

Economic Inequality as God's Law?: Considering the Nature of Economic Life

ALISON LUTZ*

At the Episcopal Church's national conference in 1924, one of the ten issues discussed was "The Christian Approach to the Solution of Industrial Problems." The consideration of this issue opened the door on two different lines of thinking about the role of the church in economic life: whether the current organization of the economic system is a natural and immutable fact of the world created by God, or whether it is a human construction that can be influenced and changed to bring it more into alignment with Christian principles. This paper will consider the arguments made in 1924, and offer a brief analysis of their implications for how the church speaks to economic life today.

When the Church Congress of the Episcopal Church met in Boston on its fiftieth anniversary in 1924, one of the ten issues that it discussed was "The Christian Approach to the Solution of Industrial Problems." The consideration of this issue opened the door on two different lines of thinking about the role of the church in economic life. One argument, put forth by industrialist William H. Barr, posited that the market economy system is natural and ordained by God. Economic decisions are therefore not subject to moral debate and thus there is no role for the church in economic discussions. The other argument, which Episcopal minister John Howard Melish and a handful of others gave voice to, asserted that economic systems are ordered by human hands to serve the shared well-being of all people and that the church has a role in advocating for an economic system that embodies Christian principles. Identifying these two arguments,

* Alison Lutz is an Episcopal priest recently ordained in the Diocese of New York. She serves in rural Haiti through Partners In Health and is a part-time volunteer priest with the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti. She holds degrees from Emory's Candler School of Theology and Yale Divinity School, and a certificate in Anglican studies from Berkeley Divinity School.

studying their implications, and critiquing their viability will be the main thrust of this paper. Following these analyses, I shall consider briefly how these arguments appear in today's understanding of economic life, nearly one hundred years after the 1924 Church Congress meeting. By the end of this discussion, I hope to demonstrate that the church's evolving history and its theology offer unique resources for the work of creating a society that is more equal and where all people can thrive.

In the early twentieth century, industrial problems originating in the conflict over wages and working conditions between those who labor in manufacturing and those who own the means of production were rampant. Notorious activities in the industrial sphere featured prominently in American life, from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, which claimed the lives of 146 garment workers, to the horrors of the meatpacking industry captured in Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle*. From sweatshops to food production, the drive for profits trumped human welfare. Workers and consumers suffered the consequences. But workers struck back. From 1870 to 1920, there were more strikes in America than in any other country. The year 1919 saw more than thirty-six hundred strikes involving more than 4 million workers.¹ Violence and intimidation were commonly employed by public and private authorities to prevent workers from organizing unions, to ward off strikes, and to force laborers back to work—most infamously at the Ludlow Massacre during the Colorado coal strike of 1914. It is in this context that the Episcopal Church chose to address “The Christian Approach to the Solution of Industrial Problems” at its Church Congress in 1924.

The Church Congress selected two people from opposite ends of the labor debates to present papers. William H. Barr, President of the National Founders' Association, presented the first paper. Barr represented an anti-union view. In his role as President of the National Founders' Association, Barr was quoted in the *New York Times* in 1920 as calling the work of labor unions “coercive efforts” of a “small, destructive minority.”² He opposed the eight-hour workday and made

¹ Robert H. Zieger and Gilbert J. Gall, *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University, 1994), 6.

² *The New York Times*, “Declares Country Wants ‘Open Shop’; William H. Barr Asserts Question is of Utmost Importance to the People,” November 18, 1920.

“frequent sharp attacks on union policies.”³ John Howard Melish, Rector of Holy Trinity Church in Brooklyn, New York, delivered a paper in response to Barr’s from the opposite end of the political spectrum. A “notable leftist,”⁴ Melish preached against the National Guard’s interference in the Colorado coal strike of 1913–1914,⁵ and was a member of the Christian Socialist League.⁶ Following the delivery of these two formal papers, the conference invited speeches and remarks in response. Five of these responses—along with the papers delivered by William H. Barr and John Howard Melish—were published in 1924, in a volume called *Honest Liberty in the Church: A Record of the Church Congress in the United States on its Fiftieth Anniversary*.⁷

Barr sets his paper against the backdrop of truth and law, both spiritual and natural. Melish, by contrast, uses historical Christian movements for social reform as the frame for his argument. Both Barr and Melish explore the values that should be factored into economic decisions; how economic inequality relates to freedom; and what the role of the church ought to be concerning the problem of industrial relations. Barr emphasizes the inevitability of economic laws like supply and demand while Melish focuses on love and resistance as principles guiding a Christian’s behavior in the public sphere. The other speakers dedicate their responses almost entirely to critiquing Barr’s arguments. They take issue with various aspects of Barr’s paper. Almost without exception, though, the main difference between what Barr and all the other presenters argue turns on whether the economic system as it currently stands is a natural and immutable feature

³ *The New York Times*, “William H. Barr Dies; Ex-Industrialist, 70,” November 19, 1944.

⁴ Jacqueline Castledine, “Quieting the Chorus: Progressive Women’s Race and Peace Politics in Postwar New York,” in Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, ed., *Anticommunism and the African Freedom Movement: “Another Side of the Story”* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 71.

⁵ Howard Zinn, Dana Frank, and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Three Strikes: Miners, Musicians, Salesgirls, and the Fighting Spirit of Labor’s Last Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 44.

⁶ John F. Woolverton, *Robert H. Gardiner and the Reunification of Worldwide Christianity in the Progressive Era* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 52.

⁷ *Honest Liberty in the Church: A Record of the Church Congress in the United States on its Fiftieth Anniversary, A.D. MCMXXIV*, with an introduction by Charles Lewis Slattery (New York: Macmillan, 1924).

of the world created by God or a human construction that can be influenced and changed to bring it more into alignment with Christian principles.

As the first speaker, Barr opens his paper and thus the entire topic with an appeal to the theological concepts of truth and law. In Barr's view, all truth is from God. It is objective and can be known by human beings through a proper understanding of the phenomena around them. "All truth is one," Barr writes, and this same truth can be known through many disciplines, "from the point of view of economics or morals, as ministers or manufacturers, as Churchmen or business men."⁸ Economic principles are not socially agreed upon aspects of human culture that can be manipulated by human whim; they are fundamental, universal truths designed by God to be recognized by human beings. In this opening construction of economics as spiritual law, Barr attempts to carve out a space where economic theory is not subject to theological inquiry because in Barr's construction economics is a parallel and equal discipline. Opening with this line of argument serves two purposes for Barr.

First, by linking economic theory to the same category of knowledge and truth as spiritual law, Barr establishes his authority as a businessperson to speak as an expert to a church conference. Barr does not take the posture of a technical consultant offering an explanation of economic theory to a church body gathered to consider the moral implications of such theory. Rather, by equating economic theory with spiritual law, Barr establishes his authority to make moral claims from his position as an expert in business.

Second, Barr's equation of economic theory with spiritual law attempts to limit the church's authority to speak on economic systems and behavior. If something makes sense economically, Barr argues, it must be in alignment with God's truth insofar as economics is a manifestation of the one truth established by God. According to Barr, "It cannot, therefore, be that right economics can be wrong morals, or that the spiritual law can conflict with the economic."⁹ The church has no moral claim on things economic, for in Barr's view they inherently unfold according to God's truth. Indeed, the church causes harm when it attempts to make claims in the economic sphere, in which

⁸ William H. Barr, "The Christian Approach to the Solution of Industrial Problems: A Paper," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 321.

⁹ Barr, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 321.

it has no expertise. "The economics of the Almighty are more sound than the theoretical economics of many sentimental reformers," Barr thunders, "for the laws of economics are as much God's law as are the Ten Commandments, and he who teaches unsound economic law is as misleading as he who teaches wrong spiritual law."¹⁰

Most of Barr's arguments stem from his assertion that "all truth is one," and his use of this claim merits interrogation. Barr uses this blanket statement to keep the church from weighing in on economic matters but he never explains why one discourse or manifestation of God's one truth cannot make claims about another discourse or manifestation of God's truth. If all truth is one, then different disciplines or manifestations of God's one truth cannot be mutually exclusive and therefore it is perfectly appropriate for the church to turn its attention—and its lens of theological inquiry—to the economic sphere. The same claim that functions to establish Barr's authority to make moral judgments from his position as an expert in business also works to establish the church's authority to make judgments on the economic system from its position as a moral authority.

Barr's ecclesiological position lays out areas of life in which the church should engage and areas of life on which the church should remain silent. Barr's ecclesiology relies on a dualism between the spiritual and the material. The church, according to Barr, should concern itself only with matters of people's souls and should leave people's bodies and material lives to be regulated by the so-called laws of nature, whether the physical law of gravity or the economic law of supply and demand. This dualism between the spiritual and material elements of life contradicts a large swath of the scriptural witness, namely Matthew 25, where Jesus praises the righteous for having taken care of the material needs of the vulnerable: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and clothing the naked.

Barr does not see that his characterization of "right economics" as divinely ordained should make it all the more appropriate for the church, also divinely ordained, to engage with questions of economics. Barr takes his claim to "right economics" to be objective and irrefutable. But how does Barr define "right economics"? Right according to whom and to which criteria? Right, Barr says, according to the market value of production, the law of supply and demand. Barr takes as his example how the rate of wages is determined. Wages, according to

¹⁰ Barr, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 327.

Barr, are set by natural law, a law “as immutable as that which sends the torrent to the foot of the Niagara. The wage-earner’s return depends on the market value of his product, and nothing else.”¹¹ Barr’s appeal to Niagara Falls evokes power, gravity, and inevitability. It would be futile to try to stop the flow of Niagara Falls. Attempting to interfere with the way wages are set by market demand is similarly foolhardy.

Barr uses this discussion of wages to reinforce his claim that the church should not concern itself with economic issues because the church brings to bear non-economic principles like human need, which end up doing more harm than good in the economic sphere. “The very fallacious idea is abroad,” Barr writes, “that wages should be arbitrarily determined by an employer on the basis of an employee’s needs.”¹² Factoring human need into the wage equation is misguided in Barr’s view. “It is out of the preaching of such false economic doctrines,” Barr scolds, “that confusion has arisen and distrust has been generated. Much of this preaching—in fact most of it—has been done by those outside of industry.”¹³ Barr critiques the source of these ideas: non-economists. When non-economists like moralizing church leaders introduce into economic calculations concepts like human need—which in his view do not belong in the economic sphere—these actors sow conflict and distrust.

Barr goes on to attack explicitly the idea that workers should be compensated according to their need: “There is prevalent in the minds of many outside of industry the vague idea that the term ‘brotherhood of man’ means that the weaker members of society should be subsidized by the strong and as a result receive more than they earn.”¹⁴ The calculation to determine what a worker should be paid is related only to the market value of what she or he produces—the amount that she or he earns, merits, or deserves according to the market, not according to the needs of a person living in this economic system.

Barr determines the essential value of everything—even the value of human beings and their labor—based on its market value in the capitalist system and calls this “the economics of the Almighty.” The *imago dei*—the basic theological premise that human beings are

¹¹ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 325–326.

¹² Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 324.

¹³ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 324.

¹⁴ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 327.

made in the image of God—refutes Barr's claim. The *imago dei* asserts that because they are made in the image and likeness of God, all human beings have intrinsic value. If all truth is one, as Barr states, then valid economic systems would account for the *imago dei* in the determination of how human labor is valued, even in market calculations. Human beings would not be reduced to the value of the things they produced for the market. Instead, the value of human well-being and dignity would be taken into account when goods, services, and labor are exchanged.

Reducing the value of human beings to the value of the goods they produce in the market system is a theologically weak proposition for another reason. One of the characteristics of God is that God is creator. God makes things. But the identity and value of God the maker of all things is not defined strictly by the value of things God creates. The infinite creator is inherently greater than the finite world God created. In the same way, human beings—made in the image and likeness of God—are of more intrinsic value than the inanimate products they make.

Barr's thinking is dis-ordered in the Augustinian sense in that Barr has improperly ordered the capitalist market system as more important than the quality of life and livelihood of his fellow human beings. According to Barr's logic, the capitalist market system is the highest good and full human flourishing can be sacrificed in order to serve this system. A view of the economic system in line with the *imago dei*, by contrast, would order full human flourishing as the higher good. The economic system would serve full human flourishing and take into account the well-being of every person, regardless of her or his ability to participate in the capitalist market system.

The Christian theological concept of redemption also undermines Barr's claim that remuneration based on what a person earns according to the market value of her or his labor is "the economics of the Almighty." The very heart of the Christian gospel is that human beings cannot earn their salvation; it is a free gift from God to people who are patently undeserving of it. In God's economy the weak are not only cared for but they also reveal the nature of God in a particular way: "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27). Everyone receives more than she or he deserves and God especially chooses the weak to check the power of the strong. Not so in Barr's view of the economic sphere, where the value of people is reduced to the market value of the things they produce and where

the strong refuse even to care for the weak, let alone be held accountable by them. The “vague idea” Barr rails against—that “the weaker members of society should be subsidized by the strong”—is the very gospel Jesus came to proclaim: God seeks out those who are spiritually or materially weak and lost and God restores them based not on what they deserve but on what they need.

The Christian principle of the body of Christ reveals another fundamental flaw in Barr’s argument: Barr’s logic is distorted because of its exclusive focus on extreme individualism. When Barr turns to address the question of economic inequality—the existence of which might be raised as a reason why economic matters should not be left in the hands of economists alone—Barr parses the notion of equality to draw a distinction between equality of possession and equality of opportunity. He privileges the latter claiming, “Inequality in possession was the inevitable result of the preservation of equality of right and opportunity.”¹⁵ For Barr, economic inequality is an “inevitable” and “unavoidable” feature of reality. Barr points to God to justify his claim: “the Almighty Dispenser of all talent distributed it unevenly.”¹⁶ Barr’s reasoning here is overly individualistic. He fails to take into account the fundamentally communal reality of the body of Christ. Humanity is formed as one into the body of Christ, a mystical and material reality. The different gifts, talents, and skills that individuals possess are not meant to be amassed for individual gain; they are to be used to build up the entire body of Christ.

Barr makes the same mistake with the notion of responsibility. His focus collapses onto the individual and he forgets about the relational nature of the body of Christ. He encourages each person to “accept the responsibility of his job.”¹⁷ There is no notion of people’s responsibility to each other. Barr does invoke “social as well as individual obligations”¹⁸ but these responsibilities flow in one direction only: the individual worker is obligated to play her or his role in the industrial system to perpetuate the functioning of social, political, and economic systems. The industrial system and the people who lead it, however, do not have a reciprocal obligation to promote the well-being of the individual worker.

¹⁵ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 322.

¹⁶ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 322.

¹⁷ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 331.

¹⁸ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 331.

Somewhat surprisingly, Barr understands the interdependence of people and resources in the economic sphere. He sees this interdependence, however, only from the limited point of view of maximizing profits:

The stimulation of a particular industry energizes the dependent industries which contribute to it. . . . But out of the sale of the product, whatever it is, must be paid all who contribute to it. . . . If any among the human contributors receive more than their due share, someone receives less than his proportion. It follows, then, that if any factor is powerful enough to place an artificial and uneconomic charge upon his service, . . . he does so, not merely at the expense of an employer, whoever he may be, but rather at the expense of other employees.¹⁹

He uses a restricted understanding of interdependence as a scare tactic to discourage workers from taking “more than their due share” of the market value of the goods they produce. In organizing, they are driving up costs and therefore taking profits from “other employees.”

When Barr addresses workers, he invokes fear of scarcity and employs a divide-and-conquer strategy to keep them from organizing. When later in his paper Barr addresses shareholders and describes to them the benefits of the capitalist market, he does not employ this same tactic or rhetoric. He crows that profits do not “go into a few hands, but rather into those of millions of shareholders in every form of enterprise.”²⁰ Compared to industrial workers, shareholders hardly “contribute” to the value of the product and yet Barr never entertains the idea that if workers were paid more, it could be the shareholders’ profits that should decrease. By claiming that potential wage increases come at the expense of other workers, Barr pits workers against each other. He is intentionally sowing the same distrust he accuses the reformers of fomenting.

Economically, Barr’s claims about natural law and economics rest on weak ground. The discipline of economics at its inception was conceived as a social science, not as the study of natural phenomena like the laws of physics. The field of economics was originally called “political economy.” It was only in the late nineteenth century that those in the field of political economy changed the name of their discipline

¹⁹ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 325.

²⁰ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 329.

to “economics” so that it would appear more like an objective science that accorded to immutable laws. This allowed “economists” to escape blame for influencing and manipulating market conditions that kept people in economic misery.²¹

Driving wages down so low that workers cannot live and participate fully in the economic system goes against sound economic theory. Quoting none other than Adam Smith, whom free marketeers take as their patron saint, Kathryn Tanner points out, “‘No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.’ States therefore generally maintain their populations above a certain poverty line by means of some sort of public provision whose extent and character will not discourage those who can from seeking work.”²² It does not make sense economically to ignore wider social factors in the market calculation of costs and benefits. This fundamental economic principle is lost on Barr.

Even as he rails against the notion of “subsidizing the weak,” Barr ignores the ways in which the wider social system subsidizes industry. Public schools educate those who work in Barr’s foundries. Public roads and buses allow them to get to work. Barr does not factor these government expenditures into his economic equation for production. He believes taxes are collected from industrial profits “for non-productive purposes.”²³ Barr fails to see the way that public spending on infrastructure and education creates the conditions that make industrial production possible.

Barr exaggerates the benefits of industry and ignores its costs. He asserts that the efforts of industrialists “enlarge the capacity of the earth to support life upon an ever improving scale of convenience and comfort.”²⁴ This claim completely overlooks the measurable environmental toll that industry takes on the earth, as evident in Barr’s day as it is in ours. Furthermore, the assertion that industry enlarges the *earth’s* capacity to support life makes it sound as though industrial production were generating natural resources. This is patently not the case. Industry uses the earth’s resources to enlarge the capacity of people to live in comfort. This raises the question: which people? Barr

²¹ Gordon Bigelow, “Let There Be Markets: The Evangelical Roots of Economics,” *Harper’s Magazine* (May 2005): 37.

²² Kathryn Tanner, “Is Capitalism a Belief System?” *Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 630.

²³ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 328.

²⁴ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 323.

claims that leaders of industry “place at our disposal an ever larger surplus of wealth, out of which to support the finer and nobler things of life.”²⁵ The finer and nobler things of life for whom? Clearly not for the workers, whose needs Barr refuses to factor into the economic equation. In his narrow calculation of the costs and benefits of industrial life, Barr not only leaves out workers, but he also fundamentally misunderstands the concept of a noble life by overlooking love and mercy. Does not care for the most vulnerable count as one of the finer and nobler things of life?

Practically, Barr's argument is not only weak; it is inconsistent and misleading. Barr is inconsistent in how he approaches the so-called forces of nature. In the face of the “immutable laws” that set wages according to the market value of a product or the inequality of fortune that “unavoidably” results from the preservation of personal liberty, Barr cautions workers and church leaders to submit to the inevitability of so-called economic laws. When it comes to the industrialists amassing social power, however, Barr valorizes a struggle against the “forces of nature”:

Social power rises out of the control which men obtain over the forces of nature in the eternal conquest which we, of necessity, wage with her. . . . Social power has not been advanced by an increase in physical strength, but chiefly by the continuing application of the mind to the consolidation of the facts of the universe. As we penetrate the secrets of nature, analyze them in the laboratory, apply them through the arts of invention, and by organization and administration make them available to the service of men, we enlarge the capacity of the earth to support life.²⁶

Barr encourages human beings to wrestle with the facts of nature and to organize them for the purposes of increasing economic opportunity, but he fiercely opposes the idea of wrestling with market forces and organizing workers for the purposes of increasing economic equality.

Barr's argument is not only inconsistent; it is misleading. Barr argues vehemently against the very thing his National Founders' Association exists to do. Though Barr claims that wages are fixed by forces as natural as gravity and that it is therefore harmful to interfere with

²⁵ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 323.

²⁶ Barr, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 323.

the laws of the market, his National Founders' Association worked very hard to affect the rate of wages in ways that benefitted foundry owners over workers. In 1900, for example, foundry workers in Cleveland, Ohio, went on strike to demand a 10-cent increase in their wages, from \$2.75 per day to \$2.85 per day. The National Founders' Association, asking all of their members for a contribution, raised enough capital to offer \$2.00 per day bonuses to any worker who would go to Cleveland and work in the foundry. Roughly three hundred workers took the bonus and replaced the striking workers at the foundry in Cleveland, undermining the strike.²⁷ Marshaling large amounts of capital to nearly double wages for temporary workers in the short term in order to prevent the permanent wage increase of 10 cents per day demanded by striking workers exerts a staggering amount of influence on and interference in the setting of wages. It also takes breathtaking hubris on the part of Barr to lead an organization that takes such actions, while also claiming that unions are bad because they artificially manipulate wages that should be set by free market forces. Barr seems unaware of the double standard that he represents: he deplores the efforts of workers to organize in order to pool their bargaining power when negotiating with manufacturers and yet he heads an association that organizes manufacturers in order to pool their capital to exert increased power over workers.

Barr concludes his paper with an exhortation to the church about what its role should be in relation to industrial problems. The content of his conclusion carries the same message as his introduction: the church should leave economic questions to business experts and simply "provide spiritual teaching as an aid to economic leadership."²⁸ Barr employs a scare tactic here, warning the church that it could lose its power by entering debates about social and economic policy: "Our Church risks its badly needed spiritual influence," Barr writes, "by mingling with it the support of theoretical or even possibly sound political and social panaceas."²⁹ Just as Barr employs theological arguments not for their own sake but places them in service of his economic and political agenda, Barr wants to place the church in the service of the status quo for the economic system. Barr does not want

²⁷ *The New York Times*, "Bonds Plan to Break Power of Unions," November 18, 1900.

²⁸ Barr, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 331.

²⁹ Barr, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 331.

the church critiquing, interrogating, or holding the economic system accountable. He wants the church to provide spiritual support for the existing economic system—specifically for its leaders, not for the workers who labor within it. In Barr's ecclesiology, the primary role of the church is to uphold the social, political, and economic status quo. The church should not interfere with new social and political policies even when these innovations are "possibly sound." Barr seeks to restrict the role of the church to the spiritual sphere, which he sees as thoroughly separate from the material world. The church, for Barr, has no claim on social, political, or economic life.

In his response to Barr, John Howard Melish's main argument is that "the religion preached by Christ and the Apostles was one of love *and resistance*."³⁰ For Melish, the genealogy of this idea begins with Christ and the apostles and can be traced to the church of Melish's day from the leaders who Christianized the Roman Empire, to the sixteenth-century European religious reformers, and through the Puritan settlers of America. The logic underlying Melish's argument is that human beings in relationship with God drive the movement and evolution of church history. Melish emphasizes the Mayflower Compact in particular. His invocation of the Mayflower Compact—the social agreement written by the early English settlers of America—demonstrates that the common life of human beings is regulated by socially constructed laws made by Christian people, who agree to submit to them mutually. These socially constructed laws accord to "God's ordinances"³¹ because they are set up by faithful Christian people. The Mayflower Compact established a new social structure put in place by Christian people when the old social order had become exploitative and abusive, as it had for the Puritans in England. This is the image that Melish invokes to establish his argument in support of the church's active role in making the economic sphere more just.

Strategically, invoking the Mayflower Compact in his opening construction inoculates Melish from the "anti-American" label frequently leveled at socialists like Melish. None other than William H. Barr, in a *New York Times* article from 1920, equates being a socialist with being not American. Barr even goes so far as to say that socialists

³⁰ John Howard Melish, "The Christian Approach to the Solution of Industrial Problems: A Paper," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 335.

³¹ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 335.

should be eradicated from public life in the United States. "We require that Socialists be eliminated from public life," Barr states, "and from public office . . . until we shall eventually have in Washington an American administration in the best sense of the word."³² Melish preempts this line of attack from his opponents by aligning himself at the outset of his paper with the spirit of religious freedom that is associated with the founding of America. Referencing the Mayflower Compact explicitly roots Melish's argument in the core values for the common good established by the founders of America. Indeed, using the Puritans as an example, Melish argues that the church should be an active advocate of innovations which seek to enshrine God's commandments in the laws people draw up to govern themselves. This strategic reference functions in direct response to Barr's closing argument that the church should be "the firm protector against all those innovations which undertake to substitute the statutes of men for the commandments of God."³³

Melish's next move considers how inequality and freedom are related. His position stands in opposition to Barr's take on freedom. Barr makes income inequality and personal freedom directly proportional: the more personal freedom is protected, the more income inequality will be the unavoidable result.³⁴ Melish questions Barr's equation. For Melish, protecting personal freedom does not inevitably result in income inequality. He argues the opposite: that income inequality and personal freedom are inversely proportional. The greater the income inequality between company owners and workers, the less personal freedom workers will have. Melish takes as his example company towns where the company dictates every aspect of a worker's life. "Workers are daily under the dictation of their employers. Their children are educated in company schools, the Churches are supported by company money, the library, if there is one, is filled with books bearing company approval."³⁵ Melish draws this analogy out and says it is not only workers living in company towns who experience such restriction of personal freedom because of economic inequality. All working people have become slaves to wages: "What is true of such places [company towns] is in a sense true of our entire industrial system. Men are free

³² *New York Times*, "Declares Country Wants 'Open Shop'."

³³ Barr, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 332.

³⁴ Barr, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 322.

³⁵ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 336.

merely to quit work and hunt another job; which is only a theoretical freedom."³⁶ Melish cites workers' lived experience to challenge Barr's conceptual market theory on freedom and inequality. Melish's rhetorical use of the human experience of freedom to argue against Barr's presentation of incontrovertible theoretical laws regarding freedom parallels Melish's opening tactic of using the course of actual church history against Barr's appeal to abstract law.

A lot is at stake theologically for Melish in this restriction of freedom that he describes. For Melish, freedom is a characteristic of God and is at the heart of what it is to be human and to be human in relationship with God. "Something deep in man," writes Melish, "something of God Himself, bids men be free indeed."³⁷ The church faces real consequences if it fails to be on the side of human freedom and instead counsels people to submit to a stifling status quo: "When it [the church] has taught submission to working people and benevolence to employers, the masses in whom class consciousness has developed have turned their backs on the Church."³⁸ This strong statement serves as Melish's answer to Barr's warning that if the church involves itself in social and political issues, it will lose its spiritual influence. Melish argues the opposite: if the church does *not* speak out and resist the social and economic forces that keep people in misery the masses will reject the church.

Melish deplors a system that "measures all things by their money values."³⁹ He grieves the fact that the economic system in the 1920s reduces everything to its monetized market value, instead of honoring "life, character, or personality."⁴⁰ For Melish, a system that commodifies everything in life is incompatible with Christianity: "A system based on Mammon is not fit for the rule of Christ."⁴¹

Melish makes clear that the economic system should serve human flourishing, and not the other way around. The shared well-being of people should not be sacrificed for the sake of the capitalist market system. Melish points out that for the better part of the nineteenth century the market economic system *did* bring increased wealth and

³⁶ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 336.

³⁷ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 336.

³⁸ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 336.

³⁹ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 337.

⁴⁰ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 336.

⁴¹ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 337.

prosperity to most Americans. Beginning around 1875, however, the system no longer served the common good and began primarily to serve a small select group who controlled the means of production, at the expense of industrial workers. Since the economic system exists to serve the common good, it should be changed when it no longer serves that purpose. Following the Archbishop of Canterbury's 1918 Report on Christianity and Industrial Problems, Melish believes society has reached the point where the economic system no longer contributes to shared well-being, and thus calls for a change in the entire economic system, "a fundamental change in the spirit of the industrial system itself."⁴²

The first step toward change in the system, Melish argues, is to require economic equations to account for values that are not currently factored into them, namely brotherhood, sacredness of personality, and service. The second step, Melish believes, is "to agitate in favour of a more Christian social order."⁴³ Melish does not call for a clash between the owners of capital and workers, with church leaders on the sidelines wringing their hands and wondering which side to join. Melish sees this agitating for a more just society as the duty of all Christian people, whether they are employers or laborers. Melish acknowledges that different people will have different roles in the building of a new economic order: workers should organize; citizens should vote; and church people should advance theological reflection on the current economic system. Melish invokes here the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury's report which exhorts church people to "urge our fellow Christians to ask themselves once more whether an economic system which produces the striking and, as we think, excessive inequalities of wealth which characterize our present society is one which is compatible with the Spirit of Christianity."⁴⁴ Melish counsels all people to do what they can in whatever situation they find themselves to make the common good available to all.

This exhortation to do what one can within one's particular situation brings Melish back to his opening argument: "Christian life is both love and resistance."⁴⁵ Melish explains that "both principles should be active in us all; we should love the good and resist the bad in

⁴² Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 338.

⁴³ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 342.

⁴⁴ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 342.

⁴⁵ Melish, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 343.

our own social attitudes and in our world.”⁴⁶ For Melish, the Christian is called in all things to love and resistance. This love and resistance must, therefore, be particular to each generation as it encounters the state of the world in its own era. Melish makes this point at the beginning of his paper by naming the generations of faithful Christians who resisted unjust social structures. He places his argument about contemporary economic systems in the line of reforms beginning with Christ and the apostles and ending in the Mayflower Compact to show that his generation of Americans must rise to do its part to establish a more just social order.

Melish ends his paper with another litany of the lineage of resistance in which Christians find themselves, from the Christians who opposed feudalism and ushered in democracy, to the Christians in the United States who opposed slavery. Melish's argument finds nuance. He notes that the voices for abolition in the United States were not greeted with unanimous approbation in the North, as one might assume. “There were a few [voices for abolition] here in Boston,” Melish notes, “and Boston mobbed them and declared the very name abolition anathema.”⁴⁷ As he calls for people to join the struggle for social change, Melish shows that he is not naive about how social change works. It is never simple anywhere. Each Christian has a duty to undertake it nevertheless. Working for social change is what it means to pick up one's cross and follow Christ in one's own generation. In this way, Melish's appeal to Christian history as the framework for his argument is not a theological gloss on a project of secular reform. Advocating for a just social order is, for Melish, at the heart of following Christ's call to love and resistance.

Following Melish's paper, *Honest Liberty in the Church* prints speeches made in response to the papers of Barr and Melish. The self-selecting people who offer these speeches tend to be on the progressive side of the social issues of the time, though not exclusively so. I will consider the responses of Mary Van Kleeck and William Lawrence Wood. Both follow Melish's basic line of argumentation: the social structures that underpin people's common life are mutable and should be adapted to embody Christian principles. While neither Van Kleeck nor Wood invokes the Mayflower Compact explicitly, each one

⁴⁶ Melish, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 343.

⁴⁷ Melish, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 344.

asserts that the establishment of a new economic order is desirable and possible in light of the Christian life.

Mary Van Kleeck, a self-identified Christian socialist and the daughter of an Episcopal priest, was a strong advocate of labor unions. She directed the department of industrial studies at the Russell Sage Foundation, a progressive social sciences research organization. Later in Van Kleeck's career, Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, appointed Van Kleeck to the Federal Advisory Council of the United States Employment Service in 1933, but Van Kleeck resigned after a day due to her conviction that the policies of the New Deal weakened unions.⁴⁸

In her speech, Van Kleeck agrees with Barr that current realities and conditions in the industrial system must be acknowledged before efforts to bring about change can be made. The work for change must address the industrial situation as it is, not as the reformers would wish it to be. Nevertheless, Van Kleeck disagrees vehemently with Barr's theoretical framing of the realities of industrial life:

This present system of industry is not an institution which has extended through the ages, with laws handed down at the time that the Ten Commandments were handed down; it is a concrete condition beginning with the machine and extending with all its ramifications into many varied phases of our life. It is because of that . . . that we cannot accept any idea of immutability in a system which is man made and man controlled.⁴⁹

Van Kleeck is adamant that the economic system is not immutable. By invoking the changes to our economic life that the machine age brought, Van Kleeck shows that the way human beings order their common social and economic life can be changed.

Van Kleeck believes not only that the industrial system can be changed, but that it *should* be changed because it has reduced the value of human beings to their value to the economic market. "Those who believe that humanity and human beings are greater than goods or profits are demanding that there be a fundamental change in our

⁴⁸ Eleanor Midman Lewis, "Van Kleeck, Mary Abby," in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1980), 708.

⁴⁹ Mary Van Kleeck, "The Christian Approach to the Solution of Industrial Problems: A Speech," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 348.

industrial order,”⁵⁰ Van Kleeck proclaims. The current industrial system—as Barr makes clear—values human beings only for the monetized market value of their labor. For Van Kleeck, this is the reason the industrial system needs to be changed to take into account human values in our common economic life.

Van Kleeck demonstrates concretely that change geared toward social good is possible in the economic realm. She reminds her audience that things that are taken for granted as a natural part of working life today were fought for, in the face of claims that such change would be impossible. She takes as her example the struggle to establish an eight-hour workday. The eight-hour workday had been considered socially good, but people claimed it was unfeasible according to economic reality. Once social pressure forced the adoption of the eight-hour workday, however, it became clear that it was not, in fact, economically impossible. “It is not much over a year ago that Judge Gary stated: ‘Socially the eight-hour day is desirable, economically it is impossible,’” writes Van Kleeck. “Then a change came, and suddenly it was announced that the hours of work would be reduced from twelve to eight.”⁵¹ By invoking this example, Van Kleeck takes away the power of Barr’s argument that certain socially desirable factors—like taking into account workers’ needs in the setting of wages—are economically unfeasible.

Van Kleeck believes that factoring social goods into economic life is not only possible, it benefits industry. “I am exceedingly optimistic,” she proclaims, “over the results in industry of placing human values first.”⁵² In an argument consistent with Kathryn Tanner’s invocation of Adam Smith, Van Kleeck makes the point that unhappy, overworked laborers paid too little are not good for business or society in the near-, medium-, or long-term.

Van Kleeck’s argument does not, however, conclude on this utilitarian note. To conclude, Van Kleeck turns to her theological roots, to the image of the kingdom of God. Human beings have the capacity to determine what kind of social and economic systems they establish and the kingdom of God should be the measure of these relationships:

⁵⁰ Van Kleeck, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 350.

⁵¹ Van Kleeck, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 351.

⁵² Van Kleeck, “Christian Approach,” in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 352.

We must rediscover the ideal of the kingdom of God, and we must realize that that is not a thing for the few, it is actually something here and now which, beginning in human hearts, is actually expressed in all the relationships of life, and what kind of city we build, what kind of factory we build, what kind of arrangements we make for our human relations, is simply the picture of our conception of the kingdom of God.⁵³

For Van Kleeck, the kingdom of God by definition takes into account the welfare of everyone. Everything people do should be oriented to building up their common life and shared wellbeing. Actions and decisions should be judged not by how they benefit an individual, but by how they benefit a common end. Van Kleeck believes that the ideal of the kingdom of God should drive the social and economic systems that humans set up to order their common lives. All businesses and professions should serve the shared values of the kingdom of God. Van Kleeck puts Christian values first, and wants to shape the social structures and economic system to serve these values. This line of argument is the inverse of the way Barr uses the rhetorical force of theology to reinforce existing political, social, and economic systems that benefit the few.

Not all of the respondents who questioned Barr's basic premise were self-identified Christian socialists like Melish and Van Kleeck. William Lawrence Wood, the Rector of an Episcopal Church in Waban, Massachusetts, is the least overtly political of Barr's respondents. There is no clear historic record of Wood's political activity. He held prominent positions in the Episcopal Church, as an assistant to the Bishop of London and the Rector of Trinity Church in Lenox, Massachusetts, where he presided at the society wedding of Kitty Lanier Lawrence and William Averell Harriman in 1915.⁵⁴ He could certainly not be called a radical.

In his speech, Wood nevertheless challenges Barr directly on Barr's presentation of economic laws as immutable:

We have heard to-night from Mr. Barr of these economic laws, which he spoke of as God's laws, laws which cannot be changed. . . . Well, now, it altogether depends on what the nature of those laws is. All economic laws are laws in part between men, or

⁵³ Van Kleeck, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 354.

⁵⁴ *The New York Times*, "In the Berkshires," July 11, 1915.

between men and money. Men have control over them, and if you can change the man's attitude you can to some extent change the law.⁵⁵

Like all of the people who stood to make a response to Barr's paper, Wood questions Barr's fundamental premise that economic laws are natural, inevitable, and immutable. Given that the economic system is made up of relationships between people and between people and money, people can change the economic system.

Wood believes not only that the economic system *can* be changed, but that it *should* be changed because it does not accord to America's founding ideal of freedom. Wood does not invoke the Mayflower Compact explicitly, but he does employ Melish's strategy of grounding his argument in the lived experience of real people. Wood recounts how he used to live near an oil field where workers lived in a company town. He would come to preach to the workers once a week. The company surveilled his sermons to make sure that he did not encourage the workers to change their working conditions. The workers themselves were fired if they even mentioned an eight-hour workday. Wood believes that these restrictions of free speech go against America's core values and they therefore indicate that the economic order needs to change. For Wood, this change should be gradual, but it should come nonetheless. "We want a gradual change," he says, "and that is why the Christian Church must make a change towards a more Christian and a more social industrial order."⁵⁶ It is perhaps not surprising that a person like Wood—a member of the clergy with connections to the elite—would advocate for gradual change. What is surprising is that he speaks out for change at all. For Wood, this change must come first in the hearts of people. A "change of spirit" will precede and lead to a change in the social order.⁵⁷

Despite the fact that most of the respondents who chose to address the question of the problem of industrial relations at the 1924 Church Congress spoke to disagree with Barr, it seems from a twenty-first-century perspective that Barr's arguments carried the day. Almost ninety years after Barr laid out his case, his thesis that the laws

⁵⁵ William Lawrence Wood, "The Christian Approach to the Solution of Industrial Problems: A Speech," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 357.

⁵⁶ Wood, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 359.

⁵⁷ Wood, "Christian Approach," in *Honest Liberty in the Church*, 359.

of economics are as immutable as the physical laws is so thoroughly accepted that this argument no longer has to be made to convince people of it. It is assumed, and taken to be as natural as the air people breathe. Today, the fact that Wendell Berry, Kathryn Tanner, Gordon Bigelow, Rowan Williams, and Paul Farmer have to argue that another way of seeing economics and valuing life is possible attests to the dominance of Barr's line of thinking.

Wendell Berry—poet, farmer, ethicist, essayist, and winner of the 2010 National Medal of Arts and Humanities—describes the way that arguments like Barr's about the immutability of the current economic system have come to be taken for granted:

All assume, apparently, that we are in the grip of the determination of economic laws that are the laws of the universe. . . . It seems that we have been reduced almost to a state of absolute economics, in which people and all other creatures and things may be considered purely as economic "units." . . . And the voices bitterest to hear are those saying that all this destructive work of mindless genius, money, and power is regrettable but cannot be helped.⁵⁸

Berry laments the very thing that Barr argues for.

Theologian Kathryn Tanner makes the point that "capitalist markets are not inevitable, . . . but optional artifacts or institutions of human construction that, because of that very fact, require a reason for being."⁵⁹ Like Melish and Van Kleeck, Tanner posits that the current capitalist market system is not a natural, immutable fact but a socially agreed upon system that must continually demonstrate that it is the best configuration of economic life. The capitalist market system can be a tool to help human beings; if it no longer serves the common good, then it can and should be changed.

English Professor Gordon Bigelow takes a historic approach. He recounts the evolution of the current market system and demonstrates that it is a socially constructed economic arrangement influenced by cultural norms, not determined by so-called natural laws of supply and demand. Bigelow traces how the field of economic inquiry intentionally changed its name from "political economy" to "economics" in

⁵⁸ Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2003), 207–208.

⁵⁹ Tanner, "Is Capitalism a Belief System?" 618.

a calculated effort to be perceived as a hard science.⁶⁰ This provides perspective that the economic system is, in fact, mutable.

Another aspect of Barr's argument is being resisted today: the commodification of every aspect of life. Citing the work of Michael Sandel, Rowan Williams, the theologian and then Archbishop of Canterbury, critiques "universal" or "absolute commodification"—a philosophy "that regards any imaginable object or transaction as capable of being exchanged for measurable material."⁶¹ The consequences are serious. If everything is reduced to its value for exchange in the market, then nothing has inherent worth. Nothing is valued for its own sake but only for how it can be useful or profitable: bodies, labor, relationships, religion.

Williams points out how far contemporary society has gone down the road toward absolute commodification. "There is virtually nothing," he writes, "that has not somewhere or other (usually but not exclusively in the USA) been packaged as a commodity and subjected to 'market' principles." Williams turns to contemporary debates about education as an example. Education reform in the United Kingdom is being discussed, he writes, "almost entirely in terms of whether this will guarantee a 'more competitive workforce.'" Williams points to this as an example of the triumph of absolute commodification: "That education could have some value other than improving profits seems to be unthinkable."⁶²

Across the Atlantic Ocean and from the field of medicine, U.S. physician and anthropologist Paul Farmer provides another example reinforcing Williams's view that market ideology now reigns supreme. Recent medical literature, Farmer points out, has begun to argue that the relationship between a doctor and patient has a positive effect on patient outcomes. Enlightened health management organizations, the literature suggests, should therefore see that "compassion is cost-effective," which causes Farmer to remark that "the need to argue that even compassion can be cost-effective shows how entrenched

⁶⁰ See Bigelow, "Let There Be Markets," 37.

⁶¹ Rowan Williams, "From Faust to Frankenstein: Markets Alone Should Not Determine Our Conception of What is Desirable," *Prospect*, April 23, 2012, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/economics/rowan-williams-archbishop-canterbury-markets-sandel-skidelsky-marx-morality-aristotle-good-life/>.

⁶² Williams, "From Faust to Frankenstein."

these processes of market ideology have become in U.S. medicine.”⁶³ Taken together, Farmer and Williams show the unquestioned influence market values have assumed.

This victory of market ideology over every aspect of life and thought gives eerie resonance to Barr’s claim that “all truth is one.” And yet, Barr’s totalizing view of economic life in which the worth of anything is defined strictly by its value in the capitalist market system can be resisted. Archbishop Williams offers possibilities of what this resistance can look like, suggesting that concepts like shared well-being and the common good should be reinserted into public discussion and factored into our personal and societal decision-making processes. Doctor Farmer would argue that compassion should be cultivated and practiced for its own sake, and not primarily because it turns out to be cost-effective.

The record that we have about the Episcopal Church’s discussion of the economic system at the 1924 Church Congress provides insight into the church’s unique position to challenge the supremacy of the market ideology that has become the status quo over the course of the last century. The status quo is maintained when people think that no other way is possible. Oppressive systems can reign unopposed when they are invisible, as natural as the air we breathe and as inevitable as the pull of gravity. Everyone who responded to Barr’s argument at the 1924 Church Congress addressed the fact that the contemporary economic system is not an unavoidable fact of nature. It takes moral imagination for people to see that the social reality in front of them is not the whole story and that change is possible. If the argument turns on whether change is possible despite what seems like overwhelming evidence, then the church has tremendous resources for forming people in this new way of seeing. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ shows that the powers of death and destruction—no matter how totalizing they may seem at any given moment—do not have the last word. Barr may have had the first word at the 1924 Church Congress and his argument may appear to hold sway ninety years later, but thanks to the faithful people who responded to him in 1924 and to those who today dispel the myth that his arguments have helped solidify, he does not have the last word.

⁶³ Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), 309.