

Chapter 1

Economic Justice and Our Faith Tradition

Often in a theological article the author begins by offering a Scriptural background. However, it may be helpful in this instance first to clear away long-term misunderstandings of our Scriptures and Tradition on the part of the Church. From the time of the Enlightenment to the end of the 19th century, the Church and its members were caught in two dichotomies that prevented them from engaging fully in economic justice work: the first is the distinction between charity and justice and whether the church should be involved in working for justice. The second is the seeming dichotomy between spirituality and an active Christian life. In the first section of this chapter (A), we recognize 1) that spirituality refers not just to our inner relationship to the divine but also to the quality of our external life in the world; 2) that justice is a necessary expression of charity and that a just system makes charity more possible; and 3) finally that, as we grow in depth in our justice work, so does our life of the Spirit deepen. Only after we have resolved these dichotomies will we be prepared to hear again with new ears the liberating events of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

The second section of this chapter (“Taking Action for Economic Justice: a Theological Assessment) can be found in Appendix I. It was written by Dr. James Perkinson to provide the context for the Resolution on Community Investment and Economic Justice for the 1988 Episcopal Convention in Detroit. Perkinson lived for many years in inner city Detroit, at the Episcopal Church of the Messiah. These pages are a reflection on the time he spent living with the poor of the City. He speaks to the North American and global contexts, to the traditions of Israel and Jesus, and to the future as an economic justice challenge.

A third section of this chapter is taken from “Organizing for Economic Justice”, by Robert Hall, published by the Economic Justice Implementation Committee in 1990. It considers the Covenant and Community of Israel (including the Sabbatical Year, the Jubilee Principle and Stewardship), the New Covenant, the Eclipse of Economic Justice in Western Thought, and Meeting Basic Needs. This section can be found in Appendix C.

A. Charity and Justice

Christian congregations in the United States have traditionally recognized their **charitable mission** to provide services to the poor. Clothing closets, food pantries, soup kitchens and, increasingly, homeless shelters have become common ministries in our parishes.

Recently (since the 1960s) more Christians in the United States have recognized a call to include **justice ministries** as well. Out of their experience of providing for emergency needs, they began to seek the causes of the problems and how they might intervene.

If we were Good Samaritans, and every time we went from Jerusalem to Jericho or back we found more people robbed, stripped, beaten and left for dead, and we continued to help those who were attacked, what would we think? Certainly we would worry about using that road, but we would also want something done to make it safer for others. We would want the muggers rounded up and brought to justice. We would want the road patrolled adequately. We would want something done. Would we be Good Samaritans if we just continued to bandage people up and take them in without trying to do something about the problem? (1)

There are numerous modern examples of this process. In Pontiac, Michigan, for example, an ecumenical emergency needs center called Lighthouse discovered, through counseling women frequently requesting food and clothing, that they were often victims of domestic violence. The counselor created a new organization to provide special services to these victims (and housed it in the Episcopal Church's former rectory). Soon this agency teamed up with similar groups to advocate changes in local police practices and to strengthen State protective legislation. This movement led to another organization that leased a church building for a transitional residence where

women who had left their violent partners could learn basic survival skills and prepare educationally for a decent job. Eventually through national advocacy by these and similar organizations, federal funding became available for these residential programs.

In traditional church parlance, a line was crossed in Pontiac between charity and justice. From relieving the emergency needs of these women and their families, the organizations sought to change the society around them so that the same problems did not recur over and over again. Carmen Guerrero, Coordinator of Jubilee Ministries of the Episcopal Church, has addressed this distinction very succinctly:

The Church has the option to respond to inequities in society by providing outreach programs which are direly needed or it can respond to these inequities by attempting to address structures and systems that create these inequities. It is not a matter of either/or – I believe that both must take place but not one at the expense of the other....While we are called to feed the hungry we are also equally called to address the cause of that hunger. Therefore our goal is to **know the difference** and to **be prepared to work in both areas** for the glory and honor of God. (2)

Carmen includes a chart in Jubilee Ministry materials which illustrates that the church can respond to the reality of society as it appears to be (with needs that we can remedy with emergency outreach programs) or to reality as it is at a deeper structural level (by helping to empower the poor and marginalized to change the reality of their lives.) (3) We have included a modified version of Carmen’s illustration below:

Two Views of Societal Conditions

Observation

- People are hungry
- People are illiterate
- Children need clothes
- There are many homeless people on the street
- There are inadequacies in jobs/wages
- People are in need of health care, etc.

Observation

- People have no say in decisions that affect their lives
- People are powerless
- The have nots are not organized, do not participate in politics
- People are told what to think
- People blame women, minorities, immigrants and outcasts for their plight.

The Church's Response

Service Orientation

- clinics
- literacy programs
- clothes closets
- food banks, soup kitchens
- emergency housing
- jobs programs, etc.

Justice Orientation

- advocacy
- empowerment
- community organizing
- power and control
- concientizacion

Why did the churches in the twentieth century become more aware of a call to create a more just world? The special role of the churches in the civil rights movement was certainly an example to all of us. The anti-war movement prompted the Church's prophetic voice in the Vietnam War. Women's liberation groups and the California farm workers also called for our support. In one of his last talks before his death, Bishop Paul Moore commended the role of social movements in training Christians in justice work. (4)

As these movements sought and achieved social change, we recognized that society did not come forth from the creative hand of God in its present condition. Rather society and culture were created gradually by people like us, with all their strengths and weaknesses. And we realized that our forbearers did not always act from the highest ideals, for instance to provide everyone with the opportunity for a decent life. They often acted out of self-interest, to create situations that favored themselves and people like themselves. It was often the affluent and those who held power who created the social, economic and political realities that everyone else had to live with. For example, our founding fathers chose not to end slavery through the U.S. constitution. It is often the responsibility of later generations to correct the biases of the past and the role of the victims and their sympathizers to redress the wrongs inflicted on them.

There will often be disagreements in our churches about when and how to cross the line between charity and justice. It is clear from the gospels and the entire biblical tradition that we are mandated to works of charity. And the mandate to be just in our personal lives is equally clear. But acting in specific circumstances to create a more just society may seem less clear and may require extensive Bible study, discernment and prayer to achieve consensus to move forward. Some issues may prompt more conflict than others. The church may be challenging the way things are while some of the church members have a stake in maintaining that status quo.

It may be helpful to recognize that there is no dichotomy between charity and justice. Theologian Stephen Charles Mott explains that charity and justice are more closely related than we usually think.

One needs justice in addition to love to carry on what love starts but cannot finish alone. Love is the greater factor, but justice is a necessary instrument of love....

Justice carries out what love motivates. It is 'the order which love requires.' As order, it shapes the kind of society to which love points. Because of the reality of sin, we cannot simply leave it to each individual in each situation to act on the impulses of love. Justice is not a different principle, in contradistinction to love; rather it expresses in terms of fixed duty and obligation the appropriate response to love in certain social situations. Loving action may take place in an evil society, for example in a slave society. But if the order of society is not changed—if 'the rich remain rich and the poor, poor, and nothing in the fundamental relationship is changed'—then love itself is thwarted. Love cannot rest until it 'will breathe a peculiar spirit into the existing world order.' The institution perverts the love within it; therefore structural changes are needed to 'make love more possible.' Love provides the impulse to change through justice. (5)

Therefore the flow from charity to justice is a natural flow. In fact, it is a challenge of Christian spirituality that, as we work for justice, we maintain our love both for the victims and for the perpetrators. We are not just fixing a problem but responding out of compassion to those affected by the problem. And we are inviting those responsible for the problem to a conversion of heart.

It was out of compassion and love for the Hebrew people that Jahweh (through Moses) acted to rescue them from Egypt and bring them to the promised land, creating a more just situation for them. Out of love for the victims of domestic violence the organizations in Pontiac sought protective legislation and remedial programs. Out of caring about the plight of desperate farmworkers church people agreed to boycott grapes and other agricultural products. Civil rights legislation made it possible and easier for people to do the just and fair thing. Justice is a completion of love. And it is a necessary condition for love to be effective.

It may be helpful to view the community outreach work of the church as a continuum. Faith communities can assist individuals through all the phases of financial recovery, from meeting emergency survival needs to advocating government assistance programs to providing opportunities for self-help programs to helping people stabilize as full participants of a cooperative economy. In the process the church is working for societal change and renewal. The final goal is the just, loving, cooperative and "beloved community" envisioned by Martin Luther King, a community we continue to strive for but we will never achieve perfectly before Jesus' Second Coming.

Below is a chart that indicates such a continuum of action in the areas of hunger, homelessness, unemployment and lack of assets. (6)

Emergency Assistance	Advocacy (Legislation)	Assistance to Self-help	The Beloved Community
Food pantries Homeless Shelters Clothing closets Alms giving	School lunches Food Stamps Medicaid Welfare Living Wage	Food co-ops Community gardens Subsidized housing Transitional housing Micro-loans for small businesses Job creation	A sharing community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggling together • Overcoming divisions • Cooperative • Supportive • An economy that is structured to work for everyone

B. The Changing Meaning of “Spirituality”

When it was first suggested that this manual on economic justice ministry contain a section on spirituality, there were different reactions. One member was fearful that we were going to place a veneer of holiness, prayer or good works over what she felt was something good and holy in itself. Another woman, a dedicated lay Franciscan, had at hand her own broader definition of spirituality: “Spirituality is of the Spirit present in every human being. It is the gift God gives us to connect with the Holy, which makes us whole human beings nurtured by God and our communities. It is this Spirit which is with us as we encounter and engage in the world around us. It is our identity and strength in the pluralistic world we live in.” (7)

Roger Haight, in his book on liberation theology, quotes Gustavo Gutierrez as announcing the consensus of liberation theologians on the nature of spirituality:

Spirituality is a comprehensive term that signifies the whole way of life of the Christian, the manner in which the Christian lives. And this mode of life is always viewed in the context of the surrounding world and the historical condition of society. “A spirituality implies an overall, comprehensive attitude. It must comprise all aspects of one’s life” (8)

Several current writers have expressed in various ways the spirituality of the active life. Parker Palmer recognizes that there is not just one way of being spiritual:

Contemporary images of what it means to be spiritual tend to value the inward search over the outward act, silence over sound, solitude over interaction, centeredness and quietude and balance over engagement and animation and struggle. If one is called to the monastic life, those images can be empowering. But if one is called to the world of action, the same images can disenfranchise the soul, for they tend to devalue the energies of active life rather than encourage us to move with those energies toward wholeness.

Aliveness is relational and communal, responsive to the reality and needs of others as well as to our own. For some of us, the primary path to that aliveness is called the active life. We need a spirituality which affirms and guides our efforts to act in ways that resonate with our innermost being and reality, ways that embody the vitalities God gave us at birth, ways that serve the great works of justice, peace, and love. (9)

Maria Harris, in **Proclaim Jubilee: A Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century**, uses the term *spirituality* “to refer to our way of being in the world in the light of the Mystery at the core of the universe; a mystery that some of us call God.” She contrasts two contemporary meanings:

One is characterized by withdrawal, turning inward, parochialism, and attending to God and one’s inner self. Such a spirituality lacks a social and political dimension...The second contemporary meaning...assumes a way of being in the world that demands even deeper involvement and immersion in the world than is usual, drawing on the belief that everything that is, is holy, though not yet completely so. (10)

Francis X. Meehan speaks of a recent “broad shift in spirituality, one that tilts spiritual living toward social concerns.” (11)

The spiritual person's new way of inclusion in the world is to understand the world at those depths where sin and grace touch the human...What is new is a certain sense of responsibility and involvement in the world, and how these impinge on one's very interiority before the Lord. This is not only a new social posture but a new spiritual one as well...we are witnessing a new understanding of the social reality. And in this understanding fundamental human development becomes not merely a social concern, but has clear spiritual implications for gospel living. (12)

Those involved in Peace and Restorative Justice Ministry at the Church of the Holy Trinity in New York City have adopted a rule of life that combines traditional elements of the spiritual life with additional practices. "The purpose of the rule is to enhance the spirituality of our mission through common spiritual practice, build a sense of a community and mutual support for ourselves, and deepen the connection of our work to the gospel." Elements of the rule are Worship, Personal Prayer, Study, Compassionate Poverty, Sabbath, Cultural Refreshment and Recreation, and Actions and Advocacy. (See www.holytrinity-nyc.org). Members of the Episcopal Urban Caucus have a similar rule of life.

C. An Economic Justice Spirituality

The descriptions that follow describe in various ways a contemporary spirituality of economic justice ministry as lived by practitioners who are also theologians reflecting on their experience so that they may help enlighten our ministries.

A unique feature of the economic justice ministry is that it is not something that the church does **for** somebody in a paternalistic way. Rather the church in this ministry is called to work **with** and **within** the disadvantaged community. The Economic Justice

Resolution approved at the 1988 Convention was not just calling for a fund drive. It was

“a call to the economically advantaged in the Church to become more engaged with the lower income community in its journey to equal opportunity within an insensitive system....The more we enter into partnership with the marginalized, the more we will be enriched with their resources. The outreach to the have-nots of the world will be the criteria of salvation for the haves of this world” (Mt. 25:31-46) (13)

But this is not an easy thing to do. In the basic areas of life, like food, clothing, shelter, jobs, the land, there are the haves and the have-nots who live in two different worlds. There is a great distance, a breach, even an abyss between them “that cuts through every level of the human reality and increasingly succeeds in integrating every local political economy into its lockstep march.” (14) Crossing over to be with the poor and to work with them can open us to conversion and transformation, to life-changing experiences that make it difficult to return to our old way of thinking about ourselves and others...

The church too often finds itself on the side of the haves. Theologian James Perkinson described the polarization happening in the late 1980s and is perhaps even more true today:

Today, with the advent of continual plant closings, raging corporate takeover battles, incessant capital-intensive automation and robotization, steadily increasing deficits and mortgaging of the “American Dream” to foreign investors, we are witnessing a massive restructuring and bifurcation of our own socio-economic context into two separate worlds, unequal and divided. On one side of that divide stands an increasingly internationalized professional and managerial elite, in economic control of

the technology and political control of institutions. On the other, there is emerging a self-perpetuating, permanently “lost” underclass, burgeoning numbers of homeless, and an increasingly harried, anxious and “left behind” middle class, which has itself eroded demographically by 14% since 1980. Race, gender, and age show up as fundamental indices of polarization: the haves are overwhelmingly white, male and adult; the have-nots are increasingly people of color, women and children. (15)

We are witnessing a deepening today of the trends of 1988. Factories are closing in this country and jobs are exported to other countries where salaries barely sustain the workers. The necessary fringe benefits of workers in this country are shrinking or non-existent. Our national government has refused to increase a minimum wage that has remained the same for too many years while inflation has increased the cost of living. Perkinson says of the 1988 Economic Justice Resolution,

....No facile “top-down” solution to the current crisis is being offered; rather, what the resolution highlights is a concern to stoop underneath and help undergird a number of creative grass roots initiatives arising “from below....Biblical cooperation is a fundamentally biased affair; it sets up shop on the victim’s side of history and only from that vantage point offers its hand in fellowship to whomever will join its efforts.(16)

The poor in Latin America, with the help of their theologians and justice ministers, developed in the 1960s a mode of group spirituality called liberation theology. Rural peasants and the urban poor came together in small faith groups called *comunidades de base*, base communities. In a spirit of prayer and reflection they first observed and analyzed the oppressed and oppressing state of their lives: what was the source of their poverty, who was responsible? Secondly, they considered how passages from the Bible pronounced judgment on these situations: they found God through Moses freeing the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, the prophets speaking against unjust

rulers, Jesus choosing to support the lives of the poor and to challenge the rich and the powerful. They compared these biblical passages to their own situations and realized the God was present in their lives wanting to liberate them from their oppression. This realization led them finally to decide among themselves on actions they could take to relieve their oppression, to free themselves for a more human life, to reclaim their right to decent lives, to make legitimate demands on political officials, landowners, factory owners, etc. The local church was often at their side to support their initiatives.

This process was called *conscientizacao*, critical consciousness, by Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian adult educator. The oppression so common among the poor prevents them from becoming fully human. Too often those who would help them want to act for them. However, Freire said that “the important thing is to help men (and nations) help themselves, to place them in consciously critical confrontation with their problems, to make them the agents of their own recuperation.” (17) Freire goes on to say that critical consciousness

is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one’s “findings” and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old. (18)

It is a major feat for the church to stoop down and be in significant relationship with the poor. Perkinson in fact refers to this stooping down and rising with the poor as “a baptism of sorts, but one in which the Church itself gives way to the waters and comes up changed. Like Jesus approaching John the Baptist, for initiation into the

prophetic movement of the rural Palestinian poor, the Church finds itself summoned to submit its resources and energies to a social movement already in progress.” (19)

Albert Nolan, a Dominican priest in Africa, in his article “Four Stages of Spiritual Growth in Helping the Poor,” asserts that “a Christian’s spiritual development is tied to serving the poor.” He identified four stages in this process of growing commitment to the poor, “each characterized not only by a heightened spiritual awareness but also by a more effective way of actually serving the poor.” (20) In the process one discovers a deeper meaning of brotherhood and sisterhood. Perkinson summarized Nolan’s four stages:

The well-to-do can expect to traverse a wide range of experiences in moving into an authentic gospel collaboration with the poor. Beginning with a compassionate concern to help, the perseverant and the sensitive will soon enough move on (in the second stage) to an indignation-stirring encounter with the systematic character of the problem (the breach). At the third stage, a surprising renewal of perceptions takes place: the oppressed themselves are discovered as “able” and “wise” in their own remarkable right. In the final stage, after disillusionment and betrayal, one breaks through to a place of realism in pursuing a cooperative, collaborative struggle to bring about change. (21)

Nolan ends his article by saying:

In the end we will find one another in God, whatever our particular approach to God might be. The system is our common enemy because it is first of all the enemy of God. As Christians we will experience this solidarity with one another as a solidarity in Christ, a solidarity with the cause of the poor. (22)

The Black Baptist minister John Perkins calls to us from across the breach into his world, where his church in a Black inner city neighborhood identifies with the people of

the neighborhood. He describes from his own experience the three Rs of Christian Community Development: relocation, reconciliation and redistribution.

Relocation: An outsider can seldom know the needs of the community well enough to know how to best respond to them. Rarely if ever can an outsider effectively lead the community in finding solutions to its own problems. That kind of leadership, the kind of leadership that empowers people, comes from insiders (23).

Reconciliation: We begin, then, by being reconciled to each other. Blacks and Whites are equally damaged, equally in need of healing. Blacks come to the community with their blame and their feelings of inferiority. Whites come with their guilt and their sense of superiority. Even when these attitudes are not conscious, even where there is a real love for those of other races, with rare exceptions these attitudes are still there...Only when we've talked about it openly can healing really begin to happen. (24)

Redistribution: As a first step....we must commit ourselves to living with less in order that we can share more...Yet living more simply will not in itself make much difference in the lives of the poor. We must find ways to use what we save to empower the needy...Our redistribution must involve us—our time, our energy, our gifts, and our skills. If we are sharing ourselves, sharing our money will follow naturally. (25)

We are invited by these authors, and by the poor for whom they are speaking, to depart from the safety and protection of our comfortable lives to various stages and ways of engagement with the poor. With their help we discern the building blocks of a new spirituality that includes engagement with the poor, group reflection and action, compassion, anger at injustice, affirmation of others, reconciliation, redistribution and simpler living. We conclude this chapter as Albert Nolan concludes his article,

This is a very high ideal and it would be an illusion to imagine that we could reach it without a long personal struggle that will take us through

several stages, through crises, dark nights, shocks and challenges. What matters is that we recognize that we are part of a process. We will always have further to go. We must always be open to further developments. There are no short cuts...What we all need is encouragement, support and mutual understanding of the way the Spirit is working in us and through us. (2)

NOTES FOR CHAPTER ONE

1. Robert T. Hall, Organizing for Economic Justice, Economic Justice Implementation Committee, The Episcopal Church, 1990, p.3.
2. Carmen Guerrero, unpublished materials of Jubilee Ministries.
3. Ibid., see Appendix B.
4. Unpublished talk at a conference of the Episcopal Urban Caucus.
5. Stephen Charles Mott, Biblical Ethics and Social Change, New York, Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 53-54.
6. Adaptation of a chart previously published in "Seeding a Movement: the First Ten Years, 1991-2001", Michigan McGehee Interfaith Loan Fund, 2001.
7. Definition by Dianne Aide, ENEJ Steering Committee.
8. Roger Haight, S.J., An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology, Paulist Press, New York, 1985, p. 235.
9. Parker Palmer, The Active Life: Wisdom for Work, Creativity and Caring, San Francisco, Harper, 1990, pp. 2,8,9.
10. Maria Harris, Proclaim Jubilee: A Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, p. 75.
11. Francis X. Meehan, A Contemporary Social Spirituality, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1982, p. 3.
12. Ibid., pp. 5-6.
13. "Taking Action for Economic Justice", Episcopal Diocese of Michigan, 1988, pp. 17 & 19.
14. James Perkinson, "Taking Action for Economic Justice: A Theological Assessment", Episcopal Diocese of Michigan, 1988, p. 3.

15. Ibid., p. 5.
16. Ibid., p. 1.
17. Paolo Freire, Education for Critical Consciousness, Seabury Press, New York, 1973, p. 16.
18. Ibid., p. 18.
19. James Perkinson, op. cit., p. 1.
20. Albert Nolan, "Four Stages of Spiritual Growth in Helping the Poor", Praying, no. 15, 1987, p. 8.
21. James Perkinson, op. cit., p. 28.
22. Albert Nolan, op.cit., p. 12.
23. John Perkins, With Justice for All, Regal Books, Ventura, CA, 1982, p. 65.
24. Ibid., p. 140.
25. Ibid., pp. 154-155.
26. Albert Nolan, op.cit., p. 12.