

## Introduction

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*Just outside of town there was a dangerous highway junction.* So begins one version of an illustrative economic justice story that may be continued this way: That part of the road was so dangerous that it seemed a twice weekly event that wailing sirens signaled new victims. Townsfolk became more and more concerned and donated generously to their hospital. They led efforts to make sure that the community had state-of-the-art ambulances staffed by trained emergency medical crews and good doctors and nurses. They solicited funds for the injured and families of the deceased. Finally, however, after another deadly accident involving teenagers, it was decided that something had to be done about the junction. Unfortunately, estimates were that this would be costly and result in a tax increase. Several of the store owners out by the highway worried that a bypass would take away from their businesses. More covertly, there were questions about what fewer accidents might mean for the high level of town medical services. Some of the older residents were nostalgic about things the way they were and wished people, especially the newcomers in the area, would just drive more carefully. Local contractors, on the other hand, lobbied in favor of the new road, and the county commissioners began to realize that they were faced with a tough decision that could cause loss of votes and perhaps campaign contributions whatever they decided.

The value of such a story is that it illustrates several ways of trying to deal with issues of economic justice—ways that could be seen as complementary, though not always. On a broader scale, one might tell the story in terms of people living in degrading poverty. Surely, caring people say, charitable help should be provided for them. With the

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oldest and perhaps best pastoral care of all, the church could open or strengthen congregations where the poor live. The poor could then be invited into a community of worship and service, as the church ministers *with* as well as *to* the poor. Yet despite these efforts poverty continues and, in some circumstances, even worsens. Concerned Christians and others come together to provide programs and institutions to offer assistance and to lift some out of their condition. Caring people work for better family services and soup kitchens, for better schools, for parks, clean air, medical clinics, legal assistance, job training, “incubators” for small businesses, and employment services. Others, however, recognize that there are imbalances and inequalities built into the political, legal, and economic structures that favor wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor, the working poor, and even much of the middle class. In the midst of debates between economic rationalists and behaviorists, they argue that moral concerns and analysis cannot be excluded as inconsequential or too difficult to measure.

No doubt such illustrations risk oversimplification of complex economic and social issues, while yet a measure of simplicity can also bring helpful transparency to the issues and efforts to deal with them. In the history of the church’s involvement with economic justice matters, and in the essays of this volume, one can discern many of the values and challenges of the three approaches to greater caring and fairness sketched out above: charitable giving, providing better programs and services, and working for changes in the economic and social order. Theologians and practitioners of economic fairness have also found it important to provide a strong rationale through Scripture and biblical theology for involvement in justice matters. Providentially, this is not difficult to do, for the Bible with some frequency advocates care for the less fortunate and poorer members of the society, as well as showering prophetic indignation on those who live well and do not share in the care for those in need.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible, however, is notoriously not a how-to manual, and complications and then arguments about how best to attain greater economic fairness and to work to overcome severe poverty locally, nationally, and abroad arise. Among the most significant of these complications are those having to do with the roles of governments and of

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<sup>1</sup> See my “The Common Good and the Invisible Hand,” *Anglican Theological Review* 87, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 5–22, especially 5–7.

the nation-state, sometimes now acting as the market-state, in increasingly globalized world economies. Again, to resort to simplicity (in this case a simplicity that is often magnified in the politics of the day), is government primarily “we the people” striving to provide common goods and to build and regulate a better society, or is it a danger to individual rights and freedoms as well as to the free enterprise system more generally? There are, of course, many positions in between these views, along with people who see benefits of government programs in certain areas and dangers in others—often depending on who are the beneficiaries. There can also be common ground between those who are pro-government services and those who want “smaller government” and yet are willing to work together for better government less controlled by private interests trying to make outsized profits from public funds.

Embedded in these differing views are variant understandings and emphases regarding the nature of society. The biblical tradition and much of our Christian heritage stress a more communal understanding. “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). Over many centuries canon law that governed Christian societies stipulated the rights of the poor to basic needs. The Protestant Reformation was then both a social as well as religious phenomenon that many interpreters see as the major impetus in bringing about free enterprise and capitalist economies. In particular, an interpretation of the Calvinist teaching of common grace allowed for a separation of the secular from the religious realms that encouraged a developing sense of liberal individualism and individual rights—in later times tending toward libertarianism as well as (unlike Adam Smith) a separation of much economic theory and analysis from ethical understandings. Many Christians concentrated on individual morality, leading to a warning like Reinhold Niebuhr’s 1932 *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, written shortly after another epic financial wreck.

The size and diversity of contemporary societies and nation-states/market-states, along with the increasing effects of ongoing globalization and challenges to the environment, have added to the complexities of issues—not least in the concentrations of capital and wealth disparities. One fact that should remain evident in the context of complexity, however, is that the possession and use of money grants power over other people’s time and labor. That is essentially why

people find money valuable and can fight over it. Money purchases others' time and labor in growing and distributing food, making and selling cars and computers, jewelry and yachts, drilling for oil, teaching children, building houses, painting houses and pictures, making, repairing, and flying airplanes, providing health services, collecting garbage, and on and on. This is why all need it in the modern world, can become anxious over the lack of it, and why, evidently, some people feel they never have enough of it.

Jesus may have been particularly concerned with his neighbors' lack of money to secure basic needs. There evidently was in the Galilee a growing "new poor," as it were, being created by the increasing monetization of the economy and the enclosure of lands that had been used as common property.<sup>2</sup> However those historical matters are interpreted, from early church times a number of Christians have felt called to share in a special concern for the poor and marginalized in their societies. In Anglicanism and in the Episcopal Church one can cite numerous efforts past and present, some of which are well illustrated in the papers of this volume. It is, of course, a mixed story, as there is always room for prophetic criticism of churches that may seem enamored with money largely for self-serving institutional or personal ends, and mixed, too, in the sense that so many of us have trouble getting and keeping our priorities right. Every Christian should continue to hear Jesus' story of the rich man and the Lazarus whom he failed even to notice. That being said, one can give thanks for the many stories that can be told of individuals and parishes, of missions and dioceses, of Jubilee Ministry programs and Episcopal Renewal and Development projects, all engaged in charitable giving and the building of clinics, schools, and programs that reach out to the poor, providing medical, educational, employment, and family services. Some of these services are also done ecumenically and, in another of the complexities of modern society, in collaboration with government programs in networks of agencies. There can also be gratitude for the verbal encouragement and sometimes action in support of the Millennium Development Goals for alleviating poverty and inequalities in large parts of the developing world.

Still more challenging for Christians have been the calls to analyze and respond to the structural and systemic problems in the social

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<sup>2</sup> See Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 219, 221.

order and economies that abet the poverty of the marginalized and the working poor. In the early part of the twentieth century the optimism and hope of the social gospel movement gave church leaders the courage to speak out in ringing tones. So the Episcopal House of Bishops in 1913 resolved that

the Church stands for the ideal of social justice, and that it demands the achievement of a social order in which the social cause of poverty and the gross human waste of the present order shall be eliminated, and in which every worker shall have a just return for that which he produces, a free opportunity for self-development, and a fair share in all the gains of progress.<sup>3</sup>

The atrocities and tragedies of World War I muted the optimism of those who thought it possible to begin the kingdom of God on earth. The Great Depression made things worse but also stirred the voices of those who no longer believed that wholly unregulated markets and capital accumulation in a relatively few hands could bring about an economy fair to all or even the majority. Still under the influence of the Reverend Endicott Peabody, his socially-conscious Groton School headmaster, along with his Episcopalian Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, the Episcopalian Franklin Roosevelt maintained that “the test of our progress in society is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”<sup>4</sup>

Far from being opposed to free enterprise, Roosevelt was a pragmatist who recognized that the United States had and needed a mixed economy in which both robust and genuinely free markets and intelligent and compassionate government could do much good. Charity could not provide enough assistance in a time of severe unemployment and poverty. Social Security would bring a measure of dignity to otherwise destitute elderly persons and enable them to participate in the economy rather than be a drag on it. Moreover, a sound economy needed to be built more from the bottom up with decent jobs and wages. Nor—and here he was following Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—could the country have a stable and moral society

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<sup>3</sup> *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 1913 (New York: Sherwood Press, 1914), 122.

<sup>4</sup> In Franklin D. Roosevelt's Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 1937.

if too much of its great wealth and resources were in the control of a slender minority.

For some Americans and some Episcopalians (including in the church in which I was brought up), Franklin Roosevelt's economic views earned him the sobriquet "class traitor." They, in their eyes, were the men who had helped create the country's well-being and had earned their "middle class," perhaps professional class, fair share of it. Roosevelt could be voted out of office or would pass away, but they hoped not to hear any of what some would call "meddling" or "class warfare" from the pulpit.

Yet for other Episcopalians, what the 1913 House of Bishops and Roosevelt had said came directly from the gospel message. Church leaders like bishops William Scarlett, John Burt, and William Spoford spoke out, and the voices of *The Witness* magazine and the prophetic critic William Stringfellow were not silent. Many others, far too numerous to name here, spoke and marched for civil rights and an economic modicum of equality and dignity that should go with those rights. George Regas and others sided with the farm workers, protesting their paltry pay and harsh working conditions, and joined Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in protesting the morality of a war in which the burdens and costs fell disproportionately upon the lowest in the economic scale and distracted resources from what was then called "the war on poverty." Equality for working women became another important issue. There were laws and structures that needed close attention and changing.

At the time Bishop John Hines helped lead the way. I recall an evening in early 1973 in a country club in Phoenix. I was the young dean of a west coast seminary—there as second-billing to make a pitch for support of theological education. John Hines was there to talk about what he saw to be the major issues of the day and to tell it as he saw it from a gospel perspective. None of us could, he would say to this and other audiences,

with humility receive the Sacrament of the broken body and poured blood of Christ while [any is] denied access to decent housing and jobs and the right to self-determination because of the oppressive character of political and social structures in which we find it convenient to acquiesce. . . . And unless we understand this and learn to change these structures, then the structures

continue to do violence to people all through the whole range of our society.<sup>5</sup>

Probably the greatest challenge of Hines's words that evening was that people there knew he was backing them up with specific concerns and actions.

John Hines would say (and would say the Bible said) that we were sinners unless we repented and sought changes in unfair social and economic structures. At the time I am not sure I knew one could speak to Episcopalians in such an unvarnished way about matters that many regarded as "political" rather than "spiritual," and it may seem that voices like his have been somewhat muted in the succeeding decades. Some may claim that his language was too judgmental, producing more guilt than action and too much of a reaction in the church. Probably of more significance are the partial successes of Social Security, Medicare, forms of Medicaid, aid to small children, the civil rights movement, and efforts for women's equality, leaving the faces of severe poverty less specifically visible. Or perhaps it is also the manner in which immigration from poorer countries has changed the face of the working poor in the eyes of many Americans—coupled with migration, international trade, outsourcing, job losses, and other factors that have to be taken into account in analyzing modern and increasingly globalized economies. Meanwhile, a significant percentage of the world's population—mostly in parts of Asia—has been lifted out of destitution. The successes of the stock market and other investment vehicles over the last quarter-century have produced benefits for the investing classes (and some nonprofit institutions, not least major universities) that have partially masked the stagnation in wages for much of the middle class and the working poor and in some cases, the virtual robbing of their pensions. Some of us can even worry that the success of our Church Pension Fund in producing sound pensions for many clergy, and hefty ones for some, along with additional funds for helpful related programs, has made it seem unsophisticated to question systemic features of the economy. In addition, economic free enterprise has become so firmly linked to democratic principles in the minds of a number of politicians and theorists that

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<sup>5</sup> See Kenneth Kesselus, *John E. Hines: Granite On Fire* (Austin, Tex.: The Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, 1995), 312, 371.

analyses of areas where it does not work fairly or well are decried as not being supportive of democracy. Deregulation and the competence of the “invisible hand” in competitive markets have taken on a near sacred character that, if questioned, can bring the response that the questioner has little understanding of modern economics,<sup>6</sup> while the support of poverty-level workers to gain even a “living wage” is said to cause inflation (a force from which executive pay seems to be exempt) and/or the loss of jobs in a globalized economy.

Perhaps it has taken the wrecks of the recent national and world economic crises, and with them the awareness that greed and foolhardiness can make players with great economic leverage not only ethically obtuse but irrational, to allow the voices of ethicists to play their part again. The response of a number of economists and other professionals that they look at only parts of the picture, along with our learning that one of the country’s chief economists had as his philosophical guru Ayn Rand, may make it possible for theologians and Christian practitioners to have their analyses heard when they raise larger concerns and pastoral questions. Anglicans may want to refer people to William Temple or, better yet, John Wesley, or to quote Christian voices from the recent past—not least Pope John Paul II and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops—that have provided important critique of unbridled capitalistic forces and wholly unregulated competition in markets.<sup>7</sup> At a recent conference on domestic poverty, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, after presenting a compendium of church antipoverty activities, sharply questioned exorbitant usury in our economy,<sup>8</sup> while the Episcopal Church’s Office of Government Relations continues to work for implementation of some of the more important resolutions of General Conventions. But, no, there are no easy answers. If there were, there would be much less

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<sup>6</sup> So read some of the responses to my “Pry Loose the Cold, Hard Fingers of the Market Place’s ‘Invisible Hand,’” *Los Angeles Times* (February 5, 2001): B-11, a satirical op-ed about the near-religious faith people can put in the “invisible hand,” written in the midst of the experiment with electricity market deregulation and as the Enron crisis was soon to unfold. Not everyone takes to satire about such subjects.

<sup>7</sup> See the 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the 1995 follow-up document, *A Decade After “Economic Justice for All”: Continuing Principles, Changing Context, New Challenges*; [http://www.usccb.org/jphd/economiclife/pdf/economic\\_justice\\_for\\_all.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/jphd/economiclife/pdf/economic_justice_for_all.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> In her keynote address at the conference “Called to Serve: The Episcopal Church Responds to Domestic Poverty,” in Newark, New Jersey, delivered on April 28, 2010.



poverty in our world. Yet Christians would not be trying to follow Jesus if they did not persevere in their caring critique and respond to great human need as best they can. For these reasons it is a pleasure to introduce and set in context the essays that follow. What analysis do you the reader find helpful? What responses to the challenges of poverty and economic disparity would you find it best to engage in? Read on!

