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On Poverty: A Call for an Economic and Theological Remedy

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by Andrew E. Kimble and Gerald H. Ellis, Jr.

In understanding how the prevailing mode of capitalism benefits a select number of institutions and their stakeholders, more and more Americans ought to be inclined to identify as economically oppressed. If a successful attempt is to be made at solving the problem of poverty in the United States, “deep solidarity” must be established among those on the margins of economic prosperity.^[1] Regardless of one’s income level, the reality is that the majority of Americans stand in close proximity to the poverty line and are one or two paychecks away from making ends meet.

In this regard, poverty must be viewed as both a material and moral crisis, requiring both an economic and theological response. An economic response not only calls for the redistribution of wealth by means of public policy, but for the restructuring of financial lending to relieve millions of citizens from the burden of debt. It requires both acknowledging and emending wage and housing discrimination, the burden of incarceration and criminal records on individuals and families, especially those in predominantly African-American and Latino-American communities, and the disparities in education funding that contributes to either a muted or exaggerated expression of self-esteem and worth. A theological response must not only demonstrate the moral imperative implicit in caring for the poor, it

must rationally explain the benefits of reorienting one's view of the material world away from that which ought to be acquired to that which ought to be shared. It requires a level of solidarity not yet achieved in the United States in relation to solving the problem of poverty; the upper-class will have to forfeit a degree of comfort and security to help the millions of struggling citizens who are soon to be crushed by the weight of capitalism. While a transdisciplinary approach to the problem of poverty is necessary, complex, and multidimensional, for those of us committed to the task of theology, that is, holding together the *logos* of *theos* or interpreting, methodologically, the contents of the Christian faith, we must consider the value of the discipline of ethics as it relates to poverty.

The discipline of ethics, as stated by James Gustafson in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, "is concerned with what is morally right and wrong about human actions and what is morally good and bad about consequences of actions."^[2] The deontological question of what is morally right and wrong about human actions is of ultimate concern here. Enormous amounts of research produced by the social sciences since the new millennium has informed political and economic decision-makers about the growing wealth disparity, the proliferation of automation, and the impact of race and gender on employment opportunities paying livable wages. While it is reasonable to conclude that the problem of poverty cannot be solved within a capitalist framework, if we are to do anything about anything, those people who call themselves Christian must remember that "Voluntary sacrifice of individual or group interest, while it clearly is a virtue commended by Christianity, is hardly an unambiguous moral obligation."^[3] Concerned Christians must see the value in sacrificing for the good of the poor, and society must develop ways to compensate those who sacrifice. Compensation, in this sense, is not limited to monetary reimbursement but suggests finding creative ways for society to reward those persons who make a difference.

Moreover, properly communicating the economic reality of the majority of Americans is crucial to the success of reversing the harmful effects of individualism and capitalism. For example, the portrayals and narratives of indigent and impoverished communities in media overwhelmingly depict African Americans, Latino Americans, and Indigenous Americans as the ones burdened by current economic trends and practices. These depictions create a false narrative and mischaracterize with whom we ought to stand in solidarity. Statistics conclude that far more White Americans are in poverty and financially insecure than other ethnic groups but continue to reject social programs and anti-corporate policies, and resist calling themselves economically oppressed, because optics suggest otherwise. A case in point is the current political discussion concerning the Affordable Care Act also known as Obamacare. A study was conducted in February of 2017 by Morning Consult, a media and research firm. After interviewing 2,000 Americans around the country, 35 percent did not realize that the Affordable Care Act and Obamacare are the same policy. Furthermore, the firm asked half of the study participants whether they approve or disapprove of the Affordable Care Act and Obamacare. It turned out that "Mentioning Obamacare polarizes people in a way that the Affordable Care Act does not...80 percent of Republicans strongly disapprove of Obamacare. Only about 60 percent strongly disapprove of Affordable Care Act."^[4] This discrepancy is a microcosm of the various ways portrayals, narratives, language, and optics make deep solidarity across ethnic and political lines increasingly difficult.

Theologians often turn to the bible as a resource for making ethical decisions, and both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament offer instructions for how we ought to treat others. A passage from the book of Deuteronomy, the fifteenth chapter, states "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be." (Deuteronomy 15:7-8, NRSV) The book of Jeremiah, the twenty-second chapter, reminds us, "Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place." (Jeremiah 22:3, NRSV) While, at this point, it is conventional to offer an analysis of these scriptures,

the instruction here is rather clear and need not be overcomplicated. We ought to willingly help those in need and be compassionate to those suffering financially, period.

The New Testament also demonstrates what it means to be deeply committed to helping the poor, the hungry, and the dispossessed as evidenced by the life and works of Jesus the Christ. An excerpt from the book of 1 John, the third chapter, asks “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 3:17, NRSV) In the book of Luke, the fourth chapter, as Jesus enters a synagogue at Nazareth on the Sabbath he opens a scroll left by the prophet Isaiah, which reads “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.” (Luke 4:18)

The Lord is using us, at this very moment, to save ourselves by finding practical solutions to the problem of poverty. Unfortunately, the growing divide between the haves and have nots is exacerbated by the individualist mindset which so often succumbs to the pressures of capitalist achievement. The underlying question is, how do we overturn this pattern to instill and encourage healthy economic practices that align with the teachings found in this sacred text? Although we are just beginning to deal with these issues at a high level, it seems that a transdisciplinary approach is the ideal method for engaging the complex and multidimensional nature of poverty today.

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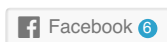
[1] Jorge Rieger and Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger, *Unified We Are a Force: How Faith and Labor Can Overcome America’s Inequalities* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2016), xii.

[2] James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 87.

[3] *Ibid*, 107.

[4] National Public Radio, “Obamacare and Affordable Care Act Art the Same, But Americans Still Don’t Know That,” accessed July 5, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/11/514732211/obamacare-and-affordable-care-act-are-the-same-but-americans-still-dont-know-tha>

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