

SOCIETY AND ETHICS: THE CHURCH AND WORLD HUNGER*

I. A VIEW OF RECENT STATEMENTS

Late this past winter and through the early spring the *National Catholic Reporter* published a series of articles and letters debating *Liberty and Justice for All*, the preliminary bicentennial document of the NCCB.¹ The series was prompted by a lengthy essay by Andrew Greeley, charging among other things that the ministry for justice in the American Church had become a presumptuous top-down operation, the work of a disaffected counter-elite lacking grassroots support. I don't agree with Greeley. But when I began reviewing statements issued by various church groups on world hunger, I found something quite like the situation Greeley described.² There were bits and pieces of pastoral strategies, a few repeated theological themes, but nothing that could be called a pastoral theology of hunger. For the most part, statements on world hunger were directed to the public policy debate on food aid, agriculture development, nutrition, trade and related areas. There were

*ED. NOTE: This paper, together with that of Margaret Farley, formed part of the presentation at the Seminar/Workshop on Society and Ethics. A third paper by David Hollenbach on Catholic Population Ethics was not available at the time of publication.

¹Andrew Greeley, "Catholic Social Activism: Real or Rad/Chic?" February 7, 1975; David J. O'Brien, "Greeley's Scenario Features Straw Men," March 7, 1975; Greeley response, March 14, 1975; Letters, February 21, 28, 1975.

²This paper refers indiscriminately to "the churches" and "the Church," because I am considering the political role of the Christian churches in the United States. In section three (III) I am referring to the Roman Catholic Church particularly and examining two sources in our own tradition for a theology of hunger.

The documents to which I refer are the following: "American Farmers on World Hunger," *Worldview* 18, 5 (May, 1975), 42-5; Eugene Carson Blake, "Dieting for Others," *Worldview* 17, 10 (October, 1974); J. Bryan Hehir, "The Food Crisis and the Church," *Worldview* 18, 2 (February, 1975), 35-8; NCCB, "The World Food Crisis—A Pastoral Plan of Action"; Pope Paul VI, Address to the World Food Conference, November 12, 1974; (Bread for the World) "The Right to Food: A Statement of Policy," *Worldview* 18, 5 (May, 1975), 45-8; (Aspen Consultation on Global Justice) "A Statement of Conscience," *Origins* 18, 7 (July 18, 1974); Milo Thornberry, "The Churches and World Hunger," *Christianity and Crisis* 35, 1 (February 3, 1975), 12-6.

only schematic attempts to persuade the average Christian of the pertinence of this issue to his or her basic faith commitment.

Set against the American political background, there were good reasons for a church strategy to be weighted toward public policy recommendations. In 1974, for one, the need for food relief was both urgent and massive. Church agencies, moreover, play a key role in the distribution of so-called "humanitarian aid" for the U. S. government. Secondly, there was really no voice to take the part of the hungry in the halls of Congress and with the executive except the religious constituency. The ecumenical appeal led by Father Hesburgh and Cardinal Cooke was probably the single most important lobbying effort in the battle to make American grain available to hungry nations.

A third reason for addressing chiefly public issues on hunger were the complex economic, social and political problems which come together when one tries to address this issue. Responsible participation in the public debate made it incumbent on the churches to take up such problems as agricultural development, terms of trade, commodity prices and population control as the price of effective participation in the policy discussion. It also required not only that they think in terms of multiple problems, but that they construct strategies assigning priorities to how these several problems should be attacked. Fourthly, it is almost inevitable in a pluralistic society that the discourse the churches employ in the public forum is not the same as the language used in appealing to the religious community itself. As a result there has been a general lack of carefully developed religious language about social problems. I say "religious language," just as earlier I spoke of a "pastoral theology," because in the Roman Catholic Church at least there is a considerable body of social teaching, but much of it is yet to be translated into terms which can be grasped by the people in the pew and integrated into their religious life and practice. In short, we need a pastoral theology for the modern world and its social problems. Few problems invite richer treatment out of a biblical tradition than does this issue of hunger.³

³See Bruce C. Birch, "Hunger, Poverty and Biblical Religion," *The Christian Century* 22 (June 11-18, 1975). This piece appeared during the CTSA convention, and differs from the suggestions made here in proposing that the U. S. churches need a biblical theology which addresses the powerful.

There are four points of strain in the present strategy. (1) Despite the high visibility of world hunger, its appropriateness to biblical and liturgical themes and the light it sheds on injustice in the modern world, we lack a theology of hunger to articulate the Church's concern with this need and to root this concern firmly in its religious mission. (2) Without a pastoral theology, the personal response of Christians remains divided from the public stance of the official Church. (3) Consequently bishops, clergy and staff people become isolated from the average parishioner. (4) In neglecting to develop a pastoral language about hunger, the churches, including our own, have underestimated their potential for leadership on this issue with the wider American public which perceives world hunger as a problem with special ties to religious motivation.⁴ In sum, I would argue that unless world hunger is grounded in the central symbols of the faith, the issue itself and its proponents are in danger of becoming trivialized.

II. BIBLICAL GROUNDING

My contention up to this point has been twofold: that the Church needs a popular social theology, and that if she had one, she would be able to tap latent religious motivation both within and without the Church itself. The expectation of the popular American mind in this respect is a more accurate index of the gospel message than the disillusioned attacks on liberation theology in recent Christian thinking. The man and woman in the street expects the churches to take the part of the needy and oppressed. For the uniqueness of the Christian message is that God who was afar drew near and ministered to us. Even in the Old Testament God revealed himself as having a special relation to the disinherited. "God, who does what is right," reads Psalm 103, "always

⁴In stressing the significance of religious symbols for moral motivation, I take my cue from Reinhold Niebuhr who distinguished between "rational" and "religious" resources in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner's, 1932). I don't believe the distinction as drawn by Niebuhr is an adequate description of the springs of the moral life. Neither do I accept the dichotomy between reason and emotion which stands behind the distinction. Nonetheless, in public affairs where reason is equated with efficiency, religious symbols play an important role in breaking down the self-regarding patterns of thought and action which otherwise dominate political life.

takes the side of the oppressed." But in the New Testament a nexus clearly is revealed between the nature of God in Christ and our care of one another. Jesus teaches that since we see God is compassionate, so we too should be compassionate. God's action is the paradigm of our action—this is the nexus of a social theology.⁵

In a recent book on ecclesiology we read: "While service is often extolled, the Church does not envisage the task of the Church as service."⁶ I suggest, to the contrary, that the mission of service is the great ecclesiological secret of the New Testament. Just as the nature of Jesus' messiahship was misunderstood by the disciples, so too the Servant Church, modelled on the Servant Saviour, represents an idea which the disciples had the greatest difficulty comprehending.⁷ And despite the idealized visions of the first community in Acts, the primitive Church seemed to have the greatest difficulty in remembering this hard teaching.⁸ In Jerusalem, Greeks complained that Jewish Christians did not share equally with them, and in Corinth the rich let the poor go hungry. Perhaps it will always be so. But the central revelation of God for those who turn to him is that the love of God and service of neighbor are one. That is why the man or woman in the street expects the churches to take up the cause of world hunger. My point here is only that there is no lack of theological foundation for themes which orient our faith commitment toward a hungry world.

III. TWO POSSIBLE SYMBOLS

The form of religious practice in any era depends on the reigning paradigm of divine encounter.⁹ If that paradigm is individualistic and

⁵See Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), pp. 214-8. Also, James M. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 114-7, and *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 150ff.

⁶Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), p. 92.

⁷Mark 9:35; 10:41-45 par.; Luke 22:27; John 13:4-15.

⁸Acts 5:1-11, 6:1-6; 1 Cor 11:17ff.; Jas 2:1-9.

⁹In speaking of a paradigm, I have in mind a characteristic style of Christianity, including doctrine, liturgy, morals and other expressions of faith. Harnack's

cultic in its orientation, then only those activities which center around individual salvation and sacramental practice will be taken seriously. Other activities will be seen as secondary dimensions of the life of faith. They will be commendable, but not necessary. If the dominant theological paradigm is confessional as it was in the age of the great councils, in the period of the confessional wars following the Reformation, or among some Pentecostal Christians today, then confession of faith and correct language of faith will be primary. Worship will become an occasion to witness to one's faith, to confess the *symbolon fidei*, to inculcate correct doctrine, or to preach the word of God. Everything else will either recede in importance, or be colored and shaped by the confessional paradigm. It will be the same with the ministry for justice. The Church's effective commitment to justice as a "constitutive element" of evangelization will depend on the emergence of a paradigmatic understanding of Christian life which highlights certain symbols and themes rather than others, stresses certain practical signs of commitment as opposed to others, and gives a new tone to liturgical worship and private prayer. The integration of the ministry of justice in the Church depends on a paradigm shift which reaches into every area of ecclesiastical life. Without such a change, social teaching will remain, as it was for so long, a dead letter.

Poverty

One of the two important theological contributions the Roman Catholic tradition can make to a pastoral theology of hunger is to be found in the notion of evangelical poverty. The teaching of Jesus and the early Church stressed the sharing of goods with the needy and among the brethren. The primitive practice was neither rigorist, i.e., ascetical in its aim, nor was it individualistic. It was genuinely religious

"dogmatic Christianity" represents one such paradigm. The most complete survey of Christian life-forms remains Ernst Troeltsch's *Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960). Though its scholarship is outdated, it is still an important source of insight. Subsequent efforts such as H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Kingdom of God in America* and *Christ and Culture* err by examining ideas without reference to the social context. W. H. C. Frend's trilogy, *The Donatist Church*, *Martyrdom and Persecution* and *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* is probably the best sustained effort by a contemporary historian to provide a "social history" of patristic Christianity in which there is a genuine interplay of ideas and praxis.

and fully communal in character.¹⁰ The sharing of property was an expression of the fullness of grace experienced in the community. It was an affirmation that God and the kingdom were near.¹¹ It was also a fulfillment of the love commandment in keeping with the ecclesiological secret. "Among the pagans it is the kings who lord it over them, and those who have authority over them are given the title Benefactor. This must not happen among you. No, the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves . . ." (Luke 22:24-26).

From the beginning, however, poverty, or better common life came under pressure. Divisions and rivalries arose in the expanding communities. The functional difference of charisms and ministries became grounds for self-seeking and vainglory. The early Church soon had as much difficulty living out the Gospel as the apostles had had comprehending a kingdom of service. The ecclesiological secret was once more a difficult saying. By the late fourth century poverty was no longer a primary expression of church life in the Roman tradition. By Augustine's time its very meaning had changed.¹² It was the self-abnegation in voluntary poverty which was praiseworthy, not one's solidarity with those in need. True, the Church maintained a strong position against injustice, but social justice and the essential discipline of communal possession were divided from one another. With that division, communal poverty was marginalized. It was a peripheral, supererogatory element of Christian life, no longer a basic part of one's faith commitment.

Centuries later in the reform movements of the middle ages, both clerical and lay religious movements re-asserted the centrality of poverty in their efforts to imitate the legendary apostolic life. For the most

¹⁰See K. E. Kirk, *The Vision of God* (New York: Harper, 1966), pp. 55-67, 108.

¹¹See Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 214-8.

¹²See Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), Chapter XX, "Two Cities . . . Two Churches," pp. 313-42, for an important interpretation of the transformation of the idea and practice of evangelical poverty in the time of Saint Augustine. For a vigorous response to Frend and a defense of Augustine, see Gerhart B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), Excursus V, "Saint Augustine's Attitude to the Socio-economic Order of His Time and a Recent Book on Donatism," pp. 463-8.

part the reform movements which survived with approbation perpetuated the self-denying and individualistic characteristics of the late patristic period. Only such movements were compatible with the feudal character of the medieval Church. Protest movements which attempted a reintegration of poverty with social concern were excluded from the mainstream. To this day the religious orders preserve the notion of Christian poverty and communal life in a singular way. Nonetheless, the segmentation of poverty as an evangelical counsel to be practiced by a select few means that, despite appeals to an apostolic model, common sharing of goods is peripheral to the religious life of the average Catholic Christian. One could conclude, then, that the history of Christian poverty has been the history of its marginalization.

I would like to suggest that until the centrality of service in Christian revelation becomes a theme of theological speculation and a focus of practical devotion and liturgical piety, the needs of the hungry will remain only an extrinsic concern for Catholics. The reintegration of Catholic piety with the social strategies of the official Church depends in large part on a theological conversion to the priority of service in Christian revelation. Just as in the early Church, that insight founded a style of life characterized in a distinctive way by communal sharing and concern for the poor, so also it can provide a ground of motivation for the Church's effort to relieve world hunger. With this theological foundation, Christian poverty could again be linked with justice. Poverty-for-the-sake-of-justice might be again a primary expression of God's self-revelation and of the Church's own self-understanding.

Solidarity

A second theme on which recent papal teaching draws in great measure for grounding response to world hunger and human development generally is the notion of human solidarity.¹³ This is an important concept in a number of ways. It translates the basic theological insight found in Christian poverty into natural law terminology. According to that tradition, material goods are given first for the well-being of the race, and only when the common good is satisfied are they

¹³See *The Development of Peoples* (Boston: Saint Paul Editions), nos. 44 and 80; *Justice in the World* (Boston: Saint Paul Editions), pp. 4-6; Pope Paul's address to the World Food Conference, no. 4.

intended for private use and enjoyment.¹⁴ Similarly, the ideal of human solidarity is quite compatible with a number of trends in the social field, even where natural law is unwelcome. The French sociological tradition has made human solidarity one of its principal ideals since Durkheim's time.¹⁵ Revolutionary and liberation movements, of course, make solidarity one of their more familiar shibboleths, and, in an age of economic interdependence, the term takes on added meaning and importance.¹⁶ A distinct advantage of this frame of reference, therefore, is that it can make contact with many secular trends and serve as a ground of common discourse between Christians and secular proponents of human welfare. Consequently it provides a means for moral argument in the public forum.

There is good reason to wonder, however, how far the Church is willing to go with such an idea. Its consequences could be quite enormous. *Populorum progressio* and *Justice in the World* go quite far. But there is already a tendency to take those documents in a less radical way especially among American theologians. Nonetheless, in terms of the general thrust of my argument the theme of solidarity offers a means of reconciling pastoral practice and preaching with public policy and strategy. In addition, solidarity has the advantage of being a key concept in papal social teaching. Accordingly, it can stand comfortably alongside other themes without demanding a change in religious paradigms.

On the negative side, solidarity is an abstract term. It lacks the roots in personal life one finds in voluntary poverty. The term itself does not suggest any pattern of life and action. It is a noun without a verb; an indicative from which one must draw the imperative. It is abstract in a second way too. Whereas poverty represents a gestalt: the abundant love of God for us, the unity of all people in that love, and the imitation of God in Christ through communal sharing—solidarity focuses attention solely on the unity of the human family. It is diffi-

¹⁴Pope Paul, Address to the World Food Conference, no. 5; *Development of Peoples*, no. 23.

¹⁵See Durkheim's *Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).

¹⁶See, for example, Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973), Chapter 13, "Poverty, Solidarity and Protest."

cult, therefore, to make of solidarity a religious symbol. It is more properly a theological idea, an analytical tool, rather than a root metaphor from which to draw inspiration and insight. The need we have is for a pastoral theology, and I suggest that will be built more readily on primary religious symbols.

III. CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS IN THE PUBLIC FORUM

The Roman Catholic community is not the only group which is in need of religious symbols in order to deal with world hunger. The need is shared by many sectors of the American community as well. As I said earlier many people outside the institutional churches see world hunger as a crisis which appeals to the central insights of Christianity, and for this reason they look to the churches for leadership. But world hunger is a religious crisis in another sense too. A catastrophe of such magnitude as global starvation brings into bold relief one's basic perceptions of the nature and destiny of human life. A person's primary values become clear when faced with a holocaust. The food crisis and the prospect of scarcity in general have raised up a number of secular prophets and apocalypsts who have popularized a secular eschatology of some persuasiveness. "The tragedy of the commons," "lifeboat ethics," "limits to growth" in some of its forms and "triage," these models and others suggest that faced with the limits of finite resources, values of justice, equality and charity must go.¹⁷ The ethics of survival is self-interest. There are many empirical, and even logical difficulties with these models. What should be of interest to us is, first, that they are suited to capture the popular mind and the media which feed it, and secondly, that physical scarcity dictates that self-interest be the basis of morality.

Our Christian view of the world is diametrically opposed to this Hobbesian view. Especially under conditions of scarcity it favors sharing and self-sacrifice. It rests on faith in the boundlessness of God's love rather than the boundedness of material resources. It proceeds from the communicability of persons rather than from the divisibility of things.

¹⁷See especially Jay W. Forrester, "The Churches at the Transition between Growth and Global Equilibrium," *Zygon* 7, 3, for a sustained attack on altruism, equality and humanitarianism from the father of World Systems theory.

In short, I would say that the Christian vision of the banquet of life must become the source of Christian models of scarcity and hunger by which to inform and educate the secular mind.

One might object that advocacy of religious symbols for the secular forum too easily degenerates into civil religion. I would answer that this charge can only be made in particular circumstances. The present state of the hunger debate would suggest to me that biblical symbols of the end-of-time will serve an important critical task in the present political environment. They will serve a prophetic rather than a mystifying function. There are also few ways which would be more appropriate for preaching the Gospel in our time.

IV. SUMMARY

Allow me to sum up my remarks by leaving you with a series of theses, which may serve to guide the discussion to follow.

(1) Church documents juxtapose pastoral directives and policy proposals without a defined theology to integrate the two approaches. The result is a split between an underdeveloped pastoral practice and a carefully developed public position.

(2) No theological justification for concern with world hunger will endure unless it is based on primary religious insights and metaphors. Only such a theology can integrate social action into the religious life of Christians on the affective and practical levels.

(3) Such a religious foundation is also important for the Church's participation in public debate on these issues as a source of inspiration, practical guidance and open criticism.

(4) One source of the Roman Catholic contribution to this work is the tradition of voluntary poverty, re-established on its primitive social basis.

(5) The difficulty with this approach is that the practice of communal sharing would have to be adapted to the whole Church with the danger of sectarianism ensuing.

(6) Solidarity is an important theological theme for grounding a response to world hunger, but it suffers from abstractness and indefiniteness of practical aim.

(7) In general a pastoral theology of hunger need not be a justification of current policy, so much as a set of life-symbols which place

human need centrally in the Catholic theological vision and its consequent pattern of life, including prayer, liturgy and confession of faith.

(8) The theological foundation of engagement in the hunger issue is the self-revelation of God in Christ as ministering love.

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I. INTERDEPENDENCE: FATE AND FUTURE OF WORLD POLITICS

The concept of American power and dominance in the globe is tied to the post-war picture of the world. The United States emerged from World War II as the only major participant whose homeland was escaped physical destruction. It thus emerged in the post-war period as the primary defender of those political, economic and military structures which we identify with the international system since 1945. Today, that system is beset by its dimensions is either in the midst of significant and necessary change or is undergoing such the course of change. To assess the depth and direction of U.S. power and wealth in the world requires a more understanding of the dynamics of change taking place in the international system today.

¹ Much of the material in this section of the paper originally appeared in a series of lectures recently by S. Hoffinger, *Justice's Frontiers*.