

Progress and Poverty

Robert N. Bellah

University of California, Berkeley, California

Let us think about two scenes: one, the lonely place outside the city of Bethsaida where Jesus has been preaching all day to a crowd of increasingly hungry listeners; and the other, the North Arabian desert, not so terribly far from where Bethsaida was, where at the hour this is written, and for weeks before and as far as we can tell weeks to come, American troops, tanks, helicopters, airplanes and supplies for an army of up to 250,000 men and women are gathering. What possible connection can we make between these two scenes? and yet how can we preach the gospel today without making a connection?

I have taken as my title "Progress and Poverty," which is the title of a book by Henry George, published in 1879, that was enormously influential for a time but is now largely forgotten. We usually think of Henry George in terms of his advocacy of a "single-tax" on land, an idea that seems only bizarre today. But Christopher Lasch points out in a new book that I am reading in galley proofs that the title of the book carried a rather electrifying message: progress leads to poverty. Henry George was dismissed as a crank by the intellectual establishment, not only for his single-tax idea, but for his obvious error in not understanding that progress leads to the elimination of poverty. The technological progress, compared to a century ago, of that equipment in the North Arabian desert is palpable. The poverty of the Arab masses is equally palpable. Indeed as the conflict between East and West which, in the form of the cold war, has mesmerized us for so long, begins to evaporate, we can see that a much more profound conflict, with consequences we cannot calculate, has long been building up: the conflict between wealth and poverty in the world.

But still, what light can what happened in that lonely place near Bethsaida as narrated by Luke shed on our present situation? Surely that strange story cannot possibly illuminate for us the present state of the world economy: the strange conjunction of extraordinary scientific and technological progress, some pockets of enormous affluence, and, after more than two centuries of such progress, a majority of the world's population living in abject poverty. Most of us in the churches have been aware of and concerned about the terrible poverty that afflicts so many in the world today and with what we can do to mitigate that poverty. Yet we do not often turn to biblical teaching to help us with our concern and, indeed, the biblical teaching about poverty is complex and not easily applied to the contemporary world. In both testaments the poor are seen as especially close to God. Indeed "the poor" and "the pious" are virtually synonymous. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." Conversely the rich are depicted as far from God. Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Yet

what we have here is not a biblical foreshadowing of class struggle. The poor are close to God because they depend on nothing but God. The rich are far from God because they worship their riches and falsely believe in their own self-sufficiency. Further, the poor are blessed because they share even the little they have—one meaning of the story of the loaves and the fishes; whereas the rich find it hard to share—the story of the wealthy young ruler. We are called on to share what we have with the poor (Matthew 25), but the Bible does not advocate that we make the poor rich, for that would only alienate them from God.

Albert Borgmann has pointed out that the poverty in today's world seems very different from biblical poverty. We are faced with what he calls brutal poverty, the terrible unnecessary poverty in a world economically and technologically capable of eliminating poverty. And we middle-class Americans live in the midst of what he calls advanced poverty, the spiritually debilitating affluence, related to the biblical depiction of the rich, that is in an important sense the cause of brutal poverty. Our secular and sometimes our religious activists concentrate on the elimination of brutal poverty, without concerning themselves very much with advanced poverty. There are two problems with this approach. One is that if it succeeded it would only promote those in a state of brutal poverty to a state of advanced poverty, decreasing physical suffering but increasing spiritual alienation, and not addressing the real problem of the sickness of our form of society. But the second, more serious, problem is that the politicians and activists are unlikely to succeed in eliminating brutal poverty if they do not address the problem of advanced poverty which is its cause.

Both brutal poverty and advanced poverty are not just economic and political conditions, they are symptoms of spiritual sickness. To be sure they require us to think about economic and political changes, but at a deeper level what they require of us is conversion.

If the basic problem in the contemporary world is simply to turn the havens into haves then the political and economic struggle is central and the churches have a significant but minor role to play. But if our problems have to do with the whole notion that having is the meaning of life, then the teaching of the New Testament may be more decisive. Indeed if an exclusive concern for having is moving us toward global economic and ecological disaster, then biblical poverty may not be an alternative suitable only for small dedicated groups like the Catholic Workers. Biblical poverty, the notion that we must let go of everything we have and depend only on God and our neighbor, may be the only thing that will save us. In that case, along with our political and economic concerns, we should also pray for the grace which is the only possible basis for the conversion of ourselves and our institutions.

But let me approach the problem of progress and poverty in a different way, starting again with the common sense of our culture, and certainly of our universities. In our almost frantic preoccupation with economic issues today we seldom ask what the economy is for. What a strange question! Is it not obvious that a productive economy is a good in itself, perhaps even the chief good? This view, taken for granted by many today, would have struck most people in human history as very odd. That human wants are potentially infinite is

something people have known for a long time. But in most of the religions and philosophies of the world this fact has been deplored as the cause of much human suffering. Only in the eighteenth century did a few moralists, with more than a little trepidation, wonder if the stimulation of human wants and the turning of yesterday's wants into today's needs, might not have positive consequences by leading to progress in the sense of higher material standard of living for all.

Before long the infinity of human wants was built into the structure of the modern capitalist economy. Joseph Schumpeter spoke of the "creative destruction" of capitalism as new products replaced old ones, leaving previously healthy industries and even regions in ruins, as new industries emerged in new regions. The product cycle of endless obsolescence and innovation was taken as natural law once science and technology had reached a certain level of sophistication. While moralists have long had doubts about the idea of an economy catering to the infinity of human wants, in recent decades environmentalists have begun to raise some serious doubts about its ecological viability. Without getting into the limits to growth argument, it is possible to say that there are very few people today who imagine that economic growth can ignore environmental consequences.

But let us go back to the question: What is the purpose of the economy? What is the economy for? The classical answer, which has never been forgotten, is that the purpose of the economy is service. What the economy is for is to provide the material goods and services that people need so that they can lead a good life. From this point of view meeting material needs is an essential means for leading a good life, but not an end. The true ends of life have to do with the way we relate to other human beings and to ultimate reality, in the perspective of biblical religion, to God. To make the accumulation of material goods the end of life would not only be a moral mistake, it would be a form of pathology that could only lead to misery. R. H. Tawney, social theorist of the early twentieth century British Labor Party and strong Anglican churchman, wrote in 1920 in his book *The Acquisitive Society* that economic institutions needed to be reordered in accord with true human purposes: Economic activity is "the servant, not the master, of society. The burden of our civilization is not merely, as many suppose, that the product of industry is ill-distributed, or its conduct tyrannical, or its operation interrupted by embittered disagreements. It is that industry itself has come to hold a position of exclusive predominance among interests, which no single interest, and least of all the provision of the material means of existence, is fit to occupy. Like a hypochondriac who is so absorbed in the processes of his own digestion that he goes to his grave before he has begun to live, industrialized communities neglect the very objects for which it is worthwhile to acquire riches in their feverish preoccupation with the means by which riches can be acquired.

"That obsession by economic issues is as local and transitory as it is repulsive and disturbing. To future generations it will appear as pitiable as the obsession of the seventeenth century by religious quarrels appears today; indeed, it is less rational, since the object with which it is concerned is less important. And it is a poison which inflames every wound and turns each trivial scratch

into a malignant ulcer. Society will not solve the particular problems of industry which afflict it, until that poison is expelled, and it has learned to see industry itself in the right perspective. If it is to do that, it must rearrange its scale of values. It must regard economic interests as one element in life, not as the whole of life. It must persuade its members to renounce the opportunity of gains which accrue without any corresponding service, because the struggle for them keeps the whole community in a fever. It must so organize industry that the instrumental character of economic activity is emphasized by its subordination to the social purpose for which it is carried on."

As opposed to the idea of infinite accumulation, the classical view had a strong sense of *enough*. Indeed the basis for much of the optimism in the period of early capitalism was that the new form of economy would provide people with a material *sufficiency* so that at last they could live a genuinely human form of life without suffering and drudgery. They would have enough. For a long time critics worried that the labor discipline that capitalism depended on was fear and hunger. How can we justify, they said, a society that provides affluence for a few but condemns the many to a life of toil under the discipline of fear and hunger? Doesn't scarcity and drudgery continue for most people? But today, although fear of losing one's job is not a negligible incentive, and even hunger may be a motive among the very poor, a majority of the population in a society like ours participates in the affluence to a degree unimaginable even a few decades ago, yet still doesn't feel it is *enough*. When a teenager who has no economic need to contribute to family income, works many hours a week at McDonald's, in order to buy designer jeans, expensive running shoes, and hi-fi equipment, instead of studying, what is going on? Or what about Donald Trump? *Enough* does not seem to be in his vocabulary. And need I mention baseball players, investment bankers, corporate lawyers or star professors? Almost all of us, from the teenager working at McDonald's to Donald Trump and everybody in between, believe or half-believe that accumulation is an end in itself, or that even if it isn't, it is the only measure of worth that others will recognize.

What I am suggesting is that "enough" needs to be built into the institutions of our new international economic order, for reasons as much moral and political as ecological. Mr. Saddam Hussein does not know about "enough," but are we really in a position to teach him? Only decades ago every major Western power was invading places like Kuwait at will with very few consequences to pay. We have learned something about that, although our own recent behavior in Panama suggests we are not through learning.

If the differentials in income are greater in America than in most industrial nations, what about the differential between the advanced nations and most of the Third World? This is the really hard question. Again, I think the answer is, "enough." There is no reason to think the earth's ecology could sustain an American-style affluence for even half its population. Yet we cannot say "enough" to the poor countries while we go on accumulating ourselves. Our challenge is how to use our material wealth in a genuinely moral way, to provide sufficient resources for people to live a good life, and dispense with endless accumulation. If we pioneer in creating a sustainable form of life then

there is the chance we may convince others to do likewise. As long as American television, now watched all over the world, goes on endlessly advertising as essential to happiness a material level of life that even our society provides for only a few, we are sowing the seeds not only of internal decay but of international envy and hostility of gigantic proportions. As someone put it, replacing the Berlin Wall with the Berlin Mall is not necessarily an advance.

So we come to the same point we arrived at in the discussion of poverty: without a paradigm shift, a metanoia, to use biblical language, a conversion, the future is bleak indeed. I am not a pessimist; I am not an optimist either: but I do have hope. Christopher Lasch in his new book quotes Glenn Gray on the difference between optimism and hope: "If optimism and pessimism have become increasingly irrelevant in our terrible dilemma [brought about by the ever-growing destructiveness of human technology], there is great reason nonetheless to practice the ancient virtue of hope. Though generally neglected in recent centuries, when optimism about progress was the rule, hope is that quality of character and virtue of mind which is directed toward the future in trust rather than in confidence."

Hope and trust, I think Glenn Gray is saying, are not our own creations: they come to us as gifts. That metanoia, that conversion that we seek, will come as grace or not at all. Our notion that we don't need grace, that we can control the world through the endless proliferation of wealth and power, is our fatal and tragic flaw. Yet hope and trust do not imply passivity. What they require of us is responsibility, something very different, if we would see it, from control.

So maybe what happened at that lonely place near Bethsaida has more to do with our practical realities than we thought. The day "began to wear away" and the disciples came to Jesus and said to him, "Send the crowd away . . . to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a lonely place." Jesus tells them to give the crowd something to eat. They say they have only a little bread and fish; should they go and buy more? They are practical; they worry that there is not *enough*. But Jesus took the bread and fish that they had, blessed it and gave it to the disciples to distribute. And it was *enough*, and to spare.

As with most of the sayings and stories in the gospels this one is easy to misunderstand, nor do I claim any depth of understanding. I am sure, however, that the story does not mean that for those with faith there is always enough to eat, or that if there is not enough it proves that those who lack have inadequate faith. The faithful are often hungry. Faith provides us no security against the travail of this world. Nor does the story mean that we need not be practical, we need not plan for the future: the Lord will provide. Yet this is closer, I think. Yes we must be practical, yes we must plan. But we cannot control the future or even the present. The more obsessed we are with controlling and planning, the more things slip away from us, the wider the chasm grows. If we could awake from our obsessive anxiety that there will not be enough, we might open our eyes to see that there is enough to go around, if we would share the simple things we have. But that would require not only faith and hope, but love, and those are the fruits of conversion, of God's grace, of realizing that in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God is already here, at work,

among us. And is that Kingdom also there in the desert of North Arabia? Can it be that a world united as never before in condemnation of aggression is *enough*, that we do not have to use that wonderfully advanced technology of destruction?