particular epistemological stance rooted in philosophical skepticism.¹⁵⁴ The point of the argument, therefore, is not to demonstrate that socialism stems from human arrogance or even that it is necessarily undesirable. It simply is infeasible.

What evangelical free market supporters have done is to add a theological dimension to the argument. In one sense, the biblical appeals are superfluous, since no one is likely to claim omniscience in any event. But the theological considerations do introduce a new dynamic into the equation. Rather than simply engaging in a futile undertaking (which was Hayek's point), the pretentious social engineers of the modern welfare state are, according to these evangelical critics, attempting to usurp one of God's

¹⁵³The debate which produced this particular line of reasoning was at its peak in the 1930's and 1940's. Both sides of the issue are presented in Friederich A. Hayek, ed., Collectivist Economic Planning: Critical Studies on the Possibilities of Socialism (London: Routledge, 1935). Subsequently, some socialist theorists responded to Hayek by attempting to demonstrate that economic planners could allocate resources efficiently more or less through a trial and error approach.

¹⁵⁴Norman P. Barry, "The 'Austrian' Perspective" in What is Political Economy?, ed. by David Whyntes (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 56.

exclusive prerogatives.

Once again, it needs to be noted that there is an implicit assumption in this argument. The basic reason central planners supposedly cannot competently make allocation decisions is because they cannot predict consumers' preferences accurately apart from a pricing mechanism. In this economic model, the economy is a huge auction, designed to satisfy consumer demand. In accordance with the valuefree bias of the economics profession, any attempt to differentiate between genuine needs and superfluous wants is automatically precluded. The consumer is sovereign.¹⁵⁵ So the argument basically asserts that if maximizing the satisfaction of consumer wants is the optimum goal of the economy, then the free market, with its network of pricing signals, is the most efficient delivery mechanism.

To draw this discussion to a close, a couple of summary points can be made about the human nature argument. First of all, certain themes in biblical anthropology may be congruent with the expectations about human behavior that undergird classical economic analysis. But while biblical support may be adduced for the basic image of human nature involved, the conclusions that are arrived at do not follow automatically from the evidence cited. They reflect the interjection of implicit value assumptions that are, in some instances, alien to the thoughtforms of the biblical writers. Essentially, what the argument claims is that, if human beings are inherently self-centered, the free market

¹⁵⁵It should be noted that in making these claims, members of the Austrian school assume that consumer wants are spontaneous and self-generated, and so constitute the basic starting point for economic analysis. This assumption has been called into question by economists such as John Kenneth Galbraith, who contends that consumer wants can be manipulated by advertizing (*The Affluent Society* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958; New York: New American Library Mentor Book], pp. 14-30).

system is uniquely suited to manipulate this impulse in order to achieve the maximum degree of economic productivity, personal liberty, and consumer satisfaction. The extent to which this appeal is a persuasive one depends on whether one both accepts the underlying diagnosis of human nature, and also recognizes all of these objectives as cardinal values.

The Analytical Grid Applied to the Free Market Capitalism Rationale

The goal of the previous section was not primarily to assess the validity of the biblical case that is made for free market capitalism. Regardless of whether the argument is plausible or implausible, the basic contention being made here is that it reflects the influence of factors extrinsic to the text itself. The aim of this section is to expose some of those influences, organizing them under the categories of theology, ethical methodology, social location, and ideology.

Theology

In analyzing the way conservative evangelical defenders of the free market use the Bible, an important distinction must be made between claims they make about the Bible and how the Bible actually functions in their ethical discourse. Taken at face value, their style of moral reasoning is predicated upon a particular conception of biblical authority which directly equates the written text with the Word of God and regards every statement in it as inerrant--both moral and theological pronouncements as well as factual details. The Bible is therefore acknowledged to be a binding code for all of life and the final

object of appeal on any issue.¹⁵⁶

This theological paradigm has several implications for the way in which the Bible is cited as a moral authority. To begin with, theories of verbal inspiration tend to stress the literal import of what the text actually says. The Bible is viewed as a set of propositions, a compendium of information to be gleaned and collated, or a source of knowledge that would otherwise elude human comprehension. The morally relevant aspect of Scripture is therefore its stateable content.¹⁵⁷

This idea is expressed in the literature surveyed here in various ways. North's basic starting point is the conviction that "the Bible presents mankind with a God-mandated set of social, economic, educational, political, and legal principles that God expects His people to use as permanent blueprints for the total reconstruction of every society on earth."¹⁵⁸ Chilton proposes out the outset of his work to concentrate, not on generalizations, but on "the actual, concrete, explicit statements of God's word."¹⁵⁹ "The Bible," he states elsewhere, "is the standard for every aspect of life. It tells us a

¹⁵⁶Several of the writers dealt with in this chapter explicitly profess adherence to an inerrancy position. The clearest case in point is Harold Lindsell, whose book Battle for the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) catapulted this issue to prominence. Chilton identifies himself with this position at the outset of his work (p. 6), and North characterizes the denial of biblical inerrancy as the root of all heresies (Tools, p. 283).

¹⁵⁷This way of expressing the Bible's role in ethics intentionally echoes David Kelsey's description of the Protestant scholastic model for using the Bible in theology (illustrated by B. B. Warfield), in which the "authoritative element of scripture is its stateable content" (The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975], p. 29).

¹⁵⁸North, Tools, p. 6.

¹⁵⁹Chilton, p. 5.

great deal about economics."¹⁶⁰ In general, the overall tendency of these writings is to treat the Bible as a sourcebook of information about economic concepts, the responsibilities of modern governments, effective strategies for dealing with poverty, and a host of similar topics.

Secondly, a view of inspiration which extends this process to all parts of the Bible equally and which ultimately attributes every utterance to God tends to enhance the status of isolated details within the narrative. Items of seemingly incidental significance to the overall point of a passage are elevated to cardinal importance in sustaining key elements of an argument. Beisner, for instance, repeatedly cites the retort of a character in one of Jesus' parables as the principal confirmation for his view of property.¹⁶¹ North uses a verse about returning a poor person's pledged garment at nightfall as the springboard for a wholesale indictment of the modern banking system.¹⁶²

Also in keeping with this doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration, evangelical theologians invariably expect the Bible to render a uniform and consistent verdict on any given issue. By minimizing the role of the Bible's human authors, they discount the possibility of diverse and conflicting perspectives emerging from the text. A single verse, taken in isolation, is therefore sufficient basis for drawing conclusions about "the biblical view" on some subject.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁶¹The text is Matthew 20:15, which Beisner cites eleven times to support the right of private property (according to his scripture index, p. 283).

¹⁶²North, Tools, pp. 738-9; Honest Money: Biblical Principles of Money and Banking (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press/ New York: Thomas Nelson, 1986), pp. 80-90. The passage in question is Exodus 22:26-7.

The result is a tendency to engage in the technique popularly known as "proof-texting", whereby, as one writer put it, "a point is established with a catena of apposite citations."¹⁶³ One of the striking features of many of these books is the extent to which the text is punctuated with a liberal supply of chapter and verse references. Generally, these are appended, parenthetically, to some assertion, often without the connection being made explicit. In a passage quoted above, North used Exodus 18 and Romans 13:1-6 to substantiate a point about trial by jury,¹⁶⁴ notwithstanding the fact that one would search these texts in vain looking for the slightest allusion to juries. At the outset of a chapter on the profit motive in business enterprises, Chilton quotes Isaiah 48:17: "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, 'I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit. . .'"¹⁶⁵ While these examples of proof-texting may be extreme cases (some might say, abuses of the procedure), they do illustrate the inherent pitfalls in this manner of using Scripture.

A final feature of the evangelical paradigm that deserves mention is the fact that law emerges as the predominant ethical motif. The Bible is treated as a series of authoritative directives which specify the definitive content of one's moral obligation. As a result, Christian ethics and biblical ethics are regarded as synonymous. The moral norm

¹⁶³Kathleen C. Boone, The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 89.

¹⁶⁴North, Inherit, p. 15.

¹⁶⁵Chilton, p. 122. Chilton appears to have quoted from the Authorized Version (modifying only the second person pronouns). Most English translations have a rendering similar to that of the New International Version: "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you." In any event, the modern technique of calculating profit and loss using double entry bookkeeping was not invented until the Renaissance.

is simply a reformulation of some biblical pronouncement. One classical evangelical work on ethics by John Murray, for example, stated: "The ethic of the New Testament is one of obligation; it requires obedience; it recognizes authority which is of divine origin and institution. It is an ethic of law."¹⁶⁶

While this theme is evident throughout the ethical literature of conservative evangelicalism, it reaches its culmination in the Christian Reconstructionist movement and its concept of theonomy. The basic underlying premise of theonomy is that "Biblical law gives us God's fixed ethical standards."¹⁶⁷ Unless explicitly abrogated elsewhere in Scripture, biblical injunctions are supposed to be scrupulously observed in every area of life. In political and economic matters, this means implementing the civil laws of ancient Israel and applying the prescribed judicial penalties specified in the Mosaic legislation. Those who follow this approach consistently are not all reticent even about endorsing practices such as slavery, since provision is made for it in biblical law codes. According to Chilton, "if slavery laws seem unjust to us, it is because we are wrong. God's law is the perfect transcript of His justice. Any protest against God's laws is a moral indictment of God."¹⁶⁸

Needless to say, this is an extreme position, even among conservative evangelicals. But even outside the circles of Theonomy, there is a general tendency in

¹⁶⁶John Murray, Principles of Conduct (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 106. It is worth noting that Rousas Rushdoony, the principle architect of Christian Reconstructionism, and North, the movement's primary economist, are both former students of Murray.

¹⁶⁷North, Tools, p. 106.

¹⁶⁸Chilton, p. 63.

this tradition to regard specific commandments in the Bible as the starting point for economic analysis. Thus, Wayne Grudem, in sketching out an approach for evaluating alternative economic systems, writes:

Apart from [Old Testament and New Testament] commands directed to specific communities of people, we may expect that the commands of Scripture regarding human activity generally, and economic activity in particular, are commands that reflect the moral will of God, which He expects all people to obey, and which He has implanted in the conscience of mankind generally. . . . What should be our goal, then, in discussing biblical principles and economic systems? In light of the considerations mentioned above, it seems that our goal as Christians should be to seek economic systems that (1) best enable Christians to fulfill the whole range of biblical economic teachings, and (2) best enable the nonChristians to conform to those moral demands of God that can be known through general revelation.¹⁶⁹

One of the challenges confronting any faith community which attempts to govern life in accordance with an ancient code of conduct is that of adapting this body of law to constantly changing conditions. Generally, an ingenious process of casuistry develops in order to translate seemingly archaic legislation into meaningful categories for the present. Among theologians, this quest has spawned a formidable body of legal commentaries based on the Pentateuch. One of the basic devices used in this literature to bridge temporal and cultural distances is formulating analogies between the subject matter of the text and contemporary situations. Thus, in discussing laws dealing with owners' responsibilities for their domesticated animals, North comments that "the automobile is like a large beast"; hence, the state can require drivers to obtain liability insurance.¹⁷⁰ A

¹⁶⁹Wayne A. Grudem, "How An Economic System Can Be Compatible With Scripture," in *Chewning*, pp. 28-9, 30-1.

¹⁷⁰North, *Tools*, p. 480.

law about holding landowners accountable for damage caused by an open pit on their property prompts a discussion of hazards in general and the field of torts law.¹⁷¹ It should be pointed out that this process of reasoning by analogy, while it may provide a promising avenue for applying the text to contemporary situations, is predicated on one fundamental assumption. The implicit presupposition is that while the biblical world may differ in terms of the scale and complexity of economic activity, there is no qualitative distinction between the economic outlook of antiquity and that of modernity.

These, then, are the cardinal elements in the theological claims these authors make about the Bible. If one examines how the Bible actually functions in the context of this literature, however, the reality often diverges from the theory. What one often finds is that, far from supplying authoritative directives, the Bible is actually used as a source of illustrative material or rhetorical ornamentation for conclusions derived from other sources. Where laws such as the eighth commandment are invoked, the situations to which it is applied are dictated by a particular conception of property rights. Paradigmatic elements in narrative accounts (such as the Ahab/Naboth incident, or the ownership of land in ancient Israel) are also drawn into the argument, but again it is difficult to determine whether they supply a model of conduct or whether contemporary concerns and issues are simply being projected back into the narrative.

The function that the Bible is actually performing in all these instances is to provide a sort of transcendent point of reference for particular economic assertions. What would otherwise be conjectural proposals or expressions of opinion take on an aura of

¹⁷¹Ibid., pp. 486ff.

absolute truth when a biblical citation is affixed to them. In this way, the Bible contributes toward sustaining a theodicy for the established economic order. As Peter Berger argues in the Sacred Canopy, one of the indispensable tasks that religion plays in the social matrix is to support such a theodicy--to furnish ultimate answers to the "why" questions.¹⁷² In a competitive economic system constantly producing winners and losers--often with utter disregard for individual merit--there is a particularly acute need for such a justification. A free market distributes society's resources in what may appear to be an arbitrary and capricious fashion, indifferent to considerations of fairness or need. Overwhelming abundance exists side-by-side with abject poverty. Any social system so constituted faces a perennial crisis of legitimacy. The answer proffered by libertarians like Hayek--that social justice is an illusion¹⁷³--is only vaguely satisfying, at best. By invoking the Bible, and ultimately the authority of God, Christian free market proponents are able to provide a compelling rhetorical sanction for this economic structure. Moreover, a theory of biblical inspiration which claims to find in the text a repository of inerrant and timeless truths is admirably suited for this task of undergirding a religious theodicy. It enables Harold Lindsell, one of biblical inerrancy's foremost defenders, to assert that

the case for free enterprise presented here is based on the authority of God mediated through his divine revelation to man in the Old and New Testaments and is binding upon all men everywhere. Because it comes from God it is normative, it will work, and it will prove itself to be

¹⁷²Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967; Anchor Books, 1990), pp. 53-80.

¹⁷³Friedrich von Hayek, Law, Legislation, and Liberty, vol. 2: The Mirage of Social Justice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

superior to socialism, which can only be validated by denying what God has revealed. . . .¹⁷⁴

Ethics

There is a close correlation between the Bible's role in evangelical economic debates and the general style of ethical reasoning prevalent in this tradition. Unlike many of their secular counterparts, evangelical proponents of the free market premise their argument on explicitly moral grounds. In other words, they do not simply stipulate that an unregulated market operates more efficiently or that it produces a higher standard of living than any alternative; they are wont to argue that outside intervention in the economy constitutes an assault on God-given freedoms or the theft of other people's property.

This approach to ethics has a couple of important features. To begin with, it has a heavily prescriptive orientation, with rather absolutist overtones. In keeping with the tendency to view the Bible as a law book prescribing a code of conduct, maintaining a free market is often presented as an explicit mandate of God. Just as personal morality revolves around the observance of rules, social ethics entails conformity to objective standards.

¹⁷⁴Lindsell, p. 51. The use of biblical inerrancy claims to fortify politically conservative positions is evident as well in the outcome of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, a decade-long project spearheaded by several leading evangelical theologians (including Lindsell) to mount a scholarly defense of this dogma. The Council's efforts culminated in a major Washington D. C. conference on applying the Bible's inerrant message to social concerns. It was of no small consequence that for their keynote speaker, the conference's fundamentalist organizers turned, not to a fellow Protestant, but to the pre-eminent spokesperson for American conservatism, Catholic commentator William F. Buckley (as noted by George Marsden, "The New Paganism," Reformed Journal, January 1988, p. 3).

Consequentialist considerations occasionally surface, but their use is limited. One clearcut example of this style of moral reasoning would be the case for capitalism offered in Brian Griffiths' book, The Creation of Wealth. As even the title indicates, the paramount value, for Griffiths, is "wealth creation," the process by which material resources are harnessed to serve the common good. The biblical doctrine of creation and the dominion mandate provide the theological basis for this endeavor.¹⁷⁵ The fact that "market economies create wealth more efficiently than state-owned and state-planned economies" establishes at the outset an initial presumption in favor of capitalism.¹⁷⁶ Having shifted the burden of proof to capitalism's critics, Griffiths proceeds to demonstrate that none of their indictments of the market system (directed against competition, inequality, the profit motive, etc.) can meet this standard. In this rationale, therefore, capitalism is vindicated, not because it necessarily is divinely ordained, but because it represents the optimal means for achieving a biblically sanctioned end (the creation of wealth). The so-called human nature argument follows a similar pattern, attempting to show that a system propelled by self-interest enables society to achieve goals such as greater productivity and more personal liberty.

Still, much of this literature is permeated by a decidedly absolutist mindset, indifferent to considerations of consequences. For example, the claim is sometimes made that the current graduated income tax should be replaced by a flat tax of no more than 10%. Ostensibly, this proposal is based on the assertion that the state is not entitled to a

¹⁷⁵Griffiths, p. 167.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., p. 11.

larger share of one's income than the tithe that God requires. Conspicuously absent from the discussion is any consideration of the effects such a policy would have on matters like the distribution of disposable income, levels of public revenue, the poverty rate, and so forth.

Perhaps the clearest example of the absolutist tendency in this literature is in the treatment of property rights. The rationales historically offered by property theorists for the existence and protection of private ownership fall into a couple of broad categories. Justifications along utilitarian lines typically view patterns of property-holding as conventional arrangements, to be assessed in terms of their instrumental value in promoting broader social objectives. They point, for example, to the way in which property protections enable resources to be directed to their optimal use, satisfy the human need for security, and provide a stable framework for a system of labor incentives.¹⁷⁷ Many theorists following this approach endorse restrictions on property rights when they are warranted by overriding considerations of social welfare. Others, such as Hayek, adopt a kind of rule utilitarian principle against any tampering with property holdings. Regardless of the outcome of this debate, the utilitarian argument still offers, as Alan Ryan points out, a "lukewarm defense" of private property because it is always reversible. A reconsideration of the consequences may force a reconsideration of the justification.¹⁷⁸

Alongside this utilitarian line of defense has been a longstanding tradition of

¹⁷⁷Ryan, pp.55-6.

¹⁷⁸Ibid., p. 59.

natural law reasoning that validates property rights on the basis of extrinsic entitlement.¹⁷⁹

The classic example of this approach is Locke's argument¹⁸⁰--recently revived in a slightly different form by Nozick¹⁸¹--which derives property rights from the prerogatives of the initial appropriator and the legitimacy of subsequent transfers. Evangelical ethicists surveyed in this chapter stand squarely in this natural right tradition, fortified by a claim of divine sanction. North appeals to divine providence, not only to justify property in the abstract, but also to legitimize the present distribution of wealth.

According to his exposition of property rights, God, the "cosmic Owner,"

has delegated temporary ownership of selected portions of His property to individuals and organizations, so that they might work out their salvation or damnation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). Because God has delegated responsibility for the care and use of His property to specified individuals or organizations, who are held responsible for its management, others are required to honor this distribution of ownership and its associated responsibilities.¹⁸²

Elsewhere, he writes that

Theft [which, according to the following page, includes government policies such as the graduated income tax and interference with voluntary exchanges] is based on a view of the present order of society that says that God has wrongfully or erroneously distributed property. The thief takes things into his own hands--literally. He redistributes property along lines more pleasing to him. He makes himself a little god, a judge of the

¹⁷⁹Grunebaum, pp. 52-85; Ryan, pp. 61-9.

¹⁸⁰John Locke, The Second Treatise of Government, Library of Liberal Arts edition, ed. by Thomas P. Peardon (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), pp. 16-30.

¹⁸¹Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 174-82.

¹⁸²North, Tools, p. 774.

present social order and the God who established it in history.¹⁸³

These sweeping vindications of the status quo position of property holdings leave little room for tampering and probably exceed even classic libertarian theories in their unconditionality.

Along with this deontological and absolutist cast, a second feature of the style of ethics shaping this body of literature is a strikingly dualistic tendency. The ethicists in this tradition inhabit an either-or moral universe of diametrically opposed alternatives and clear-cut choices. Within this frame of reference, mediating positions are rejected, and discounting one option necessarily confirms the other. As it plays itself out in the economic debate, this perspective involves juxtaposing free enterprise capitalism over against socialism (or communism) and using attacks against the latter to cinch the case for the former. Lindsell, for example, states that free enterprise and socialism, as "competing and antithetical ideologies," are the only options for organizing economic life, since so-called "hybrid systems" (such as the welfare state or the mixed economy) are non-viable.¹⁸⁴

It would be tempting to dismiss this dualistic mindset as simply being a legacy of the bipolar geopolitical alignment of the Cold War era. This interpretation does have some merit, inasmuch as the upsurge of anti-communist sentiment that set the stage for

¹⁸³North, Inherit, p. 47.

¹⁸⁴Lindsell, p. 47. This statement actually echoes a long-standing theme in free market polemics. Its classic formulation is in Hayek's Road to Serfdom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), which basically argues that any departure from a free market system places a society on the slippery slope to socialism and totalitarianism.

subsequent evangelical economic reflection coincided historically and stylistically with the McCarthy era in American politics.

At the same time, however, an ethical dualism is deeply rooted in the Western monotheistic religions. Biblical imagery is replete with antitheses between God and the Devil, good and evil, light and darkness, Heaven and Hell, Christ and anti-christ, the sheep and the goats, and the like. Didactic literature in the Bible frequently employs contrasts between opposing paths or stereotypical individuals (cf. Psalm 1). Similarly, theological discourses tend to have a disjunctive, rather than conjunctive or dialectical, style (e.g., the Pauline juxtaposition of faith and works).

What evangelical polemicists in the economic debate have done is to assimilate alternative economic systems into this metaphysical framework. Not only do they insinuate that any movement away from a free market puts a society on the road to socialism, they are quick to read all sorts of diabolical designs into this development. North, for example, claims that what he calls the "Savior State" is "one more example of Satan's efforts" to rob humanity of their God-given inheritance.¹⁸⁵ Consequently, the conflict between a free market system and the welfare state reflects the struggle between the society of Satan and the kingdom of God.¹⁸⁶

This approach to ethics and the way in which evangelicals view the Bible reinforce one another. In keeping with a prescriptive style of ethics, the Bible is treated as a moral code. Ethical injunctions and examples from narrative materials are deemed to

¹⁸⁵North, Inherit, p. 71.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., p. 140.

constitute moral imperatives for contemporary conduct. Part of the reluctance to engage in biblical criticism or to recognize ambiguities or tensions within the text is because these factors would undermine the sense of moral certainty that this position requires.¹⁸⁷ An absolute ethic necessitates clearcut standards. The dualistic tendency that permeates so much of this literature also intersects with biblical interpretation. As was noted above, it is rooted in the biblical tradition, and when it begins to shape economic analysis, biblical symbolism becomes a convenient mode of expression.

Social Location

Whenever biblical texts are marshalled in support of some socio-political option, particularly one in which important economic interests are on the line, the social location of the interpreter is a relevant consideration. Arguments such as the ones examined in this chapter are not formulated in a vacuum. They reflect perceptions of the social process shaped and reinforced within communities that have an identifiable history and place within the power structure (either one of advantage or disadvantage). Moreover, given the political climate of the 1980's (when much of this literature was produced), an attempt was clearly underway to influence economic policy debates--with their inevitable winners and losers. All this does not mean that apologists for capitalism intentionally slant the biblical data in order to defend a personal stake in the economic status quo.

¹⁸⁷This suspicion is confirmed by North's essay, "The Hoax of Higher Criticism," which is included as an appendix to his book, Tools of Dominion. His principle objection to biblical criticism is that it constitutes a "strategy. . .to discredit the Christian world's faith in a permanent standard of righteousness" (p. 1064). One section of the essay, entitled "Textual Indeterminacy Equals Ethical Indeterminacy," advances the claim that "the real motive of higher criticism is ethical"(p. 1077).

Although the figures surveyed in this chapter are overwhelmingly white, North American males, with secure positions in academia or some other institutional setting, they do not appear to be any more privileged, as individuals, than their more liberal counterparts.

Nevertheless, they articulate values and religious perspectives that have crystallized within a particular sociological context. This broader frame of reference is constituted by the Protestant evangelical subculture in the United States, with its distinctive pattern of social attitudes. Not only is this the religious community in which these writers have largely been nurtured, it is also the category that defines their target audience. Their reputation for theological expertise has been cultivated within these circles, their books are usually distributed by evangelical publishing houses, and their style of discourse is customarily laced with the jargon of this tradition. It would therefore be safe to assume that this body of literature championing the cause of capitalism represents, not simply the idiosyncratic views of a few conservative iconoclasts, but a social outlook that resonates with a major segment of American Protestantism.

For a number of reasons, this evangelical subculture is highly receptive to conservative economic appeals. To begin with, the basic institutional structure for the evangelical movement is a variegated configuration of independent ministry organizations, each with a unique niche in the religious market. Included within this network are centers of higher education, publishing houses, media outlets, and a host of special interest groups and service agencies catering to different constituencies.¹⁸⁸ One

¹⁸⁸Accounts of this organizational infrastructure can be found in Hunter, pp. 57-8; Nancy T. Ammerman, "North American Protestant Fundamentalism," in Fundamentalisms Observed, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 1, ed. by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 17-20, 29-38;

cannot read an account of this system without being struck by the pivotal role charismatic-type leaders play in launching these organizations and shaping their institutional culture. By dint of their ability to target a particular segment of the market, package their message attractively, devise innovative publicity strategies, and cultivate financial backing, enterprising individuals, otherwise devoid of impressive educational or ecclesiastical credentials, can build formidable religious empires and often reap lucrative rewards. The disestablishment clause in the Constitution performs the same function for religion in America that market competition performs in the economy, and it has largely been evangelical para-church agencies that have capitalized on the opportunities this situation affords. This factor has infused the evangelical movement with a strong entrepreneurial spirit that easily translates into support for capitalism.

This institutional pattern has another important implication for economic attitudes--it magnifies the influence of substantial financial contributors. Bereft of accumulated endowments and denominational resources, evangelical enterprises are invariably dependent upon the largess of wealthy supporters. George Marsden's history of Fuller Seminary, which is intended to provide a paradigm for studying the post-war neo-evangelical movement in general, furnishes an apt illustration. According to Marsden, several members of the business community--and oil magnate J. Howard Pew in particular--became early backers of the seminary and its kindred causes, primarily because they found in its leadership prominent religious voices ardently committed to the

Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 100-31.

free enterprise system.¹⁸⁹ A few decades later, the New Religious Right was partly spawned (according to one account) by a couple of quasi-political undertakings spearheaded by staunchly conservative benefactors, such as Texas oilman Bunker Hunt, insurance executive Art DeMoss, and Amway founder Richard M. DeVos.¹⁹⁰

At the same time, the influence of wealthy business elites, while it may partially account for capitalism's strong appeal among evangelicals, does not provide a comprehensive explanation for the phenomenon. Demographic profiles, both of self-avowed evangelical Protestants as well as of the rank-and-file constituency of New Religious Right organizations,¹⁹¹ do not suggest that these movements are primarily concentrated among the affluent segments of society. If religious rationales for capitalism were promoted solely by privileged beneficiaries of the economic system, they would lack this sort of grass roots support. According to James Davison Hunter's

¹⁸⁹Marsden, pp. 154-7. This pattern extends back into the nineteenth century. D. L. Moody's revivals were underwritten by leading captains of industry, prompted, William G. McLoughlin claims, by the conviction that "an effective lay preacher (as Moody was), together with a sentimental 'gospel singer' (like [soloist Ira] Sankey), given thousands of dollars to spend on highly organized six- to-eight-week revival campaigns in the nation's largest cities, could reach the unemployed clerks, salesgirls, and working people with a Christian message that would calm their anxieties over unemployment and turn their attention to higher thoughts than labor agitation" (Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform, Chicago History of American Religion series [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], p. 142). The publication and free distribution of The Fundamentals was subsequently financed by brothers Lyman and Milton Stewart, two wealthy California oilmen.

¹⁹⁰Robert C. Liebman, "Mobilizing the Moral Majority," in The New Christian Right: Mobilization and Legitimation, ed. by Robert C. Liebman and Robert Wuthnow (New York: Aldine Publishing Co., 1983), pp. 50-2.

¹⁹¹J. Milton Yinger, Stephen Cutler, "The Moral Majority Viewed Sociologically," in New Christian Politics, ed. by David Bromley and Anson Shupe (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), pp. 69-90.

sociologically-informed survey of their subculture, "contemporary Evangelicals are most widely represented among the moderately educated, lower and lower middle-income, working class occupations."¹⁹² As a result, "the sociocultural genre of contemporary Evangelicalism is firmly representative of the world of the American middle class, who are dominant in American society."¹⁹³ Elsewhere, Hunter refers to evangelicalism's perpetual "close association with middle-brow American culture," a feature which normally "meant the quiet affirmation of everyday American middle-class life patterns. . . ." ¹⁹⁴

The significance of this characterization of evangelicalism's sociological base is that it places this religious tradition squarely within a segment of society where the capitalistic ideology is deeply entrenched. As one sociologist observed, "the T[raditional] M[iddle] C[lass] worldview uniformly involves opposition to government job guarantees, national health insurance, and social services, and favorable attitudes toward 'big business' combined with a coolness toward labor unions."¹⁹⁵ Several explanations have been advanced to account for this phenomenon. In the first place, to whatever extent members of this class are engaged in the traditional manufacturing processes of producing and distributing material goods (as opposed to the knowledge-based activities of the so-called post-industrial age), they would be more attuned to the ideology of

¹⁹²Hunter, p. 55.

¹⁹³Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁹⁴Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁹⁵John C. McAdams, The New Class Struggle: Social Class and Politics in Post-Industrial Society (unpublished manuscript, 1988), p. 65, quoted by Gay, p. 190.

commerce associated with the industrial era. Higher education also has a liberalizing effect on its recipients. Hence, segments of the population with lower levels of educational attainment have a greater tendency to espouse socially conservative views. In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that the tax burden to support the welfare state falls most heavily upon families closest to the median income level.¹⁹⁶

Moreover, whatever tendencies toward social conservatism already exist among members of this demographic group would only be reinforced by religious fundamentalism. It is interesting to note that the classical school of economics is often referred to as "economic orthodoxy"¹⁹⁷--a term borrowed from the theological realm. In light of this, it is not surprising that self-styled defenders of theological orthodoxy should also undertake to defend economic views regarded as orthodox.

Regardless of the reason, it is clear that capitalism is an integral part of the socio-cultural world inhabited by the typical Protestant evangelical in the United States. It is only natural, therefore, that this particular social location colors the way in which the biblical text is read. Themes that resonate with the American middle class value system are accented. Biblical images, parables, and stories become illustrations of attitudes and social perceptions shaped by this cultural environment. The Bible thereby echoes and confirms a sociologically and historically conditioned worldview.

¹⁹⁶These factors are discussed by Gay, pp. 190-93.

¹⁹⁷The use of this label is widespread. John Maynard Keynes often refers to the classical school as "orthodox economics" (e.g., pp. v, 13, et passim). Note also the title Modern Political Economy: Radical and Orthodox Views on Contemporary Issues, ed. by James H. Weaver (Boston: Allyn and Beacon, 1973) and see the definition of "orthodoxy" in Shaun Hargreaves-Heapes and Martin Hollis' "Bread and Circumstances: The Need for Political Economy," in Whynes, p. 8.

Ideology

A critical analysis of each strand in the biblical argument for free market capitalism has invariably revealed a gap between the ideas which can, in light of their historical context, be reasonably attributed to the biblical writers and the economic inferences that contemporary inquirers often draw from their writings. In some instances the biblical data has been selectively assembled, in other cases the evidence is inconclusive, and in still others, the implications that are derived do not follow automatically from the data cited. One of the primary reasons for this disjuncture between perspectives embedded in the text and contemporary models of economic life is the gulf separating the worldview of antiquity from that of the modern age.

Consequently, in the process of formulating social ethical proposals, this gap between the scriptural text and contemporary realities is filled by a consistent pattern of ideological presuppositions governing the way biblical images are interpreted. In the case of free market supporters, this ideological construct generally corresponds to what the various schools of classical and neo-classical political economy prescribe and to the overall theory of limited government developed within the Western liberal democratic tradition. In terms of the spectrum of opinion in current public policy discussions, the figures surveyed in this chapter would fall anywhere between the modified *laissez faire* philosophy of most political parties of the Right in the West (i.e., minimal government regulation, with a 'safety net' in place for the disadvantaged) and the thoroughgoing

libertarianism of Robert Nozick (traces of which are discernible in the Reconstructionist movement).

Various aspects of this ideological perspective have been noted throughout the discussion, so the aim at this juncture is simply to recapitulate some of its cardinal elements. The cornerstone of this system is its strongly individualistic orientation. Among other things, this means that individual persons, as free moral agents in control of their own destinies, are the basic components in any explanation of the social process. Hence, economic success and wealth creation are invariably attributed to factors such as personal initiative and hard work. Conversely, poverty tends to be ascribed, not to institutional or structural causes, but rather to character flaws in its victims. Similarly, unemployment is treated, not as an inevitable result of a system in which owners of capital control the fate of wage laborers or of the vicissitudes of the marketplace, but rather as a form of indolence.

These assumptions are implicit throughout the literature of Christian free market supporters. The connection, for example, between individual merit and economic success is a recurrent theme. Davis cites several texts, primarily from Proverbs, to demonstrate that diligence is the basis of wealth.¹⁹⁸ Elsewhere, he points to emerging Asian economic powerhouses such as South Korea and Singapore to show that "poverty can be overcome not through exploiting others, but through initiative, enterprise, efficiency, and hard work."¹⁹⁹ Throughout North's writings, one of the key texts is Deuteronomy 28, which

¹⁹⁸Davis, p. 23.

¹⁹⁹Ibid., p. 29.

sets forth the principle that prosperity is the reward for righteousness.²⁰⁰ Likewise, according to Chilton, "The Bible teaches. . . that power flows to those who work and serve: the industrious meek shall inherit the earth."²⁰¹

On the other hand, poverty is consistently traced to individual shortcomings. With his trademark bluntness, North opines that "there is presumably some flaw in the poor man's character."²⁰² These sort of sentiments echo George Gilder's comment that "the poor know that their condition is to a degree their own fault or choice."²⁰³ One piece of evidence frequently cited to substantiate this connection between personal virtue and economic success is the fact that predominantly Christian countries are prosperous, whereas "pagan" countries are poor.²⁰⁴ In keeping with this diagnosis of the problem, the solutions to poverty proffered by these writers typically revolve around individual remedies. Government initiatives, such as income transfer programs and minimum wage laws, are routinely debunked. Private charity, administered through churches, is generally promoted as an alternative.²⁰⁵ Such recommendations are frequently

²⁰⁰The Scripture index for his Tools of Dominion book lists 30 references to this chapter (p. 1222). One respondent to an essay by North defending capitalism observed that 39 of his 48 biblical citations were from the Old Testament, and 33 of these were from Deuteronomy (William Diehl, "A Guided-Market Response," in Clouse, p. 66).

²⁰¹Chilton, p. 36.

²⁰²North, Tools, p. 222.

²⁰³Gilder, p. 90.

²⁰⁴North, Tools, p. 66; Chilton, p. 91-96.

²⁰⁵Beisner offers the most comprehensive plan for implementing this recommendation. In one chapter of his text, he presents an elaborate statistical argument attempting to demonstrate that churches could hypothetically assume the entire burden of relieving poverty in the United States (pp. 199-210).

accompanied by the immediate qualification that aid should only be made available to the "deserving poor." As Beisner points out, "Biblical charity knows nothing of promiscuous handouts to sluggards."²⁰⁶

Individual actors, working out their own fates for better or for worse, are therefore the starting point in any analysis of social phenomena. The role that families, churches, and religio-cultural influences play is acknowledged, so these are not thoroughly atomistic and autonomous individuals. But little attention is paid to structural components in the economy or institutionalized patterns of privilege or discrimination that mitigate this image of self-determination.

These individualistic tendencies are reflected in the way the standard triad of political values--freedom, justice, and equality--are developed. Freedom--or at least one conception of it--emerges as the paramount value and the chief criterion for assessing social alternatives. Defined more specifically, freedom (or, more precisely, "liberty") is understood almost exclusively in negative terms as the absence of outside coercion, especially from centers of political control. This value judgment is implicit, for example, in the oft-repeated claim (particularly by Reconstructionists) that the state is not to interfere with any sort of activity unless it is expressly authorized to do so by the Bible.²⁰⁷ Needless to say, this requirement places a formidable burden of proof on those who would seek to circumvent individual liberties with various forms of state regulation. Similarly Griffiths, while disavowing attempts to elevate freedom into an absolute (a

²⁰⁶Ibid., p. 205.

²⁰⁷Beisner, p. 100.

view he attributes to Milton Friedman)²⁰⁸, nonetheless sums up his "moral case for the market economy" with the assertion that for "all its weaknesses, [capitalism] is a system which pays respect to human dignity because it allows human freedom."²⁰⁹

Another revealing indication of the ideological orientation of these writings is the manner in which the relationship between justice and equality is delineated.

Administering the law in a impartial and consistent fashion is taken to be the fundamental requirement of justice. This principle is frequently validated on the basis of Exodus 23:2,3,6 (a series of apodictic laws which forbid both favoritism toward, as well as bias against, poor people in legal proceedings).²¹⁰ As it works itself out, however, this position has strong affinities to Hayek's theory of jurisprudence, which stresses the necessity for a stable and predictable legal order as the framework for a free economy.²¹¹ Since justice is concerned with procedures, rather than with outcomes, it in no way precludes inequality. Beisner, in fact, maintains that "because God equips people unequally, social justice requires that their roles--and consequently their wealth. . . be unequal as well."²¹² Griffiths likewise avers that "in a fallen world inequality of income is an essential aspect of Christian justice."²¹³ The quest to insure a greater measure of parity in the distribution of wealth within a society is consequently not one that arouses

²⁰⁸Griffiths, p. 105.

²⁰⁹Ibid., p. 89.

²¹⁰e.g., see North, Tools, pp. 757-73.

²¹¹Ibid., pp. 396-400.

²¹²Beisner, p. 48.

²¹³Griffiths, p. 79.

much enthusiasm in these quarters. North, for example, declares that "the goal of total economic equality as a standard for society is demonic."²¹⁴

This perspective on society, with its attendant value commitments, translates quite readily into an unequivocal endorsement of a free market economic system. In the first place, capitalism is considered to be a necessary (albeit, not entirely self-sufficient) precondition for the sort of freedoms proponents of this position espouse. In other words, maintaining personal liberty, as it is defined within this tradition, requires a free market economy, but this economic system alone does not automatically guarantee a comprehensive set of freedoms.²¹⁵ Private property rights are integrally bound up with this conception of freedom. To begin with, property is viewed as a unique expression of one's individuality, so having complete discretion over its use is a natural extension of one's personal liberty. In addition, property rights are regarded as a check on concentrations of political power. A widely diffused system of private ownership is therefore a continual safeguard against tyranny. When this property theory--which was actually formulated prior to the rise of industrial capitalism--is applied to the means of production in an industrialized setting, it creates a formidable line of defense for a free enterprise economy. Another important derivative from property rights is the right to engage in voluntary market transactions. Hence, any interference by the state, other than to prevent fraud, is an unwarranted intrusion into the prerogatives of property holders.

It should be noted that the Christian ethicists who espouse the free market system

²¹⁴Gary North, "An Economic Commentary on the Bible; No. 31: The Rights of Private Property," Biblical Economics Today 3:3 (June/July 1980).

²¹⁵This argument is made by Griffiths, p. 95.

openly acknowledge their indebtedness to articulations of this philosophy that are not distinctively religious. Lindsell, for example, traces his view of property to John Locke,²¹⁶ even though he goes on to validate it using the Bible. Adam Smith is also occasionally mentioned favorably, such as when Chilton defends him against charges that he was a deist under the spell of the Enlightenment.²¹⁷ Among more recent economists, the figures associated with the Austrian school have clearly had a discernible influence on these Christian writers. To cite but a few examples, Beisner draws heavily upon Eugen von Bohm-Bawerk's theory of value and price at one point,²¹⁸ North has an extended excursus on Friedrich Hayek's legal philosophy,²¹⁹ and Chilton makes widespread use of Ludwig von Mises' critique of socialism.²²⁰ On matters of international economics, P. T. Bauer of the London School of Economics is widely acknowledged as the pre-eminent authority (Chilton, in fact, dedicated his rejoinder to Ronald Sider's book on world hunger to Bauer²²¹). The writings of U. S. conservative intellectuals such as Murray Rothbard, Russell Kirk, Thomas Sowell, Charles Murray, and Harry Hazlitt also surface frequently in footnotes, along with numerous publications of the Hoover Institute and the American Enterprise Institute.

It is evident, therefore, that these ethicists stand foursquare in an established

²¹⁶Lindsell, pp. 52-3.

²¹⁷Chilton, p. 180-1.

²¹⁸Beisner, chapt. 8: "Stewardship, Value, and Price."

²¹⁹North, Tools, pp. 396-400.

²²⁰Chilton, pp. 94, 174, 189, 220, 226-7, 293-4, et passim.

²²¹*Ibid.*, p. xiv.

tradition of social and economic theorizing. How this ideological stance relates to the practice of biblical interpretation, however, is not an issue that they adequately address. On the surface, the impression they convey is that they are simply extrapolating information or ethical principles directly from the Bible, without any intermediary steps. The only explanation that occasionally surfaces to account for the degree to which their biblically-derived principles coincide with established patterns of political and economic life in the United States is the fact that the architects of the American system were supposedly influenced by the Bible.²²²

In reality, however, ideological considerations intrude into every stage of the interpretive process. These conceptual models of how society operates provide the basic framework that gives structure and cohesion to what would otherwise be random biblical observations and pronouncements. In this way, isolated elements of biblical narrative, pieces of dialogue, commonplace aphorisms, and theological themes are all woven together and absorbed into a systematized social philosophy. For the most part, this ideological construct could (and in its secular manifestations does) stand alone, without any biblical or religious foundation. But the biblical references do offer certain enhancements. Sometimes they merely provide illustrative material, a memorable image, or pithy tag line. Ultimately, however, they form a point of contact between a set of social prescriptions and an overarching conception of ultimate meaning.

The biblical justifications advanced for free market capitalism furnish numerous examples of this phenomenon at work. Biblical descriptions of land tenure in ancient

²²²Davis, p. 9.

Israel, for instance, are interpreted in line with the mode of controlling capital in a free market economy. Prophetic denunciations of despotic monarchs provide a prototype for standard libertarian critiques of the welfare state. The biblical image of the person-as-sinner is conflated with abstract depictions of the human actor in economic theory. Sometimes biblical appeals serve merely to provide theological embellishment for an otherwise purely pragmatic argument. The attempt to supplement the familiar critique of economic planning developed by members of the Austrian school with theological claims about God's exclusive omniscience clearly falls into this category. In all these instances, biblical themes and images have been recast in terms of some ideological set of categories.

Conclusion

The way in which conservative evangelicals have used the Bible to support free market capitalism represents one pattern for bringing scriptural resources to bear upon a social issue of contemporary importance. Generally speaking, the methodology followed in this body of literature putatively entails directly applying biblical mandates and paradigms to situations in a modern industrial context that are regarded as analogous to the biblical precedents. In keeping with the distinctive theological accents of the evangelical Protestant tradition, the Bible is treated as a completely reliable (or 'inerrant') compendium of information about economic topics and an authoritative expression of how God expects economic life to be ordered.

When this rationale for capitalism is examined more thoroughly, however, it demonstrates the complex web of factors which are involved in formulating a social

ethical proposal and in moving from biblical standards to contemporary applications. For a variety of reasons--historical, sociological, and theological--an innate predisposition to favor a free market system exists within the evangelical tradition. There is, for example, a clear affinity between the individualistic themes in the ideology of capitalism and the predominant role personal religious experience plays in the overall ethos of evangelicalism. Consequently, this ideological depiction of the social process comes to be used as a device to synthesize and interpret biblical images and theological symbols. In effect, the Bible provides confirmation and rhetorical sanction for an existing policy option.

The way in which the mainstream evangelical establishment has dealt with economic issues and responded to the problems precipitated by industrialization may reflect features unique to this religious tradition. Other religious communities (and even alternative voices within the evangelical constituency) have generated different responses. At the same time, however, similar patterns are discernible in terms of how the Bible is cited. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, other attempts to relate the Bible to the problems of modern economic life represent assorted variations on a common theme.

CHAPTER II:

THE SOCIAL MARKET SYSTEM

"Those who plumb the scriptural material find a fundamental commitment to community with a submerged individualism. When they apply this position to economic policy, they find themselves somewhere between left-wing capitalists and democratic socialists."

--Warren R. Copeland¹

Although, as the previous chapter indicated, certain strands of Protestant Christianity may have fostered the development of capitalism, it is equally apparent that other segments of the Christian community have been at the forefront of efforts to temper this system's excesses. These opposing tendencies, in turn, mirror tensions and crosscurrents within the Christian tradition itself. For alongside those religious themes and images that have proved congenial to the capitalist ideology, there are countervailing motifs that contravene the unrestrained competition, disparities of wealth, and sanctioning of greed that frequently characterize a free market economy. Consequently, religious reformers and social critics have marshalled these faith resources in the quest to ameliorate capitalism's shortcomings.

Religious critiques of capitalism appeared almost simultaneously with the rise of large-scale industrialism and its attendant problems at the beginning of the nineteenth

¹Warren R. Copeland, Economic Justice: The Social Ethics of U.S. Economic Policy (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), p. 112.

century. In England, the Christian Socialists, led by J. F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley, pioneered the application of Christian principles to economic matters through a variety of literary, educational, and organizational endeavors.² Although this undertaking was short-lived, the cause was soon taken up by advocates of the Social Gospel theology in the United States (some of whom were indebted to British Anglican influences). This distinctively American contribution to the enterprise of Christian ethics was precipitated by the period of rapid industrial expansion in the post-Civil War Gilded Age. According to one of its leading chroniclers, the movement specifically targeted four areas of concern: the rationalization of unrestricted competition in classical economic theory, the conflict between labor and capital, predatory business practices, and the wretched conditions of urban life.³

Confronted by these problems, Protestant Christianity in America generated a range of responses--all of which have, at times, been included under the overall rubric of the Social Gospel movement.⁴ At one end of the spectrum, groups such as the Salvation Army and the organizers of downtown rescue missions represented a traditional

²Ronald C. White, Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins, The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), pp. 26-30.

³C. Howard Hopkins, The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940; paperback edition, 1967), pp. 24-35.

⁴The tripartite division of the movement used here is incorporated into many summary overviews. See, for instance, Dictionary of Christianity in America, s.v. "Social Gospel Movement," by R. T. Handy, p. 1104; and Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, s.v. "Social Gospel," by N. A. Magnuson, p. 1028.

evangelical model of voluntaristic social service.⁵ At the opposite extreme, the radical wing of the Social Gospel movement espoused a thoroughgoing socialism and called for a complete economic restructuring of American society. The Society of Christian Socialists, founded by W. D. P. Bliss, and, later, the Christian Socialist Fellowship, exemplified this tendency.⁶ Among the latter organization's avowed objectives were "to show that Socialism is the necessary economic expression of the Christian life" and "to end the class struggle by establishing industrial democracy."⁷

But the mainstream wing of the Social Gospel movement adopted a less radical, melioristic strategy, consonant with the platform of the political Progressives.⁸ Permeating the rhetoric of these moderate figures were sharp denunciations of the prevailing individualistic, laissez faire approach to economics, coupled with vaguely worded appeals for a spirit of Christian cooperation to resolve industrial conflicts. Washington Gladden typified this sentiment with his assertions that the power of Christian love could overcome the division between capital and labor and that the application of the Golden Rule would assuage the ills of capitalism. Rejecting both

⁵The standard treatment of this approach is Norris A. Magnuson's Salvation in the Slums: Evangelical Social Welfare Work, 1865-1920, ATLA Monogram series, ed. by Kenneth Rowe (Metuchen NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977).

⁶Hopkins, pp. 171-83, 233-44.

⁷quotations from the Christian Socialist Fellowship platform and Christian Socialist magazine, as cited by Hopkins, p. 235.

⁸The affinities between proponents of the Social Gospel and Progressive era reformers, such as Theodore Roosevelt and the Muckraker journalists, is a constant theme in Donald K. Gorrell's The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988).

socialism and individualism, he envisaged some unspecified synthesis of the two.⁹ Even Walter Rauschenbusch, the pre-eminent theorist and exponent of the Social Gospel, while remaining committed to socialistic ideals, still endorsed more modest, incremental measures.¹⁰

Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, this reform impulse became institutionalized as the major northern denominations established agencies and programs such as the Congregational Church's Industrial Committee, the Episcopal Church's League for Industrial Democracy, the Methodist Federation for Social Service, and the Presbyterian Department of Church and Labor--all of which sought to improve working conditions.¹¹ Additional momentum was supplied by the nascent ecumenical movement. One symbol of this convergence between ecumenical interests and the movement for social reform was the adoption of the so-called "Social Creed of the Churches" by the first convocation of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908.¹² This landmark pronouncement, ultimately endorsed by several denominational bodies, enunciated both

⁹Hopkins, pp. 31, 234.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 225-27. Many of these recommended reforms (such as minimum wage legislation, safety standards, a progressive income tax, and the like) are spelled out in Part VI of Rauschenbusch's Christianizing the Social Order (New York: Macmillan, 1921), esp. pp. 412-47.

¹¹This development is treated extensively by Gorrell. See also Hopkins, pp. 280-301.

¹²The term "Social Creed of the Churches" is actually applied to a series of documents. The original version, issued by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1908 and subsequently adopted by the Federal Council of Churches, is found in Hopkins, p. 291. The more familiar 1912 formulation is found on pp. 316-17 and in White and Hopkins, pp. 205-6. A later 1932 revision, reflecting the conditions of the Great Depression era, can be found in White and Hopkins, p. 208.

the general principles (such as the prevention of poverty and the equitable division of profits) as well as specific reform measures (e.g., a living wage, occupational safety standards, and the elimination of child labor) to which the churches were committed. Not surprisingly, then, the New Deal program, vilified by many fundamentalists, was greeted by the leadership of the mainline Protestant establishment as the fulfillment of the Church's longstanding vision for American society.¹³

Concurrent with the rise of the Protestant Social Gospel, the Catholic Church also began addressing economic conditions. In a series of papal encyclicals, beginning with Rerum novarum in 1891,¹⁴ the Church charted what was sometimes referred to as a "third

¹³Merlin Gustafson traces the relationship between Franklin Roosevelt and ecumenical Protestant leaders in his "Franklin D. Roosevelt and his Protestant Constituency," Journal of Church and State 35 (1993):285-97. He concludes: "Protestant leaders and church members who supported a social gospel emphasis based on Scripture were among those who gave [Roosevelt] his strongest support" (p. 297). Cushing Strout similarly concludes that "in the New Deal. . . the liberal social gospel indirectly found its fulfillment. . . ." (The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America [New York: Harper and Row, 1974], p. 265). See also Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 918-23. In their studies of the opinions of rank-and-file clergy who responded to a White House questionnaire in 1935, Monroe Billington and Cal Clark have found considerably more ambivalence about the New Deal. Parish clergy typically supported many of the relief programs, but were wary of other aspects of the Administration program (see, for example, Monroe Billington and Cal Clark, "Baptist Preachers and the New Deal," Journal of Church and State 33 [1991]:255-70; Idem, "Presbyterian Clergy and the New Deal," American Presbyterians 65 [1987]:249-58).

¹⁴The primary source materials are contained (in English translation) in The Papal Encyclicals, 5 vols., ed. by Claudia Carlen ([Wilmington, NC:] McGrath Publishing Co., 1981). The historical evolution of this tradition is traced by Richard L. Camp, The Papal Ideology of Social Reform: A Study in Historical Development, 1878-1967 (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1969). There are also numerous scholarly assessments from various perspectives. Mary Hobgood, for example, discussed this evolving body of social dogma from an avowedly socialist feminist orientation (p. 10), focusing on the tension within the Catholic tradition between the orthodox/neo-classical and radical economic paradigms (Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory [Philadelphia: Temple

way" between laissez faire capitalism and socialism. On the one hand, with its organic and hierarchical view of society inherited from the Middle Ages, the Church eschewed the individualistic liberalism that undergirded classical economics. At the same time, socialism was equally unacceptable, in light of its irreligious overtones and its perceived threat the natural rights of property. Accordingly, the Catholic-oriented Knights of Labor, founded in 1869 as the first national labor union in the United States, was viewed with suspicion by the ecclesiastical hierarchy until it explicitly repudiated any socialistic tendencies.

The alternative vision offered by the encyclicals envisages a web of reciprocal rights and responsibilities. The employee-employer relationship is qualified by the employers' right to receive honest service and by the laborers' right to organize and to receive a "just wage." While circumscribed by natural law and the principle of subsidiarity, the state is obligated to promote an equitable distribution of wealth and to protect the weak. In the European context, these principles found expression in the Christian democracy movement, whose political parties were often in the vanguard of efforts to implement welfare state policies.¹⁵

During the crucial New Deal era in American politics, Catholic opinion ran the gamut from the right-wing demagoguery of Father Charles Coughlin to the left-leaning

University Press, 1991]). Each of the major social encyclicals is also summarized and critiqued from a neo-conservative perspective in Building the Free Society: Democracy, Capitalism, and Catholic Social Teaching, ed. by George Weigel and Robert Royal (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co./Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993).

¹⁵See Michael Fogarty, Christian Democracy in Western Europe, 1820-1953 (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1957).

activism of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement. The Church's official stance, however, pointed in the direction of a regulated market economy.¹⁶ Much of the social welfare legislation of the 1930's was in fact foreshadowed by the 1919 Bishops' Program of Social Reconstruction, an agenda of reforms endorsed by the Catholic hierarchy.¹⁷ Among other things, this document called for minimum wage legislation, vocational training programs, comprehensive social insurance coverage, and the elimination of child labor. Msg. John Ryan, the primary influence behind this initiative, was a pioneering figure in the application of classical Christian moral principles to contemporary economic problems, and his service within the Roosevelt administration and support for social welfare programs earned him the nickname "Right Reverend New Dealer."¹⁸

¹⁶The most comprehensive survey of Catholic opinion during this period, particularly as it was reflected in the Catholic press, is David J. O'Brien's American Catholics and Social Reform: The New Deal Years (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). The history of the evolving, and often conflicting, assessments of the Roosevelt administration within this medium is traced on pp. 47-96. For the position of the Catholic hierarchy, see the text of the Depression-era statements and the accompanying commentary in Justice in the Marketplace: Collected Statements of the Vatican and the United States Catholic Bishops on Economic Policy, 1891-1984, ed. by David M. Byers (Washington: U. S. Catholic Conference, 1985), pp. 393-443. Summarizing the gist of these statements, the editor comments that "[the bishops] are definitely on the same general track as the New Deal Reforms in these documents" although they continually remind their audience of the limitations imposed on the state by the principle of subsidiarity (p. 392). Another helpful overview of Catholic social teaching in the American context is David J. O'Brien, "The Economic Thought of the American Hierarchy," in The Catholic Challenge to the American Economy: Reflections on the U. S. Bishop's Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U. S. Economy, ed. by Thomas M. Gannon (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), pp. 27-41.

¹⁷See the text and introductory commentary in Byers, pp. 365-83.

¹⁸Francis L. Broderick, Right Reverend New Dealer: John A. Ryan (New York: Macmillan, 1963). (The title was actually initially used contemptuously by Father

At the risk, therefore, of glossing over important differences--differences that often mirror confessional distinctives and varying traditions of ethical discourse--it would be fair to say that throughout the twentieth century, an ecumenical consensus began to emerge within the mainstream faith communities in the United States concerning the overall direction that a religious response to the rise of industrial capitalism should take. This convergence of opinion between the mainline Protestant denominations, carrying on the legacy of the Social Gospel movement, and the American Catholic hierarchy has been reflected in a series of collaborative endeavors, frequently involving representatives of organized Judaism as well. In 1931, for example, the Federal Council of Churches, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis jointly convened a "Permanent Preventives of Unemployment" forum.¹⁹ Again, in 1946, the statement "Basic Principles of Economic Justice" was released over the signature of 122 religious leaders and carrying the endorsement of the Federal Council of Churches, the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and the Synagogue Council of America.²⁰ In general, these religious bodies, at least in their official pronouncements, tended to support efforts designed to cushion the effects of poverty, expand the scope of the government's welfare responsibilities, and restrain the untrammelled operations of the free market. So it is against this historical backdrop that

Coughlin in his radio addresses, p. 227.) On Ryan's career, see also O'Brien, American Catholics, pp. 120-49.

¹⁹Edwin Scott Gaustad, A Religious History of America, new revised ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 239.

²⁰Robert Wuthnow, The Restructuring of American Religion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 66.

the literature surveyed in this chapter must be understood.

In recent years, the ranks of capitalism's critics have also come to include dissident voices within the evangelical Protestant community. To some extent, this development reflects the influence of two traditions with European roots that have provided significant intellectual guidance to the cause of theological conservatism in the United States--British evangelicalism and Dutch neo-Calvinism. Among those who have made contributions to the field of social and economic ethics, Oxford University economist Donald Hay and Anglican clerics John Gladwin and John R. W. Stott would fall into the former category,²¹ while the Dutch influence would be exemplified by figures such as Free University of Amsterdam economist Bob Goudzwaard and philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff.²²

There is also an indigenous element to this trend in American evangelicalism, represented by the so-called Young Evangelicals or radical evangelical faction, spawned

²¹See Donald A. Hay, Economics Today: A Christian Critique (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989); John Gladwin, "Centralist Economics," in Wealth and Poverty: Four Christian Views of Economics, ed. by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1984), pp. 181-97. See also the discussion in Craig M. Gay, With Liberty and Justice for Whom? The Recent Evangelical Debate over Capitalism (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 152-58.

²²Bob Goudzwaard, Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979); Nicholas Wolterstorff, Until Justice and Peace Embrace (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983); John P. Tiemstra, ed. Reforming Economics: Calvinist Studies on Methods and Institutions (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990). See also the discussion in Gay, pp. 131-52 and in Roland H. Preston, Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century: The Economic and Political Task (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 77-81.

by the social upheavals of the 1960's.²³ This younger generation of evangelical activists often laid claim to the legacy of nineteenth century revivalists and appealed to the Bible with the same degree of conviction as their counterparts on the Religious Right--albeit with strikingly different conclusions about its economic message. While some segments of this movement pursued a more sectarian option (such as the Washington D. C.-based Sojourners community), political reform is at least one element in the approach of Ronald J. Sider,²⁴ another leader in the effort.

Much of the primary source material surveyed in this chapter was occasioned by developments that took place in the 1980's. With a major restructuring of the American economy underway, a Republican administration seeking to curtail social spending, and neo-conservative thinkers launching an intellectual assault on the underpinnings of the welfare state, faith communities and religious ethicists felt compelled to once again turn their attention to matters of economic policy.²⁵ On the advocacy front, groups such as

²³See Richard Quebedeaux, The Young Evangelicals: Revolution in Orthodoxy (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), esp. pp. 99-134 (on the "Evangelical Social Gospel"); idem, The Worldly Evangelicals (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), esp. pp. 145-62; Robert Booth Fowler, A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 115-39; Augustus Cerillo, Jr. and Murray W. Dempster, Salt and Light: Evangelical Political Thought in Modern America (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House/Washington: Christian College Coalition, 1989), pp. 63-104; Gay, pp. 22-63.

²⁴See esp. his Completely Pro-Life: Building a Consistent Stance (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1987), esp. pp. 73-103. The biblical basis for the domestic policy proposals presented in this book is spelled out more completely in Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: A Biblical Study (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1977), a work which focuses primarily on the issue of world hunger.

²⁵According to Dennis P. Hollinger's historical overview, the period from the 1960's onward marked the second major Christian foray into the economic policy arena, following the Social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

Interfaith Action on Economic Justice mobilized in support of a more progressive agenda.

This renewed interest in economic affairs was also reflected in a series of significant statements by various Christian church bodies, generally expressing dismay at the direction in which public policy was moving. Certainly the most noteworthy example of this development was the Pastoral Letter by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops released, in its final form, in November 1986.²⁶ This pronouncement (and a preliminary draft, which appeared in November 1984) received widespread media attention and was the subject of numerous academic symposiums and critical reviews.²⁷ In terms of its public policy implications, it was often characterized--rightly or wrongly--

centuries (Dictionary of Christianity in America, s.v. "Public Policy, Christianity and," p. 958). Edward LeRoy Long also noted a sharply increased level of attention to economic issues in the annual meetings of the Society of Christian Ethics during the 1980's (Academic Bonding and Social Concerns: The Society of Christian Ethics, 1959-1983 [Religious Ethics, Inc., 1984], pp. 125-28).

²⁶National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U. S. Economy (Washington: U. S. Catholic Conference, 1986). Hereafter, the main body of the text will be referred to as NCCB, with citations identified by paragraph number. The accompanying "Pastoral Message" will be referred to as NCCB, Message, with citations identified by paragraph number.

²⁷A partial list of the most significant of these critical responses would include the previously cited Gannon volume; R. Bruce Douglass, ed. The Deeper Meaning of Economic Life: Critical Essays on the U. S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on the Economy (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1986); George E. McCarthy and Royal W. Rhodes, Eclipse of Justice: Ethics, Economics, and the Lost Traditions of American Catholicism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); John Pawlikowski and Donald Senior, eds., Economic Justice: CTU's Pastoral Commentary on the Bishops' Letter on the Economy (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1988); Charles R. Strain, ed., Prophetic Visions and Economic Realities: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics Confront the Bishops' Letter on the Economy (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989). Entire issues of some periodicals were also devoted to articles related to the Pastoral Letter: America (12 January 1985 and 4 May 1985), Christianity and Crisis (21 January 1985) and the Journal of Business Ethics (1987).

as a rebuke to the Reagan administration's attempts to scale back the welfare state.²⁸

At roughly the same time, albeit accompanied by considerably less fanfare, several major mainline Protestant denominations were also issuing statements on the U. S. economy.²⁹ When the northern and southern branches of American Presbyterianism reunited in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church (USA), both of the predecessor churches were conducting inquiries into economic issues. Christian Faith and Economic Justice,³⁰ which originated in the Council on Theology and Culture of the former southern church, was officially adopted as a study paper in 1984, and Toward a Just, Caring, and Dynamic Political Economy,³¹ which originated in the former northern church's Advisory Council on Church and Society, was accorded the same status the following year. In

²⁸See, for example, Jack Patterson, "The Bishops' Letter: A Clear Challenge to Reaganism," Business Week, 26 November 1984, pp. 55-56. A New York Times article similarly concluded that "much of [the Letter] reads like an assault on the Reagan administration's economic, social, foreign aid and military policies" (Leonard Silk, "Bishops' Letter and U. S. Goals," New York Times 14 November 1984, p. D2). For the record, the bishops denied any partisan motives.

²⁹For an overview of these statements, see Paul F. Camenisch, "Recent Mainline Protestant Statements on Economic Justice," Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics (1987), pp. 55-77; Audrey R. Chapman, "Economic Pastorals and Public Policy," Theology and Public Policy 2:1 (Summer 1990):36-48; Karen Lebacqz, "Protestant Statements on Economic Justice," in A Cry for Justice: the Churches and Synagogues Speak, ed. by Robert McAfee Brown and Sydney Thomson Brown (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 46-63.

³⁰Presbyterian Church (USA), Christian Faith and Economic Justice (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1989). This document will subsequently be cited as PCUSA, CFEJ, with specific references being identified according to the text's internal system of paragraph enumeration.

³¹Committee on a Just Political Economy, Toward a Just, Caring, and Dynamic Political Economy (New York: Advisory Council on Church and Society, Presbyterian Church [USA], 1985). This document will subsequently be cited as PCUSA, TJCDPE.

1989, following a nine year process, which resulted in three preliminary drafts, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ adopted its "Pronouncement on Christian Faith: Economic Life and Justice."³² Other statements, less comprehensive than these in their scope and magnitude, were issued by the Lutheran Church in America (now part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) in 1980,³³ the Reformed Church in America in 1984,³⁴ the Disciples of Christ in 1987,³⁵ the bishops of the Episcopal Church in 1987,³⁶ and the United Methodist Church in 1988.³⁷ There was, therefore, ample justification for Audrey Chapman's observation that "the 1980's may be remembered as

³²For a highly critical history and evaluation of the process leading up to the issuing of this statement, see W. Widick Schroeder, Flawed Process and Sectarian Substance: Analytic and Critical Perspectives on the United Church of Christ General Synod Pronouncement "Christian Faith: Economic Life and Justice" (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1990). The text can be found on pp. 121-44 of this book and in Rebecca M. Blank, Do Justice: Linking Christian Faith and Modern Economic Life (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1992), pp. 151-89. This statement will hereafter be cited as UCC. Since the document itself lacks any internal system of numbered divisions, citations will be identified according to the page number in the Blank book.

³³Lutheran Church in America, "Economic Justice: Stewardship of Creation in Human Community," 1980. This document will subsequently be cited as LCA.

³⁴"Biblical Faith and Our Economic Life," in The Acts and Proceedings of the 178th Regular Session of the General Synod, Reformed Church in America, vol. 64 (1984), pp. 51-68. This statement will subsequently be cited as RCA.

³⁵Joint Working Group in International Concerns, "Economic Systems--Their Impact on the Third World: A Beginning Christian Study," Minutes of the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 1987, pp. 284-301. This statement will subsequently be cited as DC, with specific references being identified by the text's internal system of paragraph enumeration.

³⁶Urban Bishops' Coalition, "Economic Justice and the Christian Conscience" (Marquette, MI, 1987).

³⁷"Economic Justice" in The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church, 1988 (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1988), pp. 330-40. This statement will subsequently be cited as UMC.

the decade of the economic pastorals."³⁸

The Biblical Rationale for a Social Market System

One important point that should be underscored at the very outset of this discussion is the fact that most of this literature has not been written for the express purpose of defending one particular economic system. This objective is, in fact, explicitly disavowed by many of these documents, which maintain on theological grounds that every existing economic system has flaws and that none should be regarded as sacrosanct.³⁹ Consequently, they lack the apologetical and polemical tone of the evangelical literature written in support of capitalism. Rather than promoting one system, some of the church study papers offer a comparative survey of different models without expressing a preference for any,⁴⁰ while others appear to represent a synthesis of dissonant perspectives.⁴¹

³⁸Chapman, p. 36.

³⁹NCCB, "Message," par. 12; PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.073, 29.080, 29.246; DC, par. 49, 147.

⁴⁰PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.256-29.293 compares "democratic capitalism" and "democratic socialism;" DC, par. 66-98, compares "free market capitalism," "modified market capitalism," and "centralized socialism," followed by a critique (par. 99-106), and then the presentation of an alternative strategy that supposedly can be realized within the context of any of these models--"localist self-development" (par. 107-14).

⁴¹Roger L. Shinn, who served on the drafting committee for the UCC's Pronouncement, opined that the final product contained "three theological ethical strands, uneasily joined:" a sectarian sort of Christian perfectionism, liberation theology, and an economic meliorism (i.e. "a market economy modified by government regulation"). The last, he says, is the dominant emphasis, onto which the other two strands occasionally intrude ("Christian Faith and Economic Practice," Christian Century, 24-31 July 1991, p. 721).

Nevertheless, in tenor and tone, if not in concrete substance, the literature included in this chapter resonates most closely with the values and ideological rhetoric of the modern welfare state. To begin with, the writers generally assume that--for better or worse--they are addressing participants in a market economy.⁴² The primary issue for them, therefore, is not whether this is the optimum economic system, but rather how it can be modified or reformed so that it reflects biblical and ethical values more adequately.

Notwithstanding their individual distinctives, all of these writings tend to follow a fairly uniform pattern of biblical and theological reasoning. The difference is that some of the documents derive more specific policy applications from these guidelines, while others simply develop the overall theoretical framework.

But even the statements which are devoid of specific recommendations generally affirm, in principle, the government's responsibility to promote economic justice.⁴³ When specific recommendations are offered, they generally entail extending the scope of this mandate through measures such as establishing a national minimum income standard,⁴⁴ guaranteeing full employment,⁴⁵ expanding affirmative action programs,⁴⁶ raising the

⁴²This assumption is made explicit in UCC, p. 165; NCCB, "Message," par. 20; NCCB, par. 131.

⁴³e.g., PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.100; LCA, p. 5.

⁴⁴UCC, p. 174; NCCB, par. 212-13; Sider, Pro-Life, pp. 89-90.

⁴⁵UCC, p. 174; NCCB, par. 151-58; PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 29; Hay, p. 174, Sider, Pro-Life, p. 85.

⁴⁶NCCB, par. 167; PCUSA, TJCDPE, pp. 18, 31.

minimum wage,⁴⁷ and instituting universal health care coverage.⁴⁸ In terms of fiscal priorities, there are calls to cut military spending,⁴⁹ raise taxes (at least on wealthier families),⁵⁰ and channel more resources into domestic spending programs⁵¹ and international aid funds.⁵² So while it may be true that none of the writings under consideration here are prepared to give any one economic system a divine imprimatur, in the final analysis, the social market variety of capitalism tends to receive at least a qualified (and usually implicit) endorsement as an authentic expression of what Christian faithfulness demands within the current historical context.

Consistent with the overall methodology employed in this literature, there is generally no direct connection made between biblical warrants and economic prescriptions. Scriptural citations, in other words, are not tagged to ideological claims or policy proposals in proof-text fashion. Instead, the biblical component in these writings customarily involves a rehearsal of the Bible's storyline, highlighting the pivotal stages in its unfolding drama--the creation epic, the exodus-event, the formation of a covenant people, the prophetic tradition, and the Jesus movement (a pattern which is reflected in the organization of this section of the chapter).

But although there may not be a direct correspondence between elements in this

⁴⁷NCCB, par. 197.

⁴⁸UCC, p. 174; NCCB, par. 103.

⁴⁹NCCB, par. 294; PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 25.

⁵⁰NCCB, par. 202; PCUSA, TJCDPE, pp. 22, 25; Sider, Pro-Life, p. 96.

⁵¹NCCB, par. 212-13.

⁵²NCCB, par. 265.

summary of the biblical message and the proposals for how contemporary economic life should be organized, there clearly is a degree of correlation. One certainly would have a hard time mistaking these renditions of the Bible's message with the comparable biblical surveys in the manifestos for free market capitalism. So while the process of discerning how particular themes in the biblical narrative contribute to the overall moral argument may involve an element of speculation, it is reasonable to assume that the two are congruent.

The Social Market System Manages the Gift of Creation for the Good of All

The Argument

The opening chapters of Genesis contain a pair of creation stories that establish the framework for the Bible's view of the cosmos and humanity's place within it. The more familiar narrative in Genesis 1:1-2:4a--attributed by critical scholarship to the Priestly source (P)--depicts the deity bringing various aspects of the natural world into existence through the instrumentality of the spoken word and then declaring each one to be good. This process reaches its culmination in the creation of the male and female progenitors of the human race, who are given a mandate to exercise dominion over the rest of creation. Throughout the remainder of the biblical text, the various theological themes that are introduced here--God's transcendence in relation to the created order, the goodness of material existence, and humanity's dominion over nature--continue to be echoed and reaffirmed.⁵³

⁵³On the recurrence of the dominion motif throughout the Hebrew Bible canon, see Hans Walter Wolff, Anthropology of the Old Testament, trans. by Margaret Kohl

Proponents of a social market economy invoke these creation images in various ways. The most comprehensive summary of the creation story's economic relevance appears in the Presbyterian Church's Christian Faith and Economic Justice paper, which identifies four implications. First, by affirming the goodness of the material world (Gen. 1:12, 18, 25, 31), the doctrine of creation is said to underscore the importance of the economic aspect of life. For this reason, the statement rejects any view of religion which restricts its application exclusively to spiritual matters.⁵⁴ To the contrary, "since the material world is part of God's good creation, the fulfillment of such needs as food, shelter, medical care, clothing, and opportunity for work are part of what God expects all to enjoy."⁵⁵

Secondly, according to this statement, by virtue of the fact that it was created by God, "the earth is the Lord's" (Ps. 24:1)." This claim is used to circumscribe the extent of human proprietorship over the things of creation and to suggest that material goods should be viewed as a stewardship from God--a requirement which is undermined if they are squandered or not passed along to succeeding generations intact.⁵⁶

In fact, throughout this body of literature, stewardship--understood in terms of a collective responsibility to manage the resources of creation for the well-being of

(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), pp. 226-29.

⁵⁴PCUSA, CFEJ 29.083.

⁵⁵ibid, 29.126. Along these same lines, the Catholic bishops affirm that "one legacy of [the] theology of creation is the conviction that no dimension of human life lies beyond God's care and concern" (NCCB, par. 31).

⁵⁶Ibid, 29.085.

everyone--is a dominant theme. It forms the overarching framework, for example, of the Lutheran Church's statement entitled "Economic Justice: Stewardship of Creation in Human Community," which opens by echoing the words of Psalm 24:1 and Genesis 1:28. The fact that the word "economy" itself can be traced etymologically to the image of a household steward familiar to readers of the Bible is not lost on the drafters of these church documents. The United Church of Christ affirms that "for Christians, economics involves the management of the human household in a manner consistent with God's intentions as revealed in Scripture."⁵⁷ The stewardship symbol, therefore, effectively conveys the sense that there is a level of accountability in the conduct of economic affairs beyond the random interplay of market forces.

The third aspect of the creation story identified as significant by the Presbyterian paper is the reference to human beings as creatures made "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27)--a metaphor which means, according to the writers of this document, that they are free and responsible agents in the world. Negatively, this understanding of the human person precludes any so-called "theory of economic determinism" which regards human existence as merely the product of economic forces or which disavows any responsibility for shaping the economy to serve human needs.⁵⁸ Positively, this view affirms the dignity

⁵⁷UCC, p. 154. The motif of "managing the human household," which is a central image in this document, is developed more fully by M. Douglas Meeks (a member of the task force which drafted the Pronouncement) in his God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). The connection between stewardship and the etymology of "economy" is also made in LCA, p. 1.

⁵⁸PCUSA, CFEJ 29.086. The text does not identify these theories, but one could conceivably apply this indictment both to rigid interpretations of Marx's historical materialism, as well as to laissez faire depictions of the market as an autonomous, self-regulating mechanism.

and worth of every person. Since everyone is said to be equally endowed by their Creator with these qualities, social and economic equality is advanced as the primary standard by which the patterns of economic life are to be evaluated.⁵⁹ Secondly, the paper also infers from the symbol of the divine image that economic freedom is an important consideration. So another criterion by which economic arrangements are to be assessed is the extent to which they afford opportunities "for the responsible use of liberty."⁶⁰

A similar assertion of human dignity, again largely predicated on the creation theme of the divine image, constitutes the core value commitment in the Catholic bishops' Pastoral Letter as well. The opening paragraph of the chapter outlining the Letter's "Christian Vision" for the economy cites Genesis 1:27 (the first scriptural reference in the Letter) to support the central premise that "the dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured."⁶¹ In subsequent sections of the Letter, this value is invoked to support such things as economic rights,⁶² full employment with generous benefits,⁶³ unionization,⁶⁴ and income support programs that do not stigmatize the recipients.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ibid. 29.122. Interestingly, on this point, the writers cite the Declaration of Independence, rather than a biblical or theological warrant.

⁶⁰ibid. 29.130.

⁶¹NCCB, par. 28 (cf. par. 32). In par. 186, the bishops also refer to the "human dignity" standard as the heart of their approach.

⁶²ibid., par. 79-80.

⁶³ibid., par. 136, 103.

⁶⁴ibid., par. 104.

⁶⁵ibid., par. 215.

Finally, a fourth implication of creation is the crucial one.

The doctrine of creation affirms that material things are given for all humankind to enjoy. The Genesis story expresses this by speaking of God as planting a garden for Adam, giving him authority over all creatures, and providing him with every plant for food. . . . God's good creation is not just for the privileged few. It is for all people to share and enjoy. All are to have fair access.⁶⁶

This is the same lesson that the Catholic bishops derive from creation in their Pastoral Letter. One of the key points in the letter's biblical rationale is the contention that:

"From the patristic period to the present, the Church has affirmed that misuse of the world's resources or appropriation of them by a minority of the world's population betrays the gift of creation since 'whatever belongs to God belongs to all'.⁶⁷ This idea that the gifts of God's creation should be widely distributed so that everyone can share in them is a recurrent theme, which is echoed by the UCC Pronouncement,⁶⁸ the Presbyterian Church's other economic policy statement,⁶⁹ and by Donald Hay.⁷⁰

In this way, the creation motif functions as a counterbalance to the assertion of absolute property rights in capitalist theory. By invoking this theological symbol, social market theorists suggest that ownership prerogatives are qualified by the rights of everyone to share in the abundance of God's creation and by the need to maintain the well-being of the natural environment. Achieving these objectives does not necessarily

⁶⁶ibid, 29.084.

⁶⁷par. 34.

⁶⁸UCC, p. 152.

⁶⁹PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 10.

⁷⁰Hay, pp. 75-6.

mandate a particular economic system, but it does lay the foundation for asserting a greater measure of social control over the economic arena.

Analysis

This particular facet of the biblical rationale for a mixed economy stands in direct continuity with a longstanding feature of social theories. Myths of origins--whether they are represented as a literal account of primeval history or as an idealized projection of what a hypothetical state of nature would be like--have frequently formed a prologue to various prescriptions for contemporary social institutions. In fact, one standard treatment of private property theory by an historian of political philosophy claims that the major schools of thought on this issues are all anticipated by (if not based on) the various ways of interpreting the Genesis story within the Christian tradition.⁷¹

Yet, as this observation implies, images drawn from the Hebrew Bible's creation epic are sufficiently fluid and multivalent to enable them to be pressed into service on behalf of various social ideologies. Mark Ellington's survey of church pronouncements on several different social questions has demonstrated that appeals to creation are often made by supporters of quite contrary positions. When creation is construed in a more or less static fashion--as in reasoning involving natural law and orders of creation (often dialectically juxtaposed, à la Lutheranism's two kingdoms ethic, with the order of redemption)--it tends to legitimize the established social order. On the other hand, when creation is viewed in continuity with Christological themes or the redemptive sphere of

⁷¹Andrew Reeve, Property, Issues in Political Theory series, ed. by Peter Jones and Albert Weale (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, International, 1986), pp. 72, 74.

the gospel, it can be used to authorize more progressive social currents.⁷²

This overall situation is reflected in the field of Christian economic ethics, where creation theology is cited by capitalism's critics and defenders alike. Genesis 1:28, for example, which is the starting point in many biblical rationales for social intervention into the economy, is also the cornerstone for the philosophy of economic libertarianism known alternately as Christian Reconstructionism or Dominion Theology.⁷³ What these appeals--and most other references to creation within the context of economic ethics--have in common is a tendency to focus on the 'P' narrative in Genesis 1:1-2:4a, with its view of human beings as God's image-bearers, subduing the earth and exercising dominion over the rest of nature. The fact that the predominant economic models originating in the West--ranging from laissez faire capitalism to socialist command economies--have all promoted large-scale industrial enterprises that regard the natural environment as a collection of resources to be exploited for human purposes may be one cultural legacy of this theme of dominion.⁷⁴ Critics of this imbalance have sometimes pointed to the older Yahwistic creation saga (Gen. 2:4b-25) as a text which offers a

⁷²Mark Ellingsen, The Cutting Edge: How Churches Speak on Social Issues (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993). This is a subtext throughout the entire book, but see esp. pp. 4-15, 19, 58-61, 116, 127, 134-37.

⁷³On the use of this verse, see Bruce Barron, Heaven on Earth: The Social and Political Agendas of Dominion Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 13-16, 154-55.

⁷⁴The classic statement of this general thesis within the context of the current environmental situation is Lynn White Jr.'s "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," Science 155 (1967):1203-7. Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb comment on the similar patterns of industrialization in capitalist and socialist economies in their For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 13.

complementary and more benign picture of humanity's interdependent place within the physical world.⁷⁵

Where the different approaches to economic ethics diverge is over the way in which this theme of human dominion is construed. For social welfare capitalists, this mandate summons "women and men to be faithful stewards in caring for the earth,"⁷⁶ a responsibility that includes conserving its resources for future generations and insuring the wide and equitable distribution of economic benefits. In free enterprise capitalism writings, images of control and domination are more prevalent, as in Gary North's statement (in the context of discussing Gen. 1:26-28) that "the doctrine of dominion teaches. . . that there is a chain of command in the universe," which entails, for example, the subordination of women to men.⁷⁷ Overall, in this Reconstructionist vision, fulfilling the dominion mandate involves participating in the process of wealth creation, maximizing the economic return on the resources at one's disposal, and seeking to impose biblical law codes on every sphere of life.

In addition to the fact that the dominion terminology is invested with different shades of meaning, another crucial distinction concerns whether stewardship is construed corporately or individualistically. In other words, what is fundamentally at stake in this

⁷⁵Bruce C. Birch, Larry L. Rasmussen, The Predicament of the Prosperous, Biblical Perspectives on Current Issues series, ed. by Howard C. Kee (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), pp. 112-18. An attempt to balance the emphases in these two creation stories is evident in the discussion by Hay, pp. 18-19, 72.

⁷⁶NCCB, par. 32.

⁷⁷Gary North, Inherit the Earth: Biblical Principles for Economics (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 29.

discussion is whether stewardship is (at least in part) a responsibility that the community discharges collectively in the interest of a common set of goals and values or whether it is an individual responsibility guided entirely by one's private religious conscience.

In opting for the former alternative, the literature surveyed in this chapter harks back to a classical Christian moral teaching, with roots in the Patristic period (as evidenced by the fact that the Catholic bishops quote Cyprian on this point), which maintains that the gifts of creation were bestowed on humankind collectively. This notion that the biblical story of creation implies an original community of goods continued virtually unchallenged throughout the medieval period, engendering within the Christian tradition a sense that private property is, at best, morally suspect, if not evil.⁷⁸ These ideas were to eventually take root among such groups as the Anabaptist sects, English Levellers, and early religious socialists.⁷⁹

But with the rise of a commercial economy, it became incumbent on Christian thinkers to reconcile the presumed communism of Paradise with the existence of private property. In a formulation that became the definitive treatment for Catholic moral theology, Thomas Aquinas resolved this tension by arguing that private property is an essential economic incentive and source of security in a post-lapsarian world. At the

⁷⁸For an annotated summary and review of primary source materials illustrating this perspective, see Charles Avila, Ownership: Early Christian Teaching (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), esp. pp. 43-5, 66-9, 71-8, 116-22, and the summary on pp. 134-6 and 138-44. See also Martin Hengel, Property and Riches in the Early Church (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) and Justo Gonzalez, Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 93-6, 116-7, 188-93, and the summary on pp. 225-9.

⁷⁹Robert M. Veatch, The Foundations of Justice: Why the Retarded and the Rest of Us Have Claims to Equality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 48-55.

same time, these ownership prerogatives are qualified by the responsibility to use one's belongings for the common good and by the principle that under conditions of dire necessity anyone may legitimately appropriate what they need for their survival.⁸⁰

Interestingly, even John Locke predicated his classic defense of private property on the supposition that the world and its resources were conferred by God on the human race as a common estate.⁸¹ Since individuals are entitled to the fruits of their labor, however, they acquire private shares by combining their creative energy with some portion of this common storehouse of goods to produce a finished product. Again, however, this right is qualified by the famous two-fold Lockean proviso--namely that no one should appropriate more than he or she can use without spoilage and that enough has to be left in the common stockpile to allow everyone an opportunity to benefit. What these intermediate property explanations offer, therefore, is a provisional property right based on the notion that one's private holdings have ultimately been withdrawn from a common pool of resources, subject to certain terms and conditions.⁸²

⁸⁰J. Philip Wogaman, Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 92-3.

⁸¹John Locke, The Second Treatise of Government, ed. by Thomas P. Peardon (Indianapolis: Bobb-Merrill [Library of Liberal Arts], 1952), sections 25-27. (In offering this conjecture, Locke was responding to the views of a contemporary, Robert Filmer, who maintained that private property prevailed even in paradise. For the historical background to this dispute, see Reeve, pp. 55.)

⁸²Locke's position is admittedly somewhat ambiguous on this point, since some of his language (e.g., about "exclusive dominion") has historically served to buttress the laissez faire philosophy. Many recent commentators, however, would aver, with James Grunebaum, that "whatever Locke may have intended, his arguments cannot justify the excesses of capitalism" (Private Ownership [New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987], p. 69).

In the literature supporting free enterprise capitalism, there is a subtle--albeit pivotal--shift in emphasis. Rather than accenting the corporate nature of the creation endowment, with the concomitant responsibility to share it equitably, free market supporters tend to describe stewardship in wholly individualistic terms. Again, this tendency has long-standing historical antecedents extending back at least into the seventeenth century. One version of the Genesis story prevalent in this period maintained that Adam exercised a private dominion over the realm of creation, which was subsequently parcelled out among his individual descendants, thereby giving rise to the institution of private property.⁸³ Consistent with this line of interpretation, by the nineteenth century the stewardship philosophy within American Protestantism had acquired strongly individualistic overtones. One industrialist at the turn of the twentieth century captured the essence of this position well when he stated (in the context of a labor dispute): "The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for, not by the labor agitators, but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given control of the property interests of the country."⁸⁴

Rather than postulating a situation in which the resources of creation were initially held in common and then conditionally divided up, this philosophy simply stipulates that God, the ultimate owner of all things, has bestowed upon select individuals

⁸³Reeve, p. 55.

⁸⁴From a quote attributed to George F. Bauer in Gail Kennedy, ed., Democracy and the Gospel of Wealth (Boston: C. C. Heath & Co., 1949), p. xii, cited by J. Philip Wogaman, Christian Moral Judgment (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 103.

the right to manage a certain portion of them as proximate owners.⁸⁵ The awareness that one's wealth is a trust from God is intended to engender a sense of moral responsibility to use it wisely and to engage in philanthropic endeavors--generally undertaken in a paternalistic spirit of noblesse oblige. But under this scenario, the community-at-large, or its members who lack an adequate livelihood, have no prior claim on anyone's property.

In conclusion, then, this brief excursus through the history of interpretation shows that there are several ways of depicting the primordial human condition within the parameters of the Genesis story and of relating the creation saga to contemporary patterns of property holding. Some versions legitimize the status quo, while others provide a religious basis for critiquing it. In either case, the conclusions that follow from these interpretive moves correspond to the standard set of approaches put forth by non-religious theorists. The predominantly patristic and medieval version of a lost paradise finds its analogue in the socialist theory of "primitive communism" and the dictum that "property is theft." The conditional acquiescence to private ownership set against the backdrop of an original community of goods--the Thomistic position--parallels, in its practical effects, conventional or utilitarian justifications for private property which create a provisional right.⁸⁶ Finally, the more absolute claims advanced by Christian proponents of the free market, based on God's providential bestowal, essentially coincide with the natural rights theory of property advanced by libertarian thinkers such as Robert Nozick.⁸⁷ In this

⁸⁵For examples of this line of reasoning, see North, pp. 13, 23.

⁸⁶See Alan Ryan, *Property*, Concepts in Social Thought series, ed. by Frank Parkin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 53-60; Grunebaum, pp. 86-113.

⁸⁷See Grunebaum, pp. 52-80; Ryan, pp. 61-9.

context, what the creation appeals do is to provide an etiological rationale for a particular social vision by projecting it onto the landscape of a primordial sacred past.⁸⁸

The Social Market System Corresponds to the Covenant Pattern

The Argument

While the creation stories establish the framework for the Bible's theistic cosmology, the Exodus-event and the enactment of the covenant with Yahweh represented the defining moments in the national epic of the ancient Hebrews and thereby shaped their distinctive sense of cultural and religious identity. In their present canonical form, these two episodes are depicted as sequential and complementary stages in the formation of the people of Israel. But in terms of their ethical implications, the Exodus is often viewed as the paradigmatic revolutionary liberation event, whereas the covenant materials provide the biblical precedent for a stable framework of law.⁸⁹

Not surprisingly, therefore, it is this latter set of texts that receives primary

⁸⁸This observation, of course, should not diminish the significance of these religious foundations. Robert M. Veatch has argued that a religious starting point (which, in his case, specifically entails a belief in creation and human stewardship) is a necessary precondition for an egalitarian social vision. The only way, he suggests, non-religious egalitarian theorists (such as John Rawls) can present a coherent account of their system is by smuggling in religious assumptions (Veatch, pp. 111-2). In a similar vein, Alan Ryan comments that Robert Nozick has a more difficult time establishing a particular point in his property theory than did his alleged forerunner, John Locke, because while the latter appealed to God, Nozick's "universe has lost its Creator" (*Property*, Concepts in Social Thought series, ed. by Frank Parkin [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987], p. 69).

⁸⁹This distinction is evident, for example, in the discussion by Birch and Rasmussen, p. 85, although it is important to note that they strongly affirm the complementary nature of these motifs.

emphasis in the social market literature--although (reflecting the influence of Liberation Theology) references to the Exodus are common as well. In a general way, the biblical covenant motif suggests images of social solidarity, mutual responsibility for other members of the community, and legal protection for the vulnerable and disenfranchised. As a compact into which the ancient Israelites were summoned as a corporate entity, the covenant affirms that "humans are communal beings"⁹⁰ and it counteracts "an autonomous rugged individualism" that pictures persons living "in a social vacuum."⁹¹ The "Biblical/Theological Background" section of the United Methodist "Economic Justice" resolution elaborates on this perspective and spells out its social ethical implications:

Within the universal gift of God's creation we are called into the particular tradition and mission of being a covenant people. . . . In covenant we are committed to the welfare of our neighbors, and this must include our economic and political relationships. Covenant people are committed to equitable distribution of resources to meet basic human needs and to social systems that provide ongoing access to those resources.⁹²

These overarching ideals are given concrete expression in the legal stipulations of the Pentateuch. As the Catholic bishops point out, "these codes made life in community possible."⁹³ Predictably, the emphasis in the discussions of these materials falls on the various provisions regulating economic activities and mandating assistance for the needy. A typical summary statement is provided by the United Church of Christ's

⁹⁰DC, par. 43.

⁹¹PCUSA, TICDPE, pp. 8-9.

⁹²UMC, p. 331.

⁹³NCCB, par. 36.

Pronouncement:

The covenant of the Old Testament focuses on the needs and rights of those who are often excluded from the community. The rules of God's household demand that the poor (Exodus 23:6, Deuteronomy 15:7-11), the stranger (Exodus 22:2-11), the sojourner (Deuteronomy 10:19), and the widow and orphan (Exodus 22:22) all be accorded special protection and access to the livelihood of the household. . . .⁹⁴

The United Methodists elaborate on the protections to which these groups of disadvantaged persons were entitled, asserting that the law codes in the Pentateuch "guarantee basic rights such as food (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 23:21-22, 24:19-22), clothing (Ex. 26-27), just business dealings (Deut. 25:13-16), and access to just judicial process (Ex. 23:6-8)."⁹⁵ One particular point that is often underscored is the fact that these texts supposedly established legal mechanisms for addressing the problem of poverty. The Presbyterians, for instance, claim that under this system, meeting the needs of the poor "was not simply a matter of private inclination to charity. It was the demand of God written into Israel's law."⁹⁶

Throughout this body of literature, the two pieces of biblical legislation that receive the most attention are the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year provisions. The former set of practices were tied to an agricultural cycle in which fields were not tilled in the seventh year. In conjunction with this fallow year, the land's uncultivated yield of crops was to be set aside, in part, for people who were poor (Exodus 23:10-11), and slaves were supposed to be emancipated (Exodus 21:2)--requirements which, the United

⁹⁴UCC, p. 154.

⁹⁵UMC, p. 331.

⁹⁶PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.047.

Methodists claim, were designed "to periodically re-balance economic inequities."⁹⁷

Moreover, according to Ronald J. Sider: "The sabbatical provision on loans is even more revolutionary (Deut. 15:1-6). Every seven years all debts are to be canceled!"⁹⁸

But the pre-eminent biblical paradigm for the social market position is the Year of Jubilee. According to the description given in Leviticus 25:8-55, every fifty years family patrimonies which had been seized by creditors were to revert back to the original family of ownership. Other provisions in this legislation involved the manumission of slaves and the cancellation of debts. Sider, who regards this passage as "one of the most radical texts in all of Scripture,"⁹⁹ characterizes its importance in this way:

That this passage prescribes justice rather than haphazard handouts by wealthy philanthropists is extremely significant. The year of Jubilee envisages an institutionalized structure that affects everyone automatically. It is to be the poor person's right to receive back his inheritance at the time of Jubilee. . . . The biblical concept of Jubilee underlines the importance of institutionalized mechanisms and structures that promote justice.¹⁰⁰

Elsewhere, he describes this measure as a "divine demand for a regular, fundamental redistribution of the means of producing wealth"¹⁰¹ and as a "law which would equalize

⁹⁷UMC, p. 332.

⁹⁸Sider, Rich Christians, p. 91.

⁹⁹ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰⁰ibid., p. 89 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰¹ibid, p. 223. This is a common theme. The study guide for the UCC Pronouncement says that the Jubilee entailed "a regular redistribution of property" (Blank, p. 18) and a United Methodist resolution supporting a comparable worth standard for wages characterizes it as a "time when . . . land and wealth were equitably redistributed" ("Pay Equity" in Book of Resolutions, p. 361).

land ownership every fifty years."¹⁰² Its ultimate objective, he says, was to curb concentrations of wealth¹⁰³ and to prevent the emergence of extreme economic disparities.¹⁰⁴ Alongside its function as an equalizing mechanism, the Jubilee legislation is also cited to establish the principle that under the laws of ancient Israel, property rights were not inviolable¹⁰⁵ and the so-called justice-in-transfer criterion (which upholds the validity of property rights acquired through legitimate and voluntary market exchanges¹⁰⁶) was not the ultimate norm.¹⁰⁷

Overall, then, the legislative materials in the Pentateuch contribute several things to the social market perspective. First, their setting within the context of the covenant is used to offset the individualism inherent in classical economic theory and to establish a communitarian framework for economic ethics. Secondly, these legal codes are said to contravene the laissez faire philosophy of non-interference in market transactions by showing that economic activity was regulated in ancient Israel. Thirdly, they supposedly provide a precedent for schemes of wealth redistribution that are designed to produce a greater measure of economic equality.

Analysis

As the only unit of Scripture containing specific guidelines concerning the

¹⁰²ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰³Sider, Pro-Life, pp. 76-77.

¹⁰⁴Sider, Rich Christians, p. 129.

¹⁰⁵ibid., pp. 115-16.

¹⁰⁶see Nozick, pp. 150-53.

¹⁰⁷Hay, p. 161.

economic practices of a functioning society, the Pentateuch plays a crucial role in virtually all attempts to construct an economic ethic based on the Bible. But at the same time, the way the various statutory requirements in this portion of the canon have been appropriated by contemporary ethicists provides a classic example of the problems connected with transferring normative principles formulated within one social setting into another. Almost inevitably, this process involves using the biblical materials in a selective fashion, often with insufficient regard for their original context.

A good case in point is the much-heralded spirit of social solidarity in the Hebrew Bible, which is embodied in the theology of covenant and which many ethicists regard as a healthy corrective to present trends in the direction of an excessive individualism. This current situation may, of course, be a legitimate cause for concern, and traditional patterns of community life reflected in ancient sources may well offer an element of neglected wisdom. But it still must be recognized that this group-oriented mentality, which the ancient Israelites shared with all pre-modern societies, was a function of a particular set of cultural dynamics, such as a patriarchal social structure and a strong sense of tribal identification¹⁰⁸ (even as modern individualism is, by some accounts, a function of social differentiation and a specialized labor force¹⁰⁹). It was, moreover, nurtured and sustained by a national religious cultus, in which participation was

¹⁰⁸On the relationship between the individual and the community in the Old Testament, see Walther Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament, trans. by J. A. Baker, Old Testament Library series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 2:231-67; Otto J. Baab, The Theology of the Old Testament (New York: Abingdon, 1949), pp. 56-61; and Wolff, pp. 214-22.

¹⁰⁹A classic statement of this thesis is Emil Durkheim's The Division of Labor in Society, trans. George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1933).

apparently mandatory. Needless to say, this was not an environment conducive to the cultivation of values such as freedom of conscience, individual rights, and religious tolerance. This group consciousness also entailed other features equally undesirable from a modern standpoint, including notions of collective guilt and perhaps even a diminished psychic sense of personal identity.¹¹⁰ There is, therefore, a profound disjunction between this corporate mindset in antiquity and the benign commitment to the common good which undergirds contemporary liberalism.

Another factor that has to be reckoned with in the process of studying these biblical materials is the extent to which the economy of ancient Israel, like that of all pre-industrial societies, was thoroughly embedded within a wider framework of kinship, civil, and cultic structures. Consequently, since there is no independent realm of economics operating according to its own internal logic, customs governing economic activities are interwoven with the overall fabric of the culture. The Jubilee institution in ancient Israel furnishes an apt illustration. On one level, it represents an attempt (perhaps a purely

¹¹⁰The biblical data corroborating this idea of collective guilt is summarized by Baab, pp. 57-8. For a slightly different perspective, emphasizing the dimension of personal responsibility, see Bruce Birch, Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), pp. 296-97; and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward Old Testament Ethics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 70-72. The extent to which such phenomena reflected a different mode of consciousness is disputed. Some of the strongest claims about this kind of collective consciousness are offered in H. Wheeler Robinson's Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel, revised ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). Robinson's work, which drew heavily upon the anthropological theories of Lucien Levy-Bruhl about the pre-logical features of the primitive mentality, has been subjected to much criticism in recent years, a summary of which can be found in Gene M. Tucker's introduction to this edition of the book (pp. 7-13). In his work cited above, Durkheim similarly used the ancient Hebrews (e.g., pp. 86, 157-8) to illustrate the phenomenon he referred to as "mechanical solidarity"—the situation that supposedly prevails in traditional societies, whereby the individual is submerged in an all-pervasive, religiously-based collective consciousness.

utopian one) to reassert the egalitarian ethos of Israel's pastoral nomadic traditions. Assuming that the present text took shape in the late monarchical period,¹¹¹ this set of prescriptions would have been designed to circumvent the increasing consolidation of land-holdings—a development which repeatedly drew the ire of figures in the prophetic movement. But the institution, as it is formulated here, also reflects an assortment of other cultural values. It is, for example, bound up with the whole notion of the vertical solidarity of a particular clan throughout the generations and with the sense that a perpetual bond exists between this family line and a plot of land representing their stake in the people of Israel (a sentiment to which many biblical texts allude).¹¹² To this extent, the Jubilee legislation reflects the same preoccupation with maintaining the integrity of a clan's territorial allotment that prompted the rather abstruse inheritance dispute recounted

¹¹¹There is actually no uniform consensus on the dating of this material. It is assigned by critical scholars to the P tradition, which assumed its final form in the exilic or early post-exilic period. The Holiness Code (comprising Lev. 19-26) is, however, often regarded as an older collection of laws, set down in the closing years of the monarchy (so Norman K. Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], p. 458; Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, 3rd ed. [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975], p. 423). The Jubilee legislation, in turn, probably reflects even more ancient customs, dating perhaps to the early settlement period. (On the latter point, see the extensive discussion of dating and authorship in Robert G. North, Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1954], pp. 191-212, a treatment which argues for the antiquity of this institution.)

¹¹²Christopher J. H. Wright elaborates on this concept of vertical solidarity and its connection to land tenure in his God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 72-89, 176-79. In this vein, he cites the Jubilee year and leverite marriage custom as two provisions designed to protect family patrimonies (p. 55). Stephen Herbert Bess similarly concludes that the primary motivation for the Jubilee legislation was not altruism or the desire to assist needy people, but rather the retention of land within the tribe ("Systems of Land Tenure in Ancient Israel," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1963, p. 80). (Bess goes on to add, however, that the effect of this system was to create a spirit of economic independence and a sense of equality before God, pp. 86, 117-8).

in Numbers chapter 36.

On a theological plane, this institution expressed, in a concrete manner, the conviction that the land of Israel belonged to Yahweh and that its inhabitants were Yahweh's tenants (Lev. 25:23)--ideas that paralleled (but fundamentally contravened) the claims to exclusive land ownership asserted by feudal monarchs in other ancient near eastern societies.¹¹³ Moreover, the sabbatarian framework of the Jubilee legislation¹¹⁴, its literary setting within the Holiness Code (comprising Lev. 17-26), and the correlation of this observance with the cycle of religious festivals (cf. Lev. 23, 25:9) all invest it with certain sacral overtones and link it to the cultus. So, in short, the underlying motivation for this set of laws is complex and involves cultural values and theological concerns alien to the mindset of most people in the modern world.

It is somewhat misleading, therefore, to characterize this custom as though it were primarily a mechanism for redistributing wealth in order to achieve a result that conforms more closely to some abstract notion of equality (i.e., the guiding principle of the modern welfare state). In point of fact, any number of variables--ranging from the topography and fecundity of the soils to the relative number of male heirs in different clans over the

¹¹³On the comparison and contrast with ancient feudal systems, see North, pp. 46-69 and Bess, pp. 86-117.

¹¹⁴I.e., the Jubilee year acquires its significance from the fact that it comes at the culmination of the seventh of a series of seven-year cycles--a pattern that recapitulates the deity's primordial act of creation. Moshe Weinfeld comments on the connection between the symbolism of seven (which he characterizes as a uniquely Hebrew convention) and the sacral nature of the Jubilee observance in his "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee in the Pentateuchal Laws their Ancient Near Eastern Background," in The Law in the Bible and in its Environment, ed. by Timo Veijola, Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society, no. 51 (Helsinki, Finland: Finnish Exegetical Society, 1990), p. 58.

course of many generations--could have produced vastly disparate degrees of wealth under this system that would not have been affected by the operation of these laws. As some conservative commentators on this institution have noted, the Jubilee essentially involved a return of wealth rather than a redistribution of wealth.¹¹⁵ Although it would generally be safe to assume that the creditor was in a better economic position than the dispossessed debtor, the operative criterion governing the Jubilee transaction was the original ownership status of the property, rather than the relative economic condition of the parties involved.

But regardless of whether this was its primary intent, had it been fully implemented, a custom such as the Jubilee would arguably have had the net effect of dispersing land ownership more widely. In addition, as the previous discussion indicated, there were a variety of other provisions in Israel's law codes designed to protect especially vulnerable members of the community, such as widows, orphans, sojourners, slaves, and poor people. Some commentators have contended that the degree of solicitude for disadvantaged persons displayed in these biblical mandates was unparalleled in the ancient world¹¹⁶--a claim that may well be warranted.

At the same time, there is significant evidence that policies similar in intent, even

¹¹⁵E. Calvin Beisner, Prosperity and Poverty: the Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), pp. 62-5; David Chilton, Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald J. Sider (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), p. 162; John Jefferson Davis, Your Wealth in God's World: Does the Bible Support the Free Market? (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1984), p. 40.

¹¹⁶So, for example, Leon Epzstein, Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible, trans. by James Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1986), pp. 135-40.

if not on the same scale, existed in other ancient near eastern societies. Comparative surveys of literary artifacts from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Ugarit have demonstrated that protecting widows and orphans and meting out justice for the oppressed were functions routinely ascribed both to deities as well as to model human rulers. Legal inscriptions and adages from wisdom literature attest to the implementation of this ideal, at least in sporadic periods of social reform.¹¹⁷ According to the annals of various Mesopotamian city-states, important civic occasions such as the accession of a new monarch were marked by the promulgation of a general amnesty (comparable to the Jubilee observance), providing for such things as the manumission of slaves and the cancellation of debts.¹¹⁸

Moreover, anthropological studies have identified customs similar to those which existed in ancient Israel being practiced in many more recent peasant societies. While markets perform a limited function in pre-industrial economies, economic outputs are primarily allocated through systems of reciprocity (patterns of obligatory gift exchanges)

¹¹⁷F. Charles Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," Journal of Near Eastern Studies 21 (1962):129-39; Hans Jochen Boecker, Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East, trans. by Jeremy Moiser (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), pp. 54, 75-6; Epzstein, pp. 3-42. Some prime examples of this theme can be found, for instance, in Hammurabi's Code. A portion of the prologue reads: "Anum and Illil [Babylonian deities] called me by name Hammu-rabi, the reverent God-fearing prince, to make justice to appear in the land, to destroy the evil and the wicked that the strong may not oppress the weak. . . ." The epilogue contains the words: "That the strong may not oppress the weak (and) so to give justice to the orphan (and) the widow, I have inscribed my precious words. . . ." (G. R. Driver, ed., The Babylonian Laws, vol. 2: Transliterated Text, Translation, Philological Notes, Glossary [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955], pp. 7, 97.)

¹¹⁸Bess, pp. 124-40; North, pp. 73-83; Weinfeld, pp. 39-62.

and redistribution.¹¹⁹ The latter practice entails the collection of goods by some administrative center--either a temple or by a civil ruler--and their redistribution to achieve some common objective. The clearest parallel to this system in biblical legislation would be the various tithing regulations, in which the central storehouse was managed by religious functionaries (Deut. 14:22-29).

In his treatment of primitive and peasant economic systems, Manning Nash discusses several other so-called "leveling mechanisms," which, he says, insure the social use of accumulated resources and inhibit aggrandizement.¹²⁰ One such mechanism is the obligation to provide loans to relatives or fellow citizens, a practice which is enjoined by biblical texts such as Deuteronomy 15:7-8 and Leviticus 25:35-38. Beneficiaries of an economic windfall are often obligated to share the fruits of their good fortune with the community in a feast, a custom reminiscent of some of the cultic practices of ancient Israel (e.g., Deut. 26:1-15). There are frequently limitations on the sale of land, particularly to buyers outside the community. Among the indigenous Mayan peoples of Central America, for instance, land could not be sold, but it could be pledged against

¹¹⁹This typology evidently originated with the work of Karl Polanyi. In Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies: Essays of Karl Polanyi, ed. by George Dalton (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1968), see his "Societies and Economic Systems," pp. 3-18; and "The Economy as an Instituted Process," pp. 148-73. See also Manning Nash, Primitive and Peasant Economic Systems (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1966), pp. 26-33; T. F. Carney, The Economies of Antiquity: Controls, Gifts, and Trade (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973), pp. 59-79; and George Dalton, "Traditional Production in Primitive African Economies," in Tribal and Peasant Economies, ed. by George Dalton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), pp. 70-75.

¹²⁰Nash, pp. 35, 72-81.

monetary loans in times of crisis¹²¹--again paralleling, to some extent, the way in which land was intended to function under the Jubilee system.

The various stipulations in the law codes of ancient Israel cited by proponents of a social market system, therefore, reflect a widespread orientation toward economic life exhibited by pre-industrial societies throughout the world. In order to maintain the existing pattern of status prerogatives and to guarantee a minimum level of subsistence for everyone, economic activities are regulated by customary conventions and economic outputs are often distributed according to formulas unrelated to individual performance. The degree to which this sort of system corresponds to the program of the modern welfare state, however, is open to debate. There are, in fact, two crucial points of discontinuity that need to be taken into account.

The first has to do with the role of the state. Under the customary practices followed in ancient Israel, and by traditional societies in general, responsibility for helping those in need rests with primary groups, such as family and kinfolk, fellow villagers, religious communities, and private eleemosynary associations. What the welfare state essentially did was to transfer the ultimate burden for supporting the needy from these primary groups to the political apparatus of the nation-state.¹²² This development was, of course, precipitated by a variety of factors, including the rise of a

¹²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 39, 72.

¹²² International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1968), s.v. "Welfare State," by Harry K. Girvetz, p. 512. The evolution of the modern system from the parish-based English poor laws, through the colonial programs of local relief, the rise of so-called scientific charities in the nineteenth century, and finally the emergence of a national welfare state is traced by Walter I. Trattner in From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America, 2nd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1979).

large-scale industrial order, the declining role of traditional religious institutions (i.e., the process of secularization), and the loss of extended family structures.¹²³

The degree to which this new social order corresponds to the previous pattern is difficult to assess. On the one hand, the welfare state is viewed by many as a natural outgrowth of the mutual support mechanisms that exist in simpler societies. One recurrent theme in the scholarly writings of Karl Polanyi, for example, was the contention that the nineteenth century experiment in laissez faire economic policy was an unprecedented deviation from the universal pattern by which economic activities have been embedded within the overall framework of a society. Accordingly, he viewed the modern welfare state as a movement in the direction of re-embedding the economy in its broader social context.¹²⁴ From this standpoint, state-sponsored welfare measures provide the kind of security and guaranteed subsistence that formerly may have come from one's tribe, village, or kinship group.

On the other hand, Christian ethicists with a libertarian bent are prone to emphasize the fact that the biblical social legislation contains no enforcement provisions or civil penalties for those who fail to comply. This absence of government coercion leads them to conclude that the directives concerning the treatment of poor people and other disadvantaged groups merely imposed a moral and religious duty to deal charitably

¹²³Some of these factors are discussed by Harold L. Wilensky and Charles N. Lebeaux in Industrial Society and Social Welfare (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 50-83. This treatment focuses particularly on the break-up of the self-sufficient extended family under the impact of industrialization and interprets the welfare state as a response to this development.

¹²⁴George Dalton, "Introduction," p. xxvi, and Karl Polanyi, "The Economy as Instituted Process," p. 153 in Dalton, Essays.

with one's neighbors.¹²⁵ Despite their prescriptive form, these edicts are basically regarded in the same way as one might view a contemporary church pronouncement beseeching parishioners to tithe their income.

This perspective seems to substantially underestimate the force of custom, social pressure, and religious authority in traditional societies--factors that may well carry as much weight as the threat of civil penalties does in a modern nation-state.¹²⁶ It also overlooks whatever role civil rulers (such as the Judean King Josiah¹²⁷) may have played in promulgating biblical law codes. At the same time, it does underscore the important point that the modern combination of regulatory procedures and income entitlements, administered and enforced by a bureaucratic welfare state, is a product of recent history.

A second element of discontinuity between the social market system and its purported biblical antecedents concerns the attitude toward economic growth. Despite concerns that have surfaced recently about "limits to growth" and the criterion of sustainability, economic expansion and development is still at least one component in

¹²⁵North, Tools, p. 819; Davis, p. 52.

¹²⁶On the force of custom and the threat of ostracism in traditional societies, see Richard Thurnwald, Economics in Primitive Communities (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 60-1, 178-9; and Karl Polanyi, "Societies and Economic Systems," in Dalton, Essays, pp. 7, 21.

¹²⁷The Deuteronomic Code is generally associated with the reforms undertaken by Josiah (e.g., John Bright, A History of Israel, 3rd ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981], pp. 319-22; Anderson, pp. 350-52). As Gottwald notes, however, it is not clear from the historical record whether or not the non-cultic aspects of this code were implemented by royal fiat (Hebrew Bible, p. 371).

most modern proposals to address the problem of poverty.¹²⁸ Yet the economic mindset of antiquity does not appear to envisage the possibility that enhanced opportunities for the poor can be created through economic growth spurred on by a system of personal incentives. Classical perspectives on economic justice, including that of the Bible, are preoccupied with the way in which wealth is distributed, rather than the way in which it is created. As a result, schemes to mitigate concentrations of wealth and assist the poor are not evaluated from the standpoint of their impact on economic growth and efficiency. In fact, traditional societies dominated by leveling mechanisms are notoriously inefficient and lacking in innovation.¹²⁹

The biblical ban on charging interest for loans (Exod. 22:25-27; Lev. 25:35-37; Deut. 23:19-20) exemplifies this whole economic outlook. The loans under consideration here appear to be a form of personal assistance rather than loans for commercial purposes. But in principle, this kind of restriction--parallels to which can be found in extra-biblical sources, such as the writings of Aristotle--is symptomatic of a more general economic

¹²⁸Discussions of the economic growth factor and its significance in mainstream economic theory can be found in most standard texts (e.g., Robert Heilbroner, James K. Galbraith, The Economic Problem, 9th ed. [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990], pp. 74-84; Paul A. Samuelson, William D. Nordhaus, Economics, 15th ed. [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995], pp. 529-43). Allusions to the role growth plays in raising living standards and offsetting poverty can be found in Heilbroner and Galbraith, pp. 81-4 and Samuelson and Nordhaus, p. 529. In the writings discussed in this chapter, see NCCB, par. 158 and PCUSA, TJCDPE, pp. 23-4. The conventional wisdom about the benefits of economic growth has recently come under assault in works such as Richard Douthwaite, The Growth Illusion: How Economic Growth Has Enriched the Few, Impoverished the Many, and Endangered the Planet (Tulsa: Council Oaks Books, 1993).

¹²⁹On this point, see Neil J. Smelser, "Toward a Theory of Modernization," pp. 29-48 (esp. p. 43), and George Dalton, "The Development of Subsistence and Peasant Economies in Africa," pp. 155-68, both in Dalton, Tribal and Peasant.

orientation. Essentially, the economy is seen as a static system, money is an inert element, and there is little appreciation for the role of investment capital. Consequently, exacting a surcharge for the temporary use of money is deemed to be exploitative.¹³⁰

There are, therefore, significant disparities between the overall economic ethos that colors the biblical writings and the economic assumptions that undergird most modern techniques of analysis. Nevertheless, the social legislation in the Pentateuch bears an affinity with the modern social market philosophy in at least one crucial respect. What welfare state measures basically attempt to do--for better or worse--is to ameliorate some of capitalism's flaws without fundamentally altering the system itself. In a similar way, the biblical legislation made incremental adjustments in the way prevailing institutions operated. The consensus of most scholars is that ancient Israel did not radically challenge or seek to overturn the social structures of the ancient near east.¹³¹ Instead, the established order was infused with a more enlightened spirit. Debt slavery, the scourge of the ancient world, was not eliminated, but the reforms made it more humane. Widows and orphans were protected, but the basic patriarchal social structure that rendered them vulnerable in the first place was left intact. Despite one comment that poverty should not exist (Deut. 15:4), it is generally assumed to be an inevitable condition. So it is this element of realism that probably constitutes the closest parallel with modern social market strategies.

¹³⁰Karl Polanyi, "Aristotle Discovers the Economy," in Dalton, *Essays*, p. 79. On the overall perspective on money in antiquity, see Carney, pp. 85-94. On moral strictures against charging interest, see also Carney, p. 72.

¹³¹Ogletree makes this basic point, pp. 56-7.

The Social Market System Responds to the Prophetic Call for Social Justice.

The Argument

The third unit of Scripture that figures prominently in social market appeals is the prophetic writings. These materials contribute to the overall argument in two ways. First, they provide a powerful indictment of economic structures that deviate from the covenant standards outlined above. One perennial target of the prophet's polemical discourses was an emerging pattern of economic exploitation and social stratification that accompanied the rise of the monarchy. The Presbyterian study paper underscores the contrast between these conflicting social visions by juxtaposing a summary of the covenant model alongside a description of the monarchical period. The former is said to have been based on a theology of God's sovereignty, a politics of justice, and an economics of respect, whereas the latter was characterized by a religion of control, a politics of oppression, and an economics of privilege.¹³² This profile of the monarchy is backed up by texts drawn both from the historical writings of the Hebrew Bible, as well as from the prophetic books. The so-called "economics of privilege," for example, is illustrated with historical references to Solomon's imperialistic policies and with passages denouncing unjust land seizures in Amos and Isaiah.¹³³ A Methodist statement cites Jeremiah 22:13-14 and Amos 8:4-6 to show how "the prophets warned again and again

¹³²PCUSA, CFEJ 29.037-29.071. Variations of this model appear in Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 11-27; and Birch, pp. 222-27.

¹³³*ibid.*, 29.056-29.058.

that an economic system based on greed, economic exploitation, and indifference to the needs of the poor was contrary to God's will."¹³⁴ Similarly, the U.C.C. Pronouncement (citing Isa. 10:1-3, Amos 4:1-2, and Jer. 22:13-14) views the prophets as critics of a royal economic policy that generated affluence at the expense of the poor and as forecasters of an impending divine overthrow of this state of affairs.¹³⁵

The second contribution the prophetic writings make to the case for a social market system is that they establish social justice as an important biblical mandate. Even the titles of the various church pronouncements--all of which use the term "justice"--reflect the centrality of this theme. Calls to justice can, of course, be found in various portions of the biblical canon. But the quintessential expression of this concept is in the prophetic writings, where the Hebrew deity is revealed to be pre-eminently a God of justice, who requires that the poor be treated fairly. Under the heading "God does and demands justice," the Presbyterian paper weaves together a tapestry of texts, including three passages from the prophets: Isaiah 30:18, 42:4, 61:8, and Jeremiah 9:24. According to the Catholic bishops, "the substance of prophetic faith is proclaimed by Micah: 'to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (Mi 6:8)."¹³⁶ The pastoral letter goes on to elucidate the understanding of justice signified by the Hebrew terms mishpat and sedaqah. While recognizing that the biblical concept has many nuances and that it cannot simply be equated with any of the traditional categories of

¹³⁴UMC, p. 332.

¹³⁵UCC, p. 155.

¹³⁶NCCB, par. 38.

philosophical reflection, the letter highlights two of its dimensions. First, the bishops maintain that "central to the biblical presentation of justice is that the justice of a community is measured by its treatment of the powerless in society. . . . The Law, the Prophets, and the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament all show deep concern for the proper treatment of such people."¹³⁷ A footnote lists 14 verses illustrating this point-- among them (from the prophetic books) Isaiah 3:14-15, 10:2, Jeremiah 22:16, and Zechariah 7:9-10. Secondly, justice in the legal arena is said to prevail when social harmony is created. The words of Isaiah that "justice will bring about peace" (Isa. 32:17) are cited in this regard.¹³⁸

Against this biblical backdrop, the various writings under consideration here develop an understanding of justice that accents its distributive dimensions and the requirement that a society meet the needs of its least well-off members. The Lutheran statement, after stipulating that "God intends the institutions of government to be the means of enforcing the claims of economic justice," defines this concept as "the fair apportioning of resources and products, of opportunities and responsibilities, of burdens and benefits among the members of a community."¹³⁹ Many of these discussions construe this obligation in terms of a catalogue of economic rights--the duty to provide everyone with such things as "life, food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and basic education" along with employment under reasonable conditions and security against catastrophic

¹³⁷ibid., par. 38.

¹³⁸ibid., par. 39.

¹³⁹LCA, p. 5.

circumstances.¹⁴⁰

Overall, then, the prophetic tradition supplies a couple of elements to the social market perspective. On one level, the prophetic oracles contain some of the clearest and most compelling statements on the importance of social justice in the biblical canon--a theme that provides the leitmotif for advocates of economic reform measures. At the same time, the prophets also provide a role model of religious figures arrayed against the political and economic establishment. As self-styled "heirs of the biblical prophets,"¹⁴¹ the authors of many of these critiques of American capitalism clearly envisioned themselves playing a comparable role in the decade of the 1980's.

Analysis

Attempts to don the prophetic mantle are not uncommon in the context of ecclesiastical pronouncements on social issues. Indeed, such statements are often referred to as exercises of the church's "prophetic role" in society. Jeremiads (a term derived from the prophet Jeremiah's name) against the community's wrongdoing are a time-honored form of Christian oratory extending back at least to the colonial era. There is a certain affinity between contemporary attempts to use religion as a tool of social criticism and the spirit of the ancient Hebrew prophets.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to draw a simple parallel between the prophetic vocation in ancient Israel and the melioristic, liberal democratic reform

¹⁴⁰NCCB, par. 80. (The complete discussion is in pars. 79-84). See also the proposed "economic bill of rights" in UCC, p. 174, as well as DC 45 and PCUSA, CFEJ 29.126-29.127.

¹⁴¹NCCB, "Message," par. 4.

strategies promoted by mainstream religious bodies in the United States today. The political relevance of the prophetic movement is an issue on which there has been a considerable diversity of opinion.¹⁴² In the traditional view of classical Christian orthodoxy, whatever social message the prophets may have delivered was overshadowed by their primary role as predictors of the Messiah and the glories of the church age.¹⁴³ Under the influence of modern biblical scholarship, this dogmatic school of interpretation gave way to a more historical-critical perspective at precisely the time that "Christian sociology" was making its debut and social ethics was emerging as the organizing principle of Christian theology. Consequently, the Hebrew prophets came to be seen pre-eminently as social and religious reformers--often credited with purging the ancient cultus of its more primitive features and formulating the central tenets of "ethical monotheism."¹⁴⁴ Against a background of rising injustice, the prophets became the prototypical social critics, whose "liberal political views. . . frequently paralleled those

¹⁴²The ensuing discussion draws upon several helpful overviews of the history of interpreting the prophetic corpus: John Andrew Dearman, Property Rights in the Eighth Century Prophets: The Conflict and its Background (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), pp. 2-17; idem, "Hebrew Prophecy and Social Criticism: Some Observations for Perspective" Perspectives in Religious Studies 9 (1982):131-143; Norman K. Gottwald, All the Kingdoms of the Earth (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 350-65; International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised ed., s.v. "Prophet," by Gary V. Smith.

¹⁴³For a more contemporary statement of this approach, see J. Barton Payne, The Theology of the Older Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), pp. 49-52, 57-62.

¹⁴⁴See, for example, Julius Wellhausen's Encyclopedia Britannica article on "Israel," included as a supplement to his Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel (1878; reprint ed., New York: Meridian Books, 1957), pp. 472-74.

held by their modern interpreters."¹⁴⁵

With minor variations, this image of the prophetic role continues to shape scholarly research. Recent treatments have tended to emphasize the continuity of the prophetic movement with earlier Israelite traditions, rather than the prophet's role as innovators. The standard paradigm for reconstructing the social history of ancient Israel posits an ongoing conflict between two antithetical impulses--an egalitarian ethos emanating from the earliest pastoral nomadic traditions and a hierarchical system of royal patronage and administrative bureaucracy patterned after the ancient near eastern kingship model.¹⁴⁶ In terms of this scheme, the prophets are often represented as mediators of the older, egalitarian spirit of the tribal confederacy or as spokespersons for the disgruntled rural masses.

Other interpretations, which give equal credence to the prophets' social relevance, view their role less favorably. One turn-of-the-century study insinuated that they were

¹⁴⁵Dearman, Property Rights, p. 4. Examples of this tendency from the period in question can be found in works such as Charles Foster Kent, The Social Teachings of the Prophets and Jesus (New York: Scribners, 1920), pp. 39-140; Walter Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis (New York: Macmillan, 1907; reprint ed., Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), pp. 1-43.

¹⁴⁶This basic framework of analysis is reflected in many treatments, albeit with minor differences. The most comprehensive sociological profile of pre-monarchical Israel, focusing on its role as an alternative society, is Norman K. Gottwald's The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979). A sampling of other studies which deal with the monarchical period in terms of these sociological dynamics would include Edward Neufeld, "The Emergence of a Royal-Urban Society in Ancient Israel," Hebrew Union College Annual 31 (1960):31-53; Bright, pp. 224-28, 259-66; Robert Gnuse, You Shall Not Steal: Community and Property in the Biblical Tradition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 53-85; Birch, pp. 198-231.

foreign agents acting on behalf of surrounding nations.¹⁴⁷ A more recent economic history of ancient Israel depicted the prophets as figures with ready access to the corridors of power who orchestrated a misguided campaign of social reform that backfired and led to the collapse of the Judean state.¹⁴⁸

But alongside these reconstructions--all of which, despite their considerable differences, affirm the social significance of the prophetic movement--there has been another line of interpretation that discounts this relevancy. According to one theory, first propounded by Troeltsch and Weber, the prophets enunciated a purely utopian ethic that romanticized the social mores of a bygone era and was oblivious to the necessities of real politik.¹⁴⁹ There are, in actuality, several factors that mitigate the social impact of the prophetic tradition and undermine any simplistic analogy between this movement and contemporary campaigns for social reform.

To begin with, although the prophetic critique encompasses evils lodged within the social process, it does not offer political remedies. Unlike many of the documents surveyed in this chapter (and the style of ethics that they represent), the prophetic literature is virtually devoid of any platform for change. "There are in [the prophets'] sayings," as one scholar noted, "no solutions, no programs, no detailed approaches which can be directly appropriated and applied to our problems. In fact, of course, they

¹⁴⁷Gottwald, All the Kingdoms, pp. 353-3.

¹⁴⁸Morris Silver, Prophets and Markets: The Political Economy of Ancient Israel (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983).

¹⁴⁹Gottwald, All the Kingdoms, pp. 355-58. This view is also summarized and rejected by Epzstein, pp. 91-4.

themselves advocated no program of new laws or administrative correction."¹⁵⁰ Rather than a catalogue of reform proposals, the prophetic literature consists largely of judgment oracles, that hold out only a glimmer of hope that the nation will embark on a different course.¹⁵¹

Moreover, this feature of their writings reflects more than merely a lack of specificity. Instead it stems from a different diagnosis of the human condition. According to at least some appraisals, the prophets attributed conditions of injustice, not to defects in the ordering of society, but to a flaw in the human person. Modern scholarly reconstructions may trace the social conditions they deplored to the monarchy and the changes it unleashed, but the prophets themselves displayed a decidedly ambivalent attitude toward this institution. Only Hosea seems to have rejected it unequivocally, while others (such as Isaiah) view it in a more favorable light.¹⁵² The way in which Thomas Ogletree characterizes the ethical posture of Isaiah would apply equally to other prophets. For him, writes Ogletree, "the problem is seen not in structural or institutional

¹⁵⁰James Luther Mays, "Justice: Perspectives from the Prophetic Tradition," Interpretation 37 (1983):16. It should be noted that these sweeping generalizations are valid if one considers only the literary record of the prophetic books in the canon. The general consensus of biblical scholars holds that the deuteronomic reform legislation was at least infused with the spirit of the prophetic tradition, even if it was not actually formulated within prophetic circles (so Norman K. Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], p. 389; Bright, pp. 320-21).

¹⁵¹Birch, pp. 269-71.

¹⁵²Gottwald (All the Kingdoms, pp. 381-2) comments on this contrast in conjunction with a discussion of the prophetic theme of the ideal Davidic ruler. For a fuller discussion of Hosea's view of kingship and its historical context, see pp. 119-24, 135-40. Epzstein also observes that, in contrast to their current reputation, the prophets were not democrats, they offered no program to benefit dispossessed peasants, and they generally supported the monarchy (p. 69).

terms, but in volitional terms. Its basis is not a particular arrangement of social roles, but the personal qualities, commitments, and convictions of those who occupy the roles."¹⁵³

From this basic diagnosis of the human condition, several possible remedies emerge. One stream of the prophetic tradition looks for an inward renewal of the human person to be accomplished by God (e.g., Jer. 31:33, Ezek. 36:26).¹⁵⁴ As a member of the Jerusalem aristocracy, Isaiah anticipates a divine rejuvenation of the Davidic dynasty (Isa. 11), a theme that contributed to the development of messianism.¹⁵⁵ In apocalyptic versions of the prophetic hope (elements of which are present in such writings as Daniel and Trito-Isaiah), God is expected to suspend the normal historical process and to intervene in a cataclysmic way to usher in a new era.¹⁵⁶ Needless to say, all of these prophetic visions transcend the scope of gradual political reforms. As Abraham Heschel once noted, "Others may be satisfied with improvement, the prophets insist upon redemption."¹⁵⁷

In addition to the fact that their overall perspective on the human condition is at odds with many modern social scientific assumptions, another factor that impedes any attempt to translate the message of the prophets directly into a contemporary context is the manner in which they employ the category of "justice." Despite the frequency with

¹⁵³Ogletree, p. 68. This theme is emphasized throughout the discussion of the prophetic movement, pp. 67-82.

¹⁵⁴See Anderson, pp. 392-96, 414-15.

¹⁵⁵Anderson, pp. 302, 312-13; Gottwald, All the Kingdoms, pp. 170, 197-99.

¹⁵⁶Anderson, pp. 576-80.

¹⁵⁷Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 181.

which it is invoked by figures in the prophetic movement, the precise meaning of this term is difficult to pin down. As one scholar comments: "They hurl the word [justice] out in their messages, as though it were self-evident what it means, never lingering to analyze, justify, or explain."¹⁵⁸

The Hebrew term most frequently translated as "justice"--mishpat--covers a fairly wide semantic field, ranging from the general idea of governance or authority to specific judgements rendered in a legal proceeding or pieces of legislation.¹⁵⁹ As an extension of these concrete meanings, it acquires the more abstract sense of the quality expressed through governance or the ideal standard of equity that should prevail.

The exegetical foundation for the view of justice implicit in the social market position is comprehensively laid out in Stephen Charles Mott's Biblical Ethics and Social Change,¹⁶⁰ a work which is cited by the Catholic and Presbyterian documents.¹⁶¹ Drawing upon a wide array of biblical passages in which justice is undertaken for the sake of the poor and oppressed (e.g., Deut. 10:18-19; Job 29:14,16) or in which it is linked with allocating resources equitably (e.g., the Jubilee text and the eschatological visions of Ezekiel 45-47 and Micah 2:1-5), Mott argues that the biblical concept of justice has a

¹⁵⁸James Luther Mays, "Justice: Perspectives from the Prophetic Tradition," Interpretation 37 (1983):6.

¹⁵⁹See, for instance, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, s.v. "shapat," by Robert Duncan Culver, which delineates 11 different shades of meaning for the "mishpat" derivative.

¹⁶⁰New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

¹⁶¹Both NCCB, chapt. II, fn. 7 and the "Brief Annotated Bibliography Faith and Economics" appended to PCUSA, CFEJ refer specifically to Mott's treatment of justice in the Bible.

strong distributive component. In short, it entails creative activity on behalf of the community's underprivileged members to redress conditions of inequality and to insure that the means for achieving a meaningful social existence are available to everyone on an equal basis. "For the advantaged, justice is a duty (and, conversely, a right that marginalized groups can claim under God's provision) to bring all who are economically disadvantaged to the point where they have the capacity to participate in the full life of the community."¹⁶²

In terms of the classical criteria of distributive justice, Mott singles out need as the one which commands the highest priority from a biblical standpoint. Under the provisions of the covenant, he claims, "needs become rights."¹⁶³ The basic standard, therefore, should be "to each according to each one's need" (expressed in Acts 4:35) and "from each according to each one's ability" (Acts 11:29).¹⁶⁴ Moreover, since needs are unequal, justice often requires a measure of partiality--"unequal responses to unequal needs."¹⁶⁵ Specifically, "biblical justice is biased in favor of the poor and the weak of the earth."¹⁶⁶

Finally, using texts in which rulers are exhorted to establish justice (e.g., Isa. 1:10, 17; Jer. 22:2-3) or in which justice is required of those who gather at the gate of the

¹⁶²Mott, p. 69.

¹⁶³ibid., p. 67.

¹⁶⁴ibid., p. 70.

¹⁶⁵ibid., p. 66.

¹⁶⁶ibid., p. 71.

village to render legal verdicts (Amos 5:15), Mott attempts to demonstrate that the foregoing vision of social justice should be implemented by the political authorities. Justice is, in fact, to be the governing principle that prevails across the full spectrum of institutional structures within a society.¹⁶⁷

Yet, compelling as it may be for some, this way of construing the biblical data on justice is not universally embraced. Ronald H. Nash, a vigorous supporter of the free enterprise system, has argued that the term "justice," as it is employed by the biblical writers, most closely approximates Aristotle's category of universal justice. This is the quality of character that comprehends all other moral traits and is therefore synonymous with general virtue. Alluding to a statement in Genesis 6:9, for example, Nash comments: "When the Bible says that Noah was a just man, it does not mean that he voted the straight Democratic ticket or sent money to Salvadoran guerrillas. It simply means that he was virtuous."¹⁶⁸

In Nash's view, this interpretation has no difficulty accommodating texts (cited by ethicists like Mott) in which justice is associated with reversing conditions of deprivation and oppression. As he writes:

There is no reason to believe that any verse in the Bible conjoining justice with love or with aid for the needy is endorsing any twentieth century pattern of distributive justice. Since each verse like this makes perfectly good sense as a reference to virtue or righteousness as a whole, the individual who would make these verses say more must shoulder the burden of proof. The only way the evangelical liberal can begin to find his

¹⁶⁷ibid., pp. 73-81.

¹⁶⁸Ronald H. Nash, "A Reply to Beversluis," in Economic Justice and the State: A Debate Between Ronald H. Nash and Eric H. Beversluis, ed. by John A. Bernbaum (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 57.

theory of social justice in Scripture is by confusing biblical pronouncements about a universal sense of justice with the liberal's particular theory of distributive justice. Because of the nature of universal justice, it is a simple matter to find justice conjoined in Scripture with love, charity, kindness to the poor, and help for the hungry. But it is logically irresponsible to infer from these statements that God endorses the welfare state, or socialism, or any contemporary pattern of distributive justice.¹⁶⁹

In actuality, what is taking place in this debate is that proponents of both positions are assimilating the biblical data into a particular ideological frame of reference.¹⁷⁰ This process is, in fact, virtually inevitable, since the biblical notion of justice is not defined with any degree of precision and probably does not correspond directly to any category of contemporary theoretical reflection. To some extent, the transformation of random and isolated biblical utterances into a more refined, systematic Christian ethic follows the

¹⁶⁹Ronald H. Nash, "The Economics of Justice," in Bernbaum, pp. 21-2.

¹⁷⁰With respect to the previously cited works, this conclusion can be validated merely by perusing the footnotes in the text. Mott's sources include an assortment of biblical exegetical studies intermingled with various philosophical expositions of justice in academic journals and in the writings of theorists such as John Rawls (a procedure which accords with the methodology Mott outlines on pp. viii-ix of his introduction). The relationship between these two avenues of insight into the meaning of justice, however, is not always clear. Statements ostensibly about the Bible are occasionally documented with a footnote referencing philosophical sources. For example, on pg. 67, there is the statement: "Biblical justice is dominated by the principle of redress, which postulates that inequalities in the conditions necessary to achieve the standard of well-being be corrected to approximate equality." On the surface, this formulation of the issue appears to reflect the nuanced style of discourse prevalent in the literature of philosophical ethics and also seems to be reading contemporary notions of equality rather anachronistically into the biblical text. Not surprisingly, the footnote refers the reader to an article in the journal Philosophical Review and to Rawls' Theory of Justice. Ronald Nash, whose professional credentials are in the field of philosophy, evinces an even greater tendency to conflate biblical and philosophical categories. His essay on justice, although it purports to be a discussion of the biblical materials (and is laced with chapter and verse references) reflects virtually no familiarity with critical and exegetical resources. Instead, his documented sources consist almost entirely of works by contemporary theorists such as Friederich von Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Robert Nozick.

same course of development as ethical theories in general do. A concept like justice embodies an inner core of meaning that is rooted in an innate, universally shared sense of fairness.¹⁷¹ But how one translates this primary moral intuition into a systematic and coherent social philosophy or a concrete set of policy guidelines is dependent, to a large extent, on one's ideological commitments, sociological context,¹⁷² and psychological disposition¹⁷³--as well as on the stories that have shaped one's moral identity.¹⁷⁴

Hence, those who subscribe to a more libertarian economic philosophy tend to view justice as a procedural principle which insures that there is a fair set of rules operating in the institutional arenas of society. Christian ethicists who are sympathetic with this approach generally insist that this is the basic import of the term "justice" in the Bible (often appealing to verses about just weights and measures [Lev. 19:35-36; Deut.

¹⁷¹The argument for the existence of a set of natural moral sensibilities rooted in humanity's innate sociability is cogently made by James Q. Wilson in The Moral Sense (New York: Free Press, 1993). On the sense of fairness, see esp. pp. 55-78.

¹⁷²The sociological bases for different conceptions of justice are explored by David L. Miller, Social Justice (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 253-335. Jennifer L. Hochschild, What's Fair? American Beliefs About Distributive Justice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) also correlates attitudes about distributive justice with her respondents' social locations, but she does not find this factor to be determinative (e.g., pp. 16-19, 106, 140-43, 228-29).

¹⁷³For a review of the literature from the field of social psychology and personality theory, see Hochschild, pp. 229-37; and Kjell Tornblom, "The Social Psychology of Distributive Justice" in Justice: Interdisciplinary Perspectives ed Klaus R. Scherer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 177-236.

¹⁷⁴Waldemar Janzen demonstrates his paradigmatic approach to ethics with an illustration about how "the apparently universal and self-explanatory concept of justice dissolves into diverse understandings evoked by different stories" (Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994], pp. 56-7).

25:15] and impartial judicial verdicts [e.g., Exod. 23:3,6)].¹⁷⁵

Conversely, the theory undergirding the modern welfare state represents a relatively recent adaptation of the classical concept of distributive justice. In its original form (exemplified by Aristotle's well-known treatment), this idea related primarily to the disbursement of public funds or to the allocation of benefits within private clubs or associations.¹⁷⁶ In its modern manifestation--often signified by the phrase "social justice"--it expresses the conviction "that it is realistic to attempt to bring the overall pattern of distribution in a society into line with principles of justice."¹⁷⁷ Rather than functioning as a purely procedural principle (the libertarian emphasis), justice, in this interpretation, prescribes a particular pattern of results.¹⁷⁸

Inherent in this understanding of justice are a number of assumptions--many of which are peculiar to the modern era. First it presupposes that the resources within a given society constitute a common pool of assets from which everyone is entitled to their fair share.¹⁷⁹ This premises is implicit in any appeal to distributive justice itself, since, as Aristotle pointed out in the Nicomachean Ethics, this principle is only relevant in the case

¹⁷⁵North, Tools of Dominion, pp. 757-68; Beisner, pp. 43-4.

¹⁷⁶Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought, s.v. "Justice," by David L. Miller, p. 261.

¹⁷⁷ibid., p. 261.

¹⁷⁸This point is frequently made by proponents of the more libertarian viewpoint (e.g., Thomas Sowell, A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles [New York: William Morrow, 1987], pp. 190-203). The distinction is a fair one, but it should not be overemphasized. One could legitimately argue that a set of rules would be intrinsically flawed if they consistently produced skewed results.

¹⁷⁹see Sowell, pp. 190-3.

of goods which are initially held in common.¹⁸⁰ Characterizing the aggregate economic output of a society in this manner can be justified on theological grounds (as in the interpretation of the Genesis saga discussed above) or by arguing that the creation of wealth is a social enterprise in which everyone plays a role. But whatever the rationale, a prior claim to some share of the goods in question must be established before the canons of distributive justice can be invoked.

Secondly, this conception of justice assumes a modern understanding of the economy as a discrete and integrated system functioning according to discernible patterns. The criterion of distributive justice can only be applied to a situation in which the forces that converge to produce the final outcome can be isolated and analyzed. As libertarian critics of modern social justice theories are wont to point out, distributive justice is meaningless without a distributor. This condition can only be met in the context of a modern market economy, where the various structural components and institutional dynamics that effect the allocation of resources can be identified and analyzed quantitatively. It is worth noting that even the statistical indices used to measure factors such as per capita GNP, the poverty rate, and distribution of income--all of which are used extensively by social market critics to assess the degree of progress in moving toward the goal of social justice--are products of twentieth century economic science.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰Nicomachean Ethics 1130b30; cf. William Mathie, "Political and Distributive Justice in the Political Science of Aristotle," Review of Politics 49 (1987):65.

¹⁸¹According to Edmund Whittaker's history of economics, the use of income aggregates to provide a quantitative basis for generalizations about the economy began during the World War I era. (The development of various types of economic statistics, such as GNP, is traced in his Schools and Streams of Economic Thought [Chicago: Rand McNally, 1960], pp. 323-28.)

Finally, the modern concept of social justice is deeply imbued with the notion--absent from the ancient world--that society is a malleable entity, capable of being re-fashioned in accordance with abstract principles of right. Although movements of social reform first made their appearance at the close of the Middle Ages, the modern quest to restructure society in line with the dictates of reason and justice is largely a legacy of the Enlightenment.¹⁸² Moreover, it was not until the nineteenth century that government came to be widely viewed as the instrument for achieving this vision of social transformation.

In short, social justice functions as a slogan in modern political discourse for a platform with relatively recent antecedents. Needless to say, the fact that a concept is a modern construct does not in any way render it invalid or negate its usefulness for Christian ethics. The main point of this discussion has simply been to illustrate once more the manner in which a biblical theme comes to be equated with a contemporary ideological program.

¹⁸²Sowell (p. 190), for instance, claims that the modern notion of "social justice" first entered the parlance of political theory in William Godwin's 1793 treatise An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (although, given his anarchistic tendencies, Godwin would not have endorsed the use of civil government as the instrument for implementing this standard). In their classic history of Western social thought, Howard Becker and Harry Elmer Barnes trace the impulse to reconstruct society and ameliorate its defects, along with the concomitant belief in the inevitability of progress, to the French Enlightenment ideals that ultimately came to fruition in the early sociological theories of Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte (Social Thought From Lore to Science, 3rd ed [New York: Dover Publications, 1961], esp. 2:459-60, 487, 501-7, 527-29, 560, 585-88, 599-604). See also Barry Clark, Political Economy: A Comparative Approach (New York: Praeger, 1991), pp. 22, 26; Miller, Social Justice, pp. 166, 257; and Peter Gay's discussion of the application of reason to society in the Enlightenment era (The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, vol. 2: The Science of Freedom (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 319-43 (esp. p. 322).

In an overall way, the Hebrew prophets undoubtedly left an important legacy for subsequent religious reformers by challenging their society's ruling elite in the name of a higher set of principles. But their indifference to political remedies and the absence of social scientific analysis from their writings creates a considerable gap between their style of social criticism and the style that is practiced by modern social welfare liberals.

The Social Market System Reflects Jesus' Concern for the Poor

The Argument

The teachings and example of Jesus form another key element in the biblical rationale for this economic system. The first salient point in this rehearsal of the gospel story is the fact that Jesus himself is depicted as being a poor person. The significance of this observation is captured most forcefully by the U.C.C. Pronouncement, which states:

In Jesus, God becomes poor (2 Corinthians 8:9) and shares the suffering, the life, and the death of the poor and dispossessed. . . . Through his own table fellowship among the excluded, his signs and wonders among the outcasts, and in his crucifixion outside the city gates, Jesus took on himself the suffering of God with the poor and all who are excluded from justice within the household.¹⁸³

This pattern from Jesus' life is then interpreted as a concrete expression of the central themes in his teaching. The importance of economics for Christian discipleship is underscored by the frequency with which economic matters are addressed in the recorded sayings of Jesus. Rebecca M. Blank points out that "Jesus talks as much about

¹⁸³UCC, pp. 155, 156. The same point is made by the Catholic bishops in NCCB, par. 49; and by Sider, Rich Christians, pp. 68-9.

economics in his teachings as he does about spiritual life."¹⁸⁴ Another writer for Sojourners magazine once calculated that a tenth of the verses in the Synoptic gospels deal directly with issues of wealth and poverty and that "Jesus addressed economic questions more frequently than he did violence, sexual morality, or heaven and hell."¹⁸⁵

A couple of dimensions of these teachings are highlighted. On the one hand, Jesus extends a blessing to those who are poor in Luke 6:20—one of the verses to which the Presbyterians appeal in order to show that "justice requires special concern for the poor and oppressed"¹⁸⁶ On the other hand, he warned repeatedly of the dangers of wealth and condemned those who were given over to its accumulation.¹⁸⁷ Overall, he enjoined his followers to cultivate what Sider calls "a joyful life of carefree unconcern for possessions."¹⁸⁸

The didactic text from the gospels cited most frequently in this literature is Luke 4:18-19.¹⁸⁹ As some of the writers note, the pericope of which these verses are a part occurs at a pivotal juncture in the literary structure of the third gospel because it

¹⁸⁴Blank, p. 18.

¹⁸⁵Danny Collum, "Economics: The Way America Does Business," Sojourners, November 1985, p. 15.

¹⁸⁶PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.124.

¹⁸⁷PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 12; Sider, Rich Christians, pp. 72-3.

¹⁸⁸Sider, Rich Christians, p. 117.

¹⁸⁹NCCB, "Message," par. 4; NCCB, par. 48; UCC, p. 155; UMC, p. 332; Sider, Rich Christians, p. 66; Sider, Pro-Life, p. 75; PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.069; PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 7; DC par. 38, 48.

represents the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry.¹⁹⁰ In the narrative, Jesus announces before a synagogue gathering in his hometown of Nazareth that the purpose of his mission is to carry out the mandate of Isaiah 61: "to preach good news to the poor. . . .to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." According to Sider, this declaration is significant because it shows that "at the supreme moment of history when God took on human flesh, the God of Israel was still liberating the poor and oppressed and summoning his people to do the same. That is the central reason for Christian concern for the poor."¹⁹¹

Another oft-cited gospel passage is Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, recorded in Matthew 25:31-46.¹⁹² In this judgement allegory, the criterion by which the righteous heirs of God's Realm are differentiated from the wicked pretenders is the manner in which they have treated various types of disadvantaged people. Those who are commended have unwittingly ministered to the Christ by feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, clothing the naked, and so forth, whereas those who find disfavor have neglected all these tasks. From this text, among others, the Catholic bishops derive one of their primary ethical norms, namely "that the justice of a society is tested by the

¹⁹⁰NCCB, "Message," par. 16; NCCB, par. 48; DC, par. 48; Sider, Rich Christians, p. 66.

¹⁹¹Sider, Rich Christians, pp. 66-7.

¹⁹²NCCB, par. 4, 16, 44; UCC, p. 152; PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.069; PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 7; Sider, Rich Christians, p. 66, 69, 82-3; Sider, Pro-Life, p. 77.

treatment of the poor."¹⁹³ Using the same passage, the Presbyterian statement concludes that "Christians will judge any economy by the way in which it aids the most vulnerable: the sick, the old, the very young, and the poor."¹⁹⁴

It is pre-eminently through the gospel portrait of Jesus, therefore, that literature advocating a social market economy establishes the principle that society's poor have a preferential claim to special treatment.¹⁹⁵ On this basis, justice is understood, not in terms of a carefully calibrated balancing of rival interests, but as an active undertaking on behalf of a community's most disadvantaged and excluded members in order to secure for them a "place at the table."

Analysis

The example and teachings of Jesus are, of course, the touchstone for any exercise in Christian ethical reflection. Yet Jesus remains a remarkably enigmatic figure, whose significance for economic questions is susceptible to a variety of interpretations. To defenders of capitalism, Jesus is someone who, if he did not enjoy the rewards of wealth himself, was at least comfortable with those who did, and who paid off-handed

¹⁹³NCCB, par. 16.

¹⁹⁴PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.125.

¹⁹⁵Among the church documents considered in this chapter, the only one which does not refer to the Jesus tradition is the Lutheran statement, which grounds its moral reasoning entirely in a creation ethic. It also, not coincidentally, is the only statement which does not acknowledge something comparable to a "preferential option for the poor" (it supports government welfare measures based on the requirements of distributive justice).

compliments to their entrepreneurial skills and shrewd managerial practices.¹⁹⁶ But the ethics of Jesus have also been forcefully marshalled to critique capitalism--a process that began with the Social Gospel movement. Within this tradition, the emphasis fell primarily on Jesus' proclamation of the "Kingdom of God," a theological symbol which was interpreted to mean a democratic social order progressively being actualized within the realm of history.¹⁹⁷ In line with this perspective, efforts to curb concentrations of economic power and improve living conditions for laborers were often equated, at least in some of the more simplistic appeals, with building God's Kingdom.

Presumably out of deference to modern biblical studies (which have tended to undermine this understanding of the Kingdom) and in reaction against the Social Gospel movement's overly optimistic assessment of the potential for "Christianizing the social order," contemporary critiques of capitalism accent a somewhat different aspect of the gospel tradition. In the recent literature surveyed above, the focus has shifted to the theme of Jesus' identification with the poor--an area of emphasis that raises a new set of

¹⁹⁶See, for instance, Brian Griffiths, The Creation of Wealth: A Christian's Case for Capitalism (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), pp. 43-6; Harold Lindsell, Free Enterprise: A Judeo-Christian Defense (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House, 1982), pp. 58-62.

¹⁹⁷For overviews of the use of Scripture in this theological tradition, see William McGuire King, "The Biblical Basis of the Social Gospel," in The Bible and Social Reform, ed Ernest R. Sandeen, The Bible in American Culture series (Philadelphia: Fortress/Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982), pp. 59-84; and Max L. Stackhouse, "Jesus and Economics: A Century of Reflection," in The Bible in American Law, Politics, and Political Rhetoric, ed. James Turner Johnson, The Bible in American Culture series (Philadelphia: Fortress/Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985), esp. pp. 121-23, 128-31. Stackhouse stresses both the centrality of the gospel traditions in economic ethics as well as the diversity of ways in which these traditions have been appropriated over the past century.

exegetical problems.

To begin with, although it is not a major issue, the matter of Jesus' own economic status is a point of contention. The claim is often made that Jesus was himself a poor and disenfranchised person--a characteristic which carries, for at least some social ethicists, a certain measure of normative significance. But if one gives credence to the tradition that he was, by profession, a carpenter, then it is possible that, as a skilled artisan, he was someone of at least moderate means.¹⁹⁸ Following along these lines, David Peter Seccombe has observed that in the gospels Jesus and his disciples are customarily differentiated from the poor and depicted as the dispensers, rather than the recipients, of alms--clues that point to a higher socio-economic station than that of the severely impoverished.¹⁹⁹ One scholar has even raised the intriguing possibility that Jesus was, in fact, a wealthy individual who divested himself of his privileged position in life at the outset of his ministry.²⁰⁰ At best, therefore, the information on Jesus' own socio-

¹⁹⁸The status of those who practiced skilled trades in first century Palestine evidently varied considerably. John Dominic Crossan places the "artisan class" near the bottom of his taxonomy of classes in an agrarian society--below that of the average peasant (The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant [San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992], p. 46). Other sources suggest that at least some artisans were, along with merchants, small landowners, and minor clergy, members of a small middle class (e.g., Richard J. Cassidy, Jesus, Politics, and Society: A Study of Luke's Gospel [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978], p. 110; Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, s.v. "Rich and Poor," by P. H. Davids, p. 702). George Wesley Buchanan goes even farther in suggesting that the term used to describe Jesus' occupation and generally translated as "carpenter" could also be used for a well-to-do building contractor supervising a team of craftpersons ("Jesus and the Upper Class," Novum Testamentum 7 [1964-5]: 195-209).

¹⁹⁹David Peter Seccombe, Possessions and the Poor in Luke-Acts (Linz [Austria]: Studien zum Neuen Testament und Seiner Umwelt, 1983), pp. 31, 88.

²⁰⁰Buchanan, pp. 195-209. Among other bits of evidence, Buchanan cites the supposedly upper class perspective reflected in many of the parables, Jesus' ready access

economic status is meager and it presents an ambiguous picture.

A more consequential issue concerns the identity of those whom the gospels writers refer to as "the poor." In the context of a predominantly non-market economy, where monetary income is of negligible significance, establishing the criteria by which someone would be included in this category is not as self-evident as it may initially seem. According to some treatments of the subject, access to land (through ownership or tenancy) is the principal barometer of economic well-being in an agrarian economy. On this basis, "the poor" are considered to be primarily those landless peasants who must eke out their livelihood by selling their services, usually on a daily basis, in the precarious wage labor market.²⁰¹ John Dominic Crossan focuses on an even smaller subset within this category of the population and (based largely on the distinction between penes [poor] and ptochos [destitute] in classical Greek) equates the ptochoi of the Gospels with those on the lowest rung of the social ladder--the motley combination of social deviants and economically destitute people dubbed "the expendables."²⁰²

Others have attempted to identify the poor of the gospels with the so-called am-ha-eretz or "people of the land," a pejorative designation in rabbinic literature for the rural

to upper class circles, and a passing allusion to Jesus giving up his wealth and becoming poor in 2 Corinthians 8:9 (a verse which is usually construed as a reference to the Incarnation).

²⁰¹Dictionary of Jesus, s.v. "Rich and Poor," by P. H. Davids, p. 702.

²⁰²Crossan, Historical Jesus, pp. 270-76 (cf. p. 45); and idem, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), pp. 60-2.

peasant population, regarded as less than observant in their ritualistic practices.²⁰³ In this case, poverty would correspond to a religious distinction. Approaching the issue from an anthropological perspective, Bruce Malina has contended that in the Mediterranean world, "the poor" was a "revolving category for people who unfortunately cannot maintain their inherited status" due to some calamity that has befallen them (such as illness, indebtedness, or the death of a family breadwinner). In a culture dominated by concepts of honor and status, he suggests, poverty is a social condition signifying the dishonorable position of people who have fallen from their customary station in life.²⁰⁴

But the interpretive possibilities are not exhausted even by this formidable array of sociological options. It is generally recognized that within Judaism the terminology associated with poverty underwent a subtle metamorphosis in the centuries preceding the New Testament era. Whereas this word group was originally applied strictly to persons living under conditions of material or social deprivation (i.e., in the literature of the legal codes and the pre-exilic prophets), during the period of foreign domination in Palestine, it increasingly came to function as a spiritual designation for pious members of the community who looked to God in their distress (a meaning attested to in several extra-canonical apocryphal writings and in the Qumran literature).²⁰⁵ In the gospel tradition,

²⁰³See the summary of this position in Seccombe, pp. 28-31, and cf. Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, s.v. "Rich and Poor," by P. H. Davids, pp. 702-3.

²⁰⁴Bruce J. Malina, The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 106.

²⁰⁵Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "ptochos," by Ernst Bammel, 6:896-901; W. D. Davies, Dale C. Allison, The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary, edited by J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranford, G. N. Stanton (Edinburgh [Scotland]):

this more metaphorical sense is clearly reflected in the Matthean version of the Beatitudes, where the phrase "poor in spirit" stands in place of Luke's word "poor" (Matt. 5:3, cf. Lk. 6:20).

In light of this background, the poverty theme, particularly in the third gospel, has frequently been interpreted as a literary device or theological symbol, rather than a purely socio-economic category. One common view is that it denotes the condition of those who, bereft of any other resources, are wholly dependent on God.²⁰⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson's noteworthy treatment of the symbolic significance of poverty and possessions in the Luke-Acts corpus represents a slight variation on this general idea. The sort of poverty that is referred to in Luke's thematic statements (such as in the Nazareth sermon and the Beatitudes), he claims, "is not an economic designation, but a designation of a spiritual status"--namely a responsiveness to God's visitation in the Prophet Jesus. The interchange between rich and poor highlights the gospel's reversal motif whereby those who are outcasts within society--typified by the poor--accept Jesus' prophetic mission; whereas those who exercise social power--represented as the rich--reject the mission of

T & T Clark, 1988), pp. 442-43; Gnuse, pp. 86-90.

²⁰⁶Along these lines, I. Howard Marshall writes: "The poor are . . . the needy and downtrodden whose wants are not supplied by earthly helpers. As Matthew makes clear, the meaning of the word is not restricted to literal poverty" (Luke: Historian and Theologian [Paternoster Press, 1970; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971], p. 123). According to Schrage: "Poverty [in the gospels] can denote both penury and misery as well as submission to God. . . . The beatitude addressed to the poor (Luke 6:20) has in mind both social and religious status" (p. 101). See also Bruce Chilton, J. I. H. McDonald, Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 90-2.

Jesus.²⁰⁷

A somewhat different theological explanation is put forward by Seccombe, who contends that "the poor" had developed into a standard metaphor for the people of Israel, viewed from the standpoint of their condition as an oppressed and subjugated community in need of God's deliverance. A contextual analysis of the evangelist's Old Testament sources (principally Isa. 61:1 and various Psalms) and parallel usages of the term in extra-canonical literature demonstrate, he believes, that this meaning is the primary one in the third gospel. Hence, he concludes,

There is nothing socio-economic or socio-religious about Luke's use of "poor" terminology in the passages we have considered [Luke 4 and 19]. To seek to ground a liberation theology, or an ethic of poverty, upon these texts would be to misunderstand and misuse them. . . . Luke is not affirming that the lower strata of society are the special heirs of Jesus' salvation. . . or that even the poor, whom no one else considered, will be saved. He is telling the story of the way salvation came to all Israel, and then to the nations, in the person of Jesus.²⁰⁸

Settling this interpretive question is beyond the scope of the present work. The important point to be made here is that poverty is not a univocal concept across time and culture. Not only is it apparent that this term often has some symbolic significance within certain contexts, but even when it denotes a literal socio-economic group, the criterion for inclusion within this category is not always clear. In fact, the concept of

²⁰⁷Luke Timothy Johnson, The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation series, ed. by Howard Clark Kee, Douglas A. Knight, no. 39 (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 139-40.

²⁰⁸Seccombe, p. 95.

poverty has undergone revision just since the dawn of the industrial era.²⁰⁹ Even contemporary social scientists disagree over the yardstick by which poverty should be measured--a debate which has far-reaching consequences in terms of assessing the scope of the problem.²¹⁰ It should therefore be apparent that the people who are described as poor in the biblical tradition cannot be automatically equated with those who are classified in this way by the U. S. Census Bureau.

One final issue that arises in connection with the ethic of Jesus concerns the extent to which it has any social relevance at all. On the surface at least, the passionate commitment to social justice, which was the driving force behind the prophetic movement and which supplies the leitmotif for much of the literature under consideration here, is muted in the New Testament--replaced as the paramount value by agape, or

²⁰⁹According to Seccombe, an 1834 report by a Poor Laws Commission in Britain defined poverty as the condition of people who must obtain their subsistence through labor (p. 31). See also Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The Democratic Experience (New York: Random House, 1973; Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 205-19 on the growing consciousness of income categories in the United States and the concomitant "rediscovery of poverty" based on statistical analysis. It should be noted that the Catholic Pastoral Letter also comments on this matter of evolving definitions (par. 173).

²¹⁰For a discussion of different measuring techniques, see Heilbroner and Galbraith, pp. 632-4. To appreciate the diversity of approaches to the issue of defining poverty, one need only compare the conflicting perspectives offered in such works as Edward C. Banfield, The Unheavenly City Revisited (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1974), pp. 127-47; George Gilder, Wealth and Poverty (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 64-74; Michael Harrington, The New American Poverty (New York: Holt, Rinehold, Winston, 1984; Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 65-88, 207-29; and Charles Murray, Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 56-68. See also the discussion (and relevant citations) in footnotes 27 and 47 for chapter 3 of the Catholic Pastoral Letter.

sacrificial love.²¹¹ In this respect, the gospel writings are not entirely congruent with the overall tenor of the biblical framework for the social market position.

Turn of the century promoters of the Social Gospel cause addressed this issue by accenting the continuity between Jesus and the Hebrew prophetic tradition, thereby enabling them to interpret his message in terms of this background.²¹² More recently, other scholars have attempted to elicit from the gospel record at least the broad contours of a socio-economic agenda. Often, this is based on Jesus' supposed endorsement of the Jubilee program of property redistribution and debt cancellation.²¹³ Using sayings of Jesus and an analysis of the images in his parables, Douglas E. Oakman discerns several interlocking elements of an agenda revolving around the remission of debts, the decentralization of political and economic power, a system of exchanges based on reciprocity, and (perhaps) the elimination of private property.²¹⁴ In similar fashion,

²¹¹The previously cited article by Schoenfeld focuses on the supposed absence of justice as an ethical category in the New Testament writings--an omission which the writer attributes primarily to the socio-political conditions under which the early Christians lived.

²¹²Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, pp. 1-43; and Kent's work cited previously.

²¹³The exegetical foundation for this viewpoint is developed most fully in Robert B. Sloan, Jr.'s The Favorable Year of the Lord: A Study of Jubilarial Theology in the Gospel of Luke (Austin, Tex.: Schola Press, 1977). The social ethical implications are developed in works such as John Howard Yoder, The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 64-77; Andre Trocme, Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution, trans. Michael H. Shank, Marlin E. Miller (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1973); Sharon H. Ringe, Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology, Overtures to Biblical Theology series, ed. by Walter Brueggemann and John R. Donahue (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

²¹⁴Douglas E. Oakman, Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, vol. 8 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1986), see esp.

Halvor Moxnes sees Jesus' demands for generous almsgiving and his practice of radical hospitality as symbolic prototypes of a new pattern of social organization.²¹⁵

But whatever merit these reconstructions of the data may have, there are still elements in the gospel tradition that militate against any attempt to construe it primarily in terms of a program for social transformation. The first consideration is the apparent apocalyptic overtones in Jesus' proclamation of the impending Reign of God.²¹⁶

the summary statements on pp. 168-69, 213-15.

²¹⁵Moxnes, pp. 109-38.

²¹⁶In common with one longstanding tradition of New Testament scholarship, the discussion here assumes that Jesus' preaching about God's impending Reign should be understood in terms of the apocalyptic expectations rife among his contemporaries. A sampling of treatments that posit this kind of background would include Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, trans. by Kendrick Grobel (London: SCM Press, 1952), vol. 1, pp. 4-11; Ernst Kasemann, New Testament Questions of Today, trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 111-124; Howard Clark Kee, Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1970), pp. 76-102, 115-6, 136-41, 143-6; E. P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 123-56, 228-37; and N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 198-229, 657-662. Other scholars make distinctions that avoid classifying Jesus' message as apocalyptic altogether. For example, Werner Georg Kummel distinguishes between apocalyptic and eschatological teachings and places those of Jesus in the latter category (Promise and Fulfillment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus, *Studies in Biblical Theology* [London: SCM Press, 1957], pp. 141-55). George Eldon Ladd differentiates between the apocalyptic and prophetic traditions, and includes Jesus with the latter (The Presence of the Future [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], esp. pp. 111, 146, 148). Alongside this image of the apocalyptic Jesus, however, there has been a contrasting image of Jesus as an ethical teacher or social critic--a tendency that is evident in some of the classical Social Gospel writings. This approach has recently gained new momentum through the work of John Dominic Crossan, who views Jesus as a wisdom sage who challenged the prevailing culture of domination with a radically egalitarian vision of a "kingdom of nuisances and nobodies" (in his Historical Jesus, pp. 239-302; and Revolutionary Biography, pp. 54-74). For an overview of this debate (and the distinction between the apocalyptic Jesus and ethical Jesus), see Paula Fredriksen, "What You See is What You Get: Context and Content in Current Research on the Historical Jesus," Theology Today 52 (1995): 75-97. See also the trenchant critique of Crossan (and his

Ernst Troeltsch summed up a widespread perception when he wrote that: "the message of Jesus is not a programme of social reform. It is rather the summons to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God; this preparation, however, is to take place quietly within the framework of the present world-order, in a purely religious fellowship of love. . . ." ²¹⁷ This emphasis in Jesus' teaching has the effect of relativizing the prevailing structures of society and assigning to them a merely provisional role in the interim period preceding the Parousia. Ogletree notes that "the Synoptic treatments of Jesus do not suggest a direct concern with political and economic institutions They are taken-for-granted features in the world which is passing away." ²¹⁸ For this reason, he discounts any suggestion that "the Synoptic gospels provide a direct basis for a social ethic." ²¹⁹

The second element in the gospel tradition--indeed a corollary of the first--which minimizes its immediate social impact is its sectarian character. The focus in the gospels is on nurturing an intentional community of disciples rather than on re-shaping the fabric of society. This tendency is reflected even in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31-46), which, along with the Nazareth episode in Luke 4, is one of the most frequently cited passages in the social market literature. The poor, hungry, and homeless people with whom the Son of Man identifies are those who are designated his spiritual

predecessors) in Howard Clark Kee's "A Century of Quests for the Culturally Compatible Jesus," Theology Today 52 (1995): 17-28.

²¹⁷Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches, trans. by Olive Wyon (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931; reprint ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1981), p. 61.

²¹⁸Ogletree, pp. 116-17.

²¹⁹ibid., p. 117.

siblings (vs. 40)--an allusion, many commentators believe, to persecuted Christian messengers.²²⁰ If one narrows the focus in this manner, then this is, in its original setting, essentially a statement about "the treatment of believers by believers."²²¹ In similar fashion, in describing the poor who are the objects of charity in Luke, Thomas Schmidt observes that "these poor are initially the Jewish poor and perhaps subsequently the Christian poor. There is no hint of concern for regional or international social problems."²²²

Finally, any serious attempt to make use of the gospel materials as a resource for doing economic ethics must reckon with the radical nature of the kingdom demands articulated there. The Lukan perspective has often been characterized as one of "semi-asceticism" or ebionitism.²²³ Even if this description overstates the case, there are still repeated calls to give away one's surplus wealth, to "take no thought for the morrow," to trust fully in God's provision, and so forth--requirements which clearly transcend the scope of melioristic reform proposals.

These considerations, of course, do not render the gospel accounts irrelevant to

²²⁰Thus Robert H. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 511-16 (For the contrary view, viz. that the reference is to needy people in general, see David Hill, The Gospel of Matthew, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) p. 331; and Kummel, pp. 95-5).

²²¹Thomas E. Schmidt, Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels, JSOT Supplemental series, no. 15 (Sheffield [England]: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), p. 134.

²²²*ibid.*, p. 136.

²²³i.e., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "ptochos," by Ernst Bammel, 6:906.

the task of constructing a social ethic, nor do they preclude any appeal to them in the context of addressing economic concerns. Troeltsch qualified his comments about the lack of a social program in Jesus' message with the observation that as soon as Jesus' teachings had spawned a permanent community, it was inevitable that these religious impulses would engender a corresponding sociological form.²²⁴ Moreover, one might still maintain, as Wolfgang Schrage does, that "although Jesus did not consider his true task to be reform of social and political structures, and one searches his teachings in vain for detailed concepts of a new political or social order, of new sexual roles or economic relationships, nevertheless the will of God that he preached impinges on these areas."²²⁵

Admittedly, none of the documents surveyed in this chapter claim Jesus' categorical endorsement for the welfare state (or any other economic system). But neither do they generally concede any degree of tension between a literal application of Jesus' ethic and the exigencies of modern economic life. A legitimate question to be raised, therefore, is whether the ethic of Jesus is directly applicable to the institutional framework of society or whether it must (as, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr argued) remain an "impossible possibility," which is continually relevant but only capable of being partially approximated in relative structures of justice.²²⁶

²²⁴Troeltsch, vol. 1, p. 62.

²²⁵Schrage, p. 91.

²²⁶This position is developed most fully in Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York: Harper & Row, 1935).

The Analytical Grid Applied to
the Social Market Rationale

Once again, in evaluating the various elements of the biblical tradition marshalled on behalf of a particular economic system, it becomes apparent that there is no automatic and self-evident correlation between the texts that are cited and the social agenda that is being advanced. In some instances, the biblical images being invoked are nebulous and can be used to sanction conflicting agendas. In other cases, biblical categories, such as poverty and justice, are invested with shades of meaning conditioned by modern theoretical constructs. The purpose of this section, therefore, is to again show how the process of synthesizing the biblical materials and relating them to contemporary economic concerns is shaped, in no small measure, by the interpreter's theological assumptions about the nature of Scripture, style of ethical reasoning, social location, and ideological commitments--a configuration of factors which are all extrinsic to the text itself.

Theology

Unlike many of the arguments put forward by evangelical defenders of capitalism, the moral appeals contained in the literature supporting a social market economy are not expressly predicated on any particular conception of biblical authority. The way that Scripture is used in the writings surveyed in this chapter would be compatible with diverse theories of biblical inspiration. Some of the works display a more evangelical theological orientation, comparable to the views of many figures in the Religious Right's constituency, whereas others approach Scripture from the standpoint of modern critical scholarship.

One point, however, on which there is virtually unanimous agreement is that the Bible does not endorse a singular economic system. Ronald Sider, for example, who is arguably the most theologically conservative writer surveyed in this chapter, nonetheless observes that "we do not find a comprehensive blueprint for a new economic order in Scripture."²²⁷ The United Church of Christ Pronouncement echoes these sentiments when it notes that "there is no clear or easy way to move from biblical and theological mandates to particular policy recommendations."²²⁸ The Presbyterians likewise affirm that:

The transition from biblical framework to social policies and institutions is a human enterprise. That is, we do not believe that God specifies particular political policies or economic institutions either in the Bible or in the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.²²⁹

Implicit in this standard caveat are a couple of assumptions about the Bible. First, it signifies a greater willingness to acknowledge the existence of a gap between the cultural milieu that shaped the biblical tradition and the social context of the modern reader. The Presbyterians allude to this condition when they affirm that: "No ancient Israelite pattern of government or economy can possibly be applied to our nation

²²⁷Sider, Rich Christians, p. 205. This statement so incensed David Chilton, a vociferous critic of Sider, that he wrote a highly inflammatory parabolical parody of Sider's position entitled "The Missing Blueprints" (included as an appendix to his Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald J. Sider, 3rd ed. [Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985], pp. 343-6). The institute responsible for this book also launched a collection of economics texts called The Biblical Blueprints Series.

²²⁸UCC, p. 174 (and cf. Blank, p. 133).

²²⁹PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 7.

today."²³⁰ Hence, a degree of historical and cultural relativity is granted. The Catholic bishops recognize this reality by noting that the Church has co-existed with a variety of economic systems throughout its history.²³¹ Secondly, at least some of these writers concede a measure of diversity within the biblical tradition itself, resulting in a greater sensitivity to the interpreter's role in assessing these perspectives. Rebecca Blank, for example, states: "There is no single correct interpretation of the economic message of the Bible. The Bible does not speak from a single voice." Consequently, she concludes that "each reader will bring his or her own lenses to these stories."²³² Taken together, these two limiting factors--the element of historical distance and the diversity of economic perspectives within the canon--would rule out any attempt to derive a modern economic program directly from the Bible.

Turning, then, to a consideration of how the Bible actually does function as a moral resource in this literature, a couple of preliminary observations can be made. To begin with, the way in which the biblical references are organized, particularly in the church statements, is significant in itself. For the most part, these pronouncements follow a fairly standard format in which there is one section devoted to developing a biblical perspective on economics near the beginning. Outside of this opening prologue, one rarely encounters scriptural citations in the balance of the document.²³³ The Bible,

²³⁰PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.128.

²³¹NCCB, par. 130.

²³²Blank, p. 17.

²³³For instance, in the Catholic bishop's pastoral, the longest of the church pronouncements, this writer was able to find only two scriptural references outside of

therefore, contributes to the development of an overall moral framework, rather than supplying warrants for specific policy proposals.

Moreover, this biblical summary is frequently sandwiched in between an opening commentary on the current state of the U.S. economy (using either statistical data or personal vignettes)²³⁴ and a series of prescriptive principles. This movement from contemporary realities to biblical reflection is suggestive of a more interactive or dialogical approach to Scripture, in which (as in Liberation Theology) theological ethics is understood as critical reflection on praxis.

Another feature of these biblical perspective sections, noted previously, is their tendency to trace the storyline of the Bible sequentially. In successive order, the recitation moves from the Creation saga through the Exodus, the establishment of a covenant community, the rise of a prophetic movement, and finally the mission of Jesus. Out of this unfolding narrative, various unifying themes emerge that constitute the underlying message. As the Presbyterians sum it up, for example, "the Bible tells a story

chapter 2 (the chapter that establishes the biblical foundation) and chapter 5 (the concluding challenge). The opening paragraph of the section on agricultural policy (par. 216) quotes from Leviticus 25:23 and a subsequent section on the world food problem refers generally to "the Lord's command to feed the hungry" (par. 282).

²³⁴Examples of this type of prologue can be found in NCCB, chapt. 1 (an addition to the second draft); "The Current Situation" section in DC, par. 13-33; the "Introduction" in PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.016-29.028; the "Introduction" in PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 6; and the "Introduction" in UMC, pp. 330-31. The UCC Pronouncement reverses the order, placing the section on "Suffering Within the Household of God" (part IV) after the "Biblical, Ethical, and Theological Rationale" (part III). (It is worth noting, however, that in "Christian Faith and Economic Justice," one of the precursors to the UCC Pronouncement, much of this same material is contained in a section entitled "Economic Realities of the 1980's," which preceded the biblical rationale [see Schroeder, pp. 110-14].)

of the struggle between faithfulness to a singular, transcendent sovereign and a religion that served the interests of the powerful and rich."²³⁵ Presenting the text in this manner suggests that the Bible is less a compendium of laws and instructions and more an epic drama of God's activity in salvation history.

This style of biblical citation is consistent with the role that Scripture plays in the overall structure of the argument. At least three interrelated functions are discernible in the various documents. First, the biblical narrative often furnishes archetypal patterns that illumine the realities of contemporary economic life. In other words, various episodes in the biblical record are taken to be paradigmatic of more or less perennial features of the human drama. The synopsis of the biblical story quoted in the preceding paragraph, for example, is clearly intended to provide a moral framework for assessing analogous situations in the contemporary world.

Secondly, the Bible is used to evoke an image of the kind of society people of faith should be striving to create. According to the Presbyterians, the "biblical understanding pictures what we believe God intends" for humankind, thereby furnishing a vision that must be embodied in concrete policies and institutions.²³⁶ The Catholic bishops also refer to the "Bible's deeper vision of God, of the purposes of creation, and of the dignity of human life in society."²³⁷ So while the Bible may not mandate any particular economic system, it does, this view suggests, elevate certain ideals that should

²³⁵PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.072.

²³⁶PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 7.

²³⁷NCCB, par. 29.

be sought after.

The way in which the Jubilee legislation is used furnishes an apt illustration of this method at work. Rather than implying that this institution should be replicated today in some analogous fashion, the general tendency in this school of thought is to identify and attach normative significance to some goal it was seeking to achieve--such as guaranteeing a minimum level of family subsistence, providing everyone with the means to earn a livelihood, distributing capital assets more evenly, or curbing concentrations of wealth.²³⁸

Finally, an important function of the Bible in this literature is to provide corroboration for ethical principles. As was previously noted, specific policy proposals are virtually never justified on the basis of biblical appeals. Instead, biblical warrants are used to establish an intermediate level of "middle axioms"²³⁹ that provide direction for policy initiatives or criteria for assessing alternatives. These intermediary guidelines take several forms. In the Catholic bishops' pastoral, the import of the biblical witness is summed up in the affirmation of inherent human dignity²⁴⁰ (although biblical references

²³⁸A notable exception to this principle is Ronald Sider, who suggests at one point--evidently somewhat facetiously--that the Jubilee practice could be literally implemented if all the world's Christians would pool their capital assets in a given year and then divide them equally (*Rich Christians*, p. 93). Among the writings considered in this chapter, however, this degree of literalism is unusual--even for Sider, who subsequently warns against the "legalistic utilization of . . . texts" and following a "wooden application" (*ibid.*, p. 95).

²³⁹On the concept of middle axioms--a term which comes out of the 1937 world ecumenical Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State--see John C. Bennett, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1950), pp. 76-85.

²⁴⁰NCCB, par. 28.

are also either directly cited or alluded to in connection with some of the so-called "ethical norms for economic life"²⁴¹). The Presbyterian Church's Christian Faith and Economic Justice paper derives from the Bible a series of six theological claims that relate to economics as well as six "moral norms for evaluating the justice" of economic institutions and situations.²⁴² In the Disciples of Christ statement, the Bible forms the basis for four "Christian Affirmations" (a concern for the poor, the importance of community, the dignity of every person, and realism about persons and institutions).²⁴³ Donald Hay moves from a consideration of three biblical-theological themes (creation, fall and judgment, and the people of God) through an exposition of eight universally applicable economic principles organized around the concept of stewardship.²⁴⁴ What all these proposals have in common is the basic premise that the normative dimension of Scripture is most adequately expressed, not in terms of isolated verses which are directly applied to supposedly analogous situations in the contemporary world, but through more general principles that stand out either because of their pervasive presence throughout the canon or by virtue of their ability to synthesize diverse elements of the biblical tradition.

There are, then, considerable differences between the way Scripture is used in

²⁴¹ibid., par. 61-95.

²⁴²The theological affirmations (which are said to have been derived from Scripture by the church, 29.075) are at 29.072-29.113. The principles of justice (which are derived from a combination of Scripture, theology, and the American legal tradition, 29.118) are enumerated at 29.115-29.137. See also the summary at 29.300-29.318 (the phrase which is quoted is at 29.311).

²⁴³DC, par. 34-49.

²⁴⁴Hay, pp. 11-16, 70-77.

ethical writings with a predominantly Catholic or mainline Protestant orientation and the role it plays in conservative evangelical paeans to capitalism. Still, it would be a mistake to exaggerate the dissimilarities or to fail to recognize that the social market appeals are prone to some of the same difficulties that were identified in the previous chapter.

To begin with, there is the issue of arbitrariness in the selection of relevant biblical materials. One member of the panel that produced the U. C. C. Pronouncement went so far as to characterize their method of citing Scripture as "unsophisticated proof-texting."²⁴⁵ But regardless of whether one is foraging for isolated proof-texts or identifying overarching themes that supposedly permeate the entire canon, there is invariably a tendency to sway the process to favor a particular position. In support of this proposition, one need only to compare the various lists of biblical themes delineated in some of the writings that follow this approach. In some, the focus will be on biblical themes such as freedom, work, and personal responsibility, while others will highlight justice, community, and concern for the poor. So while a thematic approach may have more integrity and operate with less obvious capriciousness than random proof-texting, it still offers a fairly wide measure of latitude.

In addition, it is also worth noting that, notwithstanding their greater degree of openness to critical scholarship, most of the writers surveyed in this chapter still accept at face value many biblical claims that could reasonably be called into question. For example, despite their highly-charged polemical style, the indictments contained in the prophetic oracles are generally assumed to be literally accurate--a situation which calls to

²⁴⁵Shinn, p. 722.

mind Morris Silver's pointed observation that "relying on the prophets for information about the Israelite economy is like writing a history of the U.S. economy based solely on Ralph Nader."²⁴⁶

An even more foundational issue concerns the extent to which biblical pronouncements on wealth and poverty, shaped as they were by the prevailing economic ethos of a pre-industrial Mediterranean society, can be directly appropriated by contemporary ethicists and to what extent they should be modified by modern understandings of economic processes. Robert S. Bachelder, a United Church of Christ clergy member, brought this issue into sharp focus with a stinging critique of ecclesiastical policy pronouncements (including his own church's economic statement), wherein he accused the so-called "oldline denominations" of embracing an "economic biblicism" that harks back to the fundamentalism of yesteryear. Accepting "the Bible's communitarian social framework as normative for political-economic analysis today," oblivious to the insights of Adam Smith and his successors, is, he asserted, tantamount to "writing scientific papers that use the Bible's cosmology or creation account in a literal

²⁴⁶Silver, p. 113. Silver offers a provocative, iconoclastic, but rather dubious historical and sociological reconstruction of the prophetic movement. Among other things, he argues that what the prophets unfairly characterized as instances of wealthy landowners confiscating the patrimonies of poor peasants were actually examples of "entrepreneurs with superior market knowledge buying out small farmers to put their land to more efficient use" (p. 75). What the prophets misconstrued as judicial bribery was, in his view, the legitimate payment of litigants' fees in order to secure writs of enforcement (p. 127). He therefore discounts the claim that the poor were being oppressed or that their condition was adversely affected by the consolidation of landholdings. While Silver's case may not be entirely compelling, it does provide a useful reminder of the need to exercise critical scrutiny regarding every strand of the biblical tradition.

way, as though Copernicus or Darwin never lived."²⁴⁷ Even if one discounts some of the hyperbole in this indictment,²⁴⁸ it is still apparent that the failure to pay sufficient regard to critical interpretive issues is not a problem wholly confined to conservative evangelical authors.

Ethics

As one would expect, there is a close correlation between the method of citing Scripture and the style of moral reasoning that prevails in this body of literature. Consistent with the way the Bible is either summarized in the form of a series of themes or used to validate a set of general norms for economic life, ethical principles make up the core of the moral appeal. Often, the elaboration of these principles constitutes a transitional stage in the progression from biblical narrative to public policy analysis and recommendations. Implicit in this process is a contrast between the biblical story, which represents a particularistic tradition resonating primarily with members of a specific faith community, and the more universal principles, which are regarded as expressions of a wider moral consensus. Thus the Catholic bishops can extend an invitation "to all in our pluralistic society" to join in embracing their norms for economic life based on the

²⁴⁷Robert S. Bachelder, "Capitalism and Christianity: Pulling Both Oars," Christian Century 19-26 December 1990, p. 1194.

²⁴⁸The points raised in Bachelder's essay, while legitimate, are overstated somewhat. There is more diversity of opinion among economists over issues of foundational importance than there is among those engaged in the natural sciences (owing, no doubt, to the greater degree of unpredictability in accounting for human behavior). Hence, unlike literalistic theories of creation (which are only espoused by religious fundamentalists and which have no credence in the broader scientific community), the economic views presented in these church statements, while they may be to the left of the American political mainstream, still have the support of reputable economists.

conviction that "what the Bible and Christian tradition teach, human wisdom confirms."²⁴⁹ One of the functions of principles, therefore, is to frame one's ethical criteria in a language of moral discourse with which a broader segment of the American public can identify.

Where more specific policy proposals are offered (and, it should be noted, not all the writings surveyed here move to this level), they are accorded a more tentative status than the guiding principles that supposedly undergird them. This distinction is conveyed in various ways. Some writings (such as the Presbyterian's Christian Faith and Economic Justice and the Disciples of Christ statement) present two or more alternative economic systems without endorsing any one of them. Other texts propose concrete policy initiatives, but signal their more provisional nature. One of the Presbyterian papers, for example, asserts that "our fundamental moral beliefs will not change, but the way we apply them has to change because the world has changed."²⁵⁰ Similarly, the Catholic bishops preface their chapter on policy issues with the following stipulation:

In focusing on some of the central economic issues and choices in

²⁴⁹NCCB, par. 61, 65. At least one commentator on the pastoral lent credence to this claim. James Tobin, a Yale University economist and Nobel laureate, wrote: "The values expressed in the pastoral letter are presented as derived from Catholic theology. I, a non-Catholic and indeed an unrepentant 'secular humanist', find them of universal appeal, striking responsive chords among persons of all religious faiths and of none" ("Unemployment, Poverty, and Economic Policy," America 4 May 1985, p. 359). Similar attempts to broaden the appeal of one's principles are seen elsewhere. The Presbyterian Church's Christian Faith and Economic Justice paper predicates its principles, not only on Scripture, but on the values embodied in the American democratic experience as well (cf. 29.118-29.137, and the references to sources such as the Declaration of Independence and John Rawls). Hay refers to his set of standards as "universal principles" (p. 16).

²⁵⁰PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 14.

American life in the light of moral principles, we are aware that the movement from principle to policy is complex and difficult and that although moral values are essential in determining public policies, they do not dictate specific solutions. . . . Our judgements and recommendations on specific economic issues, therefore, do not carry the same moral authority as our statements of universal moral principles and formal church teaching. . .²⁵¹

A second important element in the style of ethical reasoning displayed in these documents is a willingness to hold social structures morally accountable for the manner in which they perform. The institutional context in which economic players operate is considered to be just as liable to ethical scrutiny as the personal qualities, motivations, and deeds of the actors themselves. This feature stands in marked contrast to the tendency observed in many free market capitalist writings to focus solely on personal ethical concerns and to disparage notions such as "social justice."

One indication of the different tenor of the social market writings is the application of moral categories and value-laden terminology to aspects of the social process. Thus the Catholic bishops characterize "patterns of exclusion"--factors such as poverty and repression that prevent members of the community, or nations as a whole, from participating fully in the political or economic system--as "forms of social sin." Along with "personal sin" one of the Presbyterian task forces called upon members of that church to recognize the reality of "social sin," defined as "that capacity for evil that resides in the groups, committees, nations of which we are members."²⁵² These so-called "impersonal structures built into our institutional life" can, this statement intones, "be

²⁵¹NCCB, par. 134-35.

²⁵²PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.104.

sinful when they exploit and oppress human beings."²⁵³

To document the existence of such "institutionalized evils" in contemporary society, statistical data are adduced purporting to demonstrate inordinate disparities in the distribution of income, the consumption levels of food and energy, or some other barometer of economic well-being.²⁵⁴ So in essence, the overall pattern of outcomes generated by an economic system become a primary criterion for assessing its moral acceptability.

A corollary of this approach to ethics is that one acquires a certain measure of moral culpability merely by participating in various institutional arenas and thereby becoming complicit in society's injustices. Correspondingly, therefore, one's ethical responsibility includes the task of improving one's social environment.

This perspective on the scope of ethics has important implications for the manner in which the Bible is used. When moral categories are applied to social structures, biblical themes are often introduced as a warrant. Thus, prophetic denunciations of oppression function not only as an indictment of individual conduct that exploits other human beings, but as sweeping mandates to revamp institutional patterns that supposedly, but their very existence, systematically deprive certain groups of their rightful due.²⁵⁵ Similar appeals are made to New Testament parables. According to the U. C. C.

²⁵³ibid., 29.105.

²⁵⁴The chapter entitled "Structural Evil and World Hunger" in Sider, Rich Christians, pp. 131-67, illustrates this type of argumentation well. See also NCCB, par. 183-85, 290; PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.149.

²⁵⁵So, for example, Sider can write: "God reveals his displeasure at evil institutions very clearly in Amos 5:10-15" (Rich Christians, p. 135, emphasis in original).

Pronouncement, Jesus' parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25 "reminds individuals and nations to take care of those that are in need."²⁵⁶ Echoing a standard theme in recent papal encyclicals, the first draft of the Catholic bishops' Pastoral Letter interpreted the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) as "a prophetic warning to rich nations like the United States to be concerned for the poorest, less-developed countries."²⁵⁷

Whatever its merits, it is important to note here that this ethical perspective is basically a modern development. The notion of institutionalized evil, while it may have some affinities with biblical understandings of collective guilt, basically emerged in its current form out of the American Social Gospel movement and the theology of Walter Rauschenbusch.²⁵⁸ This concept, and the overall approach to ethics that it represents, would have been inconceivable apart from various modern notions. Among other things, it assumes that the whole social edifice is an artificial and adaptable human construct, capable of being altered or re-engineered in accordance with the dictates of reason or

²⁵⁶Blank, p. 152.

²⁵⁷The portion of the text that includes this reference is quoted in a 1985 article that is based on the first draft of the letter (Dennis Hamm, "Economic Policy and the Uses of Scripture," America 4 May 1985, p. 371). Interestingly, the final draft omitted this sentence, which would have come at the end of paragraph 48. It had been called into question by some critics, who cited it as an example of the confusion of the "individual with the institutional" (e.g., Peter M. Flanigan, "The Pastoral and the Letter," America 12 January 1985, p. 14). On the long-standing precedents for the application of this parable and the Matthew 25 one to international economic relations within the tradition of papal encyclicals, see McCarthy and Roads, p. 193.

²⁵⁸see A Theology for the Social Gospel (Macmillan Co., 1917; rep. ed., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), esp. pp. 69-94. On the essential novelty of Rauschenbusch's doctrine of sin, see Bernard Ramm, Offense to Reason: The Theology of Sin (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 132-35.

morality. This is an outlook that differs sharply from the prevailing sense throughout much of human history that the structures of society represent a fixed and immutable reality.²⁵⁹ As this mindset receded during the Enlightenment era, a new, essentially secular morality of social reform emerged and became the guiding principle of modern democratic liberalism.²⁶⁰

The recent moral imperative to transform society also draws upon modern techniques of social scientific analysis. Among other things, it incorporates the kind of inquiry into class structure, social institutions, and the power dynamics of society that are all an outgrowth of modern sociological studies. For its technical underpinnings, it utilizes the various statistical measurements of aggregate economic activity (such as GNP comparisons and distribution of income curves) that have been formulated in the twentieth century--a factor that was mentioned in a previous discussion of the social justice concept.

In short, it is evident that a whole series of intellectual developments lie behind the ethical paradigm that is implicit in the way social market proponents often use the

²⁵⁹Troeltsch, for one, describes the mindset that shaped Christian social ethics for much of the church's history as follows: "While the Early Church accepted the social order of the Ancient World as something fixed and incapable of being reformed, and learnt to tolerate it, as the sinful corruption of the order of Natural Law, while it strove to heal its harmful effects by works of charity, the Medieval Church, on the other hand, believed firmly in the Divinely appointed harmony of Nature and Grace, and regarded the relative approximation of actual social institutions to the ideals of the Church as the natural, necessary, logical world-order, which, to be secured only needed the authority of the Church, and a constant renewal of the vitality of its religious principles. . . . That was as far as the social transformation extended. To the Early Church social reform was too difficult, to the Medieval Church it seemed superfluous" (vol. 1, p. 303).

²⁶⁰In Becker and Barnes, see esp. 2:565, 585-8.

Bible. What has basically taken place is that ethical norms, such as fairness, that emerged out of the matrix of interpersonal relationships were extended to critique dimensions of the social process as these processes began to be understood. These modern tools of social scientific analysis and ethical criticism then supplied a new hermeneutical key for reading the biblical text.

Social Location

Correlating the economic perspectives expressed in this set of writings with a particular social location is once again a precarious endeavor. Biographical information on the individual authors of books surveyed in this chapter is insufficient to draw any solid conclusions, but it would probably be safe to assume that their social status is comparable to that of their counterparts who support other economic philosophies. More importantly, this chapter has dealt, to a large extent, with pronouncements that purport to represent the considered opinions of ecclesiastical bodies which have a rather diverse membership.

Nevertheless, it is possible to discern in these documents a particular class outlook, and their message therefore resonates most convincingly with certain segments of the population. Critics from the left--principally academicians--often bemoan the extent to which these church pronouncements accommodate traditional capitalist assumptions. This phenomenon is generally attributed to the church's need to placate a largely middle class constituency thoroughly immersed in a capitalistic culture. One example of this kind of critique can be found in a published paper by Paul F. Carmenisch dealing with Protestant economic statements. After outlining a rather lofty, hypothetical

vision of how faith communities could critically engage current economic realities based on their biblical heritage and make an impact on the centers of power responsible for the direction in which their society is moving, he adds: "To hope that all this will be done competently by predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class bodies whose members are extensively linked with the prevailing economy is perhaps to hope for a minor miracle."²⁶¹

Undoubtedly, there is merit in this line of commentary, insofar as the concrete policy recommendations often fall short of the sweeping calls for economic equality and social transformation that reverberate throughout the earlier sections of these statements.²⁶² Nevertheless, academicians can hardly claim to have been excluded from the deliberations. An examination of the process by which these statements were formulated would reveal that in most instances, a combination of academicians, public

²⁶¹Camenisch, p. 55. See also Chapman, pp. 44-5. Such sentiments are not new. In 1962, Gibson Winter expressed misgivings about American Protestantism's growing identification with the new middle and upper classes in his classic sociological study, The Suburban Captivity of the Churches (New York: Macmillan, 1962). One study paper that candidly acknowledges this reality is the Presbyterians' Toward a Just, Caring, and Dynamic Political Economy. Near the outset of the discussion, it observes that "for most Presbyterians, the economy works well," citing statistics that indicate "most of us Presbyterians are 'uppercrust'" (p. 13). A concluding section concedes that "Presbyterians, by and large, are more often barriers to progress toward justice in the political economy than they are initiators or supporters of it" (p. 37).

²⁶²Commenting on the Catholic Pastoral Letter, for example, Warren Copeland discerns a "dissonance between principles and policy" and alleges that "the bishops have developed a socialist rationale for liberal capitalist policy recommendations" (Economic Justice: The Social Ethics of U. S. Economic Policy [Nashville: Abingdon, 1988], p. 135). With regard to the Protestant statements, Chapman notes "a major inconsistency between the potential radicalness of the biblical traditions these documents cite and the gravity of the problems they delineate, on the one hand, and the solutions they offer on the other" (p. 43).

policy specialists, and officials connected to the church bureaucracy or its various agencies played the predominant role.

A couple of examples can be cited to illustrate this observation. The process leading up to the issuance of the Catholic bishops' Pastoral Letter included a major public forum, a wide-ranging consultation with over two hundred theologians, economists, policy experts, and representatives from industry, labor, and government, and the release of two preliminary drafts for comment and review.²⁶³ In the final analysis, however, the document itself was drafted by a committee of five bishops, assisted to an indeterminate extent by the professional staff of the U. S. Catholic Conference in Washington (the bishops' administrative apparatus) and an informal cadre of economic advisors drawn from the ranks of academia.²⁶⁴

A study paper by an ad hoc "covenant group" of academicians and denominational staff people set in motion the events within the United Church of Christ that culminated in the adoption of that body's economic pronouncement. Following this initial impetus and pursuant to a resolution by the church's national assembly, a

²⁶³Thomas M. Gannon, "Introduction," in Gannon, p. 5; Kenneth A. Briggs, "Bishops Draft Economic Message," New York Times 25 November 1983, p. A22; Winston Williams, "Catholic Forum on the Economy," New York Times 15 December 1983, p. D10.

²⁶⁴On the committee itself, see Barbara Basler, "Members of Panel Span Range of Experience," New York Times, 12 November 1984, p. B11. Among those officials in the U. S. Catholic Conference who allegedly played an important role in the process of drafting the letter were Fathers William Lewers, J. Bryan Hehir, and David Hollenbach, along with Msg. George Higgins, a labor specialist, and Ronald Krietemeyer, the director of the office of domestic social development. The two principal outside consultants were economist Charles Wilber, of the University of Notre Dame, and Donald Warwick, of Harvard University's International Development Institute (Eugene Kennedy, "America's Activist Bishops," New York Times Magazine, 12 August 1984, pp. 19, 24).

seventeen-member economic study panel was convened--again consisting largely of academicians (four seminary and two economics professors) and personnel from the denominational bureaucracy (six members). This group's deliberations resulted in one proposed pronouncement entitled "Christian Faith and Economic Life." An alternative counterproposal called "Christian Faith and Economic Justice," which inveighed more heavily against racism, militarism, and the American economic system in general, was subsequently submitted for consideration by two denominational agencies concerned with ethnic minority concerns. As the final stage in the process, staff people from several denominational offices merged these two preliminary documents into a consensus version, which was the text ultimately adopted by the church's national assembly.²⁶⁵

The impetus for the two Presbyterian statements on economic issues came from the church and society offices of the former northern and southern church bodies prior to their 1983 reunion. The Christian Faith and Economic Justice paper claimed to have incorporated input from "hundreds of persons. . . throughout the church," but it ultimately was drafted by a five-member task force commissioned by the southern church's Council on Theology and Culture. The members of this panel were identified as a university professor, a pastor, a Christian educator, a bank president, and an executive with a transnational corporation.²⁶⁶ The process by which the Toward a Just, Caring, and Dynamic Political Economy paper was formulated involved what was perhaps the most ambitious undertaking to generate widespread participation--a teleconference linking

²⁶⁵This process is summarized and critically reviewed in Schroeder, esp. pp. 9-21, and Shinn, pp. 720-21.

²⁶⁶PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.015.

1300 church members at thirty-six sites across the country. Since the survey results derived from this process were considered to be inconclusive,²⁶⁷ however, the recommendations contained in the paper presumably reflect the views of the twenty-member oversight committee, operating under the auspices of the former northern church's Advisory Council on Church and Society. Members of this committee included eight persons with some type of academic affiliation, as well as three attorneys, three industry executives, two local government officials, a church lobbyist, a pastor, and the director of an advocacy group.²⁶⁸

The sociological dynamics propelling these church ventures into the public policy arena come into even sharper focus when one considers the quarters from which dissent arose. Within the Catholic Church, opposition to the bishops' program galvanized around the Catholic Lay Committee, which issued its own defense of democratic capitalism in advance of the Pastoral Letter. This organization was chaired by investment banker William E. Simon, and included a host of prominent figures in the corporate world and Republican Party politics.²⁶⁹ The pastoral also received unfavorable treatment in such

²⁶⁷PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 3.

²⁶⁸ibid., p. 1.

²⁶⁹Lay Commission on Catholic Social Teaching and the U. S. Economy, Toward the Future: Catholic Social Thought and the U. S. Economy. A Lay Letter (New York: American Catholic Committee, 1984). See also Kenneth A. Briggs, "Lay Catholic Group Offers Report Praising Capitalism," New York Times, 7 November 1984, p. A16 (which contains a complete list of the signers); Leonard Silk, "Celebrating Capitalism: Panel Sees Growth as Social Benefit," New York Times, 7 November 1984, p. A16. This work is critically reviewed in James E. Hug, "A Preferential Option for the Entrepreneur," Christianity and Crisis 21 January 1985, pp. 518-20. For background on some of the signatories, see Holly Sklar, "Co-Missionaries for Top-Down Capitalism: Who's Behind the Lay Letter?" Christianity and Crisis, 21 January 1985, pp. 521-23.

publications as the Wall Street Journal and Fortune magazine²⁷⁰ and generally critical reviews from business executives who participated in other forums.²⁷¹

In the aftermath of the initial paper written by the United Church of Christ's informal economics study group, that denomination's Pension Board launched its own effort to develop an ethical appraisal of the U. S. economy. This body's fifteen member committee conducted its inquiry simultaneously with the latter phases of the official pronouncement committee's work, but its membership was weighted more heavily in favor of people connected with finance and industry (five members) and Pension Board employees (four members). Not surprisingly, its final report, entitled "The Market System and American Democratic Polity: Reflections in Light of Covenantal Tradition," which was released one month prior to the two other alternative pronouncements, adopted a much more sanguine assessment of the market economy and advocated a moderate, incremental approach to correcting its shortcomings.²⁷²

In the Presbyterian Church, one perennial source of dissent from the General Assembly's stands on social issues has been the Presbyterian Lay Committee, a

²⁷⁰Philip F. Lawler, "At Issue is the Prophet Motive," Wall Street Journal, 13 November 1984, p. 32; "Capitalism and the Bishops" (unsigned editorial), Wall Street Journal, 13 November 1984, p. 32; Daniel Seligman, "Sins of Omission," Fortune, 10 December 1984, pp. 183, 186. A somewhat more balanced perspective was offered in "The Church and Capitalism," Business Week, 12 November 1984, pp. 104-107, 110, 112.

²⁷¹See, for example, Johnson & Johnson Chairman and CEO James E. Burke's "Reactions from Management: Manufacturing," in Gannon, pp. 218-27; investment banker Peter M. Flanigan's previously cited article, pp. 13-14; and Allied Corporation chairman Edward L. Hennessy's "A Pastoral for the Poor, Not the Economy," America, 12 January 1985, pp. 15-17.

²⁷²In Schroeder, see the discussion on pp. 14-15, 29-31 and the text on pp. 97-107.

conservative advocacy group with historic ties to business interests.²⁷³ During the mid-1980's, it used its widely disseminated newspaper to denounce the two Presbyterian economic study papers, which it regarded as attacks on capitalism.²⁷⁴

At the risk of oversimplifying the situation, the cumulative picture that begins to emerge from all these examples is one in which church policy pronouncements favoring an expanded role for government in the economy and enhanced welfare measures are formulated, to a large extent, by committees disproportionately dominated by academicians, denominational bureaucrats, and policy experts, while being opposed by members of the business community. This pattern is, in fact, consistent with a broader trend both within mainstream religious institutions as well as in American culture at large. During the past thirty years, mainline church bodies have witnessed a growing polarization between clergy who espouse a more socially progressive agenda and envision an activist role for the church, and laity, who view religion primarily as a source of personal comfort and fulfillment. This clerical trend is particularly pronounced among those who are serving in non-parish, specialized vocations (such as in seminaries and

²⁷³The original charter of this group, entitled "A Call to Presbyterian Laymen," said that the Lay Committee was "composed of leaders in business and the professions" and listed a board of directors, virtually all of whom were highly placed executives in major corporations. (This document was re-printed in Christian Economics, 11 January 1966, pp. 1, 3.)

²⁷⁴See "Christian Faith and Economic Justice," Presbyterian Layman, March/April 1984, p. 4; John C. Sparks, "Who's Putting Words in My Mouth," Presbyterian Layman, May/June 1984, p. 5; "Assembly Adopts Document Urging Study of Socialism," Presbyterian Layman, July/August 1984, p. 6; Walter E. Williams, John A. Sparks, "Free Enterprise Responses to Attacks on Capitalism," Presbyterian Layman, May/June 1985, pp. 6-8; "Toward A Just, Caring, and Dynamic Political Economy," Presbyterian Layman, July/August 1985, p. 4.

denominational agencies). Jeffrey Hadden first called attention to this phenomenon in his 1969 work, The Gathering Storm in the Churches,²⁷⁵ which examined it primarily in the context of civil rights issues. More recently, the Presbyterian Panel surveys, which utilize sampling techniques to track opinion within that denomination, have also revealed a rift between clergy and lay persons over social issues (with specialized clergy once again showing the greatest degree of deviation from the conventional point of view).²⁷⁶ In the case of the Catholic Church, even the archbishop who chaired the commission responsible for the economic pastoral conceded that it did not reflect the views of the majority of Catholic parishioners²⁷⁷--an observation which an informal newspaper survey in one heavily Catholic community confirmed.²⁷⁸

One sociological phenomenon which parallels this ecclesiastical situation, and which may partially account for it, is the emergence of the so-called "new class" of knowledge elites.²⁷⁹ Composed of educated professionals in fields such as academia, the

²⁷⁵Garden City, New York: Doubleday (Anchor Books), 1969.

²⁷⁶Keith M. Wulff and John P. Marcum, "Cleavage or Consensus? A New Look at the Clergy-Laity Gap," in The Pluralistic Vision: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestant Education and Leadership, ed. by Milton J. Coalter, John Mulder, and Louis Weeks (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 308-26.

²⁷⁷"Archbishop Doubts Letter Mirrors Catholics' Attitudes," New York Times 19 November 1984, p. B8.

²⁷⁸"In Catholic Pawtucket, Few Back Bishops' Letter on Economy," New York Times 30 December 1984, p. 10.

²⁷⁹A very useful introduction to the new class hypothesis is B. Bruce-Briggs, ed., The New Class? (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1979). It should be noted that this term is used in slightly different ways by various writers. Some scholars, usually on the ideological left, include salaried managers in the corporate sector within this category, in addition to the other professionals listed above (e.g., John Kenneth Galbraith, The

non-profit sector, social work, civil service, the "helping professions," the arts, and journalism, this class's defining characteristic is that its members are engaged in the production and manipulation of symbols and information, rather than in the manufacturing of finished goods. Hence, in contradistinction to the older business elite, their social status is dependent on educational credentials and professional certification, instead of the control of economic capital. Whatever power this class possesses comes through the ability to dominate the language of public discourse and mold the cultural environment.

The political significance of this sociological phenomenon lies in the marked propensity of persons defined by the new class category to share a common worldview. Among the salient features of this outlook are an aversion to business enterprises and the commercial values they spawn, along with a high level of social idealism, often expressed in heavily moralistic terms.²⁸⁰ A wealth of survey data indicates, therefore, that it is from

Affluent Society [New York: New American Library/Mentor Book, 1958], pp. 263-68; Alvin W. Gouldner, The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class [New York: Seabury Press, 1979], pp. 1, 15; Christopher Lasch (The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of American Democracy [New York: W. W. Norton, 1995], pp. 25-49). In the present work, the term is being used more in the way that neo-conservative writers (including most of the contributors to the Bruce-Briggs volume) use it. For an overview of this definitional issue see Gouldner, pp. 6-7; B. Bruce-Briggs, "An Introduction to the Idea of the New Class," in Bruce-Briggs, pp. 1-18; and Daniel Bell, "The New Class: A Muddled Concept," in Bruce-Briggs, pp. 169-90.

²⁸⁰These factors constitute the centerpiece of the neo-conservative critique of this social movement. See, for example, Jeanne J. Kirkpatrick, "Politics and the New Class," in Bruce-Briggs, pp. 33-48; Peter L. Berger, "The Worldview of the New Class: Secularity and Its Discontents," in Bruce-Briggs, pp. 49-55; and Robert L. Bartley, "Business and the New Class," in Bruce-Briggs, pp. 57-66. For a somewhat dated, but less polemical, discussion of the "historic leftism of American intellectuals," see Seymour Martin Lipset, Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics (Garden City, NY: Doubleday [Anchor Books], 1963), pp. 332-71.

the ranks of these new class professionals that the welfare state receives its strongest support.²⁸¹

There are a couple of possible explanations for these socio-political leanings. The more benign view would see in this segment of the population the fulfillment of Karl Mannheim's vision of a classless intellectual social stratum able to overcome the constraints of ideological thinking and pursue the common good.²⁸² More recently, neo-conservative writers have suggested a more ulterior motive. Given the extent to which most of the institutions with which the new class is associated receive public subsidies, it is argued that members of this occupational category attempt to rationalize and legitimize the system from which receive their livelihood.²⁸³

It may also be, as some have suggested, that this class's animus toward capitalism and its bourgeois values reflects a certain degree of resentment, since the free market's seemingly capricious distribution of rewards represents an affront to the notion of a meritocracy based on education and expertise. Along these lines, S. I. Hayakawa once explained the attraction of intellectuals to the Democratic Party (which he characterized as the party of the disenfranchised) by suggesting that, along with Southerners, Catholics,

²⁸¹This survey research is reviewed by Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., "Pursuing the New Class: Social Theory and Survey Data," in Bruce-Briggs, pp. 101-22.

²⁸²Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge, trans Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., n.d.), pp. 136-46.

²⁸³e.g., Richard John Neuhaus, The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 239-40; Aaron Wildavsky, "Using Public Funds to Serve Private Interests: The Politics of the New Class," in Bruce-Briggs, pp. 147-53.

Jews, and African-Americans, they feel "left out" of the northern, white, Protestant establishment--feelings, he adds, which "are intensified by their conviction that, by rights, they ought to be running the joint."²⁸⁴

In light of these sociological dynamics, it is highly significant, therefore, that the occupational identities of the key players behind most of the church economic pronouncements--academicians, denominational agency personnel, clergy members, officials in public policy advocacy groups, and social service providers--place them firmly in the new class category. It is from these constituencies within the church that the major impetus and intellectual ammunition for the various 'peace and justice' initiatives traditionally comes. Accordingly, these programs tend to mirror the ideological priorities and values associated with the overall profile of the new class social stratum. A plausible case can be made, therefore, for the premise that it is their secular counterparts in this class of knowledge elites who constitute the primary reference group for many activists in mainstream religious bodies and that their socialization within the academic community and various professional guilds plays a major role in shaping their socio-political outlook.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴S. I. Hayakawa, "Toward a Governing Coalition--II. Republicans," in Emerging Coalitions in American Politics, ed. by Seymour Martin Lipset (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1978), p. 428. Gouldner (pp. 57-73) also discusses the politics of the intelligentsia in terms of a sense of alienation created by a "status disparity, a disparity between their great possession of culture and their correspondingly lesser enjoyment of incomes in power and wealth" (p. 65). See also Lipset, Political Man, pp. 341-47.

²⁸⁵With specific reference to the mainline Protestant community, the role of new class politics has been discussed by, among others, Neuhaus, pp. 238-45; Peter L. Berger, "Different Gospels: The Social Sources of Apostasy," in Richard John Neuhaus, ed., The Triumph of "Other Gospels", Encounter Series, ed. by Richard John Neuhaus (Grand

This hypothesis has been used, not only to account for the economic orientation of the mainline Protestant establishment and the Catholic episcopacy, but also to explain the appearance of a dissident left wing in the evangelical Protestant community. According to at least some sociological assessments of it, this movement is closely linked to the rising educational achievements and more cosmopolitan outlook of a younger generation of evangelical Protestants. Moreover, some survey data indicates that the primary support base for organizations that articulate a more progressive vision of evangelical social ethics consists, to a disproportionate extent, of persons connected to the new class professions.²⁸⁶

If this type of analysis has any validity, it provides further confirmation for the observation, made in the previous chapter, that one's social location is an important factor in how biblical insights are applied to contemporary social realities. Once again, a close correlation can be demonstrated between a set of economic values rooted in a particular class identity and a way of construing the message of Scripture.

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 1-14; Barbara Hargrove, "Religion and the New Mandarins," in Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, eds., Secularization and Fundamentalism Reconsidered, Religion and the Political Order, vol. 3 (New York: Paragon House, 1989), pp. 215-29; Wade Clark Roof, William McKinney, American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 115-16, 224-27. James Hitchcock applies a similar critique to the Catholic bishops economic pastoral in his "The Catholic Bishops, Public Policy, and the New Class," This World, no. 9 (Fall, 1984), pp. 54-65.

²⁸⁶For this argument, see Gay, pp. 177-90; James Davison Hunter, "The New Class and the Young Evangelicals," Review of Religious Research 22 (1980):155-69; idem, "The Perils of Idealism: A Reply," Review of Religious Research 24 (1983):267-76. Note also the following responses to Hunter: Boyd Reese, "'The New Class and the Young Evangelicals,' Second Thoughts," Review of Religious Research 24 (1983):261-67; and Kenneth B. Bedell, "Young Evangelicals in the 19th and 20th Centuries," Review of Religious Research 30 (1989):255-61.

Ideology

There are several components to the ideology that complements the style of Christian ethics considered in this chapter.²⁸⁷ Like the ideology of free enterprise capitalism, the social market philosophy is rooted in the strong, positive valuation of freedom that emanates primarily from the tradition of Enlightenment liberalism. The difference revolves around how freedom is defined and the conditions over against which it is claimed. While defenders of free enterprise view freedom almost exclusively in terms of the absence of government restrictions on individual choice (i.e., freedom from external constraint), for proponents of a social market system, freedom also has a positive dimension. In this tradition, it includes the capacity to achieve one's aspirations or to realize a meaningful existence according to the standards of one's community.²⁸⁸

Construed in this broader fashion, freedom can be threatened not only by governmental coercion, but also by unchecked concentrations of economic power,

²⁸⁷On the overall contours of this ideology, see Clark, pp. 87-102; Norman Furniss and Timothy Tilton, The Case for the Welfare State: From Social Security to Social Equality (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 22-49; Guido de Ruggiero, The History of European Liberalism, trans. by R. G. Collingwood (Oxford University Press, 1927; rep. ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 1959); Dictionary of the History of Ideas, s.v. "Welfare State," by Asa Briggs; International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 1968 ed, s.v. "Welfare State," by Harry K. Girvetz. A useful, contemporary statement of the social welfare philosophy by one of its leading proponents in the economics profession may be found in Robert Kuttner's The Economic Illusion: False Choices Between Prosperity and Social Justice (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987). A summary and critique from a Christian ethical perspective may also be found in J. Philip Wogaman's The Great Economic Debate: An Ethical Analysis (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), pp. 98-124.

²⁸⁸See Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Freedom," in his Four Essays on Liberty (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 118-72; Ruggiero, pp. 350-57; Sowell, pp. 85-94.

conditions of physical deprivation, and various forms of social discrimination. In this vein, the Disciples of Christ statement refers to "freedom from hunger, from poverty, from lack of medical care, from homelessness, from joblessness."²⁸⁹ Starting with this understanding, it follows that freedom might be fostered and enhanced by government programs that expand the scope of individual opportunity, empower previously disenfranchised groups, and counterbalance bastions of economic privilege.

Alongside freedom, justice is the other primary abstract principle in political discourse. For proponents of the social market philosophy, this ideal functions as an important rhetorical device--much as freedom does for free market capitalists. This is evident even in the titles of the various church pronouncements--all of which contain the word "just" or "justice", but none of which, interestingly, mention "freedom." And like all such rallying cries, "justice" is employed in this literature as a condensed symbol or code word for a more comprehensive ideological perspective. As a previous section noted, in this tradition justice has reference not simply to how procedural mechanisms operate, but also to the outcomes that they generate. Justice provides the ethical standard by which the allocation of resources within a society is assessed.

Among the alternative criteria (or material principles) of distributive justice that have been proposed by various ethicists, there is, in this ideological system, at least a strong presumption in favor of equality. Insofar as this criterion is ambiguous,

²⁸⁹DC, par. 45. One Presbyterian statement also refers to the ambiguities in the way freedom is defined (PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.130).

realistically unattainable,²⁹⁰ or in conflict with other socially desirable ends (such as freedom or efficiency),²⁹¹ deviations from the norm of equality might be tolerated to one degree or another. As a basic guiding principle, however, justice requires that the basic institutional framework of society be ordered in such a way as to promote the maximum amount of equality consistent with the preservation of other cardinal values.²⁹² To the extent that there is any tension between implementing measures to distribute wealth more equitably and providing incentives for wealth creation, the social market position usually considers the former to be the most pressing ethical concern.

In actuality, this commitment to an egalitarian vision of economic justice generally translates into a somewhat more modest (albeit still ambitious) set of policy prescriptions. The cornerstone of the welfare capitalism system is the premise that a minimal level of subsistence should be guaranteed to everyone as a fundamental right (i.e., equality in meeting basic human needs). Secondly, the welfare state strives to ensure so-called equality of opportunity (often juxtaposed, perhaps somewhat simplistically, with an equality of outcomes), particularly in the provision of such things as educational benefits. Thirdly, proponents of this system generally support measures to

²⁹⁰Mickey Kaus has, for example, argued that the current trend toward increasing economic inequality is irreversible in his The End of Equality (New York: Basic Books, 1992). In place of the illusive goal of money equality, he would therefore substitute what he regards as the more attainable goal of social equality.

²⁹¹One classic discussion of the tension between two of these values is Arthur M. Okun's Equality and Efficiency: The Big Trade-Off (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1975).

²⁹²John Rawls' Theory of Justice is, of course, the most comprehensive philosophical defense of this position. See esp. pp. 60-65, 258-332.

counteract the effects of extreme disparities in the distribution of wealth--either by modifying the distributional process or by circumscribing the arena in which financial advantages can be exercised.

Once again, the identification of justice with a presumption in favor of equality in the distribution of economic resources and the specific forms by which this commitment is expressed in the system of social market capitalism are both integral elements in the literature reviewed in this chapter. Both Presbyterian papers provide a clue into their ideological underpinnings by directly or indirectly invoking John Rawls' difference principle. In the context of defining justice, one of these papers, clearly echoing a quotation from Rawls in the preceding paragraph, states: "social and economic equality is the first norm, standard, and ideal by which all economic arrangements are evaluated, but there can be arguments for particular inequalities if they are the result of the pursuit of freedom and work to the benefit of the disadvantaged."²⁹³

The United Church of Christ statement cites such things as universal "access to basic material necessities of life," equality of opportunity, and a redress of imbalances in wealth and power as hallmarks of a just economy.²⁹⁴ According to the Catholic bishops, justice does not require "a flat, arithmetical equality of income and wealth" but it does entail a "floor of material well-being"²⁹⁵ and minimum levels of participation in the life of

²⁹³PCUSA, CFEJ, 29.122. The corresponding discussion in the other Presbyterian study paper states: "According to our view of justice, inequalities are morally unacceptable unless they can be shown to work for the benefit of all people in society" (PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 10).

²⁹⁴UCC, p. 171-72.

²⁹⁵NCCB, par. 74.

the human community for all persons.²⁹⁶ It also creates a "strong presumption against extreme inequality of income and wealth" as long as poverty exists--a requirement which renders the current state of affairs in the United States morally unacceptable.²⁹⁷

A third pillar in this approach to political economy concerns its view of the market. Needless to say, advocates of a social welfare state do not share the unbridled confidence free market capitalists have in the ability of unregulated markets to channel resources to their optimum use, automatically adjust to changing conditions, and maintain a long-term state of equilibrium. This skepticism about the self-correcting tendency of free markets can be traced to the analysis of market failures pioneered by the Cambridge school of neo-classical economics at the close of the nineteenth century. This area of inquiry, which paved the way for the pivotal work of J. M. Keynes, focused on factors such as externalities, imperfect competition, and the inability to provide public goods profitably--flaws which the market, acting alone, is ostensibly incapable of remedying.²⁹⁸ Also in line with this type of analysis, poverty tends to be treated more as a by-product of the market system (which yields disparate rewards unrelated to performance, excludes

²⁹⁶ibid., par. 77.

²⁹⁷ibid., par. 185. The Pastoral's view of justice is clearly coterminous with, but in some crucial respects transcends, the conventional theories of welfare capitalism. For a much fuller discussion, see Karen Lebacqz, Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), pp. 66-82; William E. Murnion, "The Ideology of Social Justice in 'Economic Justice for All'," Journal of Business Ethics 8 (1989):847-57; Stephen Bickham, "The Bishops' Pastoral: A New Theory of Justice," Journal of Business Ethics 7 (1988):437-443.

²⁹⁸See Clark, pp. 33-34 for the historical development. The discussion of market failures is a standard feature in economics textbooks. See, for instance, Heilbroner and Galbraith, pp. 467-74.

people with inadequate job skills, and requires a certain level of structural unemployment to offset inflation), rather than as a result of character flaws in its victims.

The clearest reflection of this style of reasoning occurs in the U. C. C. Pronouncement, which offers a balanced assessment of the market system's "promises and problems." Alongside four strengths of the market mechanism, it also lists seven basic defects that require outside intervention.²⁹⁹ One of the Presbyterian papers similarly refers to the "chaos of unfettered markets" and places the notion that the market is a self-correcting mechanism first on its list of "economic myths."³⁰⁰

The combination of these three elements--the positive conception of freedom as the ability to realize one's individual potential, justice defined in terms of a modified egalitarianism, and the view of the market as a flawed and inadequate instrument for achieving social progress--all combine to shape a distinctive view of the government's role in this social philosophy. Rather than the minimalist "nightwatchman" state--i.e., one limited to protecting property rights and discharging a few other clearly delineated functions--that free enterprise proponents endorse, advocates of a social market system regard government as a positive agent for achieving their vision of social justice. In the first place, due to the vicissitudes of the market, the government is expected to intervene in order to promote steady growth and to 'fine-tune' the system.³⁰¹ Such techniques as

²⁹⁹Blank, pp. 164-69.

³⁰⁰PCUSA, TJCDPE, pp. 23 (cf. p. 30), 35.

³⁰¹The image of fine-tuning the economy (a metaphor which implies a delicate instrument which can be carefully calibrated) is admittedly less common in current discussions than it was in the heyday of classical Keynesian economics. Nevertheless, it effectively conveys the abiding sense that the extreme phases of the business cycle can be

regulating the money supply through fiscal policies, stimulating demand with tax cuts designed to boost consumption, and providing various investment incentives have all become regular instruments in the arsenal of government economic planners.

Secondly, through a variety of regulatory mechanisms (such as collective bargaining and labor laws, occupational health and safety standards, zoning regulations, building codes, labeling requirements, etc.), government is supposed to protect the interests of people who would otherwise be at a disadvantage or vulnerable to exploitation. Thirdly, through various schemes of income redistribution (progressive income taxation, transfer payments, food and housing subsidies), the government endeavors to achieve a greater measure of equality in the overall division of economic resources.

Naturally, this summary outline glosses over many variations within this general approach--variations that account for virtually all the serious public policy debates occurring within modern welfare states. One perennial issue concerns the question of whether income redistribution programs should function as an automatic entitlement (often disguised as an insurance scheme³⁰²) which is extended to everyone who meets certain conditions, or whether they should be 'means-tested' and function as a safety net

transcended and a steady pattern of economic growth sustained through a active policy of government intervention.

³⁰²For a discussion of the spurious analogy between private insurance and government income support programs (like Social Security), see the extended footnote (no. 13) in Kaus, p. 264.

to target the poorest segments of the population.³⁰³ Moreover, if programs are directed primarily at poor persons, another set of issues concerns the extent to which criteria besides economic need should be considered. Proposals to penalize recipients of public assistance for irresponsible behavior (such as bearing children out of wedlock) or to assign them community service jobs introduce criteria of desert or merit into the calculation and make an implicit distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Throughout the history of state-sponsored programs of welfare support, public policy has oscillated back and forth between these different options.³⁰⁴

In general, the religious statements surveyed in this chapter lean heavily on the side of the more comprehensive, and less punitive, vision of the welfare state. To the extent that new policy recommendations are offered, these proposals basically entail a more activist role for the government.³⁰⁵ There are, for example, calls for such things as a

³⁰³The interplay between these alternative approaches has shaped the history of social welfare policy in the Western world since they were first adumbrated in the Minority and Majority Reports of the landmark 1905 Royal Commission on Poor Laws in Britain. The more universal conception of citizen entitlements has been realized most fully in places such as New Zealand and the Scandinavian countries, while the safety-net philosophy is more characteristic of the American experience. For typologies of welfare state models that basically incorporate this distinction, see Gosta Esping-Andersen, The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 23-9; Kuttner, pp. 229-64; Furniss and Tilton, pp. 14-20.

³⁰⁴Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward emphasize the cyclical nature of this process, as well as the punitive dimension of relief programs, in their Regulating the Poor: the Functions of Public Welfare (New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1971). See also Trattner's previously cited history of the welfare state--especially the discussions of the Henrician and Elizabethan Poor Laws (pp. 7-12) and the 19th century workhouse system in Britain and the U.S. (pp. 42-52).

³⁰⁵On the positive role of government, see NCCB, par. 123; PCUSA, TJCDPE, pp. 10, 35-6; DC, par. 25, LCA, p. 5.

universal system of health care access,³⁰⁶ a full employment policy,³⁰⁷ more generous income support programs,³⁰⁸ and a greater measure of economic planning.³⁰⁹ In a couple of instances, the record of government welfare programs culminating in the initiatives of the Great Society era is defended against its conservative critics and promoted as a positive legacy.³¹⁰

So once again, it appears that a particular Christian ethical vision for the economy, predicated at least in part on a biblical rationale, coincides to a remarkable degree with a fairly standard ideological position in the contemporary world. There are, of course, several ways to account for this correlation. To begin with, the writers of the literature surveyed in this chapter would not deny utilizing non-biblical sources of insight in the process of formulating their economic proposals--a methodological practice that is both appropriate and inevitable in the field of Christian ethics. In addition, the biblical traditions that are a part of the West's cultural heritage, as well as the communal patterns of pre-industrial societies that are reflected in the Bible, undoubtedly contributed to the framework of values that fostered the development of modern welfare states. Alongside these factors, the analysis in the previous section of the chapter showed that there are also clear instances in which distinctively modern assumptions about social and economic

³⁰⁶UCC, p. 174; NCCB, par. 103.

³⁰⁷PCUSA, TJCDPE, pp. 29-30; UCC, p. 174; NCCB, par. 151-66.

³⁰⁸PCUSA, TJCDPE, p. 22, UCC, p. 174, NCCB, par. 212-3.

³⁰⁹PCUSA, TJCDPE, pp. 32-3; NCCB, par. 315-7.

³¹⁰PCUSA, TJCDPE, pp. 16, 21; NCCB, par. 190-2.

realities, rooted in the ideology of the Western liberal democratic tradition, are fused with biblical themes so that the ideological system becomes the interpretive key for appropriating the text.

Conclusion

This chapter has summarized another way of relating the biblical message to the realities of a modern, post-industrial capitalist economy--one that stands in stark contrast to the option discussed in the previous chapter. Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing throughout the twentieth, the Protestant and Catholic communities that represent the mainstream religious establishment in the United States have charted a social ethical course that has, in many ways, paralleled the development of the welfare state's version of a mixed economy. Spokespersons for these religious communities were, therefore, early advocates for the kind of reform policies that were carried out during the Progressive Era and later under the aegis of the New Deal and Great Society programs.

In pursuing this vision of social justice, each religious tradition has drawn on its own distinctive theological heritage--the legacy of the Social Gospel movement in the case of ecumenical Protestantism and the collection of papal social encyclicals in the case of Catholicism. But they have also been guided by a particular configuration of biblical themes, symbols, and images (an area of consensus that has expanded in recent years as Catholic moral theology has come to rely more on biblical sources, as opposed to natural law reasoning). This chapter has focused on four of these themes: the universal gift of creation, the humane legislation of the covenant codes, the prophetic demand for social

justice, and Jesus' identification with the poor.

Overall, the manner in which these biblical motifs are drawn together and applied to the modern world is shaped and influenced by a number of factors. The prevailing tendency in this body of literature is to define the authoritative content of Scripture in terms of recurrent or overarching themes, which are then used as warrants for principles of economic ethics. In the process of developing these principles and translating them into policy recommendations, it is apparent that the writers were guided by a social welfare ideology that represents the dominant consensus within the sociological communities with which they are primarily identified.

CHAPTER III

REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM

"It is time to drop all these side issues and concentrate on the fundamental fact: the Bible teaches communism."
--José Porfirio Miranda¹

As the number of official church pronouncements considered in the previous chapter indicates, the prevailing consensus on economic ethics within the mainstream religious communities of the United States echoes the values of the liberal democratic social welfare state. In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the dominant status of this position has been challenged by a more radical and thoroughgoing critique of the market system emanating originally from countries of the Third World. Among religious ethicists, this repudiation of capitalism came to expression most forcefully in the tradition of liberation theology.

The liberationist paradigm is actually utilized in a variety of theological projects attempting to articulate the grievances and aspirations of women, racial minorities, colonized people, the economically disenfranchised, and other historically oppressed

¹José Porfirio Miranda, Communism in the Bible, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), pp. 6-7.

groups.² But for purposes of the present study, the most relevant writings are those that have emerged out of the Latin American context over the past thirty years. Often making explicit appeal to biblical narratives and imagery, these theological texts inveighed against the oppressive legacy of international capitalism and embraced a revolutionary form of socialism with decidedly Marxist overtones.

This latest chapter in the Christian Church's ongoing engagement with industrial capitalism represents the convergence of several factors. To begin with, it manifests a revolutionary undercurrent within the Christian tradition that periodically rises to the surface, especially during times of social upheaval. Particularly in its more militant, apocalyptic forms, the eschatological dimension of the Christian faith has historically provided a basis for rendering a sweeping indictment of the existing social order and frequently sparked revolutionary campaigns to overturn it. Examples of this tendency can be seen in the millenarian movements that inspired periodic peasant revolts in the Middle Ages, in the radical sects of the Reformation era, and in the left wing of Cromwell's Puritan Revolution in England (exemplified by Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers). A recurring motif in the ideology of all these disparate groups is the conviction that the poor and disinherited have a messianic mission to overthrow the existing social

²The body of literature on this topic is quite extensive. Among the survey treatments that focus on the Latin American movement, but include a discussion of other liberation theologies are Philip Berryman, Liberation Theology: The Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond (New York: Pantheon, 1987); Harvey M. Conn, "Theologies of Liberation: An Overview," in Stanley N. Gundry and Alan F. Johnson, eds., Tensions in Contemporary Theology (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), pp. 327-392; Harvey M. Conn, "Theologies of Liberation: Toward a Common View," in Gundry and Johnson, pp. 395-434; Deane William Fenn, Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

hierarchy (often through a violent conflagration) and to usher in a new, egalitarian society based on collective ownership of the wealth.³ So although it only surfaces episodically, there is a genuinely revolutionary impulse in the theological heritage of Christianity.

There is also a long and venerable tradition of religiously-inspired socialism stretching back to the dawn of the industrial revolution. As John Cort's extensive survey⁴ of this phenomenon indicates, socialist movements sprang up in all of the major Western industrialized countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and variations of socialism shaped by broadly Christian influences both preceded and continued to exist alongside the Marxian form of "scientific socialism." European manifestations of this religious strand of socialism included followers of Henri de Saint-Simon in France⁵ and British groups such as the Christian Socialists (led by J. M. Ludlow, F. D. Maurice, and Charles Kingsley), the Guild of Saint Matthew, the Christian Social Union, and the Church Socialist League.⁶ A long line of German theologians, including Leonhard Ragaz, Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth espoused socialism in that country.⁷ And in the

³A comprehensive history of various sectarian movements from the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries is provided by Norman Cohn in his The Pursuit of the Millennium, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). Rosemary Radford Reuther places these movements in a broader historical and theological context in her The Radical Kingdom: the Western Experience of Messianic Hope (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), esp. pp. 21-35.

⁴John C. Cort, Christian Socialism: An Informal History (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).

⁵Cort, pp. 95-102; Reuther, pp. 71-2.

⁶Cort, pp. 139-72; Reuther, p. 78.

⁷Cort, pp. 179-84, 201-220.

United States, the Social Gospel movement included socialist elements, particularly in its more radical wing (exemplified by W. D. P. Bliss and George Herron).⁸

The diversity of figures and movements included under the overall rubric of Christian socialism makes any attempt at generalization hazardous. But it would be fair to say that the usual tendency among these religiously-inspired socialists has been to support some--often vaguely defined--scheme of economic cooperation or employee-owned enterprises to replace what they perceived to be the ruthlessly competitive and exploitive practices of the prevailing system of industry. To bring about this economic transformation, they have also generally favored a strategy of gradual reform implemented through the democratic process.⁹ Indeed, "economic democracy" was often hailed as the natural counterpart to political democracy. Accordingly, the rhetoric of class struggle (and its correlative conflictual view of society), the heavy overtones of economic determinism, and the legitimation of revolutionary violence--all standard features of doctrinaire Marxism--have been largely absent from religious versions of socialism. To this extent, the long tradition of Christian socialism bears a greater resemblance to the social market philosophy considered in the previous chapter than it does to the more strident forms of revolutionary socialism.

The more recent turn in the direction of appropriating a distinctively Marxian mode of social analysis, preeminently illustrated by liberation theology, reflects a number of developments both within the Christian Church as well as in the wider historical

⁸Cort, pp. 226-56; Reuther, pp. 79-88.

⁹See, for example, Reuther's observations along these lines, p. 89.

context. To begin with, as a theological paradigm shaped by its Third World milieu, liberation theology echoes the opposition to Western colonial (or neo-colonial) forms of imperialism that swept the developing world with heightened intensity beginning in the 1960's. Flush with newly acquired political independence, the emerging nations of the Southern hemisphere began challenging, with a fresh assertiveness, patterns of international trade that they regarded as a legacy of the colonial period. This quest for a "new economic order" was often expressed in the idiom of revolutionary struggle and operated in tandem with domestic economic experiments structured along the lines of socialism.¹⁰

In Latin America, where most countries had been nominally free of colonial control for over a century, these anti-imperialistic sentiments were reflected in a growing disenchantment with the model of economic development that had been in place for a decade or more. Undergirding this conventional approach (embodied, for example, in the Kennedy Administration's Alliance for Progress program) was the assumption that economies move through a fairly uniform series of stages on the path to development and that Third World poverty results from countries being at a less advanced position along this continuum.¹¹ The proposed solution, therefore, entailed accelerating the pace of

¹⁰Peter Worsley examines the historical repercussions of colonialism and the political and economic dynamics affecting new nations entering the post-colonial era in his The Third World, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). On the influence of Marxian socialism in these countries, see esp. pp. 93-103, 120-130. On the economic disparity between the developed and underdeveloped nations, see his chapter on "The Hungry Peoples and the Affluent Blocs," pp. 232-75.

¹¹The classic articulation of this view is Walter W. Rostow's The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

modernization through industrial expansion, foreign investment, and technical assistance. As conditions in the region worsened, however, many Latin American critics of 'developmentalism' became convinced that countries in the Southern hemisphere were trapped in a perpetual state of economic dependency and that their underdevelopment was the reciprocal byproduct of the industrialized world's growing prosperity.¹²

To the extent that one accepts this diagnosis of the situation, amelioristic reform strategies are less likely to appear viable. Hence, the revolutionary option, exercised by Castro in Cuba¹³ and glamorized through the exploits (and ultimate 'martyrdom') of guerilla fighters like Che Guevara and Camilo Torres, was increasingly embraced by leftist insurgency movements and radical political fronts in various Latin American countries.¹⁴

Inevitably, this rising revolutionary consciousness and challenge to Western domination sweeping the Third World reverberated in centers of ecclesiastical power. Among Protestants, these voices of protest were primarily channeled through the World

¹²Dependency analysis is treated more fully in a subsequent section of this chapter. For summaries of this theory and its relationship to liberation theology, see Berryman, pp. 19-20, 89-90; Christian Smith, The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 87-88, 145-49.

¹³On the enormous impact that the Cuban Revolution had on the Latin American psyche and on the Catholic Church in particular, see Smith, pp. 90-94, 109-110; Enrique Dussel, History and the Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective, trans. by John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), pp. 120-22.

¹⁴Milagros Pena provides an overview of this situation and a summary of the guerilla movements operating in each Latin American country in her Theologies and Liberation in Peru: The Role of Ideas in Social Movements (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), pp. 70-71.

Council of Churches. As delegates from developing countries assumed a larger role in this forum, the demand for revolutionary change gradually supplanted the old liberal democratic ideal of "the responsible society" as the theme of the Council's social agenda.¹⁵ At the same time, the Evangelical Conference of Latin Americans (CELA)--the primary regional ecumenical body--and the mainline Protestant-initiated organization, Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL), were both abandoning their previous support for traditional economic development in favor of a more revolutionary approach.¹⁶ It was against the backdrop of these developments that Harvey Cox introduced a series of papers from the 1966 World Council of Churches Geneva conference on church and society with the prescient observation that "below the Rio Grande there is a vast continent of ferment and unrest, and also a continent where a new, highly biblical and politically radical form of theological ethics is being born."¹⁷

But given the nature of its religious heritage, Latin America was much more profoundly affected by the cataclysmic changes taking place within the Catholic Church.

¹⁵For the history of this evolutionary process, see Robert McAfee Brown, Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), pp. 35-48; J. Philip Wogaman, Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), pp. 261-8. Cort, pp. 340-44, underscores this shift in emphasis by contrasting statements on economics released by the World Council of Churches' First Assembly (Amsterdam, 1948) and Sixth Assembly (Vancouver, 1983). This change is also reflected throughout a volume of essays that grew out of the World Council of Churches' 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society--by all accounts a crucial turning point in the Council's stance on world economics. See Harvey Cox, ed., The Church Amid Revolution (New York: Association Press, 1967).

¹⁶Conn, "Theologies of Liberation: An Overview," in Gundry and Johnson, pp. 345-48; Smith, pp. 115-17.

¹⁷Harvey G. Cox, "Introduction," in Cox, p. 20.

In the wake of the "opening to the world" heralded by the Vatican II Council, the Church undertook a fresh engagement with the realities of the modern age and signaled its intention to join with all persons of goodwill in the quest to construct a more just and peaceful global society.¹⁸ Among other things, this new stance entailed a re-assessment of socialism. What were widely regarded as blanket condemnations of this economic system in earlier papal encyclicals gave way, by the 1960's, to a more nuanced and accommodating perspective. The crucial distinction, for example, in John XXIII's Pacem in terris (1963) between movements that embody legitimate human aspirations and the false philosophical teachings that may undergird them (par. 159), as well as the call in the consiliar document Gaudium et spes (1965) for "sincere and prudent dialogue" with atheists pursuing "the rightful betterment of this world" (par. 21.5) were both widely interpreted as tacit endorsements of limited co-operation with Marxist-inspired political movements.¹⁹ This era also saw a shift in the focus of the Church's economic teaching. Whereas earlier encyclicals had shown a preoccupation with the conflict between wage earners and owners of capital in the industrialized nations, church documents of the post-

¹⁸On Vatican II and its influence on Latin America, see Smith, pp. 94-100; Dussel, pp. 111-12.

¹⁹For interpretations of these references along the lines suggested here, see Brown, pp. 30-31; Smith, p. 111; Mary E. Hobgood, Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory: Paradigms in Conflict (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 139-40, 145-47; and Arthur F. McGovern, Marxism: An American Christian Perspective (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1980), p. 113. The impact of these kinds of statement in the Latin American context can be seen from the way they are cited by a spokesperson for the Christians for Socialism group in Chile in a letter to the Archbishop of Santiago ("Response of the Coordinating Committee to Cardinal Silva" in Christians and Socialism: Documentation of the Christians for Socialism Movement in Latin America, trans. by John Drury, ed. by John Eagleson [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1975], pp. 52-55).

Vatican II era also began to address the growing economic disparity between developed and underdeveloped regions of the world. Paul VI's encyclical Populorum Progressio (1967), with its denunciation of the "international imperialism of money" and its call for a transfer of wealth from rich to poor nations, epitomized this new area of emphasis.²⁰

These changes had particular resonance in Latin America--a region, it is sometimes noted, that represents the only area of the developing world with a predominantly Catholic population.²¹ Beginning as early as the 1930's in some countries, Catholic intellectuals and isolated members of the hierarchy had begun re-assessing the Church's historic role as an ally of the privileged classes and pillar of support for the old order. As a result, Christian Democratic parties and Catholic Action leagues began springing up throughout the region and became a primary vehicle for advancing the cause of a liberal democratic reform model of social change.²² By the 1960's, however, even as

²⁰Hobgood, pp. 147-54. Smith, pp. 124-26, comments on the encyclical's "immense impact on Latin American Catholics," pointing to its frequent use in statements by national bishops conferences and groups of priests, references to it in the Medellin documents, and the eight times it is cited in Gustavo Gutiérrez's Theology of Liberation.

²¹Mark G. McGrath, "Church Doctrine in Latin America After the Council," in Henry Landsberger, ed., The Church and Social Change in Latin America (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), pp. 53-75; John C. Bennett, The Radical Imperative (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 131. A similar point is made by Dussel, p. 142 and Assmann, p. 134.

²²On the rise of Catholic progressivism, see Smith, pp. 14-15, 80-83; Frederick C. Turner, Catholicism and Political Development in Latin America (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), esp. pp. 4-77. A sampling of case studies focusing on particular countries would include Frederick B. Pike, "South America's Multifaceted Catholicism: Glimpses of Twentieth Century Argentina, Chile, and Peru," in Landsberger, pp. 53-75; Henry Landsberger, "Time, Persons, Doctrine: The Modernization of the Church in Chile," in Landsberger, pp. 77-94; and (on Peru) Pena, pp. 50-62. For a more critical perspective on this phase in Latin American Catholicism, see Dussel, pp. 106-7, 133-35.

Catholic progressivism, bolstered by the impact of Vatican II, was gaining the ascendancy in various national churches, many of its erstwhile supporters were turning in a more radical direction.²³ In Brazil, for example, splinter factions of Catholic Action's youth auxiliary organization formed the vanguard of the leftist student movement, and elements of the Christian Democratic Party in Chile participated in the Popular Unity coalition that brought Salvador Allende, an avowed Marxist, to power in 1970.²⁴

A new activism was also evident within the ranks of the clergy. One leading exemplar of this trend was Dom Helder Camara, Brazilian archbishop of Recife, who was the organizational driving force behind many progressive initiatives, a pioneering advocate for the cause of the poor, and an early proponent of socialism.²⁵ Throughout the 1960's, the groundwork was also being laid for innovative theological thinking as a younger generation of parish priests, often fresh from their exposure to progressive theological currents in the universities of Europe, descended upon the region's most impoverished communities seeking to fulfill John XXIII's mandate to transform their institution into a "church of the poor."²⁶ Their numbers were further augmented by an

²³Smith, pp. 15-18; Pena, pp. 62-84; Turner, pp. 139-73.

²⁴Richard Shaull, "The Church and Revolutionary Change: Contrasting Perspectives," in Landsberger, pp. 135-53; Emmanuel de Kadt, "JUC and AP: The Rise of Catholic Radicalism in Brazil," in Landsberger, pp. 191-219.

²⁵Smith, pp. 15-16, 82-3; Dussel, pp. 117-18, 128-29; Ferm, pp. 13-14.

²⁶Smith, pp. 140-43 describes the church's shift in the direction of pastoral work among the poor, and Pena discusses the creation of so-called pueblos juvenes parishes in Peru (p. 93, cf. p. 88). Also, according to Smith, pp. 169-70, an education abroad, pastoral experience, and concern for the poor are among the characteristics common to leading liberation theologians.

influx of foreign-born pastoral workers, many of whom had been jolted out of an attitude of social complacency at the renowned training center directed by Ivan Illich.²⁷

Meanwhile, at the grassroots level, the Movement for Base Education (MEB), a literacy campaign inspired by Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed,²⁸ was fostering a radical social consciousness among members of the rural peasantry and empowering them to become active participants in the liberation process.²⁹

Ultimately, the event that proved to be pivotal in harnessing all of these other influences and unleashing the momentum for a fresh perspective on the church's mission was the second general meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) at Medellin in 1968³⁰--a gathering alternately described as the "Vatican II of Latin America"³¹ and as the "cradle of liberation theology."³² The bishop's stance on social policy, reflected in the final documents of the meeting³³ was, as Enrique Dussel put it "somewhere in the transitional phase between 'developmentalism' and the 'theology of

²⁷On Illich, see Pena, pp. 62-7; Smith, pp. 118-19.

²⁸New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.

²⁹Berryman, pp. 34-38, 63-79; Smith, pp. 106-8, 130-32; Dussel, pp. 131-32.

³⁰On this event, see Smith, pp. 18-21, 150-64; Dussel, pp. 113-16; Berryman, pp. 22-24; cf. also the essays contained in Edward L. Cleary, ed., Born of the Poor: The Latin American Church Since Medellin (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

³¹Dussel, p. 113.

³²Ferm, p. 11.

³³Published in English as Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council, vol. 2: Conclusions (3rd ed., Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979). See also the discussion of these documents in Hobgood, pp. 156-65.

liberation'.³⁴ Nonetheless, at least in embryonic form, many of liberation theology's key ideas are present. The liberation motif, for example, is used in at least some places, to express the historical aspirations of the Latin American people,³⁵ and the concept of the church's "preferential option for the poor," a cornerstone of liberation theology, is adumbrated in the document on poverty (albeit in a slightly different formulation).³⁶ As a vehicle for empowering the poor, base Christian communities are endorsed³⁷ and their task of conscientization is affirmed.³⁸ The document on "Peace" explicitly utilizes dependency analysis to account for Latin America's impoverished conditions.³⁹ Moreover, the pattern of oppression linked to these conditions is condemned as a form of "institutionalized violence,"⁴⁰ and, without expressly sanctioning revolution, the bishops clearly countenance the possibility of a reciprocal counter-response.⁴¹

³⁴Dussel, p. 115.

³⁵e.g., 1.3,4; 10.2; 14.2.

³⁶Specifically, it calls for "a distribution of resources and personnel that effectively gives preference to the poorest and most needy sectors" (14.9). The exact phrase, "preferential option for the poor" was first used in a document of the 1979 CELAM III meeting at Puebla, Mexico. Gustavo Gutiérrez considers the formulation of this concept to be the major achievement of the Medellín conference ("Church of the Poor," in Cleary, p. 11, cf. pp. 13-20).

³⁷15.10-12, cf. 6.13, 9.12, 10.13-14.

³⁸1.17, 23.

³⁹2.8-9. See also 10.2.

⁴⁰2.16.

⁴¹At 2.16, they assert that in light of the institutionalized forms of violence that exist, it should come as no surprise "that the 'temptation to violence' is surfacing in Latin America," adding that "[o]ne should not abuse the patience of a people that for years has borne a situation that would not be acceptable to any one with any degree of awareness of

It was two years after CELAM II that Gustavo Gutiérrez, a consultant to the bishops at Medellín, published his seminal work, A Theology of Liberation,⁴² thereby ushering in the golden age of this new theological venture. This landmark text defined the movement's basic contours, construing its task as one of "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word"⁴³ and spelling out its aim to reformulate the Christian message from the vantage point of society's poor and oppressed members. Over the next couple of decades, a coterie of other theologians elaborated on this basic perspective, applying it to the full range of theological disciplines, including systematics, biblical studies, hermeneutics, church history, pastoral work, and spirituality.

But following this initial period of expansion, liberation theology faced a rather uncertain future as the twentieth century drew to a close.⁴⁴ Within the Catholic Church,

human rights." The next paragraph continues this theme, stating that those who impede the necessary transformation of society and defend the status quo with violence "are responsible to history for provoking `explosive revolutions of despair'" (the last phrase being a quotation from a homily by Pope Paul VI). In paragraph 19, however, they counsel against violent revolution (citing both pragmatic considerations and Christian principles) and urge a peaceful process of social change instead (cf. also 2.15).

⁴²Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

⁴³Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁴Michael Novak, never a fan of liberation theology to begin with, was among those hastening to pronounce its demise. See his "Liberation Theology--What's Left," First Things no. 14 (June/July 1991), pp. 10-12. (It should be noted that Robert Royal, writing in the equally conservative Wall Street Journal subsequently presented a less optimistic forecast in "Liberation Theology Lives--to Latin America's Detriment," Wall Street Journal, September 2, 1999, p. A14.) A conclusion basically similar to that of Novak is conveyed in Carol Ann Drogus, "The Rise and Decline of Liberation Theology," Comparative Politics 27 (1995): 465-77. Other observers and commentators envisaged a brighter future for this movement, albeit perhaps in a modified form. See Nancy Bedford, "Whatever Happened to Liberation Theology?" Christian Century,

the hierarchy actively sought to curb its influence, and some of its leading spokespersons were subjected to disciplinary sanctions.⁴⁵ Moreover, as even erstwhile supporters acknowledged, its brand of revolutionary socialism had been largely rendered obsolete by sweeping changes on the historical landscape--most notably, the collapse of Eastern European socialism (symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall), the decline of leftist guerrilla movements in Latin America, and the virtually universal penetration of capitalistic markets.⁴⁶ Whatever its fate, however, liberation theology has clearly left a mark on the enterprise of Christian ethics by introducing new motifs and developing some innovative methodological approaches. Among the distinctives guaranteeing it an enduring legacy is the fact that it represents the most ambitious effort yet undertaken to synthesize Christian moral theology with elements of Marxist social analysis.

The Biblical Rationale for Revolutionary Socialism

Whether or not Marxian revolutionary socialism was an essential component of the liberation theology paradigm--an issue on which there has been some debate

October 20, 1999, pp. 996- ; Frei Betto, "Did Liberation Theology Collapse With the Berlin Wall?" Religion, State and Society 21 (1993): 33-38; Duncan B. Forrester, "Can Liberation Theology Survive 1989?" Scottish Journal of Theology 47 (1994): 245-53; Daniel H. Levine, "On Premature Reports of the Death of Liberation Theology," Review of Politics 57 (1995): 105-131; Mark Kline Taylor, "Whither Liberation Theology?" Christian Century, December 12, 1990, pp. 1168-71.

⁴⁵Peter Hebblethwaite, "Liberation Theology and the Roman Catholic Church," in The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 179-98.

⁴⁶See, for example, José Comblin, Called For Freedom: The Changing Context of Liberation Theology, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

recently⁴⁷--it is clear that the bulk of the major writings, particularly in the early stages of the movement's development, were framed in terms of this theoretical perspective.⁴⁸ At the same time, it is important to note that the leading proponents of liberation theology showed varying degrees of attachment to Marxism, and virtually all of them qualified their commitment to this social theory in some significant ways. What they claimed, above all else, to be adopting from Marxism was a particular mode of social scientific analysis that, they believed, served to illumine aspects of the Latin American reality better than any alternative explanation. Rightly or wrongly, they consistently maintained that Marxism as an analytical tool could be divorced from its philosophical underpinnings.⁴⁹ Accordingly, they rejected, among other things, Marxism's deterministic features (expressed in its philosophy of dialectical materialism) and its classical critique of religion.⁵⁰

⁴⁷Betto, for example, claims that "[l]iberation theology has not been buried under the Berlin Wall because it has never allied itself to a specific or partisan project" (p. 35). Comblin's previously cited work represents an attempt to recast liberation theology as a movement espousing the welfare state (pp. 116-17, 125, 206-207) and rejecting the ideology of "neoliberalism" and economic globalization (pp. 104-107, 110-12, 204-205). Novak has pointed out, however, that such redefinitions are incongruous with the movement's initial impulses and remove from it all of its distinctive features (pp. 11-12).

⁴⁸For summary overviews of liberation theology's relationship to Marxism, see Berryman, pp. 138-150; Ferm, pp. 107-115; Kirk, p. 41. More critical appraisals are offered by Michael Novak, Will it Liberate? Questions about Liberation Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 21-30, 154-78; and Humberto Belli and Ronald Nash, Beyond Liberation Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), pp. 67-91.

⁴⁹Dussel, p. 134; Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 28.

⁵⁰José Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 108-109.

At least on the rhetorical level, liberationists also generally espoused a revolutionary model of social change, framed in Marxian terms. Again, a brief qualification is in order. According to several of their defenders, there is no evidence linking the theological proponents of this position to the Marxist guerilla groups engaged in armed insurrections. In the case of Peru, Milagros Pena claims that Gutiérrez's supporters were affiliated with the parliamentary left (grouped together under the umbrella of the United Left party⁵¹), and that they had denounced the tactics of the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path).⁵² Similarly, Thomas L. Schubeck denies that there was any connection between the major liberation theology figures in El Salvador and the FMLN.⁵³ The only armed conflict in which adherents to liberation theology acknowledged a connection with a guerilla movement was in Nicaragua, where they backed the Sandinistas.⁵⁴

The extent to which liberationists would follow the precedent of earlier Marxist-Leninist regimes in structuring a post-revolutionary society is not entirely clear. It certainly would be fair to point out that their indictment of capitalistic liberal democracies

⁵¹The United Left (Izquierda Unida) party is described by the reference work Political Parties of the World, 3rd. ed. (ed. Alan J. Day [Chicago: St. James Press, 1988]) as a "left-wing alliance, with pro-Soviet, Maoist, Trotskyist and independent socialist elements" (p. 440).

⁵²Pena, pp. 49, 123.

⁵³Thomas L. Schubeck, Liberation Ethics: Sources, Models, and Norms (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1993), pp. 237-38. (Schubeck is referring specifically to Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría. Pena, however, does indicate that some liberationists backed the FMLN [p. 49]).

⁵⁴Pena, p. 49; Berryman, pp. 144-47.

is not matched by any comparable critique of totalitarian socialist regimes. They do, however, occasionally make it clear that what they are endorsing is an indigenous socialism, reflecting the distinctive features of the Third World, Latin American context, and not a model transplanted from some other region of the world.⁵⁵ It also should be, they insist, a democratic and humanistic form of socialism (a vague concept left undefined), set within a the framework of a participatory style of governance.⁵⁶

What follows is a synopsis of the biblical rationale that supports, at least in an implicit way, this socio-economic perspective. By and large, the main contention is not that the Bible directly mandates the implementation of a revolutionary socialist strategy. Instead, most liberationist writers appear to be operating with the sense that a revolutionary socialist process is already underway in their region of the world. Given the fact that the tide of history appears to be moving irreversibly in this direction, and in light of the Vatican II imperative to discern the "signs of the times," people of faith are forced to grapple with the implications of these developments.⁵⁷ The Bible, therefore,

⁵⁵Gutiérrez, p. 90; Míguez Bonino, p. 40.

⁵⁶According to Ismael García, "[d]emocratic socialism is the term that best describes the political order liberation theologians advocate and consider just" (Justice in Latin American Theology of Liberation [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987], p. 171). Míguez Bonino describes the optimum society as being "socialist in the organization of its economy, democratic in terms of the political participation of the people, and open in the sense of ensuring the conditions for personal realization, cultural freedom, and opportunity, and the mechanisms for self-correction" (José Míguez Bonino, Toward a Christian Political Ethics [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983], p. 77). Dussel says that it is appropriate for Christians to work for a "humanistic and Christian version of socialism" and cites a pastoral letter from the Synod of Peruvian Bishops rejecting the bureaucratic, atheistic, and totalitarian type (p. 134).

⁵⁷Gutiérrez describes Latin America as being "in the midst of a full-blown process of revolutionary ferment" (p. 89). Míguez Bonino illustrates this idea with a quotation

becomes primarily a tool of critical discernment in the quest to place these currents of change within the framework of God's purposes in history.

Revolutionary Socialism Emulates the Exodus Paradigm

The Argument

In the rendition of the biblical message offered by proponents of liberation theology, no passage figures more prominently than the story of Israel's exodus out of Egypt--an event regarded as the decisive moment in the biblical drama. "This story is so pivotal," writes Robert McAfee Brown, "that the rest of the Bible is commentary on it."⁵⁸ Jorge Pixley similarly underscores its centrality, citing the convergence of two factors: the emerging scholarly consensus which regards the Exodus as "the basis of the Old Testament" and the concurrent discovery by oppressed people engaged in liberation struggles that this ancient story speaks to their contemporary situation in a uniquely powerful way.⁵⁹ For his part, Gutiérrez casts the significance of this biblical event in world-historical terms, claiming that "with the Exodus, a new age has struck for

from a Puerto Rican bishop, who stated: "Even a blind person can see that Latin America moves irreversibly toward some form of socialism" (Doing Theology, p. 38). The "signs of the times" mode of analysis is particularly pronounced in J. Severino Croatto's Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom, trans. Salvator Attanasio (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), pp. 6-10, 45-46.

⁵⁸Robert McAfee Brown, Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 39.

⁵⁹George V. Pixley, On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective, trans. by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), p. xiii.

humanity."⁶⁰ So in light of these sweeping pronouncements, any consideration of liberation theology's biblical sources must clearly begin with this foundational text.

Overall, the Exodus narrative makes two primary contributions to the development of a liberationist perspective. First of all, on the level of social reflection and analysis, it furnishes a biblical prototype for the revolutionary paradigm. Then, on the theological plane, it provides the standard biblical warrant for God's so-called "preferential option for the poor."

As a paradigmatic narrative, the Exodus story begins with a depiction of Israel's bondage in Egypt that illustrates the stark realities of life under an oppressive regime. The Egyptian social structure fits the pattern of what one commentator identifies as the Asiatic mode of production⁶¹--a system of exploitation predicated on a sharp class distinction (reflected, for instance, in the juxtaposition of "us" and "them" in Exod. 1:8). The dominant class, consisting of the Pharaoh and his bureaucratic establishment, subsists by expropriating tribute payments and commandeering labor from a subservient class of "Hebrews" (a term, according to Pixley, that originally designated a social class,

⁶⁰Gutiérrez, p. 158. It should be noted that one liberation theologian who does not accept this thesis about the centrality of the Exodus is Juan Luis Segundo. He dismisses it as "naive" and untenable from the standpoint of biblical theology (Liberation of Theology, trans. John Drury [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976, p. 112]).

⁶¹Pixley, pp. 3-4. (This translation of Pixley's work actually uses the phrase "Asian mode of production." "Asiatic," however, is the term traditionally used for this stage in economic history, according to classical Marxist theory. It should also be noted that the existence of such a stage is now generally debunked by serious scholars of Marx. See John Elster, An Introduction to Karl Marx [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], pp. 116, 118, 187; and Andre Gunder Frank, ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], pp. 322-23.)

rather than an ethnic group⁶²). This situation, therefore, furnishes, in Brown's view, a textbook illustration of Marx's concept of class struggle: "It is a story of masters and slaves, kings and chattel, oppressors and oppressed, owners and workers. There are two classes of people involved, and they are locked in struggle."⁶³

For their part, the Hebrews, like groups throughout history in similar straits, internalize their condition of oppression to such an extent that any hope of liberation seems inconceivable to them--a situation poignantly summed up in the biblical reference to their "broken spirit" (Exod. 6:9).⁶⁴ Yet, in their plaintive cries toward heaven (Exod. 3:7, 9; 6:15) one can also discern a glimmer of protest, signifying the newly awakened awareness of people beginning to be conscientized.⁶⁵

To Christians living in what Dussel describes as "a Latin American Egypt,"⁶⁶ the parallels are unmistakable. The "modern pharaohs," as Brown calls them, include both the authoritarian regimes that oppress people in the developing world, as well as the United States government, which keeps them in power.⁶⁷ Even the pharaoh's campaign of infanticide finds its contemporary analogue in the "genocidal 'sterilization' that is

⁶²ibid., p. 5.

⁶³Brown, Unexpected News, p. 36 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁴Brown, Unexpected News, p. 36; Croatto, p. 17.

⁶⁵Croatto, pp. 18-20; Pixley, p. 16.

⁶⁶Enrique Dussel, "Exodus as a Paradigm in Liberation Theology," in Bas van Iersel, Anton Weiler, eds., Exodus: A Lasting Paradigm, Concilium no. 189 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), p. 88.

⁶⁷Brown, Unexpected News, pp. 40, 42-44. Writing in 1988, Brown refers specifically to the regimes of Marcos in the Philippines, Somoza in Nicaragua, and Pinochet in Chile, as well as the military juntas in El Salvador and Guatemala.

practiced in Latin America under the euphemism of 'family planning' orchestrated by North Americans."⁶⁸

But the Exodus saga is about more than just oppression. A crucial turning point in the narrative is reached when, from within the ranks of the oppressors themselves, a liberator emerges in the person of Moses. For Pixley, Moses is the "prototypical revolutionary figure"--a forerunner of such latter day leaders as "Lenin, Tito, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Castro" who played similarly unique and defining roles in twentieth century insurgency movements.⁶⁹

Inspired by a theophany that reveals God's partiality toward the cause of the oppressed,⁷⁰ Moses arrives on the scene with a divinely formulated revolutionary strategy. The key elements of this plan involve mobilizing Israel's indigenous leaders, confronting the ruling power with a demand for radical change, applying force when these demands are not met, and ultimately using the threat of terrorism to exact reparations.⁷¹

In the ensuing confrontation between Moses and the pharaoh, all the dynamics of

⁶⁸Croatto, p. 18. This statement reflects attitudes widely shared by Latin Americans, at least during the period in which it was written. According to Stephen Clisshold (Latin America: New World, Third World [New York: Praeger, 1972], p. 226), opposition to birth control was the one position that united leftists, nationalists, and members of the Catholic Right. He also quotes a pronouncement by the Brazilian Medical Association condemning the "foreign sterilization of Brazilian women" and characterizing it as a form of genocide comparable to the Nazi Holocaust.

⁶⁹Pixley, p. 121. See also pp. 101 and 164, where similar analogies are drawn between Moses and leaders of twentieth century communist revolutions.

⁷⁰Brown, Unexpected News, p. 37; Croatto, pp. 20-21; Pixley, pp. 16-18.

⁷¹These four steps are outlined by Pixley, p. 23, cf. also p. 30.

a revolutionary struggle are fully on display. Precluded by the determinative factor of class interest⁷² from acceding to the Hebrews' demands, the pharaoh responds in the time-honored tradition of tyrants everywhere. Using tactics designed to divide the Hebrews against one another and against the revolutionary alliance, he alternately enacts even more repressive measures, while simultaneously showing favoritism to collaborators.⁷³ Negotiations are undertaken, but they yield results only when pressure is applied through a series of plagues⁷⁴ (a collection of natural catastrophes, which the biblical narrator attributes to divine intervention, accompanied, perhaps, by acts of terrorism⁷⁵). By the time of the last calamity ("the killing of strategically selected persons in the population"⁷⁶), the "solidarity of the state bureaucratic class"⁷⁷ has been ruptured and the Hebrews, in a bold revolutionary maneuver, collectively rebel⁷⁸ and take flight out of the country. The climax of the story comes with the famous Red Sea crossing--an event that represents the moment of liberation and also, by including the destruction of the Egyptian army, serves as a reminder of the violence involved in the revolutionary struggle.⁷⁹

Their freedom secured, the Israelites must next undergo a period of wilderness

⁷²For examples of this kind of class analysis, see Pixley, pp. 36, 41, 52, 58-60.

⁷³Ibid., p. 32.

⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 46, 49.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 80.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 66.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 52.

⁷⁸Croatto, p. 22, views this collective action as the key to their success.

⁷⁹Croatto, pp. 29-30.

wanderings, during which the new revolutionary society takes shape in the midst of counter-revolutionary opposition (the ever-present "murmurers").⁸⁰ Under these circumstances, stern measures are sometimes necessary--at least in Pixley's more ominous version of the liberation scenario. The "purge" carried out by the Levites, in which 3000 golden calf worshipers are liquidated (Exod. 32:25-29), shows, he says, that "the salvation of the people as a whole demands that the idealists be sacrificed."⁸¹

More importantly, the wilderness saga also provides the narrative setting for the formulation of Israel's body of legal traditions. Through this collection of materials, the constitutional framework was established for a new, egalitarian, classless society that would function as an alternative to the prevailing systems of state domination that protected patterns of economic exploitation.⁸² One recurrent theme in the liberationist literature dealing with this facet of the story is the complementary nature of the Exodus and Sinai episodes. As Gutiérrez expresses it, "the Covenant and the liberation from Egypt were different aspects of the same movement"--the former giving meaning to the latter.⁸³ Finally, at the end of the journey there is the arrival at Canaan, symbolizing (in Pixley's scheme) the intermediate stage of socialism, which, in turn, prefigures the more

⁸⁰Pixley, pp. 81-82, 88-89, 99-100; cf. also Dussel's comparison between the wilderness wanderings and the conflict with the *contras* in Nicaragua ("Exodus as a Paradigm," in van Iersel and Weiler, p. 88).

⁸¹Pixley, p. 150.

⁸²*Ibid.*, pp. 81-84, 118-20.

⁸³Gutiérrez, p. 157. (This perspective stands in marked contrast to the familiar thesis, principally associated with Gerhard von Rad, that these traditions arose independently of one another and were cobbled together somewhat incongruently during the course of the redaction process.)

utopian vision of a "land flowing with milk and honey."⁸⁴

To sum up this way of expounding the meaning of the narrative, three of its overall strategic implications should be noted. First, it demonstrates the futility of mere reform measures. The demand that Israel leave Egypt shows, according to Pixley, that the "means of making life tolerable are impossible within the prevailing tributary system, and the only way out is a revolutionary one."⁸⁵

Second, the victims of oppression must be, as one writer puts it, "the vehicles of their own liberation."⁸⁶ The theme of pharaoh's heart being hardened and his continual recalcitrance shows that "the oppressors never liberate either others or themselves."⁸⁷ It is only as the Hebrews raise their own voices in protest and through Moses, their emissary, present their demands (backed up by coercive measures) that liberation is achieved. Thus, for Gutiérrez, the Exodus story's central lesson is "the significance of the self-generation of man in the historical political struggle"⁸⁸--the realization of humanity's historical destiny to break out of servitude and to participate in the task of building a just and fraternal society.

Third, the Exodus illustrates the necessity of force and violence in the liberation struggle. Entreating the pharaoh peacefully had no effect (indeed, it had a reverse effect)

⁸⁴Pixley, pp. 18-19.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 23.

⁸⁶Brown, Unexpected News, p. 38.

⁸⁷Croatto, p. 21.

⁸⁸Gutiérrez, p. 182, n. 41; cf. pp. 155, 159-60.

until punitive sanctions were applied. From this example, Croatto concludes that when "the oppression is carried to the point of repression, the liberating action is necessarily violent, as is the destruction of the pharaonic hosts, or it is prepared by none too gentle persuasive means, such as the plagues."⁸⁹

For purposes of the present study, these socio-political insights gleaned from the Exodus story are the most relevant consideration. But some attention should also be given to the way this narrative informs the process of theological reflection in the liberationist tradition. For to a unique and unparalleled extent, it is this pivotal passage that provides liberation theology with its primary metaphor of the divine--a God who shows partiality toward the poor and disenfranchised and who intervenes on the side of the oppressed against their oppressors. The fact that the sacred name, Yahweh, is disclosed in conjunction with the revelation of God's liberative plan for the Hebrews (in the 'burning bush' pericope of Exod. 3) demonstrates, to some commentators, that freeing the oppressed is God's defining attribute.⁹⁰

Several theological inferences can be drawn from this basic image of God-as-liberator. To begin with, if the Exodus-event is regarded as God's archetypal salvific act, then salvation must be viewed as an intrahistorical reality, encompassing, among other things, humanity's economic and political existence. Thus, on the basis of the Exodus story, Gutiérrez maintains that "to struggle against misery and exploitation and to build a

⁸⁹Croatto, p. 29.

⁹⁰Croatto, p. 20; Pixley, pp. 20-23.

just society" are "part of the saving action."⁹¹

Moreover, if God is considered to be a partner in this struggle--the motive force propelling it forward--then its ultimate success is assured. Believing that it was God who freed the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, says one liberationist, is tantamount to affirming that "the Exodus represents the course and direction of history."⁹² This use of theological symbols and biblical imagery to interpret the meaning of historical events takes on added significance in light of the Vatican 2 Council's call for the church to "discern the signs of the times"--a phrase that many liberation theologians have seized upon enthusiastically.⁹³

Finally, members of faith communities that have come to believe that their God is partial toward the poor and oppressed are virtually compelled by this conviction to exercise their own "preferential option for the poor." This principle has therefore become a cornerstone of liberationist ethics. As a basic, pre-theoretical commitment, it provides this system of ethical analysis with its fundamental starting point--a primary orientation that shapes the subsequent process of ideological and theological systematizing.

Analysis

Liberation theology's use of the Exodus story to provide a kind of biblical prototype for its revolutionary brand of politics is by no means unprecedented. Religiously-motivated movements for social change have long drawn inspiration from this biblical epic. Yet it is still important, at the outset of this discussion, to take note of

⁹¹Gutiérrez, p. 159; cf. Croatto, p. 27.

⁹²Pixley, p. 112.

⁹³Croatto, pp. 8-10, 45-46; Gutiérrez, pp. 8-9, 271-72.

the fact that the version of this story recounted above differs, in many crucial respects, from the impression that one would derive from a straightforward reading of the narrative as it exists in its present literary form.⁹⁴ (Indeed, the liberation theologians themselves would probably not dispute this assertion.⁹⁵) On the surface, at least, this story appears to be about how a consanguineous group of kin-folk (alternately referred to either as Israelites or Hebrews) was delivered out of servitude in a foreign country, through the miraculous intervention of their God, Yahweh, in order that they might take possession of

⁹⁴Many critiques of liberation theology and its use of Scripture focus on this disparity. The most trenchant analysis has been done by Jon Levinson, and appears in several different articles: "Liberation Theology and the Exodus," *Midstream* 35, no. 7 (October 1989), pp. 30-36; "Exodus and Liberation," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 13 (1991):134-174; "The Exodus and Biblical Theology: A Rejoinder to John J. Collins," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26 (1996):4-10. Much of the discussion that ensues parallels Levinson's treatment. It should be noted, however, that Levinson tends to overlook differences between his overall methodology and the methodology that liberation theologians follow in their approach to Scripture. Notwithstanding his denials (in "Exodus and Biblical Theology," pp. 7-8), Levinson clearly focuses on the final redacted form of the canonical text and assumes that its meaning is fixed--two methodological principles not shared by the major liberation figures considered in this section. For a briefer summation of the issues presented here, see the discussion of "The Meaning of Liberation and Exodus as Paradigm" in Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation commentary, ed. James Luther Mays (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 18-20.

⁹⁵The various liberation theologians who deal with the Exodus narrative in a significant way all implicitly acknowledge this disparity, but each addresses it differently. Gutiérrez takes a more theological approach, viewing the Exodus through the prism of the Christ-event. This occurrence, he says, universalized the Exodus symbol, extending its scope to encompass all of humanity (pp. 158-60). Croatto uses contemporary hermeneutical theory to argue that archetypal events such as the Exodus contain an inexhaustible "reservoir-of-meaning," capable of generating fresh interpretations when apprehended from a new vantage point (pp. 1-3, 12-15). For his part, Pixley turns to a critico-literary methodology to identify various stages in the evolution of the present narrative (along with their respective sociological settings) and to reconstruct what he says is the primordial revolutionary event at the core of the tradition (pp. xvi-xx). Thus, none of the major writers surveyed in this section purport to be taking the text at face value and reading it literally.

a land where their ancestors had once resided as sojourners.

The disparity between this more traditional rendering of the storyline and the version offered by liberation theologians revolves around at least three cardinal issues--the identity of the "Hebrew" protagonists, whether what transpired was a revolution, and whether it was intended to produce a new, egalitarian social order. The first point at which these accounts part company, then, concerns whether the defining characteristic of the "Hebrews" who participated in the Exodus was their common ancestry or their membership in a particular social class. Obviously, this question, in turn, has a direct bearing on the collateral issue of what it was, from the perspective of the narrator, that prompted God's attentiveness to the plight of this particular group of captives.

In liberationist treatments of the Exodus story, the accent falls heavily on the social status of the Hebrews, to the extent that they virtually lose their ethnic particularity and become little more than an emblematic representation of oppressed people everywhere. The text itself, however, in its final literary form, begins with a prologue, relating how a single patriarch, his twelve sons, and their families (seventy persons in all) had settled in Egypt and over the course of several generations produced a progeny numerous enough to fill the land (Exod. 1:1-7). The impression that it was this kinship group that formed at least the nucleus of the Exodus migration is further reinforced by genealogical records (Exod. 6:13-27; cf. Num. 1,2), references to a covenant between the ancestor figures and their God (Exod. 2:24, 3:6, 4:5, 6:2-5, etc.), and by the description of Israel marching out of Egypt in their "divisions."⁹⁶ So alongside those elements of the

⁹⁶This phrase (which occurs at Exod. 7:4, 12:17, 41, 51, and Num. 1:3, 2:4, 6) has frequently been understood as a reference to "a logistical apportionment of the sons of

tradition that emphasize the deity's attentiveness to the cries of the oppressed, there is another, arguably more pronounced, theme in the storyline that explains God's intervention on behalf of this particular community of people in terms of their family lineage and a mysterious divine promise to their ancestors.

In fact, there is even some question about whether the dynamic of oppression is an integral facet of the story at all. Jon Levinson, a sharp critic of liberationist exegesis, writes:

Most of the references to the exodus in the Hebrew Bible make no mention of slavery. A surprisingly large proportion of them speak of the God who took Israel out of Egypt without the appositive so familiar from the Decalogue, "the house of bondage." This suggests that the emancipation may be less important to the exodus than the repatriation of aliens, exile more than slavery being in that case the condition for which a remedy is provided.⁹⁷

This point is also supported by the observation that in the Pentateuch's legal literature, the memory of Israel's experience in Egypt is more frequently invoked in order to encourage the humanitarian treatment of alien sojourners than it is to encourage measures easing the plight of slaves.⁹⁸

Israel by tribal and clan subdivision" (so John I. Durham, Exodus, Word Bible Commentary, vol 3 [Waco: Word Books, 1987], p. 81, cf. p. 170; see also Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, s.v. "saba'," by John E. Hartley, 2:750). Since it is a military term, customarily used to denote an army unit, it may also be rendered in these contexts as "in battle order" or "in battle array" (so J. Philip Hyatt, Exodus, New Century Bible commentary [London: Oliphants, 1971], p. 96).

⁹⁷Levinson, "Liberation Theology and the Exodus," p. 34.

⁹⁸ibid., p. 34; idem, "Exodus and Liberation," p. 146, Walzer, p. 31. (The Exodus is cited on behalf of aliens in Exod. 22:21, 23:9; Lev. 19:34; Dt. 10:19, & 23:7. In addition, Dt. 16:12; & 24:17-18, 21-22 describe the Israelites as slaves in Egypt, but in a context that is dealing with the treatment of widows, orphans, and sojourners. The Exodus experience is only invoked directly on behalf of slaves in Lev. 25:42 and Dt. 15:15.)

A second issue that arises in connection with the liberationist rendition of the Exodus story concerns the process by which the Israelites were emancipated and whether it matches the standard profile of a revolution. The flight out of Egypt itself and some of the activities that led up to it could, as one commentator noted, be legitimately characterized as subversive.⁹⁹ But it is difficult to square the revolutionary depiction of this episode with the data of the biblical text--at least as it ultimately came to be constituted. To begin with, from the narrator's perspective, it is the Hebrews' God who orchestrates their deliverance. The Hebrews themselves are depicted as essentially passive participants in a cosmic conflict pitting their God, Yahweh, over against the malevolent forces embodied in the pharaoh and his court magicians. As if to underscore this point, the Hebrews virtually disappear from the narrative from the moment of their dispirited response to Moses (Exod. 6:9) until they re-emerge in conjunction with the flight from Egypt.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, in contradistinction to the conventional aims of a revolutionary movement, the Exodus-event did not bring about any fundamental alteration in the social structure of ancient Egypt (other than the loss of some portion of its slave labor force). Rather than toppling the pharaohs's regime, the Hebrews merely withdrew from it. There is, therefore, as John Howard Yoder once remarked, no precedent in this incident for "a theocratic takeover of the land of bondage by the brickmakers."¹⁰¹

⁹⁹Fretheim, p. 19.

¹⁰⁰ibid., p. 89.

¹⁰¹John Howard Yoder, "Exodus and Exile: the Two Faces of Liberation," Cross Currents 23 (1973-4): 308.

Finally, a third incongruity between a face value reading of the biblical text and the way it is often construed by liberation theologians has to do with the ultimate goal of the Exodus. For the writers surveyed in this chapter, the meaning of this event can be summed up in the catchword that has become the designation for their theological movement--"liberation," a term that, to them denotes "[freedom] from oppression and alienation for the purpose of equality, solidarity, and community."¹⁰² But once again, this conception is fundamentally at odds with the text itself in a couple of respects. To begin with, regardless of how sharply one contrasts it with the alternative social forms existing in the near east at the time, the social order reflected in Israel's oldest body of case law was hardly the paragon of "primitive communism" depicted by Marxian-inspired exegetes. Economic disparities and differences in social standing (most notably, between slaves and free persons) are clearly presupposed, even if their effects are mitigated in various ways.

But a more important point to be noted is that, from the standpoint of the redactor who shaped the canonical form of this tradition, any socio-political implications that accrued from the Exodus are matters of peripheral importance. The agenda reflected in the text's own thematic structure and literary motifs is dominated by theological concerns. Thus, the tension in the narrative revolves, not around the conflict between tyranny and freedom (defined in terms of self-determination), but around a contest for mastery over Israel between the pharaoh and Yahweh. The central issues, therefore, are "Whose

¹⁰²Levinson, "Exodus and Liberation," p. 155.

people are these?"¹⁰³ and the corollary question, "Whom will Israel serve?"¹⁰⁴ Among the ways that this theme is expressed is through the Hebrew deity's demand of pharaoh, that forms a recurrent refrain throughout the plague cycle. In the biblical version, this oft-quoted admonition "let my people go" continues with the words "that they might serve me." In the final analysis "Exodus moves from one kind of slavery to another, from bondage to pharaoh to the service of Yahweh."¹⁰⁵

What liberation theology has done, therefore--no doubt quite wittingly in the case of its more astute spokespersons--is to venture a version of the Exodus story that represents, not a straightforward, literal reading of the narrative on its own terms, but rather a creative retelling of it from within a contemporary Third World context that has been interpreted on the basis of modern social scientific categories of analysis. But however innovative this particular approach to the Exodus story may be, it can hardly be described as unprecedented. It in fact stands in direct continuity with a long-standing interpretive tradition, deeply rooted in the history of Jewish and Christian expositions. Liberation theology has simply appropriated elements of this tradition and synthesized them, in an innovative fashion, with a modern revolutionary paradigm shaped by Marxian

¹⁰³This is how Donald E. Gowan frames the central issue of the narrative in his Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), p. 137.

¹⁰⁴Fretheim, p. 20.

¹⁰⁵Fretheim, p. 20. There is scant textual support for Gottwald's contention that "exodus refers typologically to the movement of a people from a situation of bondage to a situation of freedom, from a collective life determined by others to a collective life that is self-determined. . . ." (Norman K. Gottwald, "The Exodus as Event and Process," in Mark H. Ellis, Otto Maduro, eds. The Future of Liberation Theology [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989], p. 253).

described as unprecedented. It in fact stands in direct continuity with a long-standing interpretive tradition, deeply rooted in the history of Jewish and Christian expositions. Liberation theology has simply appropriated elements of this tradition and synthesized them, in an innovative fashion, with a modern revolutionary paradigm shaped by Marxian social analysis. The transformation of the Exodus story into a tale about freedom from political oppression began at least as early as Judaism's Second Temple period, when this theme emerged as a dominant motif in traditional midrash--a trend that is highlighted in the Aramaic Targums. In time, this interpretation made its way into the standardized version of the haggadah, wherein Passover becomes preeminently a Festival of Freedom.¹⁰⁶

As part of the Jewish biblical heritage that Christianity adopted as its own, this Exodus tradition was interjected into the cultural consciousness of the Western world, where it became a perennial symbol of resistance to tyranny and the quest for national self-determination. In the process, of course, it lost any distinctively Jewish overtones and became a universal symbol, appropriated by a variety of groups who saw their own experiences prefigured in the Exodus paradigm. Among the communities that have somehow used this biblical imagery to frame their own historical struggles have been militant peasants in sixteenth century Germany, the Calvinists of Geneva, French Huguenots, Scottish Presbyterians, English Puritans, American colonists, South African Boers, slaves in the antebellum American South, and leaders of the twentieth century

¹⁰⁶Brevard S. Childs, The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary, Old Testament Library series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 232. (Interestingly, Childs goes on to point out that in several places, the New Testament appears to call this line of interpretation into question, p. 233.)

In a few of these instances (most notably, those of the New England Puritans and South African Boers), religious groups migrating into new territory have invoked the imagery of Israel entering the promised land--generally with detrimental consequences for the region's indigenous inhabitants, who, following the biblical analogy, come to be identified with the Canaanites. Far more common, however, has been the use of images drawn from the Exodus story within the context of a domestic political conflict in which the opponents of an ostensibly tyrannical or oppressive regime come to see themselves as modern counterparts to the Hebrews arrayed against the Pharaoh.¹⁰⁸

In at least one of these cases--the American civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's--this imagery was invoked to provide rhetorical sanction for a largely peaceful process of social change in which non-violent techniques were used to secure legislative remedies.¹⁰⁹

But there is also a long and venerable tradition of appeals to the Exodus story in the midst of conflicts that were not so peaceful--a history that Michael Walzer has done much to illumine in his Exodus and Revolution. The most notable examples of this tendency

Tradition," pp. 52-53; John Newton, "Analysis of Programmatic Texts of Exodus Movements," pp. 56-62; Anton Weiler, "The Experience of Communities of Religious Refugees," pp. 63-71; Gregory Baum, "Exodus Politics," pp. 109-116; and David Tracy, "Exodus: Theological Reflection," pp. 119-20.

¹⁰⁸This basic contrast between Exodus movements that involve a migration and those that do not is discussed by Newton, "Analysis of Programmatic Texts," in van Iersel and Weiler, pp. 56-58.

¹⁰⁹*ibid.*, pp. 57-8; cf. Walzer, pp. 3-4, *et passim*. In the collection A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), see "I See the Promised Land," pp. 279-86; "Stride Toward Freedom," p. 482; "The Strength to Love," p. 495; and "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community," p. 619.

occurred in conjunction with the Puritan Revolution in England and the American War of Independence, both of which occasioned extensive use of Exodus references and metaphors by political pamphleteers and revolutionary sympathizers in the pulpit.¹¹⁰ In its overall contours, therefore, the liberationist approach to the Exodus story harks back to a classic pattern of interpreting the narrative's socio-political relevance. Some of the clearest parallels can be found in the religious pronouncements regarding seventeenth and eighteenth century movements that were, in Marxian terms, bourgeois revolutions designed to topple vestiges of the Old World's ancien régime in the name of republican principles. All liberation theologians have done is to reinterpret this method of applying the biblical text for a Third World context and integrate it with a distinctively socialist theory of revolution.

But strictly speaking, any attempt to expound the meaning of a biblical narrative in terms of some revolutionary model of politics represents the imposition of an interpretive framework at odds with the prevailing climate of antiquity. Among scholars who have analyzed the evolution of this phenomenon, there is a widespread consensus that revolutions, in their present form, were an unknown entity at this stage of history.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰The majority of sources cited in Walzer are from these two periods.

¹¹¹See, for example, the section on "The Absence of Revolutions in Antiquity" in T. F. Carney, The Shape of the Past. Arendt similarly writes that "revolutions, properly speaking, did not exist prior to the modern age; they are among the most recent of all major political data" (p. 3). Concerning Egypt, in particular, Henri Frankfort has referred to "the absence of any trace of revolution in three thousand years of recorded history" (Ancient Egyptian Religion [New York: Columbia University Press, 1948; rep. ed., New York: Harper/Torchbooks, 1961], p. 31. It should be pointed out, however, that while this consideration undermines the plausibility of a revolutionary reading of the Exodus text, the case for this interpretation must ultimately stand or fall on the basis of the biblical record itself. One cannot preclude, a priori, the possibility of a revolutionary

There have, of course, always been disturbances in the political realm that bear some affinities to modern revolutions. Classical theorists analyzed the cycle of changes that civil societies undergo in their constitutional structure--a transformation to which Aristotle applied the term metabole (often rendered into English as "revolution").¹¹² The Bible itself refers to occurrences such as changes in a nation's form of governance (Israel's transition from a tribal confederacy to a monarchy, for instance), palace coups (the assassination of rulers and the toppling of family dynasties during the period of Israel's divided monarchy¹¹³) and wars of independence (e.g., the Maccabean and Zealot-led rebellions).¹¹⁴ In addition, the right to resist tyranny, which was clearly articulated in

movement in the ancient world based solely on the absence of any other revolutions during this historical era without begging the question. Even scholars who believe that biblical Israel originated with a revolutionary struggle acknowledge that among the nations of antiquity, Israel was unique in this respect. Jan Dus says that the Israelites conducted "the first ideologically-based socio-political revolution in the history of the world" ("Moses or Joshua? On the Problem of the Founder of the Israelite Religion," trans. Nancy Bailey, Radical Religion 2, no. 2-3 [1975]: 28; cf. also Norman K. Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E. [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979], pp. 593-94).

¹¹²Arendt, pp. 13-14; Eugene Kamenka, "The Concept of a Political Revolution," in Revolution, ed. Carl Friedrich, Nomos series, no. 8 (New York: Atherton Press, 1969), p. 124; Dictionary of the History of Ideas, s.v. "Revolution," by Felix Gilbert, p. 153.

¹¹³See Simon B. Parker, "Revolutions in Northern Israel," in Society of Biblical Literature 1976 Seminar Papers, ed. George MacRae (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), pp. 311-321. Parker considers these to be examples of "simple revolutions" in contradistinction from the modern idea of "total revolution" (p. 316).

¹¹⁴On the distinction between these kinds of occurrences that took place in antiquity and modern revolutions, see Arendt, pp. 27-28; Kamenka, "Concept," in Friedrich, p. 129; Dict. History Ideas, s.v. "Revolution," p. 152. It should be noted that other scholars subsume all of these phenomena under the general category of "revolutions," but distinguish between modern forms of revolution and those that existed in the ancient world (e.g., see George Pettee, "Revolution: Typology and Process," in Friedrich, pp. 15-18).

Europe by medieval theorists, has many parallels in traditional societies throughout the world.¹¹⁵

But the concept of revolution, as it is presently construed, moves beyond the scope of these historical antecedents. For that reason, it is generally regarded as a phenomenon that only emerged with the dawn of the early modern period and was, prior to the twentieth century, confined to the domain of Western culture.¹¹⁶ The term "revolution" itself seems to have been used with some semblance of its current meaning as early as the Renaissance period (by Machiavelli, among others)¹¹⁷ and gained currency among English writers when it came to applied to the political upheavals that occurred during the seventeenth century.¹¹⁸ But by all accounts, it was the French Revolution in 1789 that provided the definitive paradigm for this concept and ushered in the modern revolutionary epoch.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵See the examples cited by Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 103-4. Concerning this type of uprising, Arendt notes: "the aim of such rebellions was not a challenge of authority or the established order of things as such; it was always a matter of exchanging the person who happened to be in authority, be it the exchange of a usurper for the legitimate king or the exchange of a tyrant who had abused his power for a lawful ruler" (p. 33).

¹¹⁶On the uniquely Western origins of this phenomenon, see Kamenka, "Concept," in Friedrich, p. 129.

¹¹⁷Dict. History Ideas, s.v. "Revolution," p. 152. Arendt refers to Machiavelli as the "spiritual father of revolutions" (p. 30), but sees his thinking on the subject as essentially pre-modern (pp. 30-33).

¹¹⁸Dict. History Ideas, s.v. "Revolution," pp. 153-54.

¹¹⁹Dict. History Ideas, s.v. "Revolution," pp. 156-57; Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought, s.v. "Revolution, Theories of," by Jack A. Goldstone, p. 437; Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

The strong affinity between this political mechanism and the spirit of the modern age is reflected in a variety of ways. One of the distinguishing features, for example, of the revolutionary tradition is that it represents a conscious deliberate attempt to reshape the institutional framework of society through a cataclysmic political upheaval. Thus, C. B. McPherson has defined "revolution" as "a transfer of state power by means involving the use or threat of organized force, and the subsequent consolidation of that transferred power with a view to bringing about a fundamental change in social, economic, and political institutions."¹²⁰ For this reason, "revolution is," as Samuel Huntington wrote, "the ultimate expression of the modernizing outlook, the belief that it is within the power of man to control and to change his environment and that he has not only the right but the ability to do so."¹²¹

Moreover, at the core of this project of social reconstruction has often been the avowed commitment to eliminate disparities of wealth and to liberate the masses of

1968), p. 265. This is also a recurrent theme in Arendt (see esp. pp. 40-55). The French Revolution, it is sometimes noted, was even the source for much of the nomenclature that is used to denote aspects of the modern revolutionary phenomenon (e.g., "counterrevolutionary," "the Thermidor," etc.).

¹²⁰C. B. Macpherson, "Revolution and Ideology in the Late Nineteenth Century," in Friedrich, p. 140. In a similar vein, Gilbert quotes Condorcet's statement, written in 1793, that "in France, the revolution was to embrace the entire economy of society, change every social relation, and find its way down to the furthest links of the political chain. . ." (Dict. History Ideas, s.v. "Revolution," p. 156). Thus, Goldstone notes that "since 1789 the idea of 'revolution' has come to stand not merely for opposition to tyranny, but for establishing an entirely new organization of society" (Blackstone Ency. s.v. "Revolution," p. 437).

¹²¹Huntington, p. 265.

impoverished and disenfranchised humanity.¹²² Yet, ironically, the driving force behind this quest to overcome poverty has not been the mere existence of abject deprivation--something that has been a constant feature of humanity's lot throughout history--but rather the more recent conviction that this situation is reversible. As

Hannah Arendt has written:

The social question began to play a revolutionary role only when, in the modern age and not before, men began to doubt that poverty is inherent in the human condition, to doubt that the distinction between the few, who through circumstances or strength or fraud had succeeded in liberating themselves from the shackles of poverty, and the laboring poverty-stricken multitude was inevitable and eternal."¹²³

For this reason, revolutionary activity in regions such as Latin America has often been correlated with increased economic development (rather than its absence). It is, by some accounts, economic growth itself, the modernizing tendencies that accompany it, and the rising tide of expectations that it unleashes which often create a climate of instability and lead to revolutionary movements.¹²⁴ Summing up this line of analysis in one classic study of the revolutionary phenomenon, Huntington wrote, "If poor countries appear to be unstable, it is not because they are poor, but because they are trying to become rich."¹²⁵ This level of instability is particularly pronounced when the pace of

¹²²The connection between the revolutionary enterprise and what she calls the "social question" is a key theme in Arendt's study (see esp. pp. 14-15, 53-110). (Ultimately, she concludes that this endeavor has been futile and that "every attempt to solve the social question with political means leads to terror" [p. 108].)

¹²³Arendt, p. 15.

¹²⁴This is a central idea in Huntington's study (see esp. pp. 32-78). See also Kamenka, "Concept," in Friedrich, pp. 129-30.

¹²⁵Huntington, p. 41.

economic and cultural modernization outstrips the rate of political modernization, leaving an authoritarian regime allied with an older oligarchy to govern a society increasingly dominated by newer classes of business, professional, and cultural elites.¹²⁶

Corresponding to this impulse to reconfigure the social order, revolutions also typically entail the reformulation of a society's dominant ideology, its prevailing symbols, and integrative myth.¹²⁷ Revolutions, in the contemporary historical context, are, in fact, driven by ideological considerations--a phenomenon that, once again, is a peculiarity of the modern era. Conversely, the absence of ideological conflict in the ancient world is one of the factors that accounts for the absence of revolutions. In place of ideologies, traditional societies are dominated by religious symbols, and, as one scholar has observed, "so long as religion was recognized as the sphere which dominated all civilization and from which all others received their supreme laws, there could be no true revolution."¹²⁸

Finally, one last element in the ethos of the revolutionary tradition that should be noted is its integral relationship with another component of the post-Enlightenment Western consciousness--the belief in the inevitability of progress. Central to the revolutionary enterprise is the sense of ushering in a new era, of creating a novus ordo saeculorum, of "[spelling] the definite end of an old order and . . . the birth of a new

¹²⁶Huntington, pp. 35, 49-56.

¹²⁷On the role of ideology, see Macpherson, "Revolution and Ideology," in Friedrich, pp. 139-53; Irving Louis Horowitz, Foundations of Political Sociology (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 255-56, 258-59.

¹²⁸Paul Schrecker, "Revolution as a Problem in the Philosophy of History," in Friedrich, p. 35.

world."¹²⁹

And nowhere is this sentiment more evident than in the strand of the revolutionary tradition represented by Karl Marx, for whom, one commentator noted, "revolutions were the milestones in humanity's inexorable march toward true freedom and true universality."¹³⁰ Propelling this revolutionary process forward, according to the Marxian scheme of history, is the dynamic of class struggle--the clash of competing interests between segments of society that differ from one another on the basis of how they relate to the factors of production. Thus, the subtext throughout history is the underlying conflict between the groups that control the means of production (such as land or capital) and the powerless groups that are thereby exploited. When ultimately a revolutionary occurrence takes place, it entails a fundamental shift in the basic mode of production. So in the same way that the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century toppled the ancien régime and replaced feudalism with capitalism, the impending socialist revolution--the final stage in this historical progression--will overturn the capitalist mode of production by abolishing private control of capital assets.¹³¹

Building on this theoretical foundation, V. I. Lenin then became the architect of

¹²⁹Arendt, p. 35 (cf. p. 254). See also Dict. Hist. Ideas, s.v. "Revolution," which observes that, for the contemporaneous participants, the fall of the Bastille "was taken as the beginning of a new age" and the revolution itself was regarded as "a step forward in the march of humanity" (p. 156).

¹³⁰Kamenka, "Concept," in Friedrich, p. 126.

¹³¹Robert C. Tucker, The Marxian Revolutionary Idea (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), pp. 10-32; Jon Elster, An Introduction to Karl Marx (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) pp. 122-40. See also Arendt, pp. 56-59; Dict. Hist. Ideas, s.v. "Revolution," pp. 161-62; Blackwell Ency. s.v. "Revolution," pp. 437-38.

Marxism's hallmark revolutionary strategy. It was his concept of the "party vanguard"--an elite band of professional revolutionaries transcending class lines and distinguished by their acute level of political awareness--that enabled human actors to seize the initiative and to foster a "revolutionary situation" even in pre-industrialized settings.¹³² Lenin was also a pioneer in another twentieth century innovation--the creation of permanent revolutionary institutions. As historians of this political phenomenon have sometimes noted, revolutions in previous centuries invariably lost their momentum and eventually led to the restoration of a regime comparable to the one that had been overthrown. It was only with the advent of the twentieth century that the concept of a permanent revolution, perpetuated through a party apparatus, a people's army, and other institutional structures, took root (following revolutions in countries such as Russia, Mexico, China, and Cuba).¹³³

Much of what is distinctive (and, in the view of many of its critics, less plausible) about the liberationist treatment of the Exodus story reflects the assimilation of this Marxian revolutionary tradition into the narrative structure. To begin with, the mere fact that the saga of Israel's bondage in Egypt is singled out as the primary biblical metaphor for illuminating the realities of contemporary economic conditions is itself significant. As Arendt once noted, Marx tended to view capitalism in terms of images derived from

¹³²Tucker, pp. 146-52; Huntington, pp. 334-43; Dict. Hist. Ideas, s.v. "Revolution, pp. 162-65. For the classic articulation of this philosophy, see V. I. Lenin, "What is to be Done: Burning Questions of our Movement" in Lenin on Politics and Revolution, ed. James E. Connor (New York: Pegasus, 1968), pp. 31-78.

¹³³Huntington, p. 313-15. According to Arendt (p. 44), the concept of "permanent revolution" originated in the mid-nineteenth century.

the slave economies of antiquity, where a captive labor force was subjugated to a class of masters.¹³⁴

Moreover, again in classic Marxian fashion, liberationist exegesis underscores the economic roots of the Hebrew oppression in Egypt. Thus, the repressive measures meted out by the pharaoh are construed as epiphenomenal reflections of underlying economic structures and the inequities inherent in the Asiatic mode of production. This perspective on the situation stands in marked contrast to the way the story was expounded in seventeenth and eighteenth century revolutionary discourses, which depicted the pharaoh as an archetypal symbol of political tyranny.¹³⁵ So with their approach, what liberation theologians are suggesting, perhaps for the first time in the history of this narrative's socio-political application, is that patterns of international trade rigged to the detriment of certain countries (or regions of the world) and domestic economies marked by acute disparities in living standards constitute forms of oppression comparable to what the Hebrew slaves endured in Egypt.

Another novel perspective incorporated into liberationist treatments of the Exodus narrative is the use of class analysis. As was noted earlier, the ethnic identity of the Hebrews is subordinated to their status as an oppressed class. The rhetoric of class struggle and the analysis of conflicting class interests is also used to interpret the interactions between the Hebrew spokespersons and the Egyptian rulers--an approach

¹³⁴Arendt, p. 56. (Arendt contends that this analogy is only apposite in the early stages of capitalism.)

¹³⁵Walzer makes an observation along these lines (p. 30), although he goes on to point out that any distinction between economic and political oppression cannot be drawn too tightly, since the Exodus story encompasses both (p. 31).

vaguely reminiscent of Marx's reporting on revolutionary developments in nineteenth century Europe, with its many references to the maneuverings of the petty bourgeoisie, peasants, lumpenproletariat, and other groups.¹³⁶ Once again, this application of the Exodus paradigm represents a departure from the way other groups throughout history have sought to equate themselves with the ancient Israelites, either to shape a sense of national cohesion or to fortify a religious identity. In the liberationist interpretation, the counterpart to the Hebrews is, perhaps for the first time, an economic class, rather than an ethnic group or a religious community.

Finally, there are overtones of this Marxian tradition in the way the revolutionary process plays itself out in at least some liberationist scenarios. A prime example of this tendency is the way Pixley describes the gains of the revolution being consolidated during the wilderness period, against the backdrop of an ever-present threat from "counterrevolutionaries." This line of interpretation fits the classic pattern of what Walzer dubbed the "Leninist reading" of the text, in which a "reign of terror" presided over by "an organized and disciplined cadre" is necessary in order to purge the people of their attachments to the old way of life (represented by Egypt). Walzer juxtaposes this rendering of the story with a more benign "social democratic reading" and traces both styles of interpretation back to the seventeenth century Puritan expositors.¹³⁷ The basic

¹³⁶See, for example, "Excerpts from the Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850" in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Writings on Politics and Philosophy, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. [Anchor Books], 1959), pp. 281-317; and "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Robert Tucker, ed., The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp. 594-617.

¹³⁷Walzer, pp. 61-70.

point to be made here is that liberation theologians, insofar as they show a proclivity for the former, as opposed to the latter, way of reading the text, once again reveal a particular socio-political commitment.

As all these examples illustrate, the popular rendering of the Exodus story associated with liberation theology represents a conflation of the biblical text with the modern revolutionary impulse, and, more specifically, with that strand of this tradition that grew out of the Marxist-Leninist school of socialism. There is, therefore, a strong element of ideological conditioning in this reading of the narrative. It is important to point out, however, that in forging a synthesis between this revolutionary theory and the story of Israel's national origins, liberation theology does have at least a potential ally in one recent scholarly proposal.

According to the hypothesis first put forward by George Mendenhall,¹³⁸ and subsequently amplified and reformulated by Norman Gottwald, Israel irrupted onto the scene in Canaan, not as an incursion of pastoral nomadic tribes sweeping in from the desert, but as an indigenous uprising against the expropriative control of the countryside by urban power centers. Spearheading this rural revolt was a coalition of village peasants, transhumant pastoralists, and social outcasts known as 'apiru, joined by the band of Yahweh worshipers who had recently fled Egypt in the Exodus.¹³⁹ Together, this revolutionary alliance successfully overturned the system of feudal domination and

¹³⁸George E. Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," Biblical Archaeologist 25 (1962): 68-87; idem, "Social Organization in Early Israel," in Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 132-51.

¹³⁹Gottwald, Tribes, p. 585.

created a decentralized, egalitarian society, the memory of which is preserved in Israel's oldest body of traditions.

In the context of this so-called peasant revolt model of Israel's origins, the story of the flight out of Egypt, with its Yahwistic theological moorings, is regarded as the ideological component that provided the nascent peasant insurgency movement with a religious identity and cohesive social mythology. As Gottwald describes the process:

Whatever their actual numbers, the Exodus proto-Israelites, who had broken away from the grip of the Egyptian empire and survived a trek through the desert, became a powerful catalyst in energizing and guiding the broad coalition of underclass Canaanites. Their experience became exemplary for all Israel, fundamentally shaping . . . the entire format of the Israelite traditions. Organized as the priestly militarized Levites, spread throughout the tribes, they became intellectual and military-political cadres significantly leavening the whole coalition.¹⁴⁰

Eventually, this cult of "mono-Yahwism" would (according to Gottwald's cultural-materialist interpretation of religion) come to operate as a reciprocal counterpart to early Israel's egalitarian social order and a "symbolic expression of the Israelite socioeconomic revolution."¹⁴¹

Needless to say, this scholarly reconstruction of Israel's origins, particularly in the form in which Gottwald articulates it, is susceptible to some of the same lines of criticism that have been leveled against the treatment of the Exodus story by liberation theologians.¹⁴² Nonetheless, this model does provide a potential framework for ethicists

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 496; cf. Mendenhall, "Hebrew Conquest," pp. 73-74.

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 700; cf. pp. 608-649, 700-709.

¹⁴²Specifically, various reviewers alleged that Gottwald anachronistically uses modern concepts such as egalitarianism and freedom to interpret his ancient subjects and thus, as one review put it "has the Bronze age peasants thinking modern thoughts"

attempting to locate a revolutionary tradition within the biblical record.

Revolutionary Socialism Fulfills the Prophetic Mandate to Achieve Justice for the Oppressed

The Argument

Following its use of the Exodus paradigm, a second key element in liberation theology's distinctive style of invoking scriptural warrants involves correlating the biblical theme of oppression with a perspective on Third World underdevelopment that is rooted in Marxist social analysis. The Bible is, of course, replete with instances of oppression--from the Israelite bondage in Egypt that preceded the Exodus through the Roman occupation of Palestine that forms the backdrop for the New Testament. It is, however, in the context of the Hebrew prophetic literature that one encounters the most sustained series of rhetorical attacks on systems of exploitation, set alongside stirring calls for justice. Gutiérrez summarizes this movement's legacy:

The prophets condemn every kind of abuse, every form of keeping the poor in poverty or of creating new poor people. They are not merely allusions to situations; the finger is pointed at those who are to blame. Fraudulent commerce and exploitation are condemned (Hos. 12:8; Amos 8:5; Mic. 6:10-11; Isa. 3:14; Jer.5:27; 6:12), as well as the hoarding of lands (Mic. 2:1-3; Ezek. 22:29; Hab. 2:5-6), dishonest courts (Amos 5:7; Jer. 2:13-17; Mic. 3:9-11; Isa. 5:23, 10:1-2) the violence of the ruling classes (2 Kings 23:30, 35; Amos 4:1; Mic. 3:1-2; 6:12; Jer. 22:13-17), slavery (Neh. 5:1-5; Amos 2:6; 8:6), unjust taxes (Amos 4:1; 5:11-12),

(Frederic R. Brandfon, "Norman Gottwald on the Tribes of Yahweh," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 21 (1981): 108. Similar objections are registered by Robert P. Carroll, review of Tribes of Yahweh, Scottish Journal of Theology 35 (1982): 176-77; and Gerhard Lenski, review of Tribes of Yahweh, Religious Studies Review 6 (1980): 276). Gottwald was also faulted for overlooking elements in ancient Israel's social structure that contradict his egalitarianism thesis (e.g., Martin J. Buss, review of Tribes of Yahweh, Religious Studies Review 6 (1980): 274.

and unjust functionaries (Amos 5:7; Jer. 5:28).¹⁴³

Among figures associated with the liberation theology movement, Thomas Hanks has undertaken what is perhaps the most meticulous and comprehensive attempt to document biblical references to oppression and to demonstrate the prevalence of this theme throughout the scriptural canon.¹⁴⁴ Concentrating largely in the area of Hebrew semantics, Hanks identified and analyzed twenty different lexical roots that have at their core some meaning related to oppression. Based on the size of this vocabulary stock, as well as on the number of places in which the terminology occurs, he seeks to establish conclusively that oppression is "a basic structural category of biblical theology."¹⁴⁵

Along with demonstrating the centrality of this theme, Hanks' other major concern is to show a linkage in the biblical mindset between poverty and oppression. This connection is apparent, he believes, even in the etymology of certain words. A case in point is one of the most common Hebrew terms for a poor person, 'ani, which comes from a root 'anah, that denotes the idea of oppression.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, the noun tsar, defined as "distress, want, or need" is part of a family of words with a root meaning having to do with oppression--leading Hanks to conclude that this particular derivative means "poverty caused by oppression."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³Gutiérrez, p. 293.

¹⁴⁴Thomas D. Hanks, God So Loved the Third World: the Biblical Vocabulary of Oppression, trans. James C. Dekker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983).

¹⁴⁵Hanks, p. 4.

¹⁴⁶ibid., p. 17.

¹⁴⁷ibid., p. 21.

The connection hinted at by these features of Hebrew lexicography is confirmed by an analysis of the literary contexts in which this word-group is used. Derivatives of the 20 roots signifying oppression appear 555 times in the Hebrew Bible, and, by Hanks' reckoning, 164 of these occurrences are in contexts dealing with poverty.¹⁴⁸ The Hebrew psalter, for example, is replete with passages combining the vocabulary of oppression with references to those who are poor. A classic case in point is Psalm 72, where, Hanks points out, three synonyms for "poor" are used a total of eight times in conjunction with two different words for "oppression." The crucial verses of this psalm highlighted by Hanks are 3-4 and 12-14:

May [the king] defend the cause of the poor of the people,
 give deliverance to the needy,
 and crush the oppressor ('ashaq). . . .
 For he delivers the needy when he calls,
 the poor and him who has no helper.
 He has pity on the weak and needy,
 and saves the lives of the needy,
 From oppression (tōk) and violence he redeems their life;
 and precious is their blood in his sight.¹⁴⁹

In similar fashion, the way the categories of "poor" (9:13, 19; 10:1, 9, 12) and

¹⁴⁸Hanks divides these twenty roots into two categories (of ten each) based on the frequency with which they are used. For the ten roots whose derivatives appear most often, a series of endnotes on pp. 125-28 list all of the relevant verse references, highlighting the ones that deal with poverty. The same information is provided for the ten less frequently used roots on pp. 26-27. A chart summarizing the statistics for the entire collection of terms is found on p. 40.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 6-7. (The quotation is reproduced here exactly as Hanks renders it. The authors being considered in this section generally rely on their own translations to bring out what they consider to be the authentic socio-political overtones contained in certain key terms [often inserting the corresponding Hebrew or Greek words in parentheses]. As a result, their renderings will be used for all direct scriptural quotations. In addition, where they have inserted Greek or Hebrew words into the text, their transliteration scheme will be replicated.)

"oppressed" (9:9; 10:7, 10, 18) are used interchangeably to characterize the people who are the subject of Psalms 9 and 10 (considered by scholars to have originally been one composition) suggests, to Hanks, that "the poor and the oppressed are thought of as one group or class." "In other words," he adds, "the poor became poor and continue to be poor basically because of pulverizing oppression."¹⁵⁰

The prophetic books also supply numerous examples of this association. From the book of Amos, Hanks cites chapter 4, vs. 1:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,
 who are in the mountains of Samaria,
 who oppress the poor, who crush (ratsats) the needy,
 who say to their husbands, "Bring, that we may drink!"¹⁵¹

Along the same lines, Amos 5:12 reads: "You oppress (tsarar) the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor ('ebyon) of justice in the courts."¹⁵²

On the basis of passages like these, Hanks substantiates his oft-repeated claim that "in biblical theology oppression is viewed as the basic cause of poverty."¹⁵³ In making this point, he readily acknowledges that other sources of poverty (such as natural catastrophes, idolatry, and slothfulness) are mentioned in the Bible--a concession that, he says, differentiates his view from that of Marxists, who regard oppression as the only cause. Nevertheless, he insists that the sheer volume of passages associating poverty with

¹⁵⁰Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁵¹Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 38 (emphasis in original). Essentially the same assertion is made on pp. xii, 33, 46, 48, 59, and 111.

oppression clearly identifies this factor as the primary reason for people being poor.¹⁵⁴

Negatively speaking, this conclusion entails rejecting certain explanations for poverty promoted by some economic policy experts. Singling out one such theory, Hanks writes: "Between 1960 and 1970, it was common to attribute Third World poverty to 'underdevelopment'. But the Bible never says that underdevelopment causes poverty. . . . It clearly teaches that injustice and oppression are the primary causes of poverty."¹⁵⁵

Elsa Tamez uses the same methodology--a lexical study of the Hebrew vocabulary of oppression--to shed light on other dimensions of this social phenomenon. One unique contribution her study makes is to demonstrate how the semantics of biblical Hebrew differentiates between domestic and international forms of oppression. While recognizing that this distinction is not consistency maintained, she nonetheless shows that certain terms tend to be used for one form of oppression or the other:

Thus, 'ashaq, for example, appears mainly in the context of injustices within a country, as does yanah. Lahats and nagash, on the other hand, tend generally, but not always, to refer to oppression on the international level. Ratsats is used with the same frequency in connection with both levels of oppression.¹⁵⁶

Like Hanks, Tamez concludes that "for the Bible, oppression is the basic cause of poverty." In other words, "the oppressed are . . . those who have been impoverished, for

¹⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 33-36.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., p. 111. (Hanks elsewhere refers to "underdevelopment" as "a comfortable code word of the 1960's for racial inferiority" [p. x].) Similar rejections of these alternative explanations for poverty are found on pp. 17, 48, and 49.

¹⁵⁶Elsa Tamez, Bible of the Oppressed, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982), p. 29. (This observation has some precedent in earlier lexical studies. BDB, s.v.הַיָּשָׁר, notes that this term is [with one exception] used specifically for domestic forms of oppression.)

while the oppressor oppresses the poor because they are poor and powerless, the poor have become poor in the first place because they have been oppressed."¹⁵⁷ But Tamez is equally insistent that just as oppression is inevitably the cause of poverty, it also is responsible for concentrations of wealth. Oppression, in other words, impoverishes its victims, while simultaneously enriching its beneficiaries. According to the Bible, ". . . it is possible to accumulate wealth only by robbing one's neighbor and committing acts of violence and injustice."¹⁵⁸

A similar perspective on wealth is registered by José Porfirio Miranda in his study of the "philosophy of oppression." "Private ownership," he declares at one point, "is robbery--legalized, institutionalized, civilized, canonized robbery."¹⁵⁹

The basis for these sweeping indictments is found in the denunciations of wealth that reverberate throughout the biblical prophetic writings and reemerge in portions of the New Testament (particularly, the Gospel of Luke and the Epistle of James). One of the specific vices singled out for condemnation in these passages is that of hoarding wealth in storehouses (Amos 5:10). Such property accumulations are, as Tamez puts it, "stolen treasure."¹⁶⁰ In a classic example of the eschatological reversal motif, however, Isaiah envisages a day when the city of Tyre will display the opposite pattern of behavior: "Her merchandise and her hire will be dedicated to the Lord; it will not be stored or hoarded,

¹⁵⁷Ibid., p. 3 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁵⁸Tamez, p. 24.

¹⁵⁹José Porfirio Miranda, Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression, trans. John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974), p. 11.

¹⁶⁰Tamez, p. 32.

but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who dwell before the Lord (Isa. 23:18)."¹⁶¹

Miranda frames the issue in terms of what he calls "differentiated wealth"--wealth that is based on owning the economic means of production or property in consumer goods that serves to reinforce class distinctions.¹⁶² Such wealth, he contends, can only be acquired by using coercion to exploit the labor of others--a fact that the biblical prophets recognized. Jeremiah's polemic against King Zedekiah and the opulent palace he had erected is cited as a typical example:

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 out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion" (Jer. 22:13-14).¹⁶³

Robert McAfee Brown, who also focuses on this passage, describes it as the "classic oppressor-oppressed model, in which the rich get richer while the poor get poorer."¹⁶⁴

A similar scenario is depicted in Amos, where the target is "the system itself"¹⁶⁵ rather than a specific individual:

Well then, since you have trampled on the poor man, extorting levies on his wheat--

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 32 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶²The terms "differentiated wealth" and "differentiated ownership" appear to be used interchangeably by Miranda. The most succinct definition is the description of differentiated ownership in Marx, p. 13.

¹⁶³Miranda cites these verses in Marx, p. 20, but the form of the quotation here is from Tamez, p. 71. The same verses are also quoted by Gutiérrez, pp. 194-95.

¹⁶⁴Brown, Unexpected News, p. 66.

¹⁶⁵Miranda, Marx, p. 20.

those houses you have built of dressed stone, you will never live in them; and those precious vineyards you have planted, you will never drink their wine. Assemble on Samaria's mountain and see what great disorder there is in that city, what oppression is found inside her. They know nothing of fair dealing--it is Yahweh who speaks--they cram their palaces full with violence and spoliation. ([Amos] 5:11; 3:9-10)¹⁶⁶

Miranda comments:

Here we have, despite all the appearances of elegance and luxury, the true consistency of the property of the rich: violence and spoliation. Their palaces and all which makes them into a class different from the rest of the population are for Amos concretized oppression, the accumulated materialization of violence and spoliation.¹⁶⁷

It is this analysis of the economic system as an arena replete with oppression that provides the starting point for the way the meaning of justice is explained by these writers. Oppression and liberation are, for Tamez, the converse of one another, with justice signifying the final outcome of the liberation process.¹⁶⁸ This linkage is illustrated, for example, in Jeremiah 22:3 (quoted by Tamez): "Thus says Yahweh: Practice right and justice, liberate the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor."¹⁶⁹ According to her synopsis of the biblical view, liberation therefore entails "the actual recovery of those basic necessities that the oppressor has taken from the poor: their land (Lev. 25), the wages of the day laborer (Jer. 22:13), the object given as a pledge (usually the blanket with which people cover themselves) (Hab. 2:6), their dwellings (Job 20:19),

¹⁶⁶This is the rendering of this passage as it appears in Miranda, Marx, p. 20. Amos 3:10 is also quoted by Tamez, p. 32.

¹⁶⁷Miranda, Marx, p. 20.

¹⁶⁸Tamez, p. 59.

¹⁶⁹Tamez, p. 23, citing the rendering of this verse in the Biblia de Jerusalén.

and their human dignity (cf. 'anah')."¹⁷⁰

In similar fashion, Miranda understands the biblical mandate to "give alms" as a dictate of justice: "The fact that differentiated wealth is unacquirable without violence and spoliation is presupposed by the Bible in its pointed anathemas against the rich; therefore almsgiving is nothing more than a restitution of what has been stolen, and thus the Bible calls it justice."¹⁷¹ This notion that justice entails, first and foremost, returning to the poor the economic resources that have been expropriated from them explains why references to justice in the Bible routinely focus specifically on poor people. Among the many passages that Miranda marshals at different points to illustrate this tendency are verses from the psalms that describe Yahweh as the one who "will do justice (din) to the poor, right (mišpat) to the needy" (Ps. 140:13) and as the one who "does justice (mišpat) to the oppressed, gives food to the hungry" (Ps. 146:7).¹⁷²

Since these liberationist writings on oppression tend to focus heavily on exegetical issues, the socio-economic relevance of their findings is not always spelled out clearly. There are, however, scattered clues along the way that at least give some indication of how these biblical insights would relate to the contemporary Latin American context. First, these studies of oppression are all obviously predicated on the assumption that Latin America is rife with forms of oppression that mirror those of the

¹⁷⁰Tamez, pp. 59-60.

¹⁷¹Miranda, Marx, p. 19. The passage that Miranda cites at this point to illustrate the connection is Matthew 25:31-46 (the parable of the sheep and the goats). On the next page, he cites Ecclesiasticus 3:30, 7:10, 12:3, and 27:1-2 in connection with the same point.

¹⁷²Miranda, Marx, p. 83.

biblical period. The biblical story, according to Elsa Tamez, is one that revolves around struggle and oppression, and the present story of Latin Americans "can be seen as a continuation of what we are told in biblical revelation."¹⁷³ Hanks sees the Latin American predicament foreshadowed in the plight of Deutero-Isaiah's Suffering Servant figure, whose nation is dominated by a great empire.¹⁷⁴

Secondly, these writings leave little doubt about the identity of the oppressors who are responsible for these conditions. In differentiating the Hebrew terminology that refers to domestic oppression from terms that signify oppression between nations, Tamez hints at a distinction that is equally relevant to the contemporary situation. Within the various Latin American nations, a local oligarchy exercises complicity in the oppression of the masses. The fourteen El Salvadoran families who control ninety per cent of the land are a prime case in point.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, throughout Latin America, members of this ruling elite work in collusion with multinational corporations by facilitating their entry into the region and profiting from their operations.¹⁷⁶ The ranks of modern-day oppressors, in Tamez's estimation, therefore include those who "exploit the proletariat in order to accumulate capital"¹⁷⁷ along with the "stockholders in the great corporations" and

¹⁷³Tamez, p. 1.

¹⁷⁴Hanks, p. 73.

¹⁷⁵This example is cited by Hanks, p. 104.

¹⁷⁶Tamez, p. 67.

¹⁷⁷Ibid., p. 67.

"those who monopolize the means of production."¹⁷⁸ In carrying out their economic designs, they have often been aided by military regimes that receive weapons from overseas in order to suppress the restive masses.¹⁷⁹

Alongside these domestic forms of oppression, there is also an international dimension. At this level, according to Tamez, "the economies of the Latin American countries are dependent on foreign nations and are structured according to the interests of the wealthy nations of the world."¹⁸⁰ Under the terms of this international economic system, the countries of Latin America are relegated to the role of supplying cheap labor and raw materials to fuel the economies of prosperous nations.¹⁸¹ And the chief beneficiary of this system of exploitation is the United States--a nation, according to Hanks "that preaches liberty but practices colonialism and oppression."¹⁸²

This oppression is, in fact, an integral feature of the capitalistic system. The impoverishment of its people is a direct byproduct of "the mode of production forced upon Latin America."¹⁸³ The presence of transnational corporations and the ideologies of the National Security State and limited democracy are props that bolster "the capitalist

¹⁷⁸Ibid., p. 80. (In the immediate context, these phrases describe categories of people who are consigned to the ranks of the unconverted and deemed unfit to receive the Christian Eucharist.)

¹⁷⁹Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁸⁰Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁸¹Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁸²Hanks, p. 104.

¹⁸³Tamez, p. 74.

system and its oppressive structure."¹⁸⁴ One of the most comprehensive critiques of this capitalistic form of oppression is found in Miranda's work, which claims that capitalism merely represents the most recent manifestation--albeit the most well-ordered one--of an oppressive infrastructure that is an integral component of Western civilization.¹⁸⁵

At least in the broadest sense, these critiques of capitalism clearly resonate with the views of Karl Marx--an association that these writers do not shrink from embracing. Hanks considers Marx to be someone who--albeit unwittingly--was influenced by the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, and the early Christians.¹⁸⁶ Miranda develops this connection even more extensively. While disavowing any preconceived attempt to "find parallels between the Bible and Marx" (an effort that would, he says, contravene his commitment to "rigorous and scientific exegesis"), he does assert that "to a great degree Marx coincides with the Bible."¹⁸⁷ There are, in fact, a couple of areas of congruence. Both Marx and the biblical writers agree that oppression and injustice are woven into the very fabric of human civilization itself by becoming institutionalized in social structures and cultural forms.¹⁸⁸ The Apostle Paul described this "structuralization of injustice" in the world as the kosmos; for Marx it was capitalism.¹⁸⁹ At the same time, the biblical and

¹⁸⁴Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁸⁵Miranda, Marx, p. xviii.

¹⁸⁶Hanks, pp. 39, 109 (Miranda makes a similar claim in Marx p. xvii.)

¹⁸⁷Miranda, Marx, p. xvii. (Similar wording about Marx and the Bible coinciding is found on pp. 30, 217, 250, 252, 254. The disclaimer about seeking out parallels is also found on p. 35.)

¹⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 169-92, 250-54.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., p. 250 (cf. pp. 186-87, 190, 252).

Marxian traditions concur in denying that this state of affair is endemic to the human condition or that it is irreversible:

The most revolutionary historical thesis, in which, in contrast with all Western ideologies, the Bible and Marx coincide, is this: Sin and evil, which were later structured into an enslaving civilizing system, are not inherent to mankind and history; they began one day through a human work and can, therefore, be eliminated.¹⁹⁰

What would constitute, for these writers, a social order consonant with biblical norms of justice must largely be inferred from the way they describe the oppressive conditions that are its antithesis. The recurrent critique of economic development strategies and the rejection of capitalistic institutions point to the need for a sweeping transformation of the current system. Similarly, the fact that "differentiated wealth" and private ownership of the means of production are, at various points, described as intrinsically oppressive suggests that socializing these resources and creating a more egalitarian pattern of distribution (if not complete equality) would be core components of a just economic order. On this point, Jose García, in his generally sympathetic treatment of liberation theology's theory of justice, seems to concur. "Democratic socialism," he writes, "is the term that best describes the political order liberation theologians advocate and consider just."¹⁹¹

Of course, under the broad rubric of this overarching socio-political commitment, many variations are possible. García is convinced that "social appropriation, control, and

¹⁹⁰Ibid., pp. 254-55.

¹⁹¹Ismael García, Justice in Latin American Theology of Liberation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), p. 171.

regulation of the social means of production mean state ownership."¹⁹² Hanks, however, is not so certain. After stating that, for liberation theologians, justice entails "democratization in the ownership and control of the means of production,"¹⁹³ he qualifies his position in an endnote by observing that implementing this policy "does not. . . imply necessarily either centralized state ownership or the abolition of personal and family property."¹⁹⁴ And in what is perhaps the clearest indication of her particular stance, Tamez points to the Sandanista Revolution in Nicaragua as a model worthy of being emulated elsewhere. This "fortunate historical event," as she calls it, "[raised] the hopes of the oppressed majority among the Latin American peoples" and showed them that liberation will come when the oppressed struggle to achieve it.¹⁹⁵

So in summary, while the writings under discussion here focus largely on exegetical issues, the socio-political implications are clearly intimated. The economic misery and degradation experienced by the masses of people in Latin America is akin to the oppression condemned by the biblical writers. In diagnosing this reality, Marxism provides the most cogent explanation, with its analysis of the mechanisms of capitalistic exploitation and economic dependency. Moreover, the achievement of justice, which, in the Bible, means removing the root causes of oppression, can only come about through a fundamental alteration in the mode of production--most likely entailing, among other

¹⁹²Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁹³Hanks, p. 62. (An endnote affixed to this statement refers the reader to Miranda's Marx and the Bible.)

¹⁹⁴Ibid., p.136, note 6.

¹⁹⁵Tamez, pp. 3-4.

things, social ownership of capital resources.

Analysis

By highlighting the theme of oppression and demonstrating how prevalent it is in the text of scripture, studies like the ones surveyed in this section make a valuable contribution to biblical scholarship. The paucity of references to this concept in many standard exegetical and theological reference works¹⁹⁶ lends credence to the claim of liberationists that mainstream biblical scholarship has been guilty of systematically neglecting certain dimensions of the biblical worldview. Liberation theologians have shown rather conclusively that "oppression" is indeed one of the Bible's primary conceptual categories, deeply embedded in the experiences of the people who wrote it.

There are, however, a number of difficulties to be noted in the way this theme has actually been developed within the framework of liberation theology. The kind of word-study methodology that is utilized by Hanks and Tamez stands squarely in the tradition of theological lexicography that found consummate expression in Gerhard Kittel's

¹⁹⁶This oversight has been noted both by liberation theologians and other scholars exploring this topic. Hanks expresses frustration over the lack of attention to such concepts as poverty (pp.ix-xi) and oppression (pp. 4, 38) by scholars in the First World. In his introduction to a dissertation on the Hebrew vocabulary of oppression, Young Ihl Kim observes that "standard Old Testament theologies (e.g., by von Rad and Eichrodt), and other major studies of Old Testament ethics (e.g., by Hempel or van Oyen) or anthropology (e.g., by Wolff) omit discussion of this problem of oppression and thus fail to appreciate the importance of the oppression theme for a proper understanding of Israel's history and theology" (Young Ihl Kim, "The Vocabulary of Oppression in the Old Testament: 'šq, ynh, lhs, and Congeners" [unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1981], p. 3). In yet another discussion of this deficiency, I. Swart notes that the Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament, edited by E. Jenni and C. Westermann, omits virtually every important Hebrew word denoting oppression (I. Swart, "The Hebrew Vocabulary of Oppression," Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages XVI [1990]:180).

monumental Theologisches Wörterbuch zum neuen Testament (TWNT). For this reason, these liberationist writings are liable to many of the same criticisms that have been leveled against this overall methodology--most notably in the work of James Barr.¹⁹⁷

As Barr convincingly argued, analyzing the lexical forms within a given piece of literature is an inherently problematic way to explore its framework of ideas.¹⁹⁸ There is not necessarily a direct correlation between the stock of words employed by the writer and the text's primary conceptual categories. Even Hanks appears to recognize this limitation. At one point, while discussing the theme of oppression in the book of Amos, he briefly expands the scope of his inquiry to include figurative expressions depicting this condition.¹⁹⁹ He is also forced to grapple with the scarcity of words denoting oppression in the Greek New Testament when he turns his attention to that portion of the biblical canon.²⁰⁰ Nonetheless, studying the relevant vocabulary remains the paramount focus of his work.

At various places in these liberationist writings, one also encounters prime examples of some specific methodological fallacies that Barr identified in TWNT. One of these flaws is the so-called "root fallacy"--the supposition that the conjectural meaning of a Hebrew root is part of the semantic value of each of its individual derivatives or that

¹⁹⁷Barr first advanced these arguments in his influential work, The Semantics of Biblical Language (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). One chapter (pp. 206-62) is devoted exclusively to critiquing the TWNT.

¹⁹⁸Barr, pp. 207-16.

¹⁹⁹Hanks, p. 32.

²⁰⁰Ibid., pp. 44-5.

derivatives sharing a common root are somehow related in meaning.²⁰¹ Barr used the example of the word pair lechem (bread) and milhamah (war). Though both are derived from the same root, he argued, it would be fanciful to suggest that this linguistic affinity automatically entailed some connection in meaning--"as if battles were normally for the sake of bread or bread a necessary provision for battles."²⁰² An equally relevant example of the same point might be Hanks' attempt to draw conclusions about the relationship between poverty and oppression based on the fact that some Hebrew words denoting these conditions are derived from common lexical roots.

Another questionable maneuver employed by some liberation theologians involves attaching ideologically-laden significations to certain biblical terms. The writer will begin by identifying a group of Hebrew or Greek words, all of which include within their respective fields of meaning one definition that relates to some characteristic of the social order (in this case, "justice" or "oppression"). The claim is then made that these sociological overtones are present whenever this class of words is used--even if reading these shades of meaning into a particular passage involves importing nuances that are seemingly alien to the immediate context. In this way, references to economic oppression or establishing social justice are found to be latent in a wide assortment of passages, based on the appearance within them of certain key words.²⁰³

²⁰¹Barr, p. 100.

²⁰²Ibid., p. 102.

²⁰³One case in point would be Hanks' explanation of Hebrews 10:32-34, a passage that would appear to be describing various forms of persecution visited upon people who had embraced the Christian message. Having previously argued that the Greek term thlipsis should customarily be translated as "oppression" (pp. 45, 47), Hanks sees in these

What is basically taking place here is something akin to what Barr calls the "illegitimate totality transfer"--interpreting the meaning of a word in one individual context in terms of the entire range of meanings it has within a given literary tradition.²⁰⁴ (He cites the example of one article in TWNT that appears to make the Johannine logos concept normative for determining what this word means in other portions of the New Testament.²⁰⁵) In addition, liberationist writers also tend to infuse these word forms with shades of meaning drawn from Marxist modes of social analysis. To this extent, their technique again resembles a pattern Barr claims to have found in TWNT, where some contributors allegedly read subsequent theological developments back into the vocabulary of the Greek New Testament (by, for instance, interpreting the word haireisis in terms of later Christian understandings of heresy).²⁰⁶

Along with these methodological problems, there are also a few rather conspicuous logical flaws that merit brief consideration--most notably in Hanks' treatment of the connection between poverty and oppression. The claim that the biblical writers overwhelmingly viewed oppression as the primary cause of poverty is one that is simply not substantiated by the evidence adduced. Merely showing (as Hanks does) that

verses a reference to oppression brought on by "the continuing 'class struggle'" (p. 48). Equally unconvincing is Miranda's interpretation of Paul's Epistle to the Romans as a treatise dealing with alternative strategies for achieving economic justice in the world (Marx, pp. 169-92), based largely on the contention that this is what the word dikaiosyne (usually translated "righteousness") signifies.

²⁰⁴Barr, p. 218.

²⁰⁵Ibid., pp. 220-22.

²⁰⁶Among other places, this charge is registered on p. 256. (The example of haireisis is found on pp. 226-28.)

these two conditions tended to coincide with one another does not automatically establish a causal connection--in either direction. Nor can any definitive conclusions about the relative importance of various potential causes of poverty be derived from a numerical tabulation of how many Bible verses mention each factor. And finally, to reject explanations of Third World poverty associated with the strategy of economic development based on the fact that "underdevelopment" is never mentioned in the Bible--purely apart from the extreme biblicism implied in such an assertion--is a classic example of an argument from silence.

More importantly, there is a strong element of historical anachronism in the entire quest to identify the causes of poverty from the Bible. In actuality, the preoccupation with identifying poverty's root causes is a distinctively modern concern. Throughout most of human history, when the majority of the world's population lived at a subsistence level and when some measure of deprivation was experienced by most people, the existence of poverty was taken for granted--an attitude succinctly summed up in Jesus' oft-quoted words about the poor always being present (Mark 14:7). It was only when the industrial revolution had boosted productivity that eliminating poverty became a realistic prospect. Under these circumstances, when pockets of poverty persist in the midst of relatively affluent societies or when certain countries remain mired in economically backward conditions while nearby ones prosper, it makes sense to seek a causal explanation for poverty.

But in pre-industrial societies, it was more apt to be concentrations of wealth, rather than remnants of poverty, that demanded an explanation. Surrounded by relative deprivation, displays of abundance were the anomaly that provoked speculation. Tamez

and Miranda, therefore, are closer to the spirit of the biblical period when they pose the issue primarily in terms of what causes wealth. And, by and large, the conclusion that they reach--that wealth is a byproduct of oppression--is one that has strong resonances in the biblical tradition.

In fact, such sentiments about wealth are not confined to canonical scripture, as Miranda demonstrates with his compilation of quotations from patristic sources making essentially the same point. What is perhaps the harshest of these indictments comes from the pen of St. Jerome, who (alluding to Jesus' words about "unrighteous mammon" in Luke 16:9) writes: "And he very rightly said, 'money of injustice,' for all riches come from injustice. Unless one person has lost, another cannot find. Therefore I believe that the popular proverb is very true: 'The rich person is either an unjust person or the heir of one'."²⁰⁷ Yet it is important to note that the outlook expressed in these quotations is neither a uniquely Christian nor even a distinctively religious one. The fact that Jerome buttresses his position by referring to a popular proverb shows that he is echoing what was essentially the commonplace wisdom of the day.

To a large extent, this perspective simply reflected the reality of the ancient world, where wealth was, in fact, generally acquired through plunder, exploitation, or conquest. To begin with, most ancient economies were constructed on a substratum of slave labor--a factor that, economic historians have maintained, was an integral component of the system. Generating a sufficient surplus to sustain the remarkable cultural achievements

²⁰⁷The quotation is reproduced here as Miranda renders it in *Marx*, p. 15 (including his insertion of italics to highlight one set of words). Other patristic quotations are found on pp. 15-17.

of antiquity's urban civilizations required enslaving a significant proportion of the population.²⁰⁸

In addition, the economies of the ancient tributary empires revolved around various coercive mechanisms for exacting wealth from primary producers (basically tillers of the soil) and redistributing it to social elites. Economic resources, therefore, tended to accumulate in the hands of those who either occupied positions of high social status or who held the levers of power--essentially, rulers and their subordinate officials, members of the military establishment, and religious functionaries. Only rarely was the acquisition of wealth directly connected to activities (such as trade and commerce) that were strictly economic in nature. As Robert Heilbroner pointedly observed: "In pre-market societies, wealth tended to follow power; not until the market society would power tend to follow wealth."²⁰⁹ Thus, when contemporary writers cite texts from the Bible or other classical sources equating wealth with oppression, what they are, for the most part, doing is taking statements that were true in the ancient world in a rather literal sense and using them more or less metaphorically to interpret the way a much more complex modern market economy (or international system of trade) functions.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸T. F. Carney, The Economies of Antiquity: Controls, Gifts, and Trade (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1973), pp. 124-26; Robert L. Heilbroner, The Making of Economic Society, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), pp. 27-28.

²⁰⁹Heilbroner, p. 30 (emphasis in original).

²¹⁰At best, one might argue that, in contradistinction to the systems of antiquity, the oppression of the modern world operates in a more subtle, indirect, and well-disguised fashion. In advanced, industrialized societies, the manipulative artifices of the "hidden persuaders" has replaced the jack-booted tactics of ancient overlords. A Marxian mode of analysis might compare the expropriation of labor's surplus value under the wage-labor system with the various forcible exactions of antiquity. In underdeveloped

The biblical view of oppression is also arguably conditioned by what anthropologists refer to as the "image of limited good."²¹¹ George M. Foster, who first introduced this concept in a widely-cited article, contended that this so-called "cognitive orientation" has been a ubiquitous feature of traditional peasant societies throughout history--a claim that, if valid, would support the relevance of this model for biblical studies. According to Forster's synopsis of his thesis:

[B]road areas of peasant behavior are patterned in such a fashion as to suggest that peasants view their social, economic, and natural universes--their total environment--as one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply, as far as the peasant is concerned. Not only do these and all other "good things" exist in finite and limited quantities, but in addition there is no way directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities.²¹²

To a large extent, this perception of the world reflects the realities of an agrarian society where the primary economic resource and basis of wealth is land, a commodity that, by its very nature, exists in limited quantities (allowing, of course, for the possibility that new areas can sometimes be converted to agricultural use by clearing forests,

nations, foreign influence operates primarily through multinational corporations rather than military garrisons. But even if one follows this line of reasoning, the differences with the ancient forms of oppression need to be acknowledged.

²¹¹The concept was developed by George M. Foster in an essay republished as "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," in Jack M. Potter, May N. Diaz, George M. Foster, eds., Peasant Society: A Reader (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), pp. 300-23. For its applicability to ancient economies in general, see Carney, p.102. This model is applied to the field of biblical studies by Bruce J. Malina, The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 90-116; and Halvor Moxnes, The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel. Overtures to Biblical Theology ser. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 76-79.

²¹²Foster, p. 304.

directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities.²¹²

To a large extent, this perception of the world reflects the realities of an agrarian society where the primary economic resource and basis of wealth is land, a commodity that, by its very nature, exists in limited quantities (allowing, of course, for the possibility that new areas can sometimes be converted to agricultural use by clearing forests, irrigating dry places, draining swamps, etc.). Moreover, in the absence of modern agricultural techniques and chemical fertilizers, the output of a given parcel of land is relatively fixed. This combination of factors engenders a static conception of economic life and leads to the conviction that the economy is a "zero sum game."

This outlook, in turn, has significant implications for how a society regards the acquisition of wealth:

[I]f "Good" exists in limited amounts which cannot be expanded, and if the system is closed, it follows that an individual or a family can improve a position only at expense of others. Hence an apparent relative improvement in someone's position with respect to any "Good" is viewed as a threat to the entire community. Someone is being despoiled, whether he sees it or not. . . . Without economic opportunities the striving for material gain is a disturbance to the existing order, since it means plunder of wealth from others.²¹³

Against the backdrop of this pattern of assumptions, it should not be surprising to encounter sentiments about wealth like the ones that are found in the Bible.

In this kind of static, limited growth environment, wealth also cannot perform one of the critical functions it plays in a modern market economy. The low level of technological development in peasant societies meant that increased capitalization was

²¹²Foster, p. 304.

²¹³Ibid., pp. 305, 320 (emphasis in original).

light.²¹⁴ Tamez rightly identifies these forms of behavior as vices condemned by Jesus and the Hebrew prophets. When she subsequently implies that these admonitions are relevant to modern corporate shareholders, however, she fails to make a distinction between wealth that is hoarded for future consumption and wealth that exists in the form of investment capital.

If considerations like these contribute to the Bible's frequently negative assessments of wealth, its corresponding indictments of "oppression" seem to bear some affinities to what anthropologists such as James C. Scott have dubbed "the moral economy of the peasant."²¹⁵ This interpretation of peasant economic values is predicated on the basic observation that members of traditional societies tend to place a much higher premium on their economic security than they do on maximizing their profit margins. This preference is, of course, a reasonable one for communities that operate close to the subsistence level and whose crop yields are always subject to the vicissitudes of nature. In the face of these uncertainties, peasant societies develop elaborate social mechanisms for distributing risk and ensuring that everyone's basic livelihood is protected.²¹⁶

This ethic of subsistence, in turn, comes to be embodied in the prevailing notions of justice and exploitation. Agreements between peasants and their more powerful patrons or landlords are considered just or unjust primarily on the basis of whether they

²¹⁴This point is cogently argued by Jim Halteman, Market Capitalism and Christianity (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 54-64.

²¹⁵James C. Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

²¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5, 15-32.

enable peasant families to maintain their customary status and to be guaranteed a culturally-defined level of subsistence. At the very minimum, these standards of justice preclude landlords from exacting a share of the produce that would deprive tenant farmers or sharecroppers of their fundamental livelihood. Along with this minimal expectation, social norms also often oblige patrons to render certain positive forms of assistance to their peasant dependents and to meet their basic welfare needs.²¹⁷ While customs may vary across time and between cultures, these socially prescribed forms of "forced generosity" may include such things as making rent adjustments in lean years, extending credit to cover planting costs, providing emergency loans, and sponsoring lavish local festivals. As such traditions become well-entrenched, they acquire the status of moral norms, bestowing reciprocal rights on the peasant beneficiaries.²¹⁸

Exploitation, then, is construed as a breach of these traditional subsistence rights. When their customary protections begin to be withdrawn--a development that often coincides with the commercialization of agriculture and the introduction of a market-based economy--peasants may regard this process as exploitive.²¹⁹ This condition, moreover, becomes particularly onerous when certain threshold points are reached bringing the loss of security to a new level. According to Scott:

One such threshold occurs at the point where self-sufficient smallholders lose the land that gives them their fairly autonomous subsistence. The means of subsistence

²¹⁷Ibid., p. 33.

²¹⁸Ibid., pp. 35-55, 180-92. See also the summary statements on pp. 11, 167, 188 about the peasant view of justice being a function of the norm of reciprocity and the right of subsistence.

²¹⁹Ibid., pp. 56-65, 157-67.

passes out of their hands and they face having to become more or less permanently dependent clients whose security is contingent on their relations with those who have the resources to help them.²²⁰

Needless to say, one must be extremely cautious about using anthropological models primarily derived (as Scott's was) from studying the rural peasant population of Southeast Asia during the French colonial period to shed light on biblical texts that originated in an ancient near eastern milieu. Nevertheless, the parallels are quite striking. In a dissertation examining the Hebrew vocabulary of oppression, Young Ihl Kim classified several forms of economic behavior that are routinely characterized as oppressive in the Bible. Foremost among these is the misappropriation of property through moving boundary stones or seizing ancestral landholdings.²²¹ The other forms of economic oppression identified by Kim were withholding wages, engaging in fraudulent market practices, improperly handling pledges, forcing debtors into slavery, and requiring interest on loans.²²² It is entirely possible, as some have suggested, that many of the practices enumerated here were justifiable on the basis of marketplace logic and economic efficiencies.²²³ Nevertheless, they clearly violated certain conventional safeguards customarily afforded to peasants within this social order and were accordingly regarded as oppressive. In this respect, the Bible resonates with the so-called "little tradition" of the stereotypical peasant villager.

²²⁰Ibid., p. 39.

²²¹Kim, pp. 223-28.

²²²Ibid., pp. 228-40

²²³Morris Silver, Prophets and Markets: The Political Economy of Ancient Israel (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983).

So once again, contemporary ethicists drawing on the resources of Scripture to frame a response to the moral dilemmas of a modern market economy are confronted with the challenge of deciding how to assess those elements of the biblical tradition that appear to be rooted in the assumptions and value systems of a pre-industrial peasant society. Some determination must be made concerning the extent to which various biblical pronouncements have a direct relevance in the contemporary context.

Clearly, there are situations in the modern world that bear a striking resemblance to the social dynamics that existed in the biblical era. It is, for example, not unheard of, particularly (but by no means exclusively) in areas of the developing world, for political leaders to amass personal fortunes by using the instruments of government to siphon wealth out of the national economy. The phenomenon of conspicuous consumption for purposes of status maintenance is also a rather prevalent one. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that these methods represent the exclusive, or even the primary, means of acquiring and using wealth in a market economy. Similarly, in the kind of predominantly agrarian societies out of which liberation theology has emerged, access to a limited supply of arable land may still be an important barometer of economic well-being.

What is required in order to engage the biblical materials critically is a careful assessment of both the ancient and the modern contexts in order to determine the degree to which various biblical claims have a contemporary relevance. This task, however, is one that liberation theologians have largely evaded. They build a compelling case for the proposition that oppression is a major structural category of analysis in the Bible. However, instead of using the tools of ancient near eastern studies, economic

anthropology, or modern peasant studies to construct a phenomenological account of how this category would have functioned within its original social context, they simply interpret it primarily through the prism of Marxist ideology and class conflict analysis.

Revolutionary Socialism Reproduces the Social Praxis of Christ the Liberator

The Argument

José Míguez Bonino introduces readers of his Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation to what is at least one way of conceptualizing a "liberator Christ" with the following anecdote:

Not long ago a group of young people from a shanty town in Uruguay was performing an improvised play in one of the well-to-do Protestant churches. In the conversation that followed between the actors and the congregation somebody asked the question: "Who, then, is Jesus Christ?" "For us," shot back immediately and spontaneously one of the group, "Jesus Christ is Ché Guevara."²²⁴

Without either endorsing or rejecting this analogy, Miguez Bonino continues with an explanation of what it presumably means in terms of three propositions that, he says, "represent a growing consensus among young Latin American Christians":

- (1) "A Jesus Christ who can be preached and worshiped outside the frame of reference indicated by the name of Guevara has no meaning or relevance for us--indeed, he becomes our enemy." . . .
- (2) "Guevara represents for us the world in which we live, the language we understand, the reality which is in us and around us--we live in the world of sociopolitical reality. If you will name the name of Jesus Christ, it must be within this world." . . .
- (3) "What we discover in Guevara is linked with the name of Jesus Christ." Curiously enough, they did not say: "Ché Guevara is Christ," but "Christ is Ché Guevara." In other words: liberation and revolution are a legitimate transcription of the gospel.²²⁵

²²⁴Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 2.

²²⁵Ibid., p. 3.

Needless to say, identifying these two seemingly disparate figures--a linkage Míguez Bonino himself concedes is shocking--may initially seem rather far-fetched. Indeed, reconciling the aims of any movement promoting radical social change with the traditional image of Jesus as he is depicted in the gospels would seem to entail some formidable problems. As Segundo acknowledges: "Jesus himself seems to focus his message on liberation at the level of interpersonal relationships, forgetting almost completely, if not actually ruling out, liberation vis-à-vis political oppression."²²⁶

One way liberationists began the process of countering this objection and demonstrating the social relevance of Jesus' mission was by stressing its connection to various antecedents in the Hebrew Bible. Of primary significance in this regard is the prevalence of Exodus imagery in the New Testament. This foundational biblical episode provides much of the conceptual apparatus--expressed through terminology such as salvation/liberation, redemption, and freedom from bondage--that the New Testament writers use to interpret the significance of the Christ event. So if one regards the Exodus story as a prototype of socio-political liberation, then the mission of Jesus should be viewed within the context of this framework of meaning. What Jesus did was to extend the scope of the Exodus paradigm, transforming it from a drama of national liberation into a universal symbol of hope for oppressed people everywhere.²²⁷

In addition, by invoking prophetic oracles such as the Suffering Servant poetry of Deutero-Isaiah and using it to interpret his mission, Jesus places himself squarely in the

²²⁶Segundo, p. 111.

²²⁷Gutiérrez, p. 158; Croatto, pp. 62, 80.

tradition of the ancient Hebrew prophets and their concern for social justice. Along these lines, Croatto observes that the "beloved son" declaration made by the heavenly voice at the baptism of Jesus echoes the wording of Isaiah 42:1, thereby identifying the vocation of Jesus with that of Isaiah's Servant figure, who was ordained to liberate people oppressed in foreign lands.²²⁸ Even Jesus' call for personal conversion needs to be understood within the context of the prophetic tradition, where conversion was inseparable from the task of establishing justice.²²⁹

When the subject turns to the modern appropriation of the Jesus story, Latin Americans sense a particular affinity with the narrative in light of the many striking similarities they perceive between their plight and the situation that Jesus encountered in first century Palestine. Then, as now in their case, a hegemonic power exercised imperial control over the region. While the bulk of the population suffered from deleterious conditions such as chronic inflation and unemployment, a small domestic elite reinforced its privileged position by collaborating with the occupying power. Finally, in desperation, some members of the oppressed populace formed guerilla groups to resist foreign domination.²³⁰

Into this environment, rife with conflict, Jesus brought a demonstration of divine partiality. From the outset, he clearly identified himself with the cause of those who were

²²⁸Croatto, pp. 48-9.

²²⁹Gutiérrez, pp. 230-31.

²³⁰These comparisons are drawn by Tamez, pp. 66-7. Jon Sobrino also refers to this parallel (Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach, trans. John Drury [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978], p. 12).

oppressed and downtrodden. Defying social convention, he kept company with members of social groups that were held in low esteem or ritually excluded--poor people, the sick, foreigners, moral outcasts, women, and children. In so doing, he undermined the foundations of his stratified society.²³¹ Croatto also adds this additional point of significance: "Even more, the gesture of Jesus was to be in solidarity with the poor, to be one of them. . . . Jesus had the experience of being marginalized, denounced, accused, and plotted against by the centers of power."²³²

Liberation theologians are not, of course, the first ethicists to focus on Jesus' concern for the poor and marginalized members of his society. Many of the documents surveyed in the previous chapter made essentially the same point--without embracing socialism as the optimum strategy for reproducing Jesus' concern in a contemporary context. The liberationist treatment of this theme, however, has a couple of distinctive elements that reflect the movement's particular socio-economic orientation.

To begin with, these Latin American theologies tend to view the objects of Jesus' solicitude in collective terms, rather than purely individualistic ones. The "poor," in other words, are regarded not merely as a random assortment of dispossessed people. Instead, they are viewed as members of an exploited class or a subjugated nationality. While Sobrino acknowledges that it would be anachronistic to look for a sociological understanding of classes in the gospel accounts of Jesus,²³³ he suggests that there is at

²³¹Boff, pp. 73-75, 91-92, 284-85; Croatto, pp. 50-51; Hanks, pp. 110-11; Sobrino, pp. 47, 207.

²³²Croatto, p. 51.

²³³Sobrino, p. 124.

least a rudimentary awareness of a key component of this concept. Jesus recognized, he says, a "clear-cut division between those who hold power (the oppressors) and those who suffer from its use (the oppressed)."²³⁴

The poor people with whom Jesus identified are therefore, in some sense, emblematic of groups that are oppressed in the contemporary world. "The 'poor' person today," Gutiérrez writes, "is the oppressed one, the one marginated from society, the member of the proletariat struggling for his most basic rights; he is the exploited and plundered social class, the country struggling for liberation."²³⁵ Miguez Bonino warns against simplistically equating those whom the Bible describes as poor with the Marxist notion of the proletariat class, given the fact that the Bible operates strictly at the level of prescientific, empirical observation. Allowing for the appropriate ideological mediations, however, he implies that a legitimate transition can be made from the biblical description to the Marxist category.²³⁶

One gospel text, in particular, that lends itself to this kind of re-reading is the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46--a text that has been alternately characterized as "the summary of the Gospel"²³⁷ and as "the cornerstone of Christian

²³⁴Ibid., p. 53.

²³⁵Gutiérrez, p. 301. See also Spohn, pp. 65-66 for several quotations from Gutiérrez's writings showing that the poor exercise the same function in his social theory that the proletariat perform in the Marxist scheme of history.

²³⁶Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, pp. 112-13.

²³⁷This precise phrase is used by Roger Mehl, "La catholicité de l'Eglise," Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses 48, no. 4 (1968):369. A similar description is given by Wolfgang Trilling, The Gospel According to St. Matthew (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 2:216. Both quotations are in Gutiérrez, p. 209, n. 17.

socialism."²³⁸ When seeking to develop a modern understanding of this passage, one must, Gutiérrez insists "avoid the pitfalls of an individualistic charity."

[T]he neighbor is not only man viewed individually. The term refers also to man considered in the fabric of social relationships, to man situated in his economic, social, cultural, and racial coordinates. It likewise refers to the exploited social class, the dominated people, and the margined race.²³⁹

As a result, a new perspective on the requisite duties is called for:

[T]o offer food or drink in our day is a political action; it means the transformation of a society structured to benefit a few who appropriate to themselves the value of the work of others. This transformation ought to be directed toward a radical change in the foundation of society, that is, the private ownership of the means of production.²⁴⁰

Miguez Bonino draws a similar conclusion from the same pericope: "In today's world there is only one way to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and imprisoned--as Christ invited us to do: to change the structures of society which create and multiply every day those conditions." "This," he then adds, "is revolution."²⁴¹

A second feature that is distinctive in the way liberation theologians treat Jesus' identification with the plight of the marginalized is actually, in many respects, a corollary to their class-oriented interpretation of the poor. Jesus' option in favor of the poor and the oppressed simultaneously implies, liberationists claim, a stance in opposition to those who are the instruments of their oppression. The universal love of Jesus meant, Sobrino

²³⁸Cort, p. 32.

²³⁹Gutiérrez, p. 202.

²⁴⁰Ibid., p. 202.

²⁴¹Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, p. 44. (In this particular passage, Miguez Bonino is actually summarizing in his own words the thinking of Camilo Torres, but there is no indication that his own view is any different.)

says, being with the oppressed and against the oppressors.²⁴² Jesus' gospel that was good news for the poor was bad news "for those who seek to maintain the existing situation and its various discriminations."²⁴³

This stance that Jesus adopted, in turn, establishes a pattern to be emulated by anyone seeking to be one of his followers today. The fact that, in a conflict-laden situation, Jesus chose sides rules out neutrality as an option in the contemporary class struggle. "Such neutrality," Sobrino claims, "is wholly contrary to the partiality that Jesus displayed in favor of the oppressed."²⁴⁴

Having thus characterized Jesus as a figure who sided with the disenfranchised and oppressed and opposed the established power structures, liberationists invariably confront the question of whether Jesus viewed armed struggle as a legitimate tool of popular resistance. One way this issue has frequently been framed is in terms of how Jesus related to the Zealot insurrectionists in first century Palestine--a possible connection that has long intrigued New Testament scholars. For a theological tradition committed to a revolutionary social praxis, establishing a link between Jesus and an armed guerilla movement might be a tempting path to pursue. Liberation theologians, however, have uniformly rejected this approach--undoubtedly out of deference to the widespread consensus among New Testament scholars that the weight of the evidence in the gospels

²⁴²Sobrino, p. 125.

²⁴³Boff, p. 288; cf. Hanks, p. 112.

²⁴⁴Sobrino, p. xvi.

is against it.²⁴⁵ Instead, they highlight several key differences between the stance that Jesus adopted and the aims of the Zealot movement. The latter was bound up with the nationalistic aspirations of the Jewish people, whereas Jesus articulated a universal message. Moreover, insofar as they sought to establish a theocratic state marked by strict adherence to Jewish legal codes, the Zealots were, in fact, a reactionary element in Palestinian society. Jesus, with his rejection of legalism and all other alienating social structures, was actually the genuine revolutionary, espousing a far more radical position.²⁴⁶

The crux of the matter, however, revolves around the issue of where the real source of oppression in Jesus' social environment is to be located. Segundo makes the case that it was not necessarily to be found in Roman rule:

Jesus' stance vis-à-vis the Roman Empire or the Zealots, as a political stance, is . . . relatively beside the point. The fact is that the concrete, systematic oppression that Jesus confronted in his day did not appear to him as "political" in our sense of the term; it showed up to him as "religious" oppression. More than officials of the Roman Empire, it was the religious authority of the Scribes and Sadducees and Pharisees that determined the socio-political structure of Israel. In real life this authority was political, and Jesus really did tear it apart. This is evident from the fact that the concern to get rid of Jesus physically--because he threatened the status quo--was primarily displayed by the supposedly "religious" authorities

²⁴⁵The most extensive discussion is by Gutiérrez (pp. 227-28), who relies heavily on the work done in this area by Oscar Cullmann. See also Boff, pp. 289-90; Sobrino, pp. 212-13; Croatto, p. 62; Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, p. 122; Segundo, pp. 95, 111.

²⁴⁶Boff, pp. 58-59, 289-90; Croatto, p. 62; Gutiérrez, p. 227; Sobrino, pp. 212-13. As Gutiérrez, in particular, acknowledges, some of these considerations had previously been cited by Oscar Cullmann. See *Jesus and the Revolutionaries*, trans. Gareth Putman (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 21-22, 44.

rather than by the representatives of the Roman Empire.²⁴⁷

This basic contention--that Jesus was a subversive figure, irrespective of whether he had ties to the Zealot movement--is one that is echoed by liberation theologians generally. Croatto stresses the degree to which Jesus undermined the symbolic legitimacy of the dominant religious establishment.²⁴⁸ According to Boff, he posed a threat to a variety of powerful forces, including the business interests of those who controlled Temple commerce.²⁴⁹

But in the final analysis, it is the manner in which he died that clinches the argument for classifying Jesus as a revolutionary. The fact that he was crucified by the civil authorities under a placard accusing him of a political offense confirms his status as one who was perceived to be a threat to the established order. Liberationists underscore this point in the various ways they characterize the crucifixion. They describe Jesus as having been "condemned as a political agitator" (Sobrino),²⁵⁰ "executed by the Romans as a Zealot leader" (Gutiérrez),²⁵¹ "judged and executed as a subversive" (Míguez

²⁴⁷Segundo, p. 95, note 5 (cf. pp. 111-12, where basically the same point is made). Hanks quotes this passage approvingly on p. 51 of his work. He also draws the seemingly reasonable inference that following this precedent in the contemporary Latin American context would entail focusing on the oppression meted out by local oligarches, rather than dwelling on foreign imperialism (p. 52).

²⁴⁸Croatto, pp. 58, 61, 64.

²⁴⁹Boff, p. 101.

²⁵⁰Sobrino, p. 209.

²⁵¹Gutiérrez, p. 229. (Again, there are allusions to Cullman, who makes the same claim. See The State in the New Testament (New York: Scribners, 1956), pp. 6, 11-12, 48.)

Bonino),²⁵² and "assassinated" at the behest of the authorities who "accused him of being a guerrilla fighter"(Boff)²⁵³.

Over the centuries, Christians have, of course, routinely claimed that Jesus was, in fact, innocent of the charges brought against him and that his execution was an egregious miscarriage of justice. Liberationists, however, are generally more reluctant to endorse this position--at least not without qualifications. Miguez Bonino centers his discussion of this issue around a crucial distinction:

The condemnation of Jesus as subversive was not a wrong judgment; it was a wrong understanding of a real fact. He was rightly (from the point of view of the power structure) accused of having taken the side of the oppressed against the constituted religious and political authorities. He was wrongly convicted of having assumed the role of religio-political leader in an armed conspiracy.²⁵⁴

Gutiérrez makes essentially the same point, responding to the claim of Jesus' innocence with the rhetorical question: "Innocent before what justice?"²⁵⁵

So under the overall rubric of the Liberator Christ, liberationists weave together elements of the gospel tradition that stress Jesus' identification with the disenfranchised, opposition to the oppressive power structures, and death as a martyr in the struggle for social justice. In circumstances almost eerily similar to the ones in which many Third World Christians find themselves living, Jesus laid out a course that involved conscientizing the mass of the people and posing a revolutionary challenge to the

²⁵²Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 123.

²⁵³Boff, p. 289 (emphasis in original).

²⁵⁴Miguez Bonino, p. 123.

²⁵⁵Gutiérrez, p. 247, note 94. (He goes on to state that before the Roman bar of justice, Jesus was guilty of undermining the legitimacy of the established regime.)

prevailing establishment. In order to avert any tendency in the direction of a politico-religious messianism, however, he did not leave behind a blueprint or endorse a specific strategy for his followers to imitate. The task of filling in the details is one that committed agents of change must make in each succeeding generation as they practice an "ethics of discipleship"²⁵⁶ within their own sociological setting.

Analysis

Liberation theology's use of the Jesus story certainly exemplifies one technique of appealing to the gospel tradition for ethical guidance. In contradistinction to the so-called Christ of faith depicted in the dogmatic formulations of classical orthodoxy, the liberationist approach attempts to construct a Christology from below, focusing on the Jesus of history as he was situated in a particular time and place. The pattern of Jesus' actions--and more specifically, the stance he adopted with regard to the social conflicts of his age--then becomes the standard by which contemporary Christians are to respond to their own ethical dilemmas. Although the two cannot be completely divorced, it is the example of Jesus' life, rather than the content of his teachings (as they were expressed, for instance, in discourses such as the Sermon on the Mount) that becomes the primary ethical resource. In this regard, liberationist Christology represents a kind of socio-political variant on the classical imitatio Christi style of ethics.²⁵⁷ The only important qualification that would need to be made is that, unlike many versions of this tradition,

²⁵⁶This is a major theme in Schubeck's treatment of liberation theology's ethics, pp. 177-202.

²⁵⁷For the classical forms of this tradition, see Edward LeRoy Long, A Survey of Christian Ethics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 110-16.

liberationists would disavow any attempt to set up and imitate a prescribed pattern of conduct. Instead, they stress the need to creatively reproduce the values and predispositions Jesus demonstrated in one's own--and presumably different--historical context.

Having adopted this kind of methodology, liberation theology is, of course, susceptible to the same dangers that have customarily beset efforts to discover the Jesus of history--most notably, the temptation to create an depiction of Jesus that corresponds to some preconceived set of culturally-conditioned expectations. Albert Schweitzer commented on this tendency in his classical survey of The Quest of the Historical Jesus:

[E]ach successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make Him live. But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.²⁵⁸

To their credit, liberation theologians have generally avoided falling into this trap. This restraint is perhaps best illustrated by their refusal to depict Jesus in the role of a Zealot-affiliated political rebel. Gutiérrez reflects a widespread consensus within the liberationist movement when he writes:

If we wished to discover in Jesus the least characteristic of a contemporary political militant we would not only misrepresent his life and witness and demonstrate a lack of understanding on our part of politics in the present world; we would also deprive ourselves of what his life and witness have that is deep and universal and, therefore, valid and concrete for today's man.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan Paperbacks, 1961), p. 4.

²⁵⁹ Gutiérrez, p. 226.

Overall, liberation theologians use the gospel narratives judiciously and operate well within the bounds of mainstream New Testament scholarship.

At the same time, there are a couple of areas in which their ideological tendencies seem to color the manner in which the gospel materials are cited. To begin with, although they are reluctant to find in Jesus an exact prototype for their model of revolutionary social change, they also generally downplay the possibility that this strategy might, in fact, contradict the ethic of Jesus. In so doing, they subtly reshape the traditional terms of the discussion over Jesus's possible relationship to the Zealot movement. Quite legitimately, they point out differences involving the nationalistic and legalistic dimensions of the Zealot program. However, they often sidestep the issue of how Jesus viewed the use of violent conflict by groups like the Zealots--a question that traditionally has been pivotal to the whole discussion over Jesus' relationship to these insurrectionist movements.²⁶⁰ Miguez Bonino touches on the subject at one point, simply stating that it would be inappropriate to construct a Christian perspective on revolution based on Jesus' attitudes toward the Zealots.²⁶¹ Less convincingly, Segundo points to what he says are examples of Jesus using violence (for instance, when he employs harsh rhetoric against his adversaries) to argue that his posture was actually more ambiguous

²⁶⁰See, for example, John Howard Yoder, The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 47-63, 93, 99-100 fn. 5; Richard J. Cassidy, Jesus, Politics, and Society: A Study of Luke's Gospel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978), pp. 40-47; Cullmann, Jesus, pp. 9-10, 35, 44-50; Anthony J. Tambasco, The Bible for Ethics: Juan Luis Segundo and First-World Ethics (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), pp. 218-25. Richard A. Horsley summarizes and partially critiques this traditional way of framing the debate in his Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 149-66.

²⁶¹Miguez Bonino, Toward, p. 45; idem, Doing Theology, p. 103.

than the way it is customarily described.²⁶² Of the writers surveyed here, only a few state unequivocally that Jesus rejected violence and chose instead the path that led to the cross.²⁶³

The counter-claim that liberation theology's supporters might advance, of course, is that Jesus' specific stance toward violence was simply one historically-conditioned response--an 'ideology' in the sense that Segundo uses the term to denote a proximate construct that fills the void between faith and concrete historical realities.²⁶⁴ But this rejoinder only raises additional issues. One might ask, for example, as Kirk does, whether this so-called 'ideology' of Jesus might not, in fact, be an appropriate response--perhaps even a universally valid one. These are possibilities that he believes Segundo dismisses too readily.²⁶⁵ Moreover, if one regards Jesus' attitude toward violence to be an historically-conditioned response to a specific set of contingencies, it is legitimate to point out that the same could just as easily be said about his views on wealth and poverty. Clearly, they embody the limited good outlook of a peasant agrarian society.

A second issue concerns the attempt by some liberation theologians to project, albeit cautiously, elements of class analysis into the discussion of Jesus' social milieu. To be sure, these theologians readily acknowledge that it would be anachronistic to attribute a modern understanding of class conflict to Jesus himself. Yet they assume that it is

²⁶²Segundo, pp. 162-65.

²⁶³The clearest statements to this effect are by Hanks, p. 92 and Míguez Bonino, p. 123. (Neither elaborates to any great extent on the implications of this observation.)

²⁶⁴Segundo, pp. 116, 166.

²⁶⁵Kirk, p. 180.

legitimate for the contemporary reader to frame the situation in these terms. The underlying supposition--sometimes openly asserted--is that modern class analysis is simply a more sophisticated or theoretically refined model for explaining the sociological dynamics that are expressed in a pre-theoretical, descriptive fashion in the biblical narrative. Thus, the Marxian category of the proletariat may be a valid ideological transcription for the classification of people as poor by the gospel writers.

But technically speaking, being poor and being a member of the proletariat class, while they may generally be coterminous conditions, are not exactly identical. According to a strict Marxist interpretation,²⁶⁶ the celebrity marquee athlete under multimillion dollar contract with a major league sports franchise or the salaried senior executive at a blue chip corporation are both (assuming that they do not have an equity stake in their respective operations) members of the proletariat class of wage earners. By contrast, the retired person drawing a modest pension from funds invested in securities or the elderly widow supplementing her meager income by renting out a spare bedroom are, by definition, members of the bourgeoisie class, profiting from their ownership of capital.

²⁶⁶Marx's concept of class is actually somewhat vague--a situation stemming partly from his untimely death. The last fragmentary chapter of his never-completed third volume of Capital was to have contained the definitive explanation, but the manuscript breaks off almost immediately after Marx poses the question "What constitutes a class?" ("Capital, Volume Three," in Tucker, pp. 441-2). The overall contours of his explanation, however, can be discerned from the first sentence of this chapter: "The owners merely of labour-power, owners of capital, and land-owners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent, in other words, wage-labourers, capitalists and land-owners, constitute then three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production" (p. 441). Taking into account all of Marx's writings, Elster addresses the issue of what constitutes, for Marx, the defining characteristic of a class. After rejecting income level, occupation, and status as possible determinants (pp. 124-25), he identifies market behavior, generated by ownership or non-ownership of the means of production as the pivotal criterion (pp. 126-27).

So although there may be affinities, one cannot automatically assume that "the poor" of the gospel tradition are equivalent to Marx's category of the proletariat.²⁶⁷

Moreover, in a broader sense, liberationists do not really substantiate a Marxist class conflict analysis of the gospels. Doing so would entail demonstrating that the power exercised by the dominant groups in first century Palestine was a function of the prevailing economic mode of production and their relationship to certain factors in that process. If, however, their status had some other basis--if it flowed, for example, from their ability to manipulate sources of symbolic legitimacy (such as the nation's cultic institutions), then the Marxian critique is weakened. Since liberationists do not pursue this line of inquiry, it is evident that what they are actually doing is employing the rhetoric of class struggle, with all of its Marxian overtones, but without the corresponding analytical framework.

The Analytical Grid Applied to the Revolutionary Socialist Rationale

Theology²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷It should be noted that one pair of liberation theologians who acknowledge that the biblical "poor" cannot be automatically equated with proletariat are Boff and Boff. They identify the "poor" with what they call the "popular classes" encompassing a variety of marginalized social groups (p. 3).

²⁶⁸Liberation theology's use of Scripture has been addressed in a number of places. A sampling of these treatments would include John Goldingay, "The Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology," Horizons in Biblical Theology 4:2/5:1 (Dec. 1982/June 1983):133-161; Vernon C. Grounds, "Scripture in Liberation Theology: An Eviscerated Authority," in Gordon R. Lewis, Bruce Demarest, eds. Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), pp. 317-46; J. Andrew Kirk, Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View from the Third World (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979); Donald K. McKim, The Bible in Theology and Preaching: How Preachers Use Scripture (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), chapt. XI: "Latin American Liberation Theology: Scripture as Foundation for Freedom," pp. 137-49; William C. Spohn, What Are They Saying

Anyone considering the issue of liberation theology's relationship to the Bible immediately confronts a seemingly paradoxical situation. As a theological movement inspired, at least in part, by the rediscovery of Scripture in grass roots Catholicism, it manifests a profoundly biblical orientation that, in the view of some critics, verges on a kind of fundamentalism. Yet at the same time, the socio-economic conclusions that it seeks to substantiate on the basis of these scriptural appeals are so radical and unsettling that ecclesiastical authorities, and other self-avowed guardians of orthodoxy, have been prone to treat it as though it were a form of heresy. Certainly its revolutionary brand of politics stands in marked contrast to the reactionary posture typically associated with North American Protestant fundamentalism.

Resolving the tension between these conflicting images involves coming to terms with liberation theology's rather distinctive methodological approach to biblical interpretation. To begin with, much of the interpretive strategy in this theological tradition presupposes the kind of dynamic, pluralistic understanding of textual meaning that is explained most fully in Croatto's Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom.²⁶⁹ No

about Scripture and Ethics? (New York: Paulist, 1984), chapt. 3: "A Call to Liberation," pp. 54-69; Anthony J. Tambasco, The Bible for Ethics: Juan Luis Segundo and First-World Ethics (Washington: University Press of America, 1981); J. Emmette Weir, "The Bible and Marx: A Discussion of the Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology," Scottish Journal of Theology 35 (1982):337-350.

²⁶⁹It should be noted that Croatto's views, while influential, are by no means universally shared by the authors considered in this chapter. Miranda (Marx, p. 36) pointedly rejects the notion of multiple meanings within the text, alleging that by means of this artifice, conservatives manage to evade the Bible's subversive message. In similar fashion, Pixley affirms that his revolutionary interpretation of the Exodus corresponds to the narrative's original intention (p. 121). (For Pixley, this statement presumably refers to the intentionality expressed within some no-longer-extant account by the original participants, since he generally regards the canonical version of the Exodus as having

longer is "meaning" regarded as a fixed and stable property of the text, expressing authorial intent and capable of being apprehended through critical analysis and then "applied" to a different set of circumstances.²⁷⁰ Instead, according to Croatto, foundational, archetypal events (such as the Exodus) that come to define a particular community's identity contain within them an inexhaustible "reservoir-of-meaning." Thus, when inscribed in textual form, they spawn a continual process of further reflection, re-examination, and discovery. As succeeding generations explore the dimensions of these primordial events from new vantage points and pose their own questions to the textual record, they tap into their "surplus of meaning" and draw new understandings from them. The meaning of the event, therefore, is not merely confined to the interpretation attached to it by the original narrator, but encompasses all these fresh appropriations of meaning that accumulate over the years along a semantic axis.²⁷¹

Perhaps the best way of elaborating on this theory and spelling out its implications for biblical interpretation is by outlining the basic stages in the so-called "hermeneutical circle"--a conceptual model that is used both by liberation theologians themselves as well as by many commentators on their writings.²⁷² The metaphor of the

been corrupted by subsequent redactors.)

²⁷⁰On the rejection of this traditional view of application, see Croatto, p. 11; Gutiérrez, p. 236.

²⁷¹In Croatto, see esp. pp. 1-3, 12-15.

²⁷²There are actually various versions of this "circle" in different liberationist writings and the summary form that is used here is not identical to any one of them. The most extensive discussion is by Segundo, pp. 9-33, 69 (cf. Tambasco, pp. 51-86). See also Boff, pp. 33, 39-49; Brown, *Unexpected News*, pp. 30-32; idem, *New Key*, pp. 85-88; Croatto, p. 2; Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, pp. 102-3; Schuback, pp. 154, 160-61

circle is, of course, a familiar one in classical hermeneutical theory (represented by figures such as Schliermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer), where it has been used to depict the reciprocal interaction that takes place between the text and its interpreters.²⁷³ For Rudolf Bultmann, the key figure in applying these insights to the field of biblical studies, modern readers are only able to apprehend what a particular literary work means because they already possess what Bultmann calls a "pre-understanding" (Vorverständnis)--some prior relationship to the subject matter of the text.²⁷⁴ In the case of the New Testament, this prior understanding of its theological subject matter develops from a personal encounter with the question of one's own existence.²⁷⁵

What liberation theologians, in turn, have done is to modify this theory by replacing Bultmann's existential categories with a focus on the reader's social location.²⁷⁶ As Miguez Bonino explains it, Bultmann's concept of pre-understanding "must be

(summarizing and diagraming Gutiérrez's approach) and pp. 212-20 (on Miguez Bonino); Berryman, pp. 60-62; Garcia, p. 12.

²⁷³A very valuable introduction to this whole topic, treating it in terms of its historical development, can be found in Anthony C. Thiselton's The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). See esp. the general comments on p. 104, as well as pp. 103-7 (on Schliermacher), pp. 147, 165-66, 196-7 (on Heidegger) and pp. 304-5 (on Gadamer).

²⁷⁴These views are expounded in two essays reprinted in Rudolf Bultmann, New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings, trans. and ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984): "The Problem of Hermeneutics (1950)," pp. 69-93 and "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible? (1957)," pp. 145-53. See also Thiselton, pp. 107-14, 234-40.

²⁷⁵Bultmann, pp. 86-88.

²⁷⁶Kirk suggests that Segundo follows Bultmann's basic methodology, merely substituting Marx for Heidegger, p. 37. See also Grounds, pp. 332-3; Thiselton, pp. 110-12; Tombasco, p. 57.

deepened and made more concrete, not in the abstract philosophical analysis of existence but in the concrete conditions of men who belong to a certain time, people, and class, who are engaged in certain courses of action. . . and who reflect and read the texts within and out of these conditions."²⁷⁷ Thus, factors such as socio-economic status and nationality become determinative in how one understands the meaning of a particular piece of writing.

For theologians encountering the biblical text within a Latin American setting, this means that the interpretive process is heavily conditioned by experiences of oppression and deprivation. Not only does such a vantage point produce different insights into what the text means, it actually leads, they believe, to a more authentic rendition of the biblical story. Living under oppressive conditions that closely parallel those of the people who first produced the biblical writings, Latin Americans (and other people in similar straits) are able to appreciate elements of the storyline that would elude readers in more privileged surroundings.²⁷⁸ The end result is an engaged, partisan reading of the biblical narrative--one that is profoundly conscious of its own social surroundings, aware of the ideological biases inherent in that situation, and wedded to a strategy of radical change.

This initial commitment to "reading the Bible with Third World eyes" (as Brown

²⁷⁷Miguez Bonino, p. 90-91.

²⁷⁸This claim about the superior ability of the poor to apprehend the Bible's message is made, for example, by Hanks, p. 62; Brown, New Key, p. 61; idem., Unexpected News, p. 14. Boff and Boff are more modest in their assessment. After commenting on liberation theology's decision to adopt "the viewpoint of the oppressed" they add: "[T]his is not the only possible and legitimate reading of the Bible. For us in the Third World today, however, it is the obvious one" (p. 32).

once described it²⁷⁹), inevitably gives rise to a second stage in the interpretive process-- that of exegetical suspicion. Miguez Bonino has expressed the thinking behind this procedure, stating:

Every interpretation of the [biblical] texts which is offered to us (whether as exegesis or as systematic or as ethical interpretation) must be investigated in relation to the praxis out of which it comes. . . . Very concretely, we cannot receive the theological interpretation coming from the rich world without suspecting it and, therefore, asking what kind of praxis it supports, reflects, or legitimizes.²⁸⁰

As the quotation indicates, this type of critique involves, first and foremost, scrutinizing the interpretations Western exegetes have put forward in order to identify distortions stemming from their privileged position. Liberation theologians have frequently commented, for example, on the extent to which their counterparts in affluent nations minimize the importance of concepts such as oppression in the Bible's thematic structure, or interpret its statements about poverty in a highly metaphorical fashion. But the cloud of suspicion also sometimes extends to elements of the biblical tradition itself. At least some of the theologians practicing a liberationist critique would render a negative evaluation of certain perspectives embodied within the biblical canon based on the fact that they represent a negative (or oppressive) ideology. Thus, writers on the Exodus such as Pixley and Croatto maintain that recovering the authentically liberating message of the original event requires stripping away the nationalistic and supernatural framework

²⁷⁹This phrase is the subtitle of his book, Unexpected News.

²⁸⁰Miguez Bonino, p. 91.

imposed on it by a succession of later redactors.²⁸¹ Similarly, Segundo posits the need to critically assess the "ideological" stance adopted by Jesus with regard to the use of violence.²⁸²

Finally, having adopted the vantage point of an engaged, Third World reader committed to a revolutionary praxis and having unmasked the ideological biases inherent in many traditional interpretations (if not in the text itself), the process of liberationist hermeneutics turns ultimately to the task of rendering a constructive reformulation of the biblical message--one that unleashes its subversive potential and advances (rather than impedes) the cause of radical social transformation. As the Boff brothers state:

"Liberative hermeneutics seeks to discover and activate the transforming energy of biblical texts. In the end, this is a question of finding an interpretation that will lead to

²⁸¹Croatto, pp. 25-6; Pixley, p. 120. See also Norman Gottwald, "The Exodus as Event and Process," p. 258: "The protean exodus symbol refuses to be 'laid to rest' in the nationalist and ecclesial securities of the horizons of monarchy and religious restoration. Insistently, hermeneutical suspicion reaches back to the originative revolutionary event/process of the first exodus, but only in circles where new exoduses are striven for."

²⁸²Segundo, pp. 116, 155-56, 166. On the need to 'deideologize' the message of Jesus, see also Tambasco, pp. 120-27, 141-43; and Kirk, pp. 179-80. The point is reinforced in a quotation attributed to Segundo by Goldingay: "[T]he suspicion of ideological interpretation, which seems quite logical when applied to historical theology, penetrates as far as the sacred writings themselves. Since the latter are already an interpretation, why should they be free of 'ideology'?" (J. L. Segundo, A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity 5: Evolution and Guilt [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974], p. 125, quoted in Goldingay, p. 152). Despite these kind of statements, however, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has contended that Segundo (and Latin American theologians in general) has not gone as far in critically evaluating the biblical materials as feminist theologians do. She points out that, for Segundo, an "ideology" is an historically conditioned perspective, but not necessarily a form of "false consciousness" (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology" in McKim, pp. 370-71. See also Berryman, pp. 174-75; and Schuback, pp. 11, 84.)

individual change (conversion) and change in history (revolution)."²⁸³

In carrying out this objective, the Bible primarily performs what might be characterized as a paradigmatic function. As preceding sections have shown, scriptural appeals in this theological tradition are clearly dominated by narrative images drawn from episodes in the Bible such as the Exodus event or the life of Jesus. These images then essentially become metaphors for contemporary socio-economic realities--based, of course, on correspondences that largely presuppose a particular social scientific analysis of the contemporary situation. The end result is a kind of dialectical engagement with the biblical record, whereby contemporary modes of social analysis (such as class struggle theory) are used to elucidate biblical stories and the stories, in turn, become a tool for interpreting the present reality.

It is also significant that the Bible functions more as an instrument of social criticism than it does as a source of prescriptive social norms. Liberationists, in other words, generally invoke particular narrative images and prophetic oracles in order to reinforce their indictment of ostensibly analogous conditions in their own social environment. Thus, the story of Israel's bondage in Egypt becomes emblematic of the plight experienced by the exploited masses in Latin America. Similarly, for Hanks and Tamez, a study of various biblical word forms underscores the reality of oppression as an operative category of social analysis and validates the causal connection that exists between oppression and poverty.

Although it may be invoked in all of these ways to advance a critique of the

²⁸³Boff and Boff, p. 34.

prevailing forms of capitalism, the Bible is virtually never cited in order to justify some alternative economic system. The writings under consideration here are, of course, often steeped in Marxian rhetoric and many of the authors have unabashedly endorsed socialistic measures (such as abolishing private ownership of capital). Yet these proposals are rarely (if ever) supported by direct appeals to Scripture. Even the story of the early church's practice of communal living (recorded in Acts chapters 2 and 4)--a traditional mainstay of biblical arguments in favor of socialism--receives minimal attention.²⁸⁴

To some extent, this tendency reflects a set of convictions about the proper role of the Bible. As García explains:

No one has the right to argue that one's analysis of the present state of affairs and one's prescribed solutions to solve its problems are directly derived from Scripture or the theological tradition. Neither of these provides by itself enough resources to construct a sociopolitical program or to decide which among the available programs is the best.²⁸⁵

Instead, he says: "The best we can claim is that our views and options seem not to contradict God's purposes as revealed in Scripture and understood by tradition."²⁸⁶

But in addition to whatever theological considerations may be at work here, it is also worth noting that this pattern has affinities with one of the salient features of

²⁸⁴Miranda offers a noteworthy exception to this general rule. His Communism and the Bible includes a rather extensive treatment of the relevant Acts passages, and it is largely on basis of this discussion that he supports his contention that the Bible endorses what he calls "communism." Otherwise, this episode is only mentioned briefly in a few of the major writings surveyed in this chapter--Boff and Pixley, pp. 65-66, 105-06, 150; Boff and Boff, p. 35; Gutiérrez, p. 301.

²⁸⁵García, pp. 15-16.

²⁸⁶Ibid., p. 14.

classical Marxism. Marx himself devoted much more attention to critiquing capitalism and exposing the internal contradictions that would supposedly lead to its collapse than he did to describing the mechanisms of the post-revolutionary communist order that would take its place.²⁸⁷ Indeed, critics of Marx have often faulted him for this omission.²⁸⁸ The fact that liberation theology has largely failed to develop its own vision of a socialistic order²⁸⁹ is therefore consistent with a broader tendency in the Marxian tradition.

Critiquing the existing social order may be the primary function that narrative images perform for liberation theologians. But their use of the Bible is not limited to this task. The same narrative accounts that expose the mechanisms of oppression--such as the Exodus and the Jesus story--also furnish (at least as liberationists interpret them) effective prototypes for a strategy of resistance, confrontation, and revolution. The Bible, therefore, provides symbolic legitimization for a process of mass mobilization directed at overturning the present oppressive conditions.

²⁸⁷Steven Lukes, Marxism and Morality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 8-9, 36-37, 42-47, 93-94. According to Lukes (p. 9), the never-completed fifth volume of Capital was supposed to develop a positive statement about the nature of communism. See also Robert C. Tucker's "Introduction" to his edited volume of Marx's writings, pp. xxvii-xxxii. Having suggested that the Hegelian concept of Kritik is the unifying theme running through all of Marx's writings, Tucker states that Marx and Engels were "critics of political economy" rather than political economists per se (p. xxix).

²⁸⁸So, for example, Neal Riemer, Karl Marx and Prophetic Politics (New York: Praeger, 1987), pp. 107-08, 117-18, 133-39.

²⁸⁹This deficiency has been pointed out by, among others, Novak, Will It Liberate?, pp. 132, 154-78 (in a chapter entitled "What Do They Mean By Socialism?") and Spohn, pp. 63, 65.

Moreover, insofar as it discloses God's partiality toward the poor and commitment to liberate them from oppression, the Bible also operates as a tool of historical discernment. Modern communities which internalize this message are thereby enabled to read the "signs of the times" and discern the movement of the divine in the drama of contemporary history.²⁹⁰ The Bible's overarching vision of a human community living in communion with God and in relationships of mutual solidarity may not be directly translatable into specific economic proposals. But it does provide a utopian ideal which guides in the selection of a mediating social scientific construct.²⁹¹

Liberation theology clearly exemplifies yet another technique for relating the Bible to the task of ethically evaluating modern economic realities. And, in common with all of the interpretive strategies considered in previous chapters, the liberationist approach has its share of features that warrant critical scrutiny. To begin with, the methodological priority that is given to the analysis of the relevant sociological praxis raises questions about whether the Bible itself contributes a distinctive perspective or provides any normative guidance. Theoretically, the reader's praxis and the biblical text function dialectically, with each informing the other (hence, the metaphor of a circle). In reality, however, the so-called hermeneutical circle often appears to be operating as a unilinear series of stages in which the revolutionary praxis plays the determinative role.²⁹² It is not always clear that the Bible has a reciprocal opportunity to challenge or correct

²⁹⁰This point is made principally (albeit not exclusively) by Croatto, pp. 6-10.

²⁹¹See, for example, Gutiérrez, pp. 232-39.

²⁹²Tambasco, p. 195; cf. Kirk, p. 179.

elements of the revolutionary praxis or its concomitant ideology.²⁹³

Under these circumstances, serious doubts arise as to whether the Bible retains an independent voice in the process of moral reasoning. Kirk is among those expressing scepticism on this point: "[I]f the Bible makes no original contribution to the praxis of liberation, then it should be made clear that the hermeneutic of liberation is using the Bible in an 'inspirational' rather than 'objective' sense--i.e., as a means to further ends over which the Bible has no decisive say."²⁹⁴

Secondly, given the fact that so much of the biblical reasoning in this tradition involves developing implicit or explicit analogies between biblical narrative images and contemporary socio-economic realities, it is appropriate to point out just how arbitrary the process of making these connections can be. One could legitimately ask, for instance, whether the most apt twentieth century counterpart to Moses is Lenin (as Pixley claims²⁹⁵) or Lech Welensa. Similarly, one might raise the issue of whether Cuba under the Castro regime represents a virtual restoration of the Promised Land--an idyllic, pro-revolutionary society where "there is literally no poverty" (as Carter Heyward seems to think²⁹⁶)--or whether it is the equivalent of Pharaoh's Egypt (in which case, the refugees

²⁹³Observations along these lines are commonplace in critical assessments of liberation theology--often supplemented with examples of biblical perspectives seemingly overlooked in liberationist exegesis. See Goldingay, pp. 151-52; Grounds, pp. 338-46; Kirk, pp. 185-94; Tambasco, pp. 182-83, 193.

²⁹⁴Kirk, p. 189.

²⁹⁵Pixley, p. 121.

²⁹⁶Carter Heyward, "Doing Theology in a Counterrevolutionary Situation," in Ellis and Maduro, pp. 397-409. (The reference to poverty is on p. 397.)

fleeing in the Mariel boat lift would have been replicating the Exodus Red Sea crossing). It is also interesting to observe that the figures included on Brown's list of modern-day Pharaohs--Pinochet, Marcos, Somoza, and the military rulers of El Salvador and Guatemala²⁹⁷--all turn out to have been allies of the United States. Conspicuously absent from this list are the names of any autocratic rulers in repressive regimes of the political left. In all of these instances, it seems obvious that the way particular biblical images are related to contemporary analogues is primarily dictated by a prior set of ideological commitments, rather than by clues derived from within the text itself. Having called attention--quite properly--to the way other schools of interpretation are held captive by the prevailing ideological currents within their social environments, liberation theology runs the risk of merely substituting one ideological slant for another.

Finally, liberation theology cannot completely evade the charge that it amounts to little more than a "fundamentalism of the religious left."²⁹⁸ To be sure, there is much evidence to counter this allegation. Liberation theologians are conversant with modern historical critical methods of biblical exegesis and (at least selectively) utilize the results of such studies. Indeed, North American Protestant fundamentalists sometimes fault

²⁹⁷Brown, Unexpected News, p. 40, 42-3.

²⁹⁸This precise phraseology is used by Levenson, "Liberation Theology and the Exodus," p. 36. Similar statements are made about Miranda by Jerome Kodell, Review of Communism in the Bible, by José Porfirio Miranda, Catholic Biblical Quarterly 45 (1983), p. 502. Assmann emphatically rejects this charge, p. 104. Hanks, however, seems more comfortable with the label. He asserts that members of base Christian communities and theologians of liberation are the "authentic 'fundamentalists'" because they "call us back to perspectives and emphases that are really the fundamental ones in the Bible itself" (p. 63).

them for their willingness to employ critical techniques.²⁹⁹ As their attempts to reconstruct the Exodus event illustrate, liberationists are not biblical literalists. Nor do they cling dogmatically to biblical formulations and seek to apply them directly to modern situations. Gutiérrez, in particular, rejects what he calls "politico-religious messianism"--applying faith-based norms directly to concrete political realities.³⁰⁰

The charge is not wholly without merit, however. Certainly the manner in which liberation theologians selectively utilize biblical themes that are consonant with their revolutionary commitments (while perhaps downplaying others) is reminiscent of the fundamentalist penchant for proof-texting. Another factor lending some credence to the fundamentalism charge is the liberationists' failure to employ socio-critical methodologies in their biblical exegesis.³⁰¹ As a result, the appropriate degree of historical distancing is not always maintained. Schubeck's observation that Gutiérrez "does not develop the sociopolitical context in which the biblical works were written" and that "he moves from today's world to the biblical text and then back to the contemporary situation"³⁰² is one that has broader applicability to the liberation theology movement in general.

²⁹⁹See, for example, Humberto Belli and Ronald Nash, Beyond Liberation Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992) pp. 117-26; and cf. Grounds, pp. 339-41.

³⁰⁰Gutiérrez, p. 236.

³⁰¹Gottwald, though generally a sympathetic observer of liberation theology, makes this point in his "The Exodus as Event and Process," pp. 252-53.

³⁰²Schubeck, p. 169.

Ethics

Irrespective of whether liberation theology constitutes--in some formal sense--an ethical system (a doubtful proposition³⁰³), it clearly embodies a great deal of ethical passion. Scholars of Marx, whose social analysis is readily appropriated by theologians of liberation, disagree over whether he smuggles in various normative premises under the guise of an ostensibly scientific socialism.³⁰⁴ But there can be no question about the fact that the brand of revolutionary socialism developed in Latin America under the rubric of liberation theology explicitly frames its appeals in the language of moral discourse.

The overarching ethical imperative expressed in these writings--the paramount duty to which the moral agent is summoned--is to enter into solidarity with the oppressed and seek to advance the cause of their liberation. Embracing this task represents a fundamental commitment that subsequently shapes every other aspect of the process of theological reflection. It supplies, for example, the vantage point from which the biblical

³⁰³Berryman, for example, writes that "liberation theology is not primarily an ethics" (p. 25). In similar fashion, Edward LeRoy Long, who devotes a chapter of his A Survey of Recent Christian Ethics ([New York: Oxford University Press, 1982], pp. 156-74) to liberation theology's ethical concerns, begins his treatment by observing that "the term liberation has been used to designate, not a particular kind of ethic, but rather a particular approach to an entire theological enterprise." He adds, however, that each of the specific movements encompassed by this term "has a strong social ethics agenda" (p. 156). An excellent introduction to this topic is provided by Schubeck's Liberation Ethics, which discusses the ethical aspects of liberation theology from a methodological standpoint.

³⁰⁴The claim that certain moral tenets (specifically what he calls a "morality of emancipation") lie at the core of classical Marxism is advanced by Steven Lukes in his Marxism and Morality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). See also Neal Reimer, Karl Marx and Prophetic Politics (New York: Praeger, 1987), pp. 25-42 (esp. p. 40, fn. 2). The contrary position had previously been argued, among others, by Robert C. Tucker in his The Marxian Revolutionary Idea (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), pp. 33-53.

message is to be read and construed. It also furnishes the criterion by which many theologians in this tradition propose to choose, from amongst competing alternatives, a model for explaining how society operates.

This particular way of defining one's ethical responsibility carries with it a number of implications that need to be spelled out more fully. To begin with, it is important to note that the call to enter into solidarity with the oppressed is obviously directed at those who enjoy a measure of power and privilege. Despite having cast their lot with society's marginalized and downtrodden members, liberation theologians seem continually aware of their status as functionaries of a powerful religious institution. Along with the landowning class and the military, the Church represents one component in what has sometimes been characterized as Latin America's traditional political triumvirate. In addition, since the ranks of the military officer corps and the church hierarchy were customarily filled by members of the landowning class, these elite institutions have tended to be interlocking.³⁰⁵ Ivan Vallier, who describes Latin America as having "a Catholic-based social order,"³⁰⁶ identifies several of the factors that account for the Church's unparalleled status in the region:

First of all, the Church is the only formal organization that spans the four and a half centuries of Spanish-American history. The implications of this unbroken continuity in the central religious institution must not be underestimated when questions arise concerning the nature of this social system.

In addition, the Church is the only formal organization and values-transmitting institution that supersedes national boundaries. . . .

³⁰⁵Robert E. Scott, "Political Elites and Political Modernization: The Crisis of Transition" in Lipset and Solari, p. 121.

³⁰⁶Ivan Vallier, "Religious Elites: Differentiation and Developments in Roman Catholicism," in Lipset and Solari, p. 221.

One should also be alerted to the fact that within any given country or region the Church is the only organization that maintains close contact with both the "people" and the "rulers." Its vertical span goes from one end of the social scale to the other. The Church's hierarchical breadth is juxtaposed, as well, with a functional scope which encompasses ritual, education, and social associations. In short, the Church is not only historically comprehensive and internationally continuous; but it is also vertically and functionally formed to meet social life in numerous places and junctures.³⁰⁷

It is against this backdrop that liberation theologians, and others sympathetic to their point of view, have challenged the Church to reassess its longstanding alliance with the established power structures and to throw the weight of its influence behind the movement for radical social transformation. Gutiérrez sums up the basis for the Church's moral obligation in the following way:

In Latin America to be Church today means to take a clear position regarding both the present state of social injustice and the revolutionary process which is attempting to abolish that injustice and build a more human order. The first step is to recognize that in reality a stand has already been taken: the Church is tied to the prevailing social system. . . . The protection which the Church receives from the social class which is the beneficiary and defender of the prevailing capitalist society in Latin America has made the institutional Church into a part of the system and the Christian message into a part of the dominant ideology.³⁰⁸

By virtue of these circumstances, liberationists are prone to frame the Church's ethical responsibility in terms reminiscent of what William James once called "a forced option"³⁰⁹--a situation in which the subject is confronted by two mutually exclusive alternatives and a decision between them cannot be avoided. Thus, having described the

³⁰⁷Ibid., pp. 222-23.

³⁰⁸Gutiérrez, pp. 265-66.

³⁰⁹James introduced the distinction between what he called forced and avoidable options in his essay "Will to Believe." See Roger Lincoln Shinn, Forced Options: Social Decisions for the 21st Century, 2nd ed. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985) esp. pp. 3-5.

Church's privileged position throughout most of the region, Gutiérrez summarizes its options in the following way:

[I]t is not a question of whether the Church should or should not use its influence in the Latin American revolutionary process. Rather the question is in what direction and for what purpose it is going to use its influence: for or against the established order, to preserve the social prestige which comes with its ties to the groups in power or to free itself from that prestige with a break from these groups and with genuine service to the oppressed.³¹⁰

Elsewhere he writes: "The class struggle is a fact and neutrality in this question is not possible."³¹¹ Failing to make a choice in this matter, according to Segundo, is tantamount to sanctioning the present reality.³¹² Miranda is equally blunt in his assessment: "To the extent that one does not participate in the revolutionary struggle, one participates in the oppression of the poor."³¹³

Needless to say, framing the issue in terms of such stark contrasts is an effective rhetorical strategy. It is worth noting, however, that these statements about the limited range of available options all presuppose the validity of a particular form of social analysis. Implicit in the requirement that one "choose sides" is the tacit assumption that society is partitioned into classes with competing economic interests and that an antagonistic struggle between them is inevitable. Under such circumstances, neutrality may indeed be impossible. However, absent this kind of class conflict analysis (which, of course, stands in sharp contrast to the organic, hierarchical view of society that

³¹⁰Gutiérrez, p. 267.

³¹¹Ibid., p. 275.

³¹²Segundo, p. 126.

³¹³Miranda, Communism, p. 69.

traditionally furnished the basis for Catholic social theory), these liberationist appeals merely represent a false dichotomy. One way or another, this line of reasoning provides a classic example of how the manner in which a particular set of social conditions are interpreted can be a pivotal consideration in defining the nature of one's moral obligation.

It is also important to point out that this ethic of responsibility, predicated on an awareness of social power, influences the selection and use of the biblical materials. It may, for example, account for the prevalence of oracles from the prophetic literature, most of which were directed originally at members of the ruling classes (such as the oft-quoted oracle of Jeremiah against King Zedekiah). Conversely, this factor may also account for the relative absence of biblical themes reflecting the experience of being an exile (i.e., powerless) community (a motif that is found in both testaments of the Christian canon). But the pre-eminent example of how this understanding of ethical responsibility intersects with the process of biblical interpretation involves the Exodus account. As John Howard Yoder pointed out, the Exodus story lends itself with at least as much (if not more) appropriateness to a strategy of withdrawal for purposes of creating an alternative community in the metaphorical wilderness.³¹⁴ Yet the universal tendency among liberation theologians has been to interpret it as a call to engage in a revolutionary struggle to remake society--a reading that, however subversive, still presupposes both the responsibility and the power to effect radical social change.

A second important feature of liberation theology's approach to ethics is its preoccupation with the institutional structures of society and a corresponding focus on

³¹⁴Yoder, "Exodus and Exile," p. 300.

systematic forms of evil. Gutiérrez again provides the clearest articulation of this perspective:

[I]n the liberation approach sin is not considered as an individual, private, or merely interior reality. . . Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men, and, therefore, an interior, personal fracture. When it is considered in this way, the collective dimensions of sin are rediscovered. . . Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes. Sin appears, therefore, as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation.³¹⁵

In keeping with this overall point of view, one of the recurrent patterns that can be observed in this literature is the use of moral categories drawn from the realm of private, individual behavior to critique the way institutional forces operate. The clearest example of this tendency is the concept of "institutionalized violence"--a phrase that originated in one of the Medellín documents and subsequently become a prevalent theme in writings reflecting the liberationist perspective. At the core of this construct is the notion that the varied techniques of coercion and manipulation used to maintain a state of extreme inequality, when taken together, inflict a level of intentional harm that is equivalent to committing an act of violence. Among these tools of violence, according to Miranda's treatment of the subject, are governmental agencies (such as the police and judiciary), the threat of hunger that prevents workers from opting out of the wage labor system, and the mass communications media (which practice what he calls "the violence of deception").³¹⁶

Again, this feature of liberation theology's ethical orientation has implications for

³¹⁵Gutiérrez, p. 175.

³¹⁶Miranda, Marx, pp. 7-14. (The phrase "violence of deception" occurs on p. 14.)

the way the Bible is interpreted. Many of the prophetic oracles dealing with the vices of the powerful groups in ancient Israel, for example, are construed as indictments of structural evil. Thus, the recurrent denunciations of bribery reflect, according to Tamez, a situation in which oppression had become institutionalized and had permeated the entire social order.³¹⁷ A similar approach to ethics informs Miranda's understanding of the Pauline concept of sin as a supraindividual totality that is incarnated in the structures of civilization.³¹⁸ When it comes to Jesus, it is more difficult to locate a structural critique of institutionalized evil in his teachings. This factor requires, according to Segundo, a transposition of the terms Jesus used to convey his message into categories relevant to an era in which love and justice have become political realities.³¹⁹ Thus, one finds Gutiérrez interpreting the needy neighbor of Matthew 25, not only as a reference to dispossessed individuals, but also as symbol for exploited nations and social classes.³²⁰

Finally, liberation theology's style of doing ethics is characterized by a combination of features that all stem from its strongly contextual orientation. Rather than working deductively from a set of universal principles or absolute norms--an approach that they customarily dismiss as being abstract and ahistorical--liberation theologians generally stress the need to discern the proper course of action within a particular historical setting. "[T]here is," as Miguez Bonino writes (summarizing the views of

³¹⁷Tamez, p. 51.

³¹⁸Miranda, Marx, pp. 188-90, 250-55.

³¹⁹Segundo, p. 71.

³²⁰Gutiérrez, p. 202.

Assmann and Gutiérrez), "no truth outside or beyond the concrete historical events in which men are involved as agents."³²¹ Applying this overall principle to one ethical value in particular, García writes: "What justice consists of and what it entails are best known by reflection on the thinking and practice of those who struggle for its realization."³²² Ethical determinations, in other words, must be made within the framework of a prior revolutionary commitment.

Negatively speaking, this approach to ethics represents a departure from the type of natural law casuistry that had traditionally undergirded Catholic moral theology. And although their style of moral reasoning is more biblically grounded, their approach also precludes a prescriptive use of the Bible to provide universal rules of conduct. "There is no possibility," Míguez Bonino writes, "of extracting the [scriptural] text and projecting it objectively as a norm."³²³

While liberation theologians often identify various standards or core values to function as guidelines in the process of moral discernment, they are adamant in insisting that the implementation of these ethical criteria must be flexible enough to accommodate the contingencies that are invariably present in any given situation. Sobrino, for example, cites two aspects of the gospel tradition that can be universalized: the dual requirement to

³²¹Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, p. 88.

³²²García, p. 20.

³²³Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, p. 81. Segundo makes essentially the same point with regard to the commandment in the Decalogue against killing, stating that it "cannot purport to constitute an absolute moral rule" (p. 165).

work for justice and to adopt the stance of the poor.³²⁴ At the same time, he rejects the notion that the teachings of Jesus can be used as a source of moral norms. Since the morality of Jesus is historically situated, his contemporary followers must strive to reproduce his fundamental values in a different historical context.³²⁵ In similar fashion, Segundo regards mutual love as the core commandment of Jesus. However, according to the view that he ultimately endorses:

Jesus did not spell out the exact kind of mutual love that his followers had to display. And he did not, precisely so that Christians would be left free to operate imaginatively and creatively, to figure out what would be the most effective and comprehensive sort of mutual love at a given moment in history.³²⁶

In other writings, this abiding standard is expressed in terms of an overarching utopian goal, often equated with the biblical symbol of the Kingdom of God. However, since this ideal transcends any particular historical manifestation, it can only be approximated through a succession of provisional and relative ideological mediations. Gutiérrez, among others, employs this style of reasoning, constructing an alternative vision of a new mode of human existence in which people live in solidarity with one another and in communion with God. The interim steps needed to achieve this vision, however, are inevitably tentative and conditional:

It will be necessary to study carefully in a permanent fashion the signs of the times (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 4), responding to specific situations without claiming to adopt at every step positions valid for all eternity. There are moments in which we will advance only by trial and error. It is difficult to establish ahead of time. . . the specific guidelines which ought to determine the behavior of the Church taken

³²⁴Sobrino, p. 137.

³²⁵Ibid., pp. 137, 132-33.

³²⁶Segundo, p. 155 (emphasis in original).

as a whole, in these questions. The Church should rise to the demands of the moment with whatever lights it has at the moment and with the will to be faithful to the Gospel.³²⁷

In choosing these proximate, relative means for pursuing the ultimate utopian goal, practitioners of this style of ethical reflection are often guided by a kind of utilitarian calculation. One of the clearest expressions of this tendency can be found in Míguez Bonino, who at one point, enunciates the following core ethical thesis:

In carrying out needed structural changes we encounter an inevitable tension between the human cost of their realization and the human cost of their postponement. The basic ethical criterion is the maximizing of universal human possibilities and the minimizing of human costs.³²⁸

The discussion over whether violence should be used in the context of a revolutionary struggle--a debate liberation theologians often frame in terms of the legitimacy of "second order violence" (in contradistinction to the first order, institutionalized violence that maintains the status quo)³²⁹--offers the best example of how this methodology works in practice. Liberation theologians generally refuse to automatically rule out the use of violence as an a priori principle. Yet they are also reluctant to exempt it from moral scrutiny. The result is pragmatic attempt to balance the relevant considerations and offer a prudential assessment.

Within the text of Scripture, liberation theologians perceive a measure of ambivalence about this issue. Alongside elements of the tradition that counsel against the

³²⁷Gutiérrez, pp. 271-72 (emphasis in original).

³²⁸Míguez Bonino, Political Ethics, p. 107 (emphasis in original).

³²⁹Dussel, pp. 126-27.

use of violent means (pre-eminently, the gospel teachings of Jesus³³⁰), there are also episodes in which violence appears to be authorized--Moses' slaying of the Egyptian,³³¹ the destruction of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea,³³² and the armed resistance to oppression led by liberator figures in the book of Judges³³³ are among the examples cited. In light of this countervailing body of evidence, Segundo concludes that the decalogue's commandment against killing "cannot purport to constitute an absolute moral rule."³³⁴ Instead, he surmises that "it was equivalent to saying that one could not kill without a justifiable reason."³³⁵ He similarly concludes that in his teachings contained in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was "urging us to use the least amount of violence compatible with truly effective love."³³⁶

Having thus ruled out an absolute prohibition against violence, liberationists

³³⁰As an earlier discussion indicated, this facet of Jesus' teaching does not receive much emphasis in the liberationist literature. It is, however, mentioned in connection with the issue of violence by Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, pp. 123-24.

³³¹Hanks, p. 106; Pixley, pp. 8-9. See also the discussion of how Pixley uses this narrative in Schubeck, pp. 144-46. (Pixley actually treats this episode in a rather cursory fashion and does not elaborate on its implications to any great extent. Schubeck, therefore, seems to be overstating its significance when he singles it out as an example of Pixley's "deontological use of Scripture in doing normative ethics" [p. 146].)

³³²Croatto, pp. 29-30.

³³³Hanks, p. 106.

³³⁴Segundo, p. 165.

³³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 166.

³³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 166.

frame the issue in terms of an assessment of relative costs and benefits.³³⁷ While his precise formulation would not necessarily reflect the views of all theologians in the liberationist tradition, Miguez Bonino's nuanced and qualified position is fairly typical.

Certainly Christians in the struggle for liberation will witness to their faith--as well as to the ultimate goal of the revolution--by insisting on counting carefully the cost of violence, by fighting against all idolization of destruction and the destructive spirit of hate and revenge, by attempting to humanize the struggle, by keeping in mind that beyond victory there must be reconciliation and construction. But they cannot block through Christian scruples the road clearly indicated by a lucid analysis of the situation. Even less can they play the game of reaction lending support to those who are profiting from present violence or weakening through sentimental pseudo-Christian slogans (however well-meaning) the will among the oppressed to fight for their liberation.³³⁸

Consistent, therefore, with an ethic that is essentially a contextual and consequentialist one, the Bible does not furnish either absolute norms or warrants to substantiate a set of universal principles. Instead, the Bible and other elements of the Christian tradition illumine the process of ethical reflection that takes place in a series of

³³⁷This approach is, of course, reminiscent of some features of the classical just war tradition--especially the proportionality criterion. And indeed, a few analysts have made this comparison. Ferm claims that whatever statements liberationists have made condoning violence "[seem] entirely consistent with the Catholic theory of the just war" (p. 116). Among liberation theologians themselves, Dussel cites the just war teaching (along with the Church's support for capital punishment and the Crusades) as an example of the Church countenancing the use of violence (p. 127). Miguez Bonino also notes that "the traditional criteria elaborated in discussions about a 'just war' still have their relevance" (p. 109). He goes on to point out, however, that this and a few other similar considerations he had mentioned involve "theoretical ethical criteria which have been abstracted from real political praxis and stated in general terms" (emphasis his). His focus is slightly different: "We are dealing here not with universal norms but with tentative ethical formulations that are offered as resources in the struggle" (p. 109). This qualification captures the difference between the mainstream of the liberation theology movement and classical versions of the just war theory. In place of a highly principled approach, the liberationists seek to articulate provisional guideposts within the framework of a prior commitment to the revolutionary struggle.

³³⁸Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, p. 128.

concrete historical settings. Guided by a utopian vision that is at least partially inspired by biblical images and sensitive to the patterns established by biblical paradigms, communities of faith must make relative judgements about the appropriate means to employ at any given moment in history.

Social Location³³⁹

One of liberation theology's principal contributions has been to highlight the way theological and biblical interpretations are influenced by the social environments in which they are formulated. Yet the issue of liberation theology's own sociological moorings is one that has generally been treated in a rather superficial and cursory manner--mostly focusing on the conditions of oppression that have significantly shaped the movement's identity.³⁴⁰ In a broader sense, however, the social perspectives embodied in the liberationist literature reflect the influence of a variety of sociological elements--including cultural, religious, and class-related factors.

To begin with, the antipathy these writings display toward market capitalism and the liberal institutions associated with Anglo-American societies reflects attitudes deeply ingrained in Latin America's collective psyche. These tendencies can, in fact, be traced

³³⁹It should briefly be noted, at the outset, that the treatment of this issue here will confine itself to describing the social location of the Latin American theologians themselves. A comprehensive consideration of this topic, however, would also have to take into account the sympathetic audience that liberation theology has found in many quarters of the North American religious community.

³⁴⁰A prime example of this tendency would be Gilbert R. Cardena, "The Social Location of Liberation Theology: From Latin America to the United States," in Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Fernando F. Segovia, eds., Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 167-82. See also Brown, New Key, pp. 50-64.

all the way back to the region's cultural roots on the Iberian peninsula. If, as Claudio Veliz has written, "[Latin] America was invented by sixteenth century Spain,"³⁴¹ then it was the product of a society still coping with the aftermath of the Inquisition and the military campaigns to reconquer territory from the Moors. In the context of this period, military and religious roles came to enjoy a high social status, while commercial and banking activities--traditionally the province of Jews and Moors--fell into disrepute.³⁴² Ultimately, the expulsion of these non-Christian minority groups was to have a crippling effect on Spain's economic progress (while correspondingly benefiting the neighboring countries to which they migrated).

Equally significant for the subsequent history of Latin America was the fact that throughout the duration of its New World empire, Spain remained a country largely untouched by the great social currents unleashed on the rest of Europe by the Protestant Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, and the toppling of the ancien régime in France.³⁴³ As Will Durant put it, summing up the tenor of these times: "For good or ill, Spain chose to remain medieval, while Europe, by the commercial, typographical,

³⁴¹Claudio Veliz, The Centralist Tradition of Latin America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 10.

³⁴²Lawrence E. Harrison, Who Prospers? How Cultural Values Shape Economic and Political Success (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), p. 45; Carlos Rangel, The Latin Americans: Their Love-Hate Relationship With the United States, trans. Ivan Kats (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 191-93; Seymour Martin Lipset, "Values, Education, and Entrepreneurship," in Seymour Martin Lipset, Aldo Solari, eds., Elites in Latin America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 8.

³⁴³Veliz, pp. 3-4.

intellectual, and Protestant revolutions, rushed into modernity."³⁴⁴

Largely as a result of this combination of factors, the Spanish-speaking world generally failed to cultivate a robust tradition of industrial pioneering--a deficiency that has often been cited to account for the weak performance of most Latin American economies.³⁴⁵ Among the circumstances adding credence to this cultural explanation is the fact that, where entrepreneurial activity did spring up in the region, it tended to be dominated by members of non-hispanic immigrant communities.³⁴⁶ Moreover, in contradistinction to the Anglo-American experience, the development of modern industry in Latin America did not give rise to a distinctively bourgeois, middle class culture imbued with commercial values. Instead, middle class entrepreneurs tended to be assimilated into the existing oligarchical elite, rooted in the hacienda system and its predominantly agrarian mores.³⁴⁷ As a result, the dominant values-transmitting institutions and agencies of socialization have historically been permeated by cultural attitudes reflecting what Seymour Martin Lipset once characterized as "the traditional

³⁴⁴Will Durant, The Story of Civilization, vol. 6: The Reformation (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 220.

³⁴⁵Lipset's essay, "Values, Education, and Entrepreneurship," in Lipset and Solari, pp. 3-60 (which is explicitly predicated on the sociological analyses of Weber and Talcott Parsons, pp. 3-7), and Harrison's Underdevelopment is a State of Mind (which cites a range of sociological sources, including Weber, on pp. 18-32) both exemplify this approach to the Latin American situation. See also Clisshold, pp. 215-27.

³⁴⁶See, for example, the chapter "Brazil: Immigrant Entrepreneurs Drive Growth" (pp. 27-50) in Harrison. See also Lipset, in Lipset and Solari, pp. 23-32, and Clisshold, p. 217.

³⁴⁷Veliz, pp. 263-64, 267-69, 272-78; Lipset in Lipset and Solari, pp. 8-10; Luis Ratinoff, "The New Urban Groups: The Middle Classes," in Lipset and Solari, pp. 67-69.

landed aristocratic disdain for manual work, industry, and trading."³⁴⁸

In the field of literature, for instance, this ethos finds consummate expression in Jose Enrique Rodo's celebrated literary classic, Ariel (and in the related cultural phenomenon that has come to be known as arielismo). This so-called "ethical gospel of the Spanish-speaking new world"³⁴⁹ extols the classic Latin virtues of spirituality, social refinement, amiability, and civility, while simultaneously denigrating the materialism, pragmatism, and technological obsession that ostensibly characterizes the "Caliban" society of the North.³⁵⁰

The same set of priorities is reflected in the educational system where, as its critics (and would-be reformers) are wont to point out, university curricula have traditionally been dominated by studies in the liberal arts and humanities. Consequently, there has been a noticeable shortage of graduates possessing the requisite scientific, engineering, and technological skills to provide the human capital for industrial enterprises.³⁵¹

³⁴⁸Lipset, in Lipset and Solari, p. 19.

³⁴⁹Quotation from an anonymous critic cited in Encyclopedia Britannica: Micropaedia, s.v. "Rodo, Jose Enrique," viii:631.

³⁵⁰See Lipset (who sees, implicit in arielismo, the outlook of a traditional, landed upper class, p. 8), in Lipset and Solari, pp. 8, 18; Kalman H. Silvert, The Conflict Society: Reaction and Revolution in Latin America, rev. ed. (New York: American Universities Field Staff, 1966), pp. 128-42; and Rangel, pp. 94-99. (It should be noted that liberation theology strongly rejects the mystical strain of spirituality and the anti-materialistic bias that are deeply ingrained in the Ariel perspective. In their attitudes toward the United States and its capitalistic culture, however, the theologians of liberation stand squarely in this polemical tradition.)

³⁵¹Lipset in Lipset and Solari, pp. 18-23, 40-48. Lipset again sees in this system a reflection of the aristocratic values sustained by the existence of a landed oligarchy. See

A similar picture emerges if one looks carefully at the record of Latin American Catholicism--a tradition that obviously played a formidable role in shaping the environment from which liberation theology emerged. Despite its stereotyped image as a socially reactionary force throughout the region, it is important to recognize that the Church in Latin America has never been a strong proponent of market capitalism. The laissez faire views of the classical economists first began making inroads into Latin America in the mid-nineteenth century in conjunction with an overall influx of liberal ideas emanating from the European continent.³⁵² Since the social agenda associated with these philosophical currents also exhibited overtly anticlerical tendencies and included proposals to curb the Church's customary prerogatives in society, the ecclesiastical establishment made common cause with the conservative opposition, eschewing, in the process, the whole democratic, egalitarian, and individualistic ethos of liberalism.³⁵³ Thus, the usual Catholic predilection for the organic, hierarchical order of the traditional agrarian society³⁵⁴ was merely reinforced by factors distinctive to the Latin American

also Frank Bonilla, "Cultural Elites," in Lipset and Solari, pp. 239-40; Clisshold, pp. 246-47.

³⁵²Veliz, pp. 178-79.

³⁵³Renato Poblete, "The Church in Latin America: A Historical Survey," in Landsberger, p. 45; Rangel, p. 143. Also in Landsberger, see Pike, "South America's Multifaceted Catholicism," pp. 54-60 on Argentina and pp.60-63 on Chile.

³⁵⁴Among others, Michael Novak has described this attitude, and the hostility toward the various manifestations of liberalism that it engendered beginning in the nineteenth century, in his Freedom With Justice: Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984). Lurking behind Catholic social theorists' use of terminology such as the "organic community" or "Distributism" lies, Novak alleges, "a kind of nostalgia for a simpler, more agrarian world of the traditional type, the type found often enough in Catholic regions from Ireland and Belgium to

context.

By the twentieth century, progressive elements within the Church had come to embrace classical liberalism's democratic political aspirations, but still not its economic outlook.³⁵⁵ Taking their cue from the 1931 encyclical Quadragesimo Anno, Catholic activists were often attracted to corporatist and solidarist social models, which formed the basis for economic policy experiments in various Latin American countries.³⁵⁶ The implementation of sweeping state-interventionist economic policies and the development of patronage-laden welfare bureaucracies--hallmarks of populist regimes that came to power throughout the continent in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century³⁵⁷--also had strong links to the Catholic social ideals embraced by rising middle class groups. Caught up in what Luis Ratinoff characterizes as their "quarrel with capitalism," these proponents of Christian democracy sought to find a "Third Way" that would avoid undesirable economic extremes:

According to the terminology most frequently adopted, capitalism produced

Bavaria, from Italy to the Philippines, from Portugal to Brazil, from Spain to Central and South America" (p. 24).

³⁵⁵Pike makes this distinction in Landsberger, p. 63, and it is alluded to by Ratinoff, in Lipset and Solari, pp.78-79.

³⁵⁶Novak, in fact, states that "of all continents, Latin America most self-consciously and energetically tried to realize the 'corporative' ideal to which Pius XI pointed in the closing pages of Quadragesimo Anno"--a phenomenon that, he says, reflects the fact that "Latin American writers, Catholic and non-Catholic, experienced the model of Anglo-American liberalism as alien" (Freedom With Justice, p. 120, with a fuller discussion of this overall tendency in Catholic social thought on pp. 115-23). Pike refers to Chile's experience with this kind of social policy in his "South America's Multifaceted Catholicism," in Landsberger, pp. 60-63.

³⁵⁷Veliz, pp. 287-92.

exploitation, parasitism, immorality, and poverty. The aims of human solidarity pursued by the Latin and Spanish culture were declared incompatible with the materialism and individualism of the capitalist system.

Thus, certain middle class Catholic groups proposed the establishment of an economic system in which the "common welfare" would take precedence over "individual interests," because capitalism had a "dehumanizing, corrupting and poisonous" effect. . . . It is agreed that in some cases property should be socialized and controlled by Christian planning, and in general, that the new social organization should be authoritative, "popular," and planned: a kind of halfway house between capitalism and socialism.³⁵⁸

In keeping with this tradition, even those religious leaders who, in more recent years, were at the forefront of efforts to suppress liberation theology's influence still often expressed profound misgivings about North American-style capitalism.³⁵⁹ The widespread perception that liberation theology represents a thoroughgoing repudiation of Latin American Catholicism's deeply-entrenched conservatism is, therefore, somewhat misleading--at least in the context of North America, where "conservatism" is generally equated with support for laissez faire economics.³⁶⁰ Rather than rejecting their heritage, liberation theologians have merely intensified its critique of capitalism using the tools of Marxist social analysis.

Thus, by way of summary, it is clear that liberation theology was nurtured in a cultural and religious environment where market capitalism and its attendant ethos have

³⁵⁸Ratinoff, in Lipset and Solari, pp. 78-79.

³⁵⁹Examples of these sentiments are cited by Novak, Will It Liberate?, p. 23; Rangel, p. 168. .

³⁶⁰The confusion, of course, stems from the fact that the term "conservative" is customarily used in the political discourse of the United States to denote views more in keeping with the tradition of nineteenth century classical liberalism. Latin American Catholicism's right wing would be conservative in the conventional European sense, insofar as it seeks to uphold the values of tradition, hierarchy, and social order.

generally been viewed rather unfavorably. Still, this background does not fully account for liberation theology's embrace of Marxism and its more radical turn in the direction of a revolutionary model of social transformation. For the roots of these elements, one must turn to a consideration of the class dynamics and consciousness of oppression that are an integral part of the movement's self-understanding.

The popularity of Marxism, both as a heuristic model to explain capitalistic exploitation as well as a revolutionary strategy to reverse the existing conditions, seems to have been a byproduct of various social circumstances. In the first place, liberation theologians were profoundly aware of their status as citizens of the Third World--a characteristic that sets them apart from the religious ethicists and church bodies whose writings were considered in previous chapters. By virtue of the Third World concept--which first entered the global political lexicon in conjunction with the 1955 Bandung Conference of non-aligned nations--Latin Americans assumed a collective identity with recently emancipated former colonies in Asia and Africa and came to see themselves as members of a bloc of countries permanently relegated to a subordinate position in the world's economy.³⁶¹ The rejection of neo-colonial forms of control implicit in this whole construct resonated strongly with the anti-imperialistic sentiments (and antiyanquismo, in particular) that had long aroused deep passions on a continent repeatedly subjected to gun-boat diplomacy and covert forms of interference.

It is also important to note that the rise of liberation theology coincided with a

³⁶¹The trend in the direction of assuming a common identity with the emerging nations of Asia and Africa under the rubric of "The Third World" is discussed (and rejected) by Rangel, pp. 113-14.

period of profound social upheaval. A combination of falling world market commodity prices, rising energy costs, and the increased burden of financing foreign debt had plunged the region into economic turmoil marked by rampant hyperinflation and cutbacks in government social welfare spending.³⁶² The resultant climate of social instability also ushered in a period of unprecedented political repression. For at least a portion of the two decades following the 1964 military coup in Brazil, all but four of the twenty Latin American republics found themselves under some form of authoritarian rule--often maintained by the systematic application of terror techniques (exemplified by the so-called 'dirty wars' and the 'disappearances' of suspected subversives).³⁶³ It is not surprisingly, therefore, that oppression became the operative social category for interpreting the Latin American experience.

But alongside these general conditions, liberation theologians are also keenly sensitive to the plight of groups who are particularly exploited. This category would include, first of all, much of the rural peasant population, severely disadvantaged by the vastly inequitable patterns of land ownership that persist throughout the region. The

³⁶²Clisshold, pp. 275-79; Ricardo Ffrench-Davis, Oscar Munoz, Jose Gabriel Palma, "The Latin American Economies, 1950-1990," in Leslie Bethell, ed., The Cambridge History of Latin America, vol. VI: Latin America since 1930: Economy, Society and Politics, part 1: Economy and Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 177-88, 242-44; Veliz, pp. 290-92.

³⁶³John Hartlyn, "Democracy in Latin America Since 1930," in Leslie Bethell, ed., The Cambridge History of Latin America, vol. VI: Latin America since 1930: Economy, Society and Politics, part 2: Politics and Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 142-43, 160; Alain Rouquie, "The Military in Latin American Politics since 1930," in Bethell, VI:2, pp. 245-70. Stable, civilian rule, with varying degrees of democratic participation, survived only in Costa Rica, Venezuela, Mexico, and Columbia (Rouquie, pp. 271-74).

urban migrations of the twentieth century have also produced a new class of marginalized people: the residents of shantytowns (alternately known as barrios, favelas, or callampas³⁶⁴) that have sprung up around all the major urban centers. Finally, there are the descendants of America's indigenous inhabitants, who frequently encounter discrimination and social prejudice, most notably in those countries (such as Guatemala, Bolivia, and Peru) where they make up a substantial proportion of the population. For these social groups, economic growth and traditional development programs had brought few tangible rewards. Even the generous state subsidies that were the hallmark of the region's post-war populist regimes overwhelmingly benefited middle class segments of the population.³⁶⁵

Liberation theologians can quite legitimately claim to be articulating the grievances of those who have been victimized by these circumstances. In many ways, the impetus for their theological venture grew out of the fresh initiatives the Catholic Church undertook in the wake of the Vatican 2 and Medellin Councils to shore up its base of support among the impoverished masses. A key component in this strategy was the creation of so-called pueblos jovenes (or "poor people parishes"), a process that brought members of the religious establishment into regular contact with oppressed elements of society. An even more significant phenomenon, at least in terms of liberation theology's origination, was the rapid growth of base Christian communities--small, Bible reflection groups organized at the local level as a technique for empowering the poor. Throughout

³⁶⁴Clisshold, pp. 218-19.

³⁶⁵Ratinoff, in Lipset and Solari, pp. 87-88.

the course of its development, the liberation theology movement always maintained a kind of symbiotic relationship with this tradition of grass roots activism.

The extent to which liberation theology was an outgrowth of these broader institutional changes in the Church becomes apparent if one examines the personal histories of the movement's principal architects. Invariably, some form of direct, sustained exposure to the plight of the poor played a decisive role in their theological journeys. A prime case in point would be Dom Helder Camara, widely regarded as one of liberation theology's important forerunners. It was largely in his capacity as archbishop of Recife, the most impoverished region of Brazil, that he became an outspoken advocate for the cause of the disenfranchised. Similarly, Gustavo Gutiérrez began his vocation in the Church with an assignment to one of Peru's original pueblos jóvenes.³⁶⁶ As recently as the late 1980's, a sympathetic profiler described his spartan living quarters in a squalid neighborhood of Lima, where he was serving as a parish priest and advisor to local base Christian communities.³⁶⁷ In a personal memoir, aptly entitled Feet-on-the-Ground-Theology,³⁶⁸ Clodovis Boff recounted how he periodically alternated between teaching in a university and making forays into the countryside to interact with

³⁶⁶Pena, p. 88.

³⁶⁷Robert McAfee Brown, Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 40-41, 46-49. (Pena, p. 102, quotes Gutiérrez as saying that his pastoral work has always been his central vocation.)

³⁶⁸Clodovis Boff, Feet-on-the-Ground-Theology: A Brazilian Journey, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

rural peasants. Another set of writings, The Gospel in Solentiname series,³⁶⁹ records biblical dialogues carried on between the poor peasant inhabitants of a rural Nicaraguan village and their priestly interlocutor, Fr. Ernesto Cardenal.

If these examples are typical of the kinds of experiences that precipitated the rise of liberation theology, then they illustrate the extent to which it represents a response to oppressive social conditions. As a result of these origins, this theological paradigm was able to focus on elements of the biblical tradition that had long been neglected in mainstream scholarly circles.

At the same time, however, it is important to emphasize that liberation theology is not simply a compendium of poor people's insights and observations percolating up from base Christian communities and embodying the view from "the underside of history." This popular perception--often conveyed in less critical treatments of the movement³⁷⁰--represents a rather idyllic and simplistic picture of the situation. In reality, the body of literature constituting this movement contains theological reflections on poverty and oppression as these conditions have been construed and interpreted by an educationally

³⁶⁹Ernesto Cardenal, The Gospel in Solentiname, 4 vols, trans. Donald D. Walsh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976-1982).

³⁷⁰The writings of Robert McAfee Brown, among others, offer some prime examples of this tendency. At one point, in what he admits is an oversimplification, Brown describes the process of producing liberation theology as follows: ". . .Gustavo [Gutiérrez] and others like him live with 'the world's anonymous', share in their perplexities, participate in their discussions and actions, and then, because of their training, are able to record and transmit accounts of what is going on, accounts that reach us in the form of books or articles" (Brown, Gutiérrez, p. 2, emphasis added). Clearly, the notion that Gutiérrez and kindred theologians are merely "recording and transmitting accounts" of what poor people are saying and doing significantly understates their role.

and culturally privileged religious elite³⁷¹ utilizing their own ideological tools of analysis. If one is seeking, therefore, to identify the social basis of liberation theology, it should be located at the convergence between impoverished peasants and barrio-dwellers, whose plight forms the backdrop for the movement, and those members of the theological guild who have been sensitized to this situation and have sought to interpret it within a religious framework of meaning.³⁷²

What one sociologically-oriented observer, Christian Smith, has styled "the first generation of liberation theologians" constituted, he says, a "network of radical theological elites" drawn from remarkably similar backgrounds.³⁷³ To begin with, having all been born within roughly a decade of one another, they formed a generational cohort whose theologically formative years coincided with the Vatican II era. Most of them also completed their educations at prestigious institutions abroad (in Europe or the United

³⁷¹In viewing liberation theology as, at least in part, an elite phenomenon, and thereby qualifying its image as a popular, grass-roots movement, this discussion, in some ways, draws upon the tradition of "elite analysis" exemplified by the work of sociologists such as W. Lloyd Warner and C. Wright Mills. By focusing on non-economic variables (such as prestige status) in the interpretation of social stratification, this approach functions as a counterweight to the mode of Marxist class analysis embraced by liberation theologians and their sympathizers.

³⁷²Pena's history of liberation theology in Peru is designed to be virtually a case study on the role of intellectuals and their ideas in the context of mass social movements. With regard to liberation theology, she contends that the basic initiative came from its popular constituency, but that intellectuals were able to apply their training, expertise, and scholarly connections to the task of articulating the movement's aims and producing an ideational construct that helped to mobilize support. "Intellectuals," in other words, "don't create social movements, but they play an integral role by articulating and elaborating movement sentiments" (pp. 194-5, see also other summaries of this thesis on pp. 6, 33-36, and 96).

³⁷³Smith, pp. 169-70.

States), giving them a more cosmopolitan outlook than many of their fellow clerics and initiating them into an international, ecumenically-diverse community of scholars.³⁷⁴ In their occupational endeavors, they also tended to combine a couple of roles--such as parish priest, university lecturer, research center staff member, or chaplain to a student group--thereby placing themselves in diverse institutional settings.

At least by Latin American standards, they certainly could be characterized as members of the intellectual class--a distinction that carries a fair amount of prestige on a continent where poets often enjoy celebrity status and where it is not uncommon to find intellectuals serving as cabinet ministers and diplomats.³⁷⁵ More importantly, Latin American intellectuals have long displayed a marked predilection for the politics of the Left. Throughout the period of liberation theology's ascendancy in religious circles, the universities on the continent where it originated were developing a reputation for being hotbeds of radical political activism. In a book published in 1976, the Venezuelan social commentator Carlos Rangel echoed these perceptions with the rather caustic observation that ". . . in a Latin American university, it is just about as daring and heretical to be a 'revolutionary' as it is for a student in an Irish seminary to be a fervent Catholic."³⁷⁶ A short time later, a journalistic profile of Latin America's leading literary figures and

³⁷⁴Pena also comments on the importance of the international connections that these theologians maintain, p. 99.

³⁷⁵On the prestige of intellectuals, see Bonilla, in Lipset and Solari, pp. 242-43; and Alan Riding, "Revolution and the Intellectual in Latin America," New York Times Magazine, 13 March 1983, pp. 31-32. "Intellectuals," according to Riding, "automatically belong to a prestigious elite" because while they "may not be the principle actors in the Latin drama. . .they define the issues" (p. 31).

³⁷⁶Rangel, p. 214. A similar point is made by Clisshold, p. 248.

members of the intellectual establishment similarly found widespread support for the region's Marxist regimes and insurgency movements and near universal antipathy toward the United States and its domestic allies.³⁷⁷ Noting the ubiquitous sentiment in these circles in favor of socialism (even among critics of its Marxist manifestations), the writer opined that the real intellectual debate on the continent was between defenders of varying socialistic interpretations, rather than between proponents of socialism and capitalism.³⁷⁸

Several factors may be at work in shaping this intellectual climate. To some extent, it may reflect the dominance of humanistic studies in the educational system.³⁷⁹ There also may be considerable merit in Seymour Martin Lipset's observation that by embracing socialism, intellectuals can endorse a nationalistic strategy of economic modernization that does not accede to the foreign influences and materialistic values associated with capitalism.³⁸⁰

But in addition to whatever regional factors may be involved, it also should be noted that this tendency among Latin American intellectuals is consistent with a universal pattern of behavior that seems to be particularly evident in developing nations. In these Third World settings, members of the intellegensia are found in the vanguard of

³⁷⁷Riding, pp. 31, 36, 38, 40.

³⁷⁸Ibid., p. 31.

³⁷⁹Glaucio Ary Dillon Soares, "Intellectual Identity and Political Ideology Among University Students," in Lipset and Solari, pp. 445-47. (It should be noted that the data supporting these conclusions, having come from survey research in the 1950's and 1960's, pre-dated the era of liberation theology by a decade or more. It does, however, coincide with the period in which the first wave of liberation theologians were students.)

³⁸⁰Lipset, in Lipset and Solari, p. 35.

movements for radical social change with such frequency that the revolutionary intellectual (the stereotypical 'salon Marxist') has become an established fixture on the world's political landscape. This phenomenon can be largely attributed to the combination of lofty idealism and sense of alienation from mainstream society that intellectuals are universally prone to experience. Whether these impulses are channeled into social reform movements (as in the case of the 'New Class' politics described in the previous chapter) or whether they instead become a catalyst for revolutionary activities largely depends on the degree to which peaceful mechanisms of social change are available within a given society. When democratic avenues of participation are blocked, as they are in many authoritarian Third World societies, the revolutionary option becomes the most viable one.³⁸¹

Studies of the standard cycle that revolutionary movements have typically followed--most notably Crane Brinton's Anatomy of Revolution--have often commented on the pivotal role that the intellectual class plays. For Brinton, it was the intellectuals' "transfer of allegiance" from the existing institutions of authority to some new revolutionary paradigm that portends the demise of the old order.³⁸² Samuel Huntington subsequently refined this thesis, at least with regard to Third World settings, by postulating that it is actually the emergence of a discrete class of intellectuals, rather than their ideological desertion, that sets the revolutionary process in motion. When an

³⁸¹Huntington, p. 274, 371.

³⁸²Brinton, pp. 39-49. Brinton acknowledges L. P. Edwards, The Natural History of Revolution, Chicago, 1927 as the source of this insight. Among the intellectual harbingers of revolution cited by Brinton are the seventeenth century English Puritans, the French philosophes, and the circle of Russian intellectuals that included Lenin.

educated elite, imbued with modern values and ideals, begins to take shape within a society still governed by archaic institutions, it creates a source of tension that may easily translate into revolutionary conflict.³⁸³

Yet however deep their sense of alienation and frustration may be, this class of intellectuals cannot unilaterally spawn a successful revolution without grassroots support. In the case of most Third World insurrections, this element of mass participation has resulted from a revolutionary coalition linking members of an urban intellegensia with a politically awakened segment of the rural peasantry.³⁸⁴

But historically, the consummation of this strategic alliance has faced two formidable obstacles. The first challenge is to counteract the inveterate conservative instincts of people at the bottom of the social ladder. There is, as Huntington points out, "a conservatism of the destitute as profound as the conservatism of the privileged."³⁸⁵ The second challenge is to bridge the cultural gap separating the urbane, cosmopolitan world of the intellectuals from the provincial, traditionalist world of their prospective peasant allies.³⁸⁶

Viewed against this backdrop, both liberation theology and the parallel emergence of base Christian communities can be seen as strategies for facilitating this kind of an alliance that are ideally suited for the Latin American context. The near universal

³⁸³Huntington, p. 290.

³⁸⁴Ibid., pp. 291-93.

³⁸⁵Ibid., p. 52.

³⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 301-2.

existence of at least a nominal affiliation with the Catholic religion provides a shared bond and common medium of discourse that transcends barriers of class and educational status. The challenge confronting radicalized members of the theological intellegensia was to transform the conventional symbols and imagery of this religious tradition--long a force for social stability--into tools for fostering a revolutionary social awareness.

Like all such endeavors, therefore, the manner in which liberation theologian read the Bible is conditioned by the sociological dynamics present in its immediate environment. Clearly, the biblical themes that this movement emphasizes--the priority of achieving justice for the poor, the mandate to free the oppressed, the suspicions about wealth--are all authentic features of the scriptural record. But it also appears evident that it was circumstances confronting Latin Americans that caused theologians on that continent to focus on these themes in such an intentional way.

Ideology

As the rhetoric of liberation itself implies, the ideological perspective associated with this style of theology is rooted in the positive valuation of freedom that emerged with the dawn of the Enlightenment era to become the hallmark of the modern age. At the same time, it is important to recognize that those who march under the banner of "liberation" espouse a conception of freedom that differs markedly from that of the classical liberal democratic tradition.³⁸⁷ The tension between these rival images is

³⁸⁷The inadequacies of liberal democratic polities is, in fact, a recurrent theme in this body of literature. See, for instance, Assmann, p. 47; Tamez, p. 59; and Miguez Bonino's discussion of the "hoax of democracy" (as it has existed in Latin America) in Doing Theology, p. 15.

reflected in a comment by Miguez Bonino, who claims that: "[w]hen a person shouts 'liberty' in Latin America today, one can immediately suspect him of being a reactionary; and one is seldom wrong."³⁸⁸ Classical liberalism, preoccupied as it was with protecting individual citizens from the coercive mechanisms of the state, articulated its understanding of freedom primarily in terms of democratic rights operating in the political arena.

Over against this more narrow and individualistic understanding, the ideological paradigm associated with liberation theology tends to define freedom in a more expansive manner that includes, among other things, the capacity of persons to achieve their human potential, as well as the ability of nations and social classes to shape their collective destinies. Meeting this standard entails dismantling the wide-ranging forms of alienation that exist in the modern world--"a struggle," as Gutiérrez describes it, "against all the forces that oppress man."³⁸⁹ Among these oppressive forces denying freedom to a large segment of humanity are economic constraints such as poverty and inequality. So in common with the social welfare capitalists considered in the previous chapter, proponents of the liberationist paradigm insist that a genuinely free society must ensure a minimal level of material well-being to everyone and limit the degree of inequality that exists.

Unlike more moderate social democratic critics, however, liberationists consider the entire capitalistic mode of production to be inherently repressive. Not only is the wage-labor system implicated in the creation of widespread inequality (a point enunciated

³⁸⁸Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, p. 17.

³⁸⁹Gutiérrez, p. 32.

quite forcefully by Miranda³⁹⁰), but there are also psychological forms of alienation endemic in this pattern of economic organization. Thus, echoing Herbert Marcuse's Marxist humanism, Gutiérrez inveighs against the "new and subtle forms of oppression in the heart of advanced industrial societies"--the stifling of the human spirit by forces of technology.³⁹¹ Liberation theology therefore shares with the broader tradition of radical political economy the underlying conviction that the capitalistic system of organizing economic life on the basis of a private property regime is fundamentally incompatible with the quest for human emancipation set in motion by the Enlightenment. Rather than simply extending the scope of freedom within the prevailing system (through techniques of income redistribution, for instance), achieving the liberationist vision of freedom requires a full-scale restructuring of the economic order--through socializing the means of production and ultimately creating a new kind of person who lives in solidarity with the rest of humankind.

Another hallmark of the radical approach to political economy is its conflict-

³⁹⁰Miranda, *Marx*, pp. 2-14. Concerning the status of wage-laborers, Miranda writes: "[T]he most inescapable snare is the necessity 'to earn a living' in the terms imposed by the social system. So there is no need for chains or bars; the slave who flees is forced by hunger to return" (p. 8). The final document of the 1972 Christians for Socialism conference in Santiago, Chile--a meeting in which many of the leading figures in the nascent liberation theology played a key role--reached a similar conclusion: "The fact is that social classes are a reflection of the economic base, which, in a capitalist society, sets up an antagonistic division between the possessors of capital and those who are paid for their labor. The latter must work for the former, and thus they are an object of exploitation" (John Eagleson, ed., *Christians and Socialism: Documentation of the Christians for Socialism Movement in Latin America*, trans. John Drury [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1975], p. 169 [emphasis added]).

³⁹¹Gutiérrez, p. 27 (cf. the discussion of Marcuse, pp. 31-32). Assmann similarly states that, in line with the views of Marcuse, the Third World revolutionary movement must be both anti-imperialistic and anti-technocratic (p. 34).

oriented interpretation of social interactions. With the ascendancy of the structural functionalist school of thought in the middle decades of the twentieth century, this conflict perspective came to represent a challenge to the dominant paradigm within the sociological disciplines. Based on an organic conception of society, functionalist sociology tends to stress the harmonious integration of various elements within the social system, the prevalence of shared values, and the maintenance of an equilibrium among competing centers of power. To whatever extent conflict exists, it is viewed as a social pathology.

For those theorists, however, who make conflict the key to interpreting social realities, society is a collection of groups with opposing interests and the resulting clash of competing forces is the dynamic that propels the process of historical change. The point at which adherents to this perspective differ is in where they draw the dividing lines and how they identify the factors responsible for these social fissures. In Marxist theory, it is ultimately economic considerations that prove to be the decisive determinant, and the basic division that exists in any society revolves around the differing relationships various groups sustain to the process of economic production. Under capitalism, this criterion produces an essentially dichotomous division between the class which owns the capital resources and the class which must supply its labor power to the productive enterprise. The resulting struggle between these groups with opposing economic interests ultimately becomes the catalyst for a revolutionary social transformation that ushers in a new stage in the historical process. Those who have asserted a proprietary right over the productive assets are destined to be divested of these holdings and society as a whole will gain control over its capital base. This socialization of the means of production will then

provide the foundation for a new economic order predicated on principles of socialism.

As the discussion throughout this chapter has indicated, this basic ideological perspective provides the framework for liberation theology's social analysis and operates as a kind of hermeneutical key for apprehending the biblical message. To begin with, the choice between a functionalist interpretation of society stressing social cohesion and a conflict-oriented perspective (which they generally equate with a Marxian dialectical approach³⁹²) represents, for many liberation theologians, a critical turning point with far-reaching consequences. It is, moreover, a decision that cannot be made strictly on the basis of empirical evidence. The criteria of comprehensiveness ("the ability to encompass the widest possible range of data") and coherence ("the ability to give a coherent and verifiable account of the phenomena") may provide partial guidance, according to Miguez Bonino.³⁹³ But ultimately, as Leonardo Boff points out, "The choice of an explanatory theory of society usually entails criteria that are not exclusively concerned with objectivity and rationality; they also have to do with the basic underlying option of the analysts and their social place or setting."³⁹⁴

From the standpoint of these liberationists, functionalism tends to be associated with attempts to preserve the status quo in Latin America, to perpetuate the existing power structures, and to give priority to stability over radical social change. It therefore

³⁹²Schubeck, pp. 243-44 expresses regret over the fact that liberation theologians have failed to consider non-Marxist alternatives to functionalism.

³⁹³Miguez Bonino, Christian Political Ethics, p. 46.

³⁹⁴Boff, p. 273. (See also Schubeck, pp. 236-37, for a discussion of the various criteria involved in the selection of a social analytical stance and the pivotal role of theological-ethical considerations.)

embodies the view "from the top"--the perspective of those who are in power. The dialectical sociologies, on the other hand, represent, according to this line of reasoning, the view "from below"--the perceptions of those who experience first-hand the inadequacies and contradictions within the present social order.³⁹⁵ For this reason, according to Miguez Bonino, "[t]he dialectical approach corresponds more adequately to the perspective, the understandings, and the concerns that emerge in an option for solidarity with the poor."³⁹⁶

As liberation theologians spell out the implications of this dialectical approach more fully, it becomes readily apparent that their interpretation of the fundamental conflicts within the social order is shaped largely by Marxist categories of analysis. Thus, in at least some instances, social conflict is attributed to the different ways in which various parties relate to the economic means of production and these divisions are said to inexorably give rise to a class struggle. Gutiérrez's description of the social process is illustrative in this regard:

Today history is characterized by conflict which seems to impede [the] building of brotherhood. There is one characteristic in particular which holds a central place: the division of humanity into oppressors and oppressed, into owners of the means of production and those dispossessed of the fruit of their work, into antagonistic social classes. But this is not all; the division brings with it confrontation, struggles, violence.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁵Miguez Bonino, *Christian Political Ethics*, pp. 46-7; Boff, pp. 273-74.

³⁹⁶Ibid., p. 47. On this fundamental option in favor of a dialectical (or conflict-oriented) approach, see also Assmann, p. 65; Boff and Boff, p. 26; Gutiérrez, pp. 48, 82; and cf. the discussions in Berryman, pp. 87-88; García, pp. 35-39; Kirk, p. 48; and Schubeck, pp. 91-92, 96-97.

³⁹⁷Gutiérrez, pp. 272-3.

Miguez Bonino concurs in this basic assessment, writing: "Class struggle is a fact. . . . At this point the Marxist analysis is, I think, indispensable."³⁹⁸

As preceding sections of this chapter have shown, this form of analysis becomes, for many writers in the liberationist tradition, a framework for interpreting the biblical narrative. In the case of Pixley, for example, the concept of class struggle (specifically as it unfolded within the Asiatic mode of production) provides a basis for understanding the conflicts in Egypt that led up to the Hebrew Exodus. Similarly, the denunciations of oppression, especially in the prophetic literature, are often construed in terms of the class divisions posited by Marxist theory. Jesus' identification with outcast members of first century Palestinian society and his stance in opposition to the religious establishment can also be interpreted in line with this model of society.

Moreover, in keeping with standard Marxist theory, the outcome of this struggle, in the liberationist scenario, is a revolutionary transformation of the social order leading to the socialization of the means of production, a classless society, and ultimately the creation of a new socialist person. Obviously, the paramount biblical symbol of this anticipated development is the Exodus event, and liberationist readings of that pericope are inevitably colored by a Marxist revolutionary ethos.

One of the principal ways by which the major proponents of liberation theology traditionally brought this overall Marxian perspective to bear upon the distinctive problems encountered within the Latin American context was through the use of

³⁹⁸Miguez Bonino, p. 119.

dependency theory.³⁹⁹ This economic construct, which flourished in Latin American intellectual circles throughout the period in which liberation theology was gaining momentum, arose in response to the perceived failure of earlier economic development models to achieve a satisfactory pattern of results. Dependency theorists explained this lack of success by contending that it was, in fact, the infusion of foreign capital into the developing economies of the Third World and their integration into the global system of trade that had thwarted their progress. Undergirding this whole method of analysis is a fundamental division in the global economy between the dominant 'Center', comprising the advanced, industrialized nations of the world, and a 'Periphery' of primarily raw export-producing countries. This latter bloc of nations, having been incorporated into the international economic order on less favorable terms, are increasingly forced to cede control over their economic destinies to the dominant economic forces of the capitalistic center. To the extent that growth and development is allowed to occur in the periphery, it

³⁹⁹There is a fairly extensive body of literature on this subject. In addition to the primary sources cited in subsequent notes, the following treatments provide helpful overviews: Joseph L. Love, "Economic Ideas and Ideologies in Latin America Since 1930," in Leslie Bethell, ed., The Cambridge History of Latin America, vol. VI: Latin America Since 1930: Economy, Society and Politics, part I: Economy and Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 403-448; Encyclopedia of Sociology, s.v. "Dependency Theory," 1:458-466; Ronald H. Chilcote, Joel C. Edelstein, Latin America: The Struggle With Dependency and Beyond, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), pp. 26-87; Ronald H. Chilcote, Theories of Development and Underdevelopment (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984). Some of the most extensive research on the use of dependency theory by liberation theologians has been done by Arthur F. McGovern, S.J. See his "Dependency Theory, Marxist Analysis, and Liberation Theology," in The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 272-286; and "Latin America and 'Dependency' Theory," in Liberation Theology and the Liberal Society, ed. Michael Novak (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1987), pp. 106-32.

is structured according to the needs of the capitalistic center and generates increasing levels of inequality in the local economy.

Starting with this basic conceptual framework, various versions of dependency theory emerged. One body of literature consisted of case studies and different forms of empirical analysis attempting to establish statistical correlations between various international economic trends and reciprocal developments in the Third World.⁴⁰⁰

Another line of inquiry focused on the historical conditions that prevented Third World nations from simply replicating the same course of economic development that had already been marked out by the industrialized nations.⁴⁰¹ In its most controversial form (associated, most notably, with André Gunder Frank⁴⁰²), dependency theory had also sometimes argued that the prosperity of the world's economically developed nations had, in fact, come at the expense of the underdeveloped nations. Frank coined the phrase "the development of underdevelopment"⁴⁰³ to express the idea that impoverished conditions in

⁴⁰⁰Some of this literature is summarized in Ency. Soc. s.v. "Dependency Theory," pp. 460-63.

⁴⁰¹See, for example, Celso Furtado, Obstacles to Development in Latin America, trans. Charles Ekker (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970). Also, cf. Garcia, pp. 44-65; Chilcote and Edelstein, pp. 27-39.

⁴⁰²The classic statement of his position is André Gunder Frank, Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967).

⁴⁰³The phrase is recurrent in his writings from this period. The two main sections of Capitalism and Underdevelopment are entitled "Capitalist Development of Underdevelopment in Chile" (pp. 1-120) and "Capitalist Development of Underdevelopment in Brazil" (pp. 143-218). See also his essay "The Development of Underdevelopment," in The Political Economy of Development and Underdevelopment, ed. Charles K. Wilber (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 94-104.

the third world were simply the reciprocal byproduct of industrial expansion in the developed world. The same process that had benefited the one had simultaneously deprived the other. Acting primarily through the instrumentality of transnational corporations, the industrialized bloc of countries had siphoned off resources from the rest of the world and contributed to a process of 'decapitalization'.⁴⁰⁴ The only viable recourse for these underdeveloped nations, Frank believed, was to opt out of the international economic order and pursue a strategy of autonomous socialistic development.⁴⁰⁵

The relationship between this theory and doctrinaire Marxism is a complicated one. In its classical forms, Marxism had regarded the introduction of capitalism into previously unindustrialized nations as an historically progressive occurrence, insofar as it supplanted less advanced stages of economic development (such as feudalism) and set the stage for the ultimate emergence of socialism.⁴⁰⁶ Dependency theory has accordingly often been viewed as an alternative to Marxism,⁴⁰⁷ since it challenges these basic assumptions about capitalism's historically progressive role in underdeveloped nations (as

⁴⁰⁴On this point, see, for example, Frank, Capitalism and Underdevelopment, pp. 6-7, 10, 61

⁴⁰⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 120, 277.

⁴⁰⁶For the clearest articulation of this view by Marx himself, see his "On Imperialism in India," in Tucker, pp. 653-64. See also Chilcote, pp. 13-16 (where, among other things, it is suggested that later writings by Marx on the Irish problem contain the seeds of what became dependency analysis).

⁴⁰⁷J. G. Palma divides the field of dependency analysis into four subsidiary schools of thought, based partly on how each approach differs from classical Marxism (New Palgrave A Dictionary of Economics, s.v. "Dependency," by J. G. Palma, 1: 802-804). See also Love, in Bethell, pp. 446-48; and David Lehmann, Democracy and Development in Latin America: Economics, Politics, and Religion in the Post-War Period (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), pp. 21-2.

well as the whole unilinear scheme of successive economic stages⁴⁰⁸ on which these assumptions are based). At the same time, the Marxist undercurrents in this theory are fairly pronounced, and many versions of it are formulated in explicitly Marxian categories. To begin with, it shows clear affinities with Lenin's description of how imperialism operates at the highest stages of capitalism.⁴⁰⁹ The bifurcation of the global economic order into two spheres with opposing interests tied to one another in a relationship of exploitation merely adds an international dimension to the Marxist class conflict analysis,⁴¹⁰ transforming the Third World, as one observer noted, into a kind of global proletariat.⁴¹¹ A correlation can even be made between Frank's explanation of Third World decapitalization and the classic Marxist understanding of capitalist exploitation based on the expropriation of the surplus value of the workers' labor.⁴¹² In addition, the revolutionary socialist option endorsed by Frank had obvious roots in the

⁴⁰⁸This basic presupposition is summarized in Marx's oft-quoted statement in the Preface to the First German Edition of *Das Kapital*: "The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future" (Karl Marx, "Capital, Volume One," in Tucker, p. 296).

⁴⁰⁹V. I. Lenin, "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (1916): A Popular Outline," in *Lenin on Politics and Revolution: Selected Writings*, ed. James E. Connor (New York: Pegasus, 1968), pp. 111-48; cf. also Chilcote, pp. 16-18.

⁴¹⁰Gutiérrez himself makes this connection at one point: "[O]nly a class analysis will enable us to see what is really involved in the opposition between oppressed countries and dominant peoples. . . . Thus the theory of dependence will take the wrong path and lead to deception if the analysis is not put within the framework of the worldwide class struggle" (p. 87).

⁴¹¹Kirk, p. 102.

⁴¹²Frank makes this connection in *Capitalism and Underdevelopment*, p. 6. Lehmann, however, makes a sharp distinction between the two concepts and contends that "utterly different" (p. 27, fn. 31).

Marxist tradition. So in light of all these considerations, dependency theory came to be generally regarded as an offshoot of Marxist studies.

But whatever its pedigree, there is no mistaking the fact that dependency theory was an integral component of liberation theology, at least in its initial stages of development. Even the liberation theme reflects this connection. As some of the pioneering works in this theological tradition explain it, "liberation" was deliberately chosen as the operative catchword to signal a break with earlier attempts to articulate a "theology of development."⁴¹³ In this context, liberation was viewed as the antithesis of dependency. Liberation theology was therefore intended to represent a new way of interpreting the Christian faith that would, among other things, respond to the growing awareness on the part of Latin American thinkers of their continent's dependent status.

Consistent with this initial design, throughout this body of literature, the Latin American context is characterized in ways that echo the conclusions of dependency theorists--including their more controversial and explicitly Marxist claims. Miguez Bonino provides a clear case in point:

Development and underdevelopment are not two independent realities, nor two stages in a continuum but two mutually related processes: Latin American underdevelopment is the dark side of Northern development; Northern development is built on third-world underdevelopment. The basic categories for understanding our history are not development and underdevelopment but

⁴¹³This contrast is spelled out most clearly in chapt. 2: "Liberation and Development" in Gutiérrez, pp. 21-42. See also Assmann, pp. 45-50, 115-16, 129-30. Denis Goulet traces the "liberation" motif to the so-called "French school" of development studies and contrasts it with alternative approaches to Third World development in his "'Development' . . . or Liberation?" in The Political Economy of Development and Underdevelopment, ed. Charles K. Wilber (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 354-61.

domination and dependence. This is the crux of the matter.⁴¹⁴

The Boff brothers offer a similar perspective, writing: "Development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin. . . . The poverty of the Third World countries was the price to be paid for the First World to be able to enjoy the fruits of overabundance."⁴¹⁵

Among the writers considered in this chapter, Gutiérrez provides what is perhaps the most in-depth and nuanced discussion of dependency theory, citing a variety of social scientific sources representing somewhat different versions of this paradigm. He clearly, however, regards underdevelopment as a corresponding derivative of development elsewhere:

The underdevelopment of the poor countries appears in its true light: as the historical by-product of the development of other countries. The dynamics of the capitalist economy lead to the establishment of a center and a periphery, simultaneously generating progress and growing wealth for the few and social imbalances, political tensions, and poverty for the many.⁴¹⁶

Accordingly, the remedy is framed in terms of a revolutionary strategy:

Only a radical break from the status quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence would allow for the change to a new society, a socialist society--or at least allow that such a society might be

⁴¹⁴Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 16.

⁴¹⁵Boff and Boff, p. 68. The "two sides of a coin" metaphor (which is also used by Boff, p. 276) echoes the words of Frank, who had written: "Economic development and underdevelopment are the opposite faces of the same coin. Both are the necessary result and contemporary manifestation of internal contradictions in the world capitalist system" (Frank, Capitalism and Underdevelopment, p. 9).

⁴¹⁶Gutiérrez, p. 84.

possible.⁴¹⁷

When it comes to construing the message of the Bible, the use of dependency analysis adds additional weight to some of the ideological conditioning factors mentioned previously. By exposing the mechanisms supposedly responsible for creating the deplorable conditions in regions of the world like Latin America and establishing an element of culpability in the process, dependency theory reinforces the whole sense of being members of an oppressed society that shapes liberation theology's interpretive stance. It is, for example, a prime contributing factor in the ability of Latin Americans to identify so strongly with the Hebrew slaves toiling in Pharaoh's brickyards (as well as the corresponding tendency to cast North American political and economic interests in the role of Pharaoh). Dependency theory also adds an international dimension to analysis of oppression--a distinction that is reflected, among other places, in the way Tamez organizes her treatment of this concept in the Bible. Moreover, as self-avowed objects of a neo-colonial form of imperialism, Latin Americans can see their plight adumbrated in the circumstances of Roman occupation that provided the context for Jesus' life and ministry.

In the degree to which its economic prescriptions and style of reading the Bible is influenced by ideological considerations, liberation theology is in no way unique. Previous chapters have shown this to be the norm. What was perhaps distinctive about liberation theology was the extent to which an entire theological movement was (at least in the case of many of its key proponents) predicated on particular ideological claims and

⁴¹⁷Ibid., pp. 26-27.

modes of social scientific analysis. This self-conscious effort to engage the social sciences as a partner in the process of theologizing was, in fact, often touted as liberation theology's signature contribution to the enterprise of religious ethics.

This relationship to a particular social scientific construct, however, also raises some obvious questions about the movement's continuing viability. With dependency theory declining in importance and the broader tradition of revolutionary Marxism losing much of its allure, it becomes necessary to ask what happens to a style of doing theology or a way of reflecting on the meaning of Scripture when the social scientific paradigm that provided the impetus for its development is undermined.

Conclusion

Citing some of the same biblical warrants from the prophetic literature and the teachings of Jesus that proponents of a social market system have often used, liberation theologians intensified the longstanding moral critique of capitalism. The centerpiece of such morally-laden indictments has always been the persistence of poverty, a situation ostensibly reflecting the inability of a market-driven system of allocation to distribute resources equitably and meet everyone's minimal needs. Liberationists (and likeminded advocates of radical political economy) allege that this defect is inherent in the system itself and therefore cannot be remedied by modest structural reforms. An economic order predicated on private ownership of capital invariably generates a dichotomous division between a powerful class of oppressors and the popular masses who are oppressed. Accordingly, rather than a Jubilee-inspired strategy of legislatively-mandated entitlements, liberationists tend to promote an Exodus-based paradigm of revolutionary

social transformation.

This particular pattern of construing the message of Scripture in terms of a recurrent conflict between classes of oppressors and oppressed and finding in it a precedent for class-based revolutionary activism is shaped by a variety of extrinsic factors. To some extent, it is the byproduct of liberation theology's self-avowed commitment to "read the Bible with Third World eyes" and to adopt the perspective of people who are socially marginalized. In addition to this hermeneutical stance, liberation theology's economic ethic is no doubt partly a function of the bias against trade and commerce that has long been an endemic feature of Latin America's cultural milieu. The use of Marxian categories of analysis and the embrace of dependency theory also reflect the prevailing climate of opinion within Latin American intellectual circles. So, once again, an alternative approach to interpreting the message of Scripture and deriving implications from it for a modern economic critique bears the unmistakable earmarks of a particular sociological setting and its attendant ideological values.

CONCLUSION

"What we see when we think we are looking into the depths of Scripture may be sometimes only the reflection of our own silly faces."
--C. S. Lewis¹

This dissertation has sought to advance a more wide-ranging methodological discussion over the role of the Bible in Christian ethics. Specifically, it has used a comparative survey approach to analyze scriptural appeals contained in writings that either explicitly or implicitly support various economic models. Chapter One examined the proposition, principally defended in books by conservative evangelical Protestant authors in the United States, that the Bible mandates the establishment of a free market, capitalistic economy. Chapter Two considered various texts--mostly Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant church pronouncements--that cite the Bible to critique the deficiencies of a market-based economy and to promote an expansion of government-sponsored social welfare measures. Finally, Chapter Three looked at the writings of Latin American liberation theologians, who read the Bible from the standpoint of a commitment to revolutionary socialism.

As even this synopsis of the options included in this study attempts to indicate, the connection between the biblical citations and the corresponding economic proposals takes different forms. Some of the literature under review here makes rather explicit

¹C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), p. 121.

assertions about the Bible supporting one economic system, presumably to the exclusion of any other. In the case of other writings, the connection was more indirect. A new economic paradigm might be endorsed, for example, because it is thought to embody biblical values more adequately than the existing system or because it represents the most viable alternative to a set of conditions deemed to be an affront to biblical standards of justice. In all these instances, however, whether by explicit warrant or indirect inference, the Bible is being used to lend moral legitimacy to a particular model of political economy.

The fact that such widely disparate economic proposals have been justified on the basis of appeals to the same body of sacred writings serves to emphasize the role that factors extrinsic to the text itself play in the process of formulating a social ethic using the Bible. Obviously, some of these attempts to interject the Bible into the debate over the relative merits of competing economic systems may prove to be entirely specious or self-serving (a matter that will be addressed below). But if one recognizes a measure of validity in the way the Bible is invoked by proponents of varying positions, then it stands to reason that the differing conclusions they reach about its economic implications are a function of presuppositions that govern how the text is construed.

Analytical Grid Summary

In seeking to identify some of these preconceived notions, this study has focused on four specific factors. These factors can, in turn, be divided into two sets of variables. The first two elements--the theological assumptions about the Bible and the overall approach to ethics--tend to complement one another. The way the Bible's moral content

and theological status is defined generally corresponds with how the ethical argument is structured. Similarly, the other two factors--social location and ideology--also operate in tandem with one another. One's ideological commitments are at least partially attributable to one's place in the social order and the perspective on society that it affords. The overall findings with respect to each of these factors can now be briefly summarized.

Theology

Needless to say, the writings considered in this dissertation represent a broad spectrum of theological traditions. Consequently, they reflect a variety of understandings about the nature of Scripture and how it should function as a moral and theological resource. For purposes of the present study, however, what is most significant about this diversity is the degree to which these theological differences correspond to the various socio-economic stances that are adopted. Such a correlation, although it is not an exact one, clearly exists in the works surveyed here.

As a general rule of thumb, it would certainly be fair to say that more conservative economic positions tend to be associated with what would customarily be regarded as more conservative or traditionalist views about the Bible. Conversely, more radical economic perspectives were associated with less traditional ways of interpreting the biblical text. This connection need not be an automatic one. But clearly if one starts with a more literalistic understanding of the Bible (the tendency among religious conservatives) and then selectively focuses on particular themes it contains--statements, for example, about the righteous enjoying prosperity or the use of almsgiving to relieve poverty--one could easily arrive at a version of the biblical message that coincides with

the ideological underpinnings of the free market philosophy. Similarly, if one assumes that the functions of government should be restricted to those that are directly enumerated in the Bible (what might be called a 'libertarian hermeneutic'), then one could make a case against the modern welfare state using an argument from silence.

In both of these examples, however, the literalistic way of reading the biblical text must be joined with other assumptions or interpretive maneuvers in order to produce the specified results. It is also worth noting that each of the chapters in this study included isolated figures who reached strikingly different conclusions while following similarly conservative principles of interpretation.² In fact, it would be fair to say that proponents of all three economic systems accept certain elements of the biblical record at face value and often rather uncritically (the major difference being which elements are treated in this way).

What is perhaps even more important than one's theological convictions about the text is the way the overall biblical story is recounted. To cite but two of the many possible renditions, it makes a great deal of difference whether the Bible as a whole depicts a struggle between the Sovereign God and the instruments of state tyranny or

²This point may be illustrated by the fact that all three chapters of this study included subjects who were one-time members of the Evangelical Theological Society in the United States. Members of this society, which aims "to foster conservative biblical scholarship," must annually subscribe to a statement affirming that "the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." (This information is contained in the inside front cover of the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society.) The 1988 "Directory of Members" (Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 31 [1988]: 359-84) contained the names of John Jefferson Davis, Harold Lindsell (both cited in chapter 1), Ronald J. Sider (chapter 2), and Thomas Hanks (chapter 3). Clearly, affirming that the Bible is "inerrant" does not automatically ensure unanimity concerning the economic implications of what it says.

whether it tells the story of a liberator God working to free the oppressed poor from conditions of exploitation (two readings that may actually share some common features, but engender markedly different contemporary applications). To a large extent, such varied renditions of the biblical storyline reflect the operation of different principles of selection. It is readily apparent, for instance, that works espousing the free market philosophy are dominated by studies of the Pentateuch--exemplified by Gary North's monumental "economic commentary" project³--and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the wisdom literature.⁴ Social market writings also focus on certain aspects of the Pentateuch (most notably, the Jubilee legislation), along with the prophetic books and aspects of the Jesus story. Meanwhile, liberation theologians tend to grant primacy to the Exodus narrative and often make it the key to interpreting the rest of the Bible.

Along with the selection of a unifying theme, the other factor that affects what kind of role the Bible plays in the context of a particular argument concerns how its moral authority is brought to bear upon the contemporary circumstances being addressed. One

³Included in this collection are Leviticus: An Economic Commentary (Tyler TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1994); Moses and Pharaoh: Dominion Religion versus Power Religion (Tyler TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985); Sanctions and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Numbers (Tyler TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1996); The Sinai Strategy: Economics and the Ten Commandments (Tyler TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1986); and Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus (Tyler TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).

⁴It is interesting to note, for example, that according to the Scripture index, the book of the Bible that is cited most frequently in E. Calvin Beisner's Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988) is Proverbs, with 125 references. Deuteronomy, with 79 references, is the next most frequently cited book of the canon. By way of comparison, there are a total of 57 references to ten books in the prophetic portion of the Hebrew Bible (including pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic writers).

way of framing this issue is in terms of the level of moral analysis at which the Bible is introduced.⁵ For some writers included in this study--especially in the liberation theology tradition--the Bible functions primarily as a resource for engendering certain predispositions or shaping the readers' overall social stance. Rather than imparting specific moral content, the Bible contains a series of paradigmatic episodes that, when taken together, facilitate a process of "learning how to learn" (as Juan Luis Segundo expresses it).⁶ In other writings, the Bible provides backing for ethical principles. Under this arrangement, the Bible does provide normative substance, but its guidance is expressed in terms of statements that represent a distillation of its moral teaching. The most specific application of the Bible's moral content to contemporary issues occurs in some of the conservative evangelical literature supporting capitalism, where, for example, imposing an income tax rate in excess of 10% is deemed to be unbiblical. Here the Bible functions as a source of specific rules related to modern socio-economic policies. The level of moral discourse at which the Bible is introduced can, therefore, have far-reaching consequences for the shape of the argument.

Ethics

Along with different ways of apprehending the message of the Bible and relating

⁵The work of Allen Verhey, in particular, has applied Henry Aiken's four levels of moral discourse (expressive, moral, ethical, post-ethical) to the issue of how the Bible is used in ethical deliberations. See esp. his "The Use of Scripture in Moral Discourse: A Case Study of Walter Rauschenbusch," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1975; and The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 155-56, 176-77, 187-96.

⁶Juan Luis Segundo, Liberation of Theology, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976), pp. 108-109, 118-22.

it to contemporary moral dilemmas, this study has also illustrated three different styles of ethical reasoning. Once again, it is important to note that while these approaches to ethics influence the way biblical materials are cited and how the overall argument for a particular position is structured, they represent a factor that is extrinsic to the text itself. As Thomas Ogletree has pointed out, several types of moral reasoning can be identified in the Bible.⁷ Moreover, the style of discourse that the biblical writer uses need not automatically dictate the form in which a particular biblical text is used by contemporary ethicists. One could, for example, acknowledge that some moral instruction in the Bible is expressed in the form of rules or moral codes without directly applying those passages to contemporary situations in the form of a rule-based code morality.⁸

Within the various collections of writings considered in the preceding chapters, there are, of course, diverse styles of ethical reasoning. At the risk of oversimplifying the situation, however, three particular types can be identified. The ethical imperative was expressed mainly in the form of either prescriptions, principles, or paradigms.⁹ Traces of a prescriptive ethic can be found in each economic school of thought. Among conservative evangelical defenders of the free market system, however, it appeared to be

⁷Thomas W. Ogletree, The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). See esp. pp. 47-48, 89-92, 192-205.

⁸See, for example, Brevard S. Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), pp. 126-30.

⁹These categories (with minor semantical variations) correspond to the categories used by Edward LeRoy Long in "The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics: A Look at Basic Options," Interpretation 19 (1965): 149-62. They also overlap with the three motifs--prescriptive, deliberative, and relational--used in his A Survey of Christian Ethics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 45-160.

the predominant approach to ethics. Particularly in the literature produced by figures associated with the Christian Reconstructionist movement (a subset, albeit a very influential one, within the category of evangelical supporters of capitalism), certain economic and political arrangements are represented as obligatory, reflecting the will of a sovereign, law-giving deity. Some efforts to develop this idea (especially the writings of Gary North) work extensively with the legal codes of the Pentateuch, which represent a natural source for a prescriptive ethic. However, other literary forms within the canon are also included. The prophetic oracle against the institution of the monarchy in 1 Samuel 8, maxims about wealth and poverty in the sapiential literature, and parables of Jesus that ostensibly extol entrepreneurial activity in the marketplace are among the biblical texts that contribute to the development of the prescriptive social ethic. It is also worth noting that these prescriptions contain positive elements, but tend, most often, to be expressed in the form of negative restrictions (forbidding, for example, government-mandated schemes of wealth transfer or income tax rates in excess of 10%).

A second approach to ethics revolves around the use of principles. Here, a society's moral duty is framed in terms of a more flexible set of standards. The biblical narrative (along with the Christian tradition in general and other sources of moral insight) provides definitive ethical content. But before being applied directly to the concrete issues of economic policy encountered in the contemporary world, this body of normative material is summarized in the form of principles. Many of the statements by U. S. church bodies, which tended to favor a system of regulated capitalism, exemplify this approach to ethics. They propose guidelines such as "Justice requires special concern for the poor

and oppressed"¹⁰ or "Social justice implies that persons have an obligation to be active and productive participants in the life of society and that society has a duty to enable them to participate in this way."¹¹ Clearly such statements are not as specific about the kinds of strategies that might lead to their fulfillment as the prescriptive norms described above. Instead, they invite a process of reflection and evaluation aimed at developing policies that might facilitate their implementation.¹²

Finally, ethical guidance has been sought in terms of what might be called a paradigmatic approach. Proponents of this position, found principally among the ranks of Latin American liberationists, resist what they regard as the abstract, ahistorical formulations illustrated above. Determinations about the proper course of action, they insist, must be made within the immediate, historical context by engaged participants. Archetypal episodes (such as the Exodus-event), however, furnish a pattern that establishes what one's priorities and predispositions should be and that points in a particular direction. Taken as a whole, the Bible depicts a deity who struggles alongside the poor and downtrodden to free them from conditions of oppression and to create a just society marked by mutual solidarity. The appropriate response to this biblical image, therefore, is to take up this cause, adopting the strategies and ideological commitments

¹⁰Presbyterian Church (USA), Christian Faith and Economic Justice (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1989), par. 29.123.

¹¹National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy (Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1986), par. 71. (Hereafter cited as NCCB with paragraph number.)

¹²This principled approach to ethics therefore corresponds to what Prof. Long characterizes as the "deliberative motif" in Survey, pp. 45-72.

that appear to be propelling it forward at any given moment in history.

Another ethical tension illustrated by the economic writings under review here concerns the way in which the available ethical options are presented. On this score, proponents of the systems found at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum engage in a similar form of reasoning. Advocates of the free market system have customarily drawn a sharp contrast between a free market and a command economy and strongly insinuated that any deviation from the former puts a society ineluctably on a slippery slope in the direction of the latter. This type of reasoning--given classic expression in Friedrich von Hayek's The Road to Serfdom¹³--causes figures associated with the Reconstructionist movement to allege that their more moderate evangelical Protestant brethren who have endorsed what are essentially social market measures are, in fact, flirting with socialism (if not communism).¹⁴

Interestingly, a similar style of reasoning is evident in the writings of liberation theologians, who actually do espouse socialism. Here, one finds a recurrent polemic against the longstanding Catholic option in favor of what was often dubbed "the Third Way"--a tertium quid between capitalism and socialism. According to critics on the left, such intermediate positions invariably collapse into support for capitalism.¹⁵ Thus, at both ends of the spectrum, there is a form of reasoning that juxtaposes a pair of

¹³F. A. Hayek, The Road to Serfdom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944).

¹⁴See, for example, David Chilton, Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald J. Sider (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1981), pp. 190-91, 260-65, 286-97, 343-46, et passim.

¹⁵Segundo, pp. 90-95.

contrasting alternatives and rejects the possibility of any viable mediating position. The worst abuses of the rejected option--either the evils of totalitarian communism, for free market proponents, or the evils of unregulated and oppressive capitalism for socialists--then become arguments in favor of the sole remaining alternative.

One could, of course, account for this form of reasoning in a variety of ways. It might simply be regarded as a rhetorical device--perhaps even cited as an example of the flaw logicians have dubbed "the fallacy of the excluded middle." It may spring from a particular way of interpreting historical precedents. It may even be rooted in a fundamental feature of the human psyche--comparable to what Claude Lévi-Strauss regards as the binary structure of the human mind.

In any event, this dualistic approach clearly stands in marked contrast to another way of presenting the ethical alternatives. Rather than stark contrasts, this perspective recognizes both the possibility--and indeed, the wisdom--of adhering to a position that avoids extremes. One finds examples of this form of reasoning in the literature of the social market system. A common strategy is to present free market capitalism and socialism (and/or communism) as undesirable extremes. Having rejected these options, a mediating position is then adopted, roughly corresponding to what is sometimes called a mixed economy.

Again, this form of ethical reasoning has broad resonances--ranging from Aristotle's Golden Mean to the Middle Way in Buddhism. So it clearly reflects a countervailing tendency in the human thought process, that operates as a crosscurrent to the bipolar, disjunctive style of logic displayed in other writings. Interestingly, there are

traces of both forms of reasoning in the biblical sources.¹⁶ But ultimately, the choice of one or the other is a decision that frames the interaction with the text, rather than being derived from it.

Like the theological assumptions about the Bible itself considered in the previous section, it is difficult to assess the extent to which these different ethical methodologies can be correlated with particular outcomes in the economics debate. There are, however, at least some affinities--although not necessarily a direct correspondence--between some of these ethical orientations and the overall logic of certain economic systems. Clearly, for example, a propensity to pursue a middle course and to avoid extremes is bound up with an avowed preference for a mixed economy.

The prescriptive approach to ethics, while it may not lead directly to support for capitalism, is certainly consonant with the emphasis, in many presentations of this economic philosophy, on immutable principles of market behavior. Marxist economics, on the other hand, is driven more by a spirit of historicism, embodying the sense that prevailing economic patterns are the byproducts of an evolutionary process. A contextual approach to ethics, with its emphasis on crafting an historically-conditioned response to changing circumstances, would therefore be a natural complement.

Social Location

This study has also shed light on the way the process of reading the Bible is

¹⁶The disjunctive style is better attested, occurring most notably in the ethical dualism that is a salient feature of the apocalyptic literature. An example of the middle way style of reasoning that has particular relevance to the issue of economics is the counsel to avoid both wealth and poverty in Proverbs 30:7-9.

affected by one's social location and its attendant cultural values--whether it be the bourgeois values of the American middle class, the reformist impulses of new class knowledge elites, or the revolutionary aspirations of Third World intellectuals. Each of these social contexts provides a distinctive vantage point for interacting with the biblical text, and those who occupy one of these niches in the social order almost automatically and instinctively tend to latch onto biblical symbols and motifs that resonate with the dominant ethos of their particular group.

It should be noted that this perspective on social location differs slightly from what has become a standard type of critique. Often this issue has been raised (particularly by practitioners of the so-called 'hermeneutics of suspicion') in order to discredit points of view ostensibly tainted by the self-interested motives of persons occupying privileged positions in society. There are undoubtedly instances in which such scepticism is well-founded. Third World liberationists have illustrated this point with examples of biblical interpretations that serve to reinforce an unjust status quo. Of course, the category of self-interest could be expanded to include more than just economic privileges. New class knowledge workers might have a vested interest in expanding the role of regulatory bureaucracies and other institutional venues (such as academia and the media) where they are firmly ensconced. Similarly, if one's interests include preserving one's self-esteem, then Third World elites would have a stake in affixing primary blame for their countries' economic failures on external forces.

But irrespective of the extent to which self-interested motives intrude into the process, it is clear that one's social location is an integral part of the interpretive context in which any enterprise involving the construction of meaning--including reading a text--

takes place. Those who share common sociologically-identifying characteristics frequently also share a common set of values, mode of discourse, and perceptions about how the social process operates. Thus, this study has suggested, there is a strong affinity between the economic values articulated by members of the conservative evangelical Protestant community in the U.S. and the cultural ethos of the movement's predominantly white, middle class social base--a traditional repository of strong capitalistic sentiments. By contrast, misgivings about capitalism and the impulse to regulate it tend to be most pronounced amongst members of what has come to be called the new class--a constituency that was disproportionately represented on the panels that produced most of the church statements critiquing the American economy. Since the significance of one's social location lies largely in its tendency to engender or reinforce certain ideological predilections, it is to that factor that the discussion now turns.

Ideology

Each set of writings considered in the main body of this work bore the unmistakable imprint of a particular ideological system and it was this factor that ultimately proved to be decisive in terms of how the biblical materials were organized and what inferences were drawn from them. One indication of how important ideological considerations are in the overall process of formulating an economic ethic can be seen in the fact that different proposals are sometimes advanced on the basis of fairly similar (albeit perhaps not identical) biblical and ethical rationales. The Catholic Bishops pastoral letter on the U.S. economy provides a good case in point. Although the letter often echoes the rhetoric of liberation theology (affirming, for instance, a preferential

option for the poor¹⁷), its policy prescriptions are framed in terms of proposals for expanding the welfare state, rather than a revolutionary strategy of change, presumably because the U. S. bishops adopted a different ideological stance than liberationists do.¹⁸

As the discussion often noted, the ideological thought patterns reflected in these writings are all modern constructs, largely formulated in response to the development of industrial capitalism and incorporating values that came to full expression only with the dawn of the Enlightenment. All three systems of thought, in fact, are animated by the quest for freedom that has become the hallmark of the modern era. At the risk of lapsing into the root fallacy (mentioned in the previous chapter), one could even find traces of this connection in some of the terminology associated with each ideological paradigm. Among other ways of describing them, the three models included in this study could be characterized, respectively, as libertarianism, liberalism, and liberationism--a collection of terms all derived from a common Latin root (lībertās) signifying freedom.

Where these ideological perspectives differ is over how they define this value and use it to assess market capitalism. Proponents of unbridled capitalism sometimes call their optimal state of affairs the "free market" or "free enterprise" system, thereby signaling the fact that, in their view, it is voluntary market transactions that should be left free--presumably from state interference. At the core of this conviction is a conception of freedom which entails an absence of government regulation, applies primarily to

¹⁷NCCB, par. 52, 86-88, cf. 24, 62.

¹⁸Thomas L. Schubeck uses this comparison (and a critique of the pastoral letter by liberation theologians Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff) as the basis of a case study in the role of social analysis in ethical deliberation. (Liberation Ethics: Sources, Models, and Norms [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], pp. 89-106.)

individuals, and is protected by a hedge of private property rights.

But for social market proponents, freedom also encompasses the ability of individuals to achieve their potential and to enjoy the benefits of full-fledged participation in society. Rather than posing a threat, government enforcement action becomes a prime guarantor of freedom, when it is viewed in this fashion. Finally, for the Third World tradition of revolutionary socialism associated with liberation theology, freedom entails, among other things, self-determinism for countries exploited by transnational capitalism, as well as the empowerment of people left destitute by domestic oppression.

Another way of defining the differences between these positions is in terms of the value that assumes preeminent importance. The famous rallying cry of the French Revolution elevated three signature catchwords: liberty, equality, and fraternity. But for free market adherents, it is ultimately liberty that trumps all other values and takes precedence over such goals as ensuring a greater measure of income equality. Advocates of a social market system, on the other hand, are willing to sacrifice a measure of personal liberty in order to achieve greater economic equality--usually, again, defined according to an individualistic standard. For Marxian socialists, such individualistic measurements of well-being are inadequate. Collective well-being requires a relationship of solidarity, which might be equated with the classic notion of fraternity.¹⁹

What much of the literature under consideration in this study is attempting to do, of course, is to find biblical resonances for these ideological values--thereby furnishing a

¹⁹See esp. Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), pp. 235, 237-38.

religious foundation for a set of ideals that, in other contexts, may be articulated in purely secular terms. Thus, when read from one angle, the Exodus story becomes a symbol of freedom from economic oppression, connecting it with a key aspiration in the socialist vision of history. For another set of readers, the Jubilee is transformed from a quaint ancient Hebrew institution--the purpose of which is now rather obscure--into a ringing affirmation of the goal of economic equality, a cardinal principle of the modern welfare state.

Interwoven with these value orientations, different ideological systems also incorporate distinctive social scientific modes of analysis. Accordingly, one of the ways the religious writings being surveyed here reveal their ideological predilections is through the social analytical methodologies they adopt. The free market writings, for instance, showed a heavy reliance on insights gleaned from the Austrian school of economics, including marginal utility analysis and the emphasis on the necessity of pricing signals for the efficient allocation of resources. The social market literature makes use of the analysis of market failures, one of the cornerstones of Keynesian economics. Finally, Latin America liberation theology utilizes traditional Marxist class conflict theories to account for some features of its economic environment, along with a neo-Marxian analysis of Third World dependency.

In some instances, these social scientific tools of analysis are actually used to reconstruct the sociological dynamics at work within a particular biblical narrative (as liberation theologians do in applying class conflict analysis to biblical accounts). For the most part, however, social scientific methods are used to interpret the contemporary situation being addressed. In this case, the social analysis determines which biblical

themes or images are deemed to be contextually relevant.

It is clear, therefore, that each body of literature in the preceding chapters has, at crucial junctures, taken its cues from a pre-existing model of political economy. The role that these ideological influences play in the process of interpreting the Bible will be addressed in the context of summarizing the overall conclusions to which this study points.

Summary Conclusions

Using insights derived from the field of economic anthropology, this study has underscored the extent to which there is a formidable--albeit not impassible--gulf between the world inhabited by the communities that produced the Bible and the one in which its modern readers live. Whatever statements the Bible makes about matters that fall within the modern category of economics are inextricably bound up with the worldview associated with traditional peasant agrarian societies. Among the salient features of this worldview are its communal restrictions on land tenure, extensive use of leveling mechanisms, allocation of outputs through systems of reciprocity and redistribution, emphasis on status maintenance, 'limited good' outlook on the supply of resources, and ethic of subsistence. Clearly, this mindset stands in stark contrast to the dynamic, growth-oriented ethos associated with the industrial (and post-industrial) era. Across the ideological spectrum today, there is near universal recognition that technology can be harnessed to serve human ends, that capital investment can enhance productivity, and that economic growth can raise living standards for everyone--all assumptions that would have been inconceivable in societies of the biblical period. Status prerogatives as

a criterion for distributing economic outputs have given way to market mechanisms. Similarly, the industrial firm has replaced the household-based economies of antiquity.

It is important to add that these differences are qualitative, and not just quantitative ones. Given the differences that exist in overall economic outlook, one cannot simply assume that the biblical world was merely a small-scale replica of the modern one. For this reason, applying statements in the Bible about economic practices directly to contemporary issues--even in an analogical way--is a problematical procedure. (Ronald J. Sider provides an example of this all-to-common tendency when he suggests, perhaps somewhat facetiously, at one point that since land was the ancient equivalent of capital, in recognition of the Jubilee principle, the world's Christians should pool their capital assets and divide them equally.²⁰)

Economics, therefore, provides a text-book illustration of the extent to which ethical norms, at least in their precise formulation, are shaped by the concrete, historical setting in which they are articulated. Borrowing a term from Gibson Winter, Thomas W. Ogletree refers to this ethical perspective as "historical contextualism"²¹ and describes it as follows:

Thus, though there is a structure to moral understanding which is derived from constitutive features of the human way of being in the world, that structure always appears concretely in forms and modes which are relative to a given history with its unique experiences and its distinctive cultural legacy. It is only with reference

²⁰Ronald J. Sider, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: A Biblical Study (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), pp. 93-94.

²¹Ogletree, p. 5. Ogletree attributes the term to Gibson Winter, Elements for a Social Ethic: Scientific and Ethical Perspectives on Social Process (New York: Macmillan Co., 1966), p. 244. The concept itself, he points out, can be traced back to Ernst Troeltsch, and ultimately to Hegel's philosophy of history (p. 17).

to such a history and by means of its traditions and achievements that we are able to articulate and enact moral understandings suited to the peculiarities of emerging life settings. Attention to the temporal structure of experience alerts us to our historicity and its role in the constitution of meaning.²²

As a result of this factor, ethicists working with the biblical text, no less than theologians, must be sensitive to the distinction, famously described by Krister Stendahl as the difference between "what it meant and what it means."²³ Clearly, there should be an element of continuity between these dimensions of meaning, and at times they may overlap. But, at least for analytical purposes, a distinction must be maintained between any prescriptive use that is made of a particular text and the descriptive task of reconstructing what it would have signified within its original context using the tools of historical-critical studies.

In some instances, these two levels of analysis may even produce results seemingly at variance from one another. Ogletree sums the situation up as follows: "Here we come up against a basic paradox: to say the same thing as the texts, we must say something different, for that 'same thing' can live again only if it is expressed in a way that is suited to the different reality in which we live."²⁴

The paradox to which Ogletree refers can perhaps best be demonstrated with an

²²Ibid., p. 36.

²³Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, s.v. "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," by Krister Stendahl, 1:419. It should be noted that in recent years, there has been a trend in the direction of denying that such a distinction is plausible. This tendency is clearly reflected in Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones' Readings in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), esp. pp. 14-21, 57-58. .

²⁴Ogletree, p. 3.

illustration. One can imagine a scenario in which a manual of advice written in 1950 contained the admonition: "Never buy any product labeled 'made in Japan!'" If this piece of writing subsequently became an authoritative text for the practitioners of some belief system, this particular directive could conceivably give rise to varying interpretations. It could continue to be construed in a strictly literal fashion, in which case adherents to this code would refrain from buying any Japanese-made products. Of course, in a more highly-integrated global economy, determining which items fall into this category would prove to be difficult--particularly in the case of manufactured goods (such as automobiles) with a myriad of component parts. Presumably, a system of casuistry would develop in order to sort out such problems. In addition, this rule could easily harden into an ideology (in the negative, Marxist-inspired, sense of that term), protecting the vested economic interests of U.S. manufacturers (along with their unionized workforce).

A contextual analysis, however, would reveal that in 1950, the American market was being inundated with Japanese products, often inexpensively priced, but of an inferior quality. Against this backdrop, the admonition in question might basically represent a warning against purchasing an inferior product merely because it appears to be a bargain. Heeding this principle in the contemporary world might now entail reversing the original formulation and purchasing Japanese-made products--often in preference to U.S.-manufactured ones.

Finally, this study has highlighted the inevitable and unavoidable role that ideological constructs play in the process of synthesizing data from the biblical sources and incorporating them into a social ethical claim. This conclusion is, of course,

basically in accord with the perspective on ideology adopted by some liberation theologians--most notably Juan Luis Segundo, who regards it as an indispensable mediating structure between the realm of faith and any concrete historical situation. Using a somewhat different ethical model, ideology could basically be said to operate at the level of what other ethicists have called "middle axioms"--the more specific and provisional ways of defining the ethical task at a given moment in history.²⁵

The analysis sections in the preceding chapters were largely devoted to pointing out interpretive maneuvers that appeared to presuppose a particular set of ideological assumptions. These assumptions, however, were generally more tacit than explicit. In other words, the writings under consideration often conveyed the impression that there was a direct connection between certain biblical pronouncements and a corresponding set of proposals related to modern economic issues.

But as the relevant discussions consistently showed, these ideological considerations were interjected into the interpretive process at several critical junctures. At the very outset, they were often implicit in the questions that were posed to the biblical text, thereby framing the whole method of engagement with it. It may be entirely appropriate to consult the Bible on such matters as the legitimate functions of government or the causes of poverty. But one must recognize that these are modern concerns, prompted by historical developments that post-date the biblical era.

Having set the terms of the discussion, these ideological influences also often provide the selection criteria by which, from amongst the vast array of materials

²⁵Long, Survey, pp. 108-10.

available, certain biblical themes, narratives, or statements are singled out for particular emphasis. Conversely, this same ideological filtering process may exclude or downplay less suitable biblical images. Having narrowed the focus to certain strands of the biblical record, some modern construct was then often used as an interpretive device. Implicit or explicit biblical conceptual categories such as property, justice, or oppression were developed and refined with reference to modern social theories. Ideology therefore assists in the task of systematizing what may essentially be random and inchoate biblical utterances.

An overall sociological perspective also often governs the sphere of application. A thoroughgoing methodological individualism would preclude the possibility of using normative values (derived from the Bible or from any other source) to assess the way some collective social process operates or the outcomes it generates. Since those who adopt this position claim that any pattern of societal behavior is merely the aggregate sum of many individual actions, only those individual acts are susceptible to any kind of meaningful analysis. A holistic sociological perspective, however, does accord substantive status to social entities, thereby making value judgements about them intelligible. Depending on where one comes down on this issue determines, among other things, whether biblical calls for social justice are interpreted as mandates for sweeping structural changes or whether they are construed entirely as appeals for individual acts of charity.

Finally, this study documented several instances in which ideological systems supplied hidden premises in an argument drawing a particular inference from the biblical text. The inference, in other words, was only valid if one made certain other assumptions

that were not explicitly spelled out.

Along with these conclusions about the use of the Bible in Christian social ethics, a few qualifications also need to be made. First, the fact that the Bible might, with some legitimacy, be used in conjunction with different ideological complements to sustain alternative economic paradigms need not imply that there are no limits on the uses to which it reasonably can be put. The fact that a body of evidence is open to varying interpretations does not mean that all have equal merit. This point can perhaps best be illustrated with a legal analogy. In a criminal trial, the opposing counsel can be expected to construe the body of evidence quite differently. The prosecuting attorney will, of course, interpret it in a way that would assign criminal culpability to the accused, whereas the defense counsel would attempt to find exculpatory evidence or construe the facts in a manner that leaves room for reasonable doubt. These varying reconstructions, however, must bear some semblance of a connection to the evidence at hand. A jury, moreover, will ultimately weigh the competing interpretations and render a verdict.

In similar fashion, the different ways of relating the message of the Bible to contemporary economic realities examined in this study are not necessarily all equally cogent and convincing. In addition to identifying hidden assumptions, the analysis sections in the preceding chapters have also noted examples of flawed interpretive maneuvers. Certainly one criterion that may be legitimately employed in evaluating such appeals is that of simple exegetical accuracy.²⁶ This study has documented at least some

²⁶See the discussion on "the importance of exegesis" in Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life, revised and expanded ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), pp. 166-171. D. A. Carson provides a very useful compendium of common flaws (with copious examples) in his Exegetical Fallacies

instances in which the biblical sources were handled in a way that, to one degree or another, contravened generally accepted principles of sound exegesis. In some cases, for example, modern ideas were projected rather anachronistically into the biblical narrative.

Comprehensiveness in the use of varying biblical perspectives is another neutral criterion that could conceivably be invoked for evaluative purposes. If one considers the entire canon to be the appropriate context for theological and ethical reflection,²⁷ then there is a presumption against using the biblical materials in a highly selective manner. It may be that a "working canon"²⁸ or "'functional' canon within the canon"²⁹ is inevitable in concrete situations, and it also is entirely possible to justify a decision to give preference to certain themes and images.³⁰ When this selection process appears to be operating in

(Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984).

²⁷This point is emphasized by, among others, Birch and Rasmussen, pp. 171-76; and Childs, pp. 97-116, 130-38.

²⁸John Goldingay, Models for Interpretation of Scripture (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995); Jeffrey S. Siker, Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth Century Portraits (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

²⁹This phrase is used by Fowl and Jones (p. 53, fn. 23), who explain: "Within a canon as diverse as the one Christians recognize, there is no reason to think that all of its texts will be equally relevant all of the time. Some texts will be more appropriate than others in any given situation." They distinguish this idea of a "'functional' canon within the canon" from a normative canon within the canon--making an a priori decision to exclude certain texts from consideration. They reject this latter notion.

³⁰Various rationales have traditionally been used to justify exercises of selectivity. Based on a theory of "progressive revelation," some schools of theology have granted primacy to biblical texts that supposedly reflect a more advanced stage in the revelatory process. A Christocentric (or incarnational) theology might use the example of Jesus as a criterion of selection. Particular biblical themes might also be singled out because they are considered to be more central or pervasive within the canon or because they represent a stark contrast with the prevailing culture of the period in which they were formulated. Some (or even all) of these options may be problematical, but they at least constitute a

an almost arbitrary and capricious fashion, however, it undermines the credibility of the scriptural appeal.³¹ (To frame the issue in theological terms, affirming that every economic system is marred by imperfections and that none can be equated with the ideal Reign of God does not necessarily imply that all are equidistant from God's Realm.)

Secondly, the fact that ideological forces shape the manner in which the biblical materials are synthesized and incorporated into a social ethical construct does not rule out the possibility that elements of one's faith tradition might simultaneously play a role in the selection of this ideological counterpart and modulate how it is applied. In other words, a dialectical relationship can exist between a set of values that one considers to be biblically-grounded and the ideological model that provides the framework for one's analysis of society. While its message (at least as it pertains to societal issues) may be mediated through an ideological filter, the Bible still retains the potential to exercise a measure of autonomy, enabling it to perform a corrective function.³²

rational basis for operating with a measure of selectivity.

³¹In the literature included within this study, some selective emphases were validated; others were not. Christian Reconstructionists do attempt to justify (citing various textual and theological considerations) their focus on the case laws of the Pentateuch. Similarly, liberation theologians have advanced various arguments to explain why they stress the Exodus narrative. As was previously noted, some religious proponents of the free enterprise system also place a heavy emphasis on the book of Proverbs (while simultaneously disregarding the prophetic perspective). Other writers--especially in the welfare state or socialist traditions--disregard the sapiential literature entirely. Neither of these selective imbalances are ever explained or justified.

³²This point has been made by, among others, Roger Lincoln Shinn, who cites both science and faith as potential correctives for ideological systems. With regard to the latter, he offers the following, rather guarded, assessment: "Any religiously serious person recognizes a responsibility to bring ideology under the judgment of faith. But that is hard to do when faith is already infused with ideology. There are important occasions when persons or communities of faith, by a serious searching of their scriptures or an

Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones describe this process as one of reading Scripture "over-against ourselves" and being interrogated by it. Elaborating on the latter image they write:

Scripture interrogates us in manifold ways. For example, as we have already noted, we come to Scripture with particular predispositions, ideologies and theological presumptions. Left unchallenged, we will fail to recognize the corrupting power of these predispositions, ideologies and theological presumptions. The interrogatory power of Scripture challenges us to be constantly reforming the preconceptions we inevitably bring to interpretation.³³

Though perhaps notable more because of their relative infrequency, there are at least some examples in the literature included in this study where such a process of ideological modification may be taking place. Some of the writings in the tradition of free market capitalism, for instance, address issues of poverty and in a more sensitive way than one might find in a secular briefs for the same position.³⁴ Presumably the theme of securing justice for the poor is so deeply ingrained in the biblical tradition that these writers are seeking to expound that it is impossible to ignore--even for someone who basically subscribes to a philosophy that gives free reign to market forces. At the

experience of prayer, correct their ideologies by their faith. More frequent, perhaps, are those occasions when scripture or prayer simply reinforce existing ideology" (Forced Options: Social Decisions for the 21st Century, 2nd ed. [New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985], p. 233).

³³Fowl and Jones, p. 42.

³⁴Among the writings considered in this study, see, in particular, E. Calvin Beisner, Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in World of Scarcity (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), esp. pp. 191-226. This genre of literature would also include Marvin Olasky, Herbert Schlossberg, Pierre Berthoud, and Clark Pinnock, Freedom, Justice, and Hope: Toward a Strategy for the Poor and the Oppressed (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988); Marvin N. Olasky, The Tragedy of American Compassion (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1992); George Grant, The Dispossessed: Homelessness in America (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1986).

opposite end of the ideological spectrum, one can detect a measure of discomfort among liberation theologians surrounding the issue of violence.³⁵ Although they do not reject it outright, they also seem hesitant to embrace it. Again, it appears as though the Christian tradition might be exerting an influence that helps to offset one aspect of the ideological model they have adopted.

Finally, the fact that a gap exists between the world in which the Bible took shape and the one in which its modern readers live does not automatically preclude the possibility of making valid normative transfers or gleaning morally-relevant insights from the biblical text. Just as it is possible to minimize the differences that exist, it is also possible to overstate or exaggerate their significance. There are, in fact, two fault lines separating the Bible's original social setting from the one that its contemporary readers inhabit. There is an element of historical-temporal distancing and there is also a formidable cultural divide. Yet, it can be argued, neither of these factors abrogates the constitutive features of human nature that provide the basis for moral reasoning. The fact that classic works of literature written in periods throughout history often manifest a timeless quality and address perennial aspects of the human condition in profoundly powerful ways bespeaks the existence of fundamental character traits that transcend any historical gap. Similarly, there is ample evidence of a bond of shared humanity that cuts across cultural barriers. In at least some instances, individuals have established a

³⁵In his study of Segundo, for example, Anthony J. Tambasco prefaces his discussion of this issue with the following observation: "Segundo himself seems somewhat cautious about the role of violence. It seems to be one of the few places where he questions the Marxist social analysis itself" (The Bible for Ethics: Juan Luis Segundo and First-World Ethics [Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981], pp. 213-14).

meaningful rapport across cultural divides arguably even more pronounced than the one separating the Bible's ancient near eastern milieu from the modern, industrialized world.³⁶

It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that the basic moral intuitions expressed through biblical narratives and paraenetic materials may reflect dimensions of the human experience that have a certain universal resonance. In light of the clear and obvious differences in social contexts, identifying and articulating these trans-contextual, cross-cultural moral perspectives requires the exercise of what Max L. Stackhouse has called a "double hermeneutic." In other words, there must be both a hermeneutic of texts that is sensitive to their distinctive cultural horizons as well as a hermeneutic of contexts, able to analyze contemporary social and economic realities with an openness to the possibility of normative transformations.³⁷ This study has illustrated the full range of possible strategies for bridging the divide and bringing biblical insights to bear upon contemporary economic issues. As was pointed out above, not all of these efforts may appear equally convincing. But the fact that some of these attempts have been less

³⁶To cite but one example, anthropologist Kenneth Good spent eleven years living amongst and studying the Hasupuweteri Yanomama, a Stone-age, semi-nomadic, indigenous people group of the Amazon rain forest. Belying their image as "the fierce people," renowned for brutality and aggression, Good made the following discovery: "[T]hese people are just like us. . . . They were frightened and apprehensive. They worried and got angry. They laughed and were happy. Maybe different things set us off, maybe we showed our feelings and expressed ourselves differently, but underneath we were the same. There were no sudden revelations, but slowly it dawned on me that I was simply living with others of my kind." (Kenneth Good, Into the Heart: One Man's Pursuit of Love and Knowledge Among the Yanomama [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991], p. 81.)

³⁷Max L. Stackhouse, "What Then Shall We Do? On Using Scripture in Economic Ethics," Interpretation 41 (1987): 390-91.

adequate than others does not negate the basic enterprise. A comparative analytical survey like the present study achieves its fullest potential only insofar as it helps this constructive task of formulating concrete social ethical proposals to proceed in a more perceptive, self-critical fashion.

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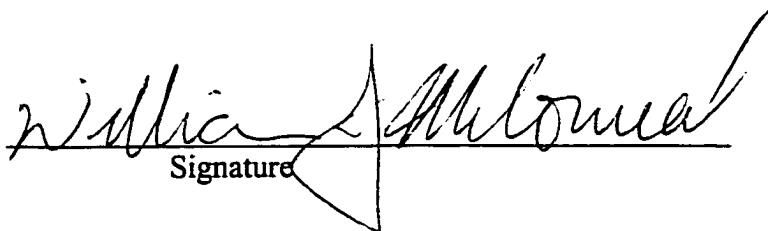
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