The Recurring Christian Debate about Social Justice: A Critical Theoretical Overview

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Abstract

Social justice is best understood as distributive justice, distinct from other forms of justice. It is inherently ideological in both the neutral and negative sense, inherently moral in its dedication to fairness and to care for others, and inherently political in its structural embodiment of values in a society. Christian conceptions of and commitments to social justice have vacillated the past two hundred years as its importance relative to personal salvation and sanctification has constantly been contested. Debate between the Christian conservative right and Christian progressive left has intensified again recently, as ever more theologically conservative Christians champion social justice, however guardedly, triggering ever more alarm from socially conservative Christians. The debate is elucidated here from the perspective of critical theory, first linguistically by noting alternative translations of the biblical text, then theologically by the *imago Dei* and Christology, then ethically by contrasting Christian views of social ethics, and finally sociologically by the duality of personal agency and social structure.

Keywords: critical theory, history, ideology, morality, politics, public theology, social justice

Introduction

Indicative of the "pervasive interpretive pluralism" within Christianity (Smith 2011), multiple view books have become a prominent genre in Christian literature. *Christian Faith and Social Justice: Five Views* (McCraken 2014) is among the myriad anthologies in which several contributors argue different Christian positions on a particular theological, ethical, or social issue. Each scholar takes a different approach to social justice, but all take it to be a biblical imperative. Recently, a sixth view has re-emerged, again arguing that social justice is *not* biblical justice (Allen 2020). Others even contend that social justice has now become a new religion unto itself, with as much zealous fervor and unforgiving furor as any cult or creed (Murray 2019).

Addressing this complicated issue beneficially requires a focused approach. German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, the most recent and renowned critical theorist, delineated three different knowledge systems and their corresponding interests (Habermas 1971). Analytic science is built on systematic observation, has interest in prediction and control of human behavior, and is critiqued as being reductionistic and naïve. Humanistic knowledge is built on interpretation, has interest in mutual and self-understanding, and is critiqued as being non-scientific and subjective. Critical knowledge is built on dedication to social change, has interest in human emancipation, and is critiqued as being moralistic and political (Ashley and Orenstein 2008). While empirical observations about the various types and extents of social (in)justice are prerequisite, and comprehension of the various Christian interpretive positions taken on (in)justice is imperative, the following analysis is built on critical theory, and is in essence the use of critical theory to critique the conservative evangelical critique of critical theory.

As a legacy of Socrates, Kant, Hegel, and Marx, critical theory is most associated with the Institute of Social Research founded in Frankfurt, Germany in 1923. The foci of its major critiques included the economic determinism of Marxian theory, the supposed neutrality of scientific positivism, the domination of formal rationality and "technocratic thinking" in modern society, and the "culture industry" and "knowledge industry" of mass society (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2018). Its representatives argued that the "dialectic of Enlightenment" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972) had led to domination, not emancipation, to regress, not progress, and that "one-dimensional society" (Marcuse 1964) had stripped individuals of the ability to think critically and negatively about society. Though never explicitly addressing social justice specifically, together they waged "an unrelenting assault on the exploitation, repression, and alienation embedded within Western civilization" (Bronner 2017:1). Notably, Max Horkheimer, their guiding light, and Jurgen Habermas, their second-generation luminary, "both [saw] religion and specifically Christianity as playing an important role in the contemporary world. . . [as] a means of hope" (Scimecca 2019:173).

While the debate between Christian proponents and opponents of social justice is nothing new, the dispute has intensified in recent years due to provocative public events, social circumstances, and political administrations. Greater clarity on the character of social justice is necessary before assessing potentially related virtues and practices. Furthermore, achieving sufficient balance of analysis requires input from multiple academic perspectives. Defining social justice, apprehending its social correlates, tracing the recent history of Christian engagement, and scrutinizing the character of the debate as follows will facilitate greater discernment of the challenge Christianity faces on this front.

Definitions

Social Justice

Justice is a value and force at the macro societal level of both social discourses and institutions, as well as the micro individual level of both personal attitudes and actions (Liebig and Sauer 2016). Comprehending social justice in particular must begin by differentiating four kinds of justice (Sabbagh and Schmitt 2016). First, retributive justice is concerned with "just desert," a retroactive approach that justifies punishment with the principle that people deserve to be treated the same way they treat others. Second, restorative justice is concerned with "healing victims' wounds, restoring offenders to law-abiding lives, and repairing harm done to interpersonal relationships and the community" (Maiese 2003). Third, procedural justice is concerned with "fair treatment" through following rules impartially and applying them consistently, as enshrined in human rights and the unbiased rule of law. And fourth, distributive justice is concerned with all members of society receiving a "fair share" of benefits and resources available, and with the criteria used to define what fair means. "In the world of distributive justice there are three key actors—allocator, observer, rewardee—and four key terms—actual reward, just reward, justice evaluation, justice consequences" (Jasso, Törnblom, and Sabbagh 2016:201). Social justice is usually equated with the latter distributive justice, and is the pursuit of fairness in the distribution of social goods (empowerment, wealth, rights, privilege) and social "bads" (disempowerment, poverty, disprivilege) within a social system.

Coined in the 1840s by the Jesuit priest Luigi Taparelli based on the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, an exact, consensual definition of social justice remains elusive. Indeed, in *The Mirage of Social Justice*, the leading 20th century neoliberal economist Friedrich Hayek dismissed it as amorphous, meaningless, atavistic, and unfeasible – "not belong[ing] to the category of error, but to that of nonsense, like the term 'a moral stone'" (Hayek 1976:78) – as he misunderstood social justice based on Catholic social teaching (Booth and Peterson 2020). The most respected and referenced definition is from John Rawls, the leading 20th century political philosopher, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Employing the social contract tradition to counter John Stuart Mill's classic utilitarianism and Robert Nozick's contemporary libertarian alternative (Lebacqz 1987), Rawls defended the liberal democratic welfare state concerned with protecting the least advantaged. To begin, he wrote:

> Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory, however elegant and economical, must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise, laws and institutions, no matter how efficient and well-arranged, must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust. Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override . . .. Being first virtues of human activities, truth and justice are uncompromising. (Rawls 1971:3)

To conclude, Rawls specified the two principles of justice:

> 1. Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.
> 2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both
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> (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and
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> (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. (Rawls 1971:266)

Throughout his treatise, Rawls basically equated social justice with fairness, which then begs the question of what is fair. Competing notions of what is fair, distributive, social justice include: a) equality, in which rewards are distributed equally, regardless of one's contribution, b) equity, in which rewards are distributed in proportion to one's contribution, and c) relative needs, in which rewards are distributed according to individual needs of members, regardless of their contribution (Maiese 2003). Which definition of fairness is employed is often determined by the social level in question. Equality is used more at the macro, national level, such as in legal codes, equity is used more at the meso, organizational level, such as in schools and businesses, and relative needs is used more at the micro level, such as among family and friends. The transformation the 19th century slogan sought – "from each according to their ability to each according to their needs" – was not just about systems of state, but also about individual diversities of ability.

Iris Marion Young contests the reduction of social justice to distributive justice, taking an inverse approach to the issue and conceptualizing social injustice as five forms of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young 2018). She defines oppression as "the institutional constraint on self-development, and domination [as] the institutional constraint on self-determination" (Young 1990:37). From a Christian practitioner perspective, Gary Haugen of the International Justice Mission concurs with the focus on oppression, and defines injustice as "when power is misused to take from others what God has given them, namely, their life, dignity, liberty, or the fruits of their love and labor" (Haugen 2009:72). He then defines justice as "when power and authority between people is exercised in conformity with God's standards of moral excellence" (Haugen 2009:72).

All these definitions of social justice have three social correlates which illuminate further its character: ideology, morality, and politics.

Ideology

As commonly used today, the word 'ideology' is usually intended to discredit, dismiss, and even disparage the thoughts and positions taken by those with whom one disagrees. To

label an opponent's worldview and values as ideological is to criticize them as false belief wrought by preconceived ideas, faulty reasoning, and absence of evidence. As such, ideology has become a decidedly negative, pejorative term, connoting opposition to 'fact', 'logic', 'reason', and even 'truth.' But the term first appeared in English in 1796 as a translation of a new, post-French Revolution, non-judgmental 'science of ideas' – literally idea-ology – initiated by French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracey. As a purely neutral, descriptive term, it denoted a systematic body of concepts about human life and culture, the sum of a person's values, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations, such as neoliberalism. Ideology was therefore unavoidable, and anyone with any coherence in their thought was an ideologue. For someone to claim that the other was ideological while they themselves were above it was simply naïve at best and arrogant at worst, and a blatant attempt to stigmatize the other.

However, the connotation of ideology today is not so much in what it is, but in what it does, in how it functions. And it is not merely individual; it is profoundly collective. Ideology is "cultural beliefs that justify particular social arrangements" (Macionis, Jansson, and Benoit 2013:196), and the process by which those beliefs and values become "naturalized," binding individuals together in a society. Furthermore, ideology is an idea system that is "held for reasons that are not purely epistemic" (Honderich 1995:392), but rather, is an expression of, and driven by, certain social interests. As Terry Eagleton put it, "[i]deology is a system of concepts and views which serves to make sense of the world while obscuring the *social interests* that are expressed therein, and by its completeness and relative internal consistency tends to form a *closed system* and maintain itself in the face of contradictory or inconsistent experience" (Eagleton 2007, emphasis in original). Thus, ideology is also a pair of blinders not known to be worn, a set of limits to consciousness. "In providing the very concepts through which the world becomes intelligible, our own ideology is effectively invisible" (Heywood 2017:12).

For Karl Marx, ideology reflects the interests of the bourgeois ruling class and serves as an unconscious rationalization of the status quo that keeps them in power, while the proletariat suffer the systematic mystification and false consciousness of their own exploitation (Marx and Engels 1846). For Antonio Gramsci, ideology is related to cultural hegemony – the 'common sense' of the age – which is the ability of dominant groups in society to exercise control over subordinate groups, not by means of force, but by gaining their consent without their awareness, so that the unequal distribution of power appears to be both legitimate and natural (Gramsci 2011). For Louis Althusser, ideology is maintained and reproduced through several "ideological state apparatuses," most notably education, media, and religion, which promote illusions about the way society works and why things are the way they are, leaving little room for individual agency (Althusser 1970). For Terry Eagleton, "the most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire and identify with his power; and any practice

of political emancipation thus involves that most difficult of all forms of liberation, freeing ourselves from ourselves" (Eagleton 2007:xiii–xiv).

Most recently, political scientist Andrew Heywood defined ideology as

> a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action, whether intended to preserve, modify, or overthrow the existing system of power. All ideologies . . . a) offer an account of the existing order, usually in the form of a worldview, b) advance a model of a desired future, a vision of the 'good society,' and c) explain how political change can and should be brought about. (Heywood 2017:10)

Concerning social justice, the original, neutral notion of ideology can be summarized as a coherent set of interrelated ideas (about what is) and ideals (about what ought to be) that explain and justify (legitimate) the prevailing or proposed distribution of power, wealth, and privilege. Therefore, all views of social justice are inherently ideological.

Notably for our purposes here, all ideologies, whether conscious or subconscious, are action-oriented systems of thought at once both descriptive and normative, both moral and political. "Ideologies are thus 'secular religions;' they possess a totalizing character and serve as instruments of social control" (Heywood 2017:9). Conversely, all religion is, by its character, ideology. All theology functions as ideology, both in the neutral sense of moral worldview (Wellman 2008), but also in the negative sense of vested interests.

Morality

A critical theory approach to social justice may well be moralistic and political, but it is difficult to conceive of social justice as anything other or less than both an ethical and moral imperative. While ethics are general and theoretical – life is valuable – morals are specific and practical – murder is evil. Indeed, according to Aristotle, justice is "not a part of virtue, but the whole of virtue" (Aristotle 2011:93). It is "the foundational religious virtue and the prime ethical value" (Maguire 2014:27). Aquinas asserted that human equality before God requires obedience to natural principles of morality to satisfy duty owed to God, social justice thereby being driven by the tenets of morality embedded in Christianity.

Anthropologist Richard Shweder identified three cross-cultural clusters of moral concerns based on different ontological presuppositions (Shweder et al. 1997). The "ethic of autonomy" is focused on preserving the rights and freedoms of individuals and protecting them from harm by others, thereby ensuring fairness and justice. The "ethic of community" sees the world as a collection of social institutions that must be preserved through duty, respect, loyalty, and interdependence if individual lives are to have meaning and purpose. The "ethic of divinity" considers each person to be reflective of, or in the image of God, whose body, soul, and spirit must therefore be protected from degradation. Social justice, then, is the ethic of autonomy

writ large, precluding submission to oppressive social institutions or religious definitions of degradation.

Lawrence Kohlberg (1969) was the first modern moral psychologist to argue that justice was the single foundation of morality. Carol Gilligan (1982) then argued for dual, gendered foundations, positing that justice may be the male foundation of morality, but care was the female foundation of morality. Toward the end of the 20th century, sociologist James Davison Hunter's seminal book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* described the emergent and current conflict as "political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding" (1991:42). The opposing camps no longer spoke a common moral language, or even inhabited a common moral universe.

The foremost social psychological theory of morality today has added three more foundations to justice and care. Moral foundations theory, popularized by Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012), identifies five foundations underlying all moral virtues. In selecting a title for his book, Haidt deliberately chose the "righteous" mind instead of the "moral" mind "to convey the sense that human nature is not just intrinsically moral, it's also intrinsically moralistic, critical, and judgmental" (2012:xix).

Based on massive cross-cultural data and grounded in evolutionary psychology, moral foundations theory rejects rationalist theories of morality, maintaining that moral judgments are caused by quick, pre-rational, emotional intuitions. Moral reasoning, in contrast, is motivated by strategic objectives, and simply serves as post-hoc rationalization. "Moral thinking is more like a politician searching for votes than a scientist searching for truth" (Haidt 2012:89). Therefore, morality is like viewing a painting that we instantly like or dislike, and then coming up with reasons why. "In brief, the theory proposes that several innate and universally available psychological systems are the foundations of 'intuitive ethics.' Each culture then constructs virtues, narratives, and institutions on top of these foundations, thereby creating the unique moralities we see around the world, and conflicting within nations too" (moralfoundations.org n.d.).

The five foundations are:

Care (versus harm): preventing suffering by protecting others
Fairness (versus cheating): rendering justice according to shared rules
Loyalty (versus betrayal): thinking and acting in terms of "we"
Authority (versus subversion): submitting to hierarchy and tradition
Sanctity/Purity (versus degradation): abhorring what is regarded as disgusting

A sixth foundation, Liberty (the opposite of oppression), was only added later in Haidt's book.

Notably for our purposes here, moral foundations theory has been criticized for adding loyalty, authority, and purity to the more established foundations of care and fairness. While care and justice are unqualified goods – there is no sense in which they are not virtues – the

other three foundations are conditional, penultimate virtues contingent on what or who one is loyal to, what or who is accepted as authoritative, and what is defined as purity (and why). After all, the Nazis built on all three: loyalty to the Third Reich, the authority of Hitler, and the purity of the Aryan race. "Conservatives value institutions as much or more than individuals," hence, in terms of moral foundations theory "justice and related virtues (based on the fairness foundation) make up half of the moral world for liberals, while justice related concerns make up only one fifth of the moral world of conservatives" (Haidt and Graham 2007:98-9). However, fairness or justice, and the care manifested by pursuing it, remain the pure heart of morality.

Politics

According to the American Sociological Association, politics is "the process by which groups make decisions and promote their interests, typically in civil government but also in groups such as corporations, universities, unions, and churches" (asanet.org). As such, it is the structural embodiment of values in a society, and it inevitably enacts one ideology and morality or another. The political spectrum is typically charted by transecting axes of the liberal/left–conservative/right spectrum and the libertarian–authoritarian spectrum, with the underlying question of the left-right axis being whether the present social order should be preserved or changed.[1] The conservative right wants to conserve long-standing social structures and preserve traditional values, believing that the individual is more important than the collectivity, and the best society is the product of individual freedom. The liberal left, also known as progressives, wants to progress beyond long-standing social structures and traditional values, believing that the collectivity is more important than the individual, and the best society exists when individuals function as responsible members of their group. By its moralistic and political character expressed in its dedication to social change, the critical theory employed in the analysis here is inherently antithetical to conservative commitments.

In general, politically, the right campaigns for more personal freedom, less regulation, and thus smaller government, while the left campaigns for more social welfare, more regulation, and thus more government services. Economically, the right advocates for a free market built on private enterprise in competitive capitalism, while the left advocates for less inequality built on progressive taxation and government regulation of the economy. Morally, the right promotes gender hierarchy, private education, retributive punishment, and militarism, while it opposes abortion, same-sex marriage, and affirmative action. The left promotes gender

[1] These locations originally referred to seating arrangements in the French parliament after their 1789 Revolution. As seen from the Speaker's seat at the front of the General Assembly, the aristocracy seeking preservation of the status quo sat on the right, the commoners seeking change sat on the left.

egalitarianism, public education, restorative justice, and peace, while it opposes excessive wealth and all violations of social justice and human rights.

An illustration of ideology embedded in politics is the political right's belief in meritocracy, which is the assumption that ability and effort are the sole determinants of personal success, and that equality of opportunity is therefore the only requisite social arrangement. Contrarily, the left maintains that equality of opportunity is hollow and meaningless in the absence of equality of conditions. Meritocracy is only true where there is also equality of conditions, when everyone starts the race from the same starting line, instead of some starting twenty-five, fifty, or one hundred meters back, facing additional hurdles in their lane. Success is not only about who crosses the finish line first. It is also about who has actually run the fastest, overcome the most hurdles, or progressed the furthest, which can only be calculated by taking respective starting points and hurdles into account. In unequal conditions, the "highest achievement" of winning the race is not necessarily the greatest achievement. Only when equality of rights, conditions, and opportunity are all extant is inequality of outcome just. The exceptional individuals who overcome inequality of conditions typically discount its effects, implicitly crediting their own merits. Ignoring or denying inequality of conditions is thus ideological in the negative sense.

Morality is also embedded in politics in that left liberals tend to rely almost exclusively on the first two moral foundations of care and fairness, whereas right conservatives tend to rely equally on the additional three foundations of in-group loyalty, respect for authority, and sanctity or purity (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). Since the rise of fascism in the 20th century, loyalty, authority, and purity have been associated with the authoritarian personality by research in political psychology (Adorno et al. 1950). For example, Matthew Kugler et al. found that

> liberal-conservative differences in moral intuitions are statistically mediated by authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, so that conservatives' greater valuation of in-group, authority, and purity concerns is attributable to higher levels of authoritarianism, whereas liberals' greater valuation of fairness and harm avoidance is attributable to lower levels of social dominance. [Furthermore], in-group, authority, and purity concerns are positively associated with intergroup hostility and support for discrimination, whereas concerns about fairness and harm avoidance are negatively associated with these variables. (Kugler, Jost, and Noorbaloochi 2014:413)

Kugler et al. go on to question the wisdom of treating preferences based on authoritarianism and social dominance as moral rather than amoral or even immoral, and thereby incorporating conservative ideology into the study of moral psychology. Consequently, perception of truth then has more to do with blind in-group loyalty than with verifiable facts, because once an

intuitive moral judgment has been made, motivated reasoning and confirmation bias simply seal it.

The ideology, morality, and politics of social justice have played out recurrently, if not always constantly, throughout recent Christian history, and are again being vigorously debated today. As always and in everything, examining the past is instructive for contextualizing and understanding the present debate on the issue.

History

The *Handbook of Social Justice Theory and Research* states on its opening page that "[t]he origins of the old-time notion of justice in Western civilization can be traced to the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition" (Sabbagh and Schmitt 2016:1). Yet Christian perspectives of and commitment to social justice have repeatedly waxed and waned over the past two hundred years. In the 19th century, Christians were actively engaged on multiple fronts as slave abolitionists, women's suffragists, and trade unionists. Methodism was thriving as it focused equally on evangelism and social justice, fighting against slavery, inhumane prisons, and child labor, while practicing additional acts of mercy. Catholic social teaching focused on the life and dignity of the human person, and the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. Thus, "when in the late 19th century Otto von Bismarck determined to pioneer the first national health care plan in the world, he labeled his Sickness Insurance Law 'Applied Christianity'" (Maguire 2014:35).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Social Gospel movement was peaking, applying Christian ethics to additional social problems such as poverty, alcoholism, crime, racial tensions, slums, unclean environments, lack of unionization, poor schools, and the dangers of war. Taking its mandate from the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10), the movement maintained that, while an individualistic gospel may make individual sinfulness clear, it does not shed light on institutionalized sinfulness. As Walter Rauschenbusch wrote in *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, an individualistic gospel "has not evoked faith in the will and power of God to redeem the permanent institutions of human society from their inherited guilt of oppression and extortion" (1917:5). In America, the Social Gospel facilitated Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s, and had a profound effect on the American Federation of Labor (AFL). It had an even greater effect in shaping the evolving polity of Canada, where its principles served as the foundation for the formation of the New Democratic Party in the 1930s by Methodist minister J. S. Woodsworth, which was later led by Baptist minister Tommy Douglas, who introduced universal medicare, family allowance, and old age pensions.

Yet by the second quarter of the 20th century, evangelical engagement with social problems in general, and politics in particular, had all but disappeared in what David Moberg

termed the Great Reversal (1977). Partially as fall-out from the fundamentalist-modernist controversies dramatized by the Scopes Trial of 1925, an individualistic social ethic displaced most evangelicals' commitment to the "worldly" concern of progressive social reform. Pitting personal transformation sought by fundamentalists against social reform sought by liberals, evangelicals, as offspring of fundamentalists, looked only inward and upward, not outward. Instead of giving "proper attention to both evangelism and social concern" (Moberg 1977:26) as Methodists and Catholics had long done, evangelicals embraced the former and abandoned the latter, turning toward salvation and sanctification, and turning away from the "poor, dispossessed, outcast, strangers, and minorities in society" (Moberg 1977:134). By mid-century, Carl Henry (1947) attempted to call evangelicals out of their apolitical quietism, but they remained mostly politically moribund through the 1950s.

The radical 1960s brought upheaval to many sectors of American society, and to some limited extent to evangelicals as well with the emergence of "progressive evangelicals." This "moral minority" was conservative in theology, but liberal in politics, and aspired to be a "third way" to social change, transcending "categories of right and left by establishing micro-communities of authenticity, peace, and justice directed by Jesus" (Swartz 2014:87). As such, they were "politically homeless" (Gasaway 2014:155). Nevertheless, they gave the lie to liberal individualism by articulating a more vigorous theological grounding than the Social Gospel had, and a "public theology of community" that did not merely sacralize social institutions. "Unlike most white evangelicals, they defined sin as institutional injustice as well as personal failure and they insisted that private charity was not an adequate substitute for government efforts to alleviate disabling economic inequalities" (Miller 2015:98).

The 1973 Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern provided the benchmark for progressive evangelicals and gave rise to its three leading organizations: 1) John Alexander's *The Other Side* magazine, 2) Jim Wallis' Sojourners, and 3) Ron Sider's Evangelicals for Social Action (Gasaway 2014). They addressed six primary issues – racism, feminism, abortion, gay rights, poverty, and anti-militarism – but there were significant differences among the organizations on each issue. For example, they took varying stances on abortion and gay rights but also promoted women's rights, thus angering both pro-choice and pro-life factions, as well as confusing and frustrating secular feminists. Ironically, conservative Christians have not always opposed abortion. As recently as the early 1970s, *Christianity Today*, the Christian Medical Society, and the Southern Baptist Convention each wrote strong statements supporting abortion before it was politicized by the New Christian Right. "[T]he real roots of the religious right lie not in the defense of a fetus but in the defense of racial segregation" (Balmer 2014).

In contrast to the unifying grand narrative of the emerging New Christian Right, the progressive evangelical movement eventually fragmented by the end of the century due to the polarizing below-the-belt issues of abortion and sexual orientation. Different organizations took different positions on different issues, including which was most important, and these

cleavages proved debilitating to the movement. Hence the left was soon left behind. But by becoming politically active, evangelical progressives may have inspired and enabled their rival New Christian Right to be actively political in ways the right's fundamentalist ancestors had never deemed properly Christian.

The high public profile of the New Christian Right and its role in fueling the rise of neoliberalism and the Reagan revolution of the 1980s is well documented. After campaigning across America explicitly against what he perceived to be the decay of the nation's morality, and implicitly against the separation of church and state, Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority primarily to uphold "traditional family values" considered under attack in American culture. Anti-gay rhetoric was a full part of their agenda. Though Falwell declared that Jim Wallis "is to evangelicalism what Adolf Hitler was to the Roman Catholic Church" (Balmer 2014:3), by the end of the decade, critics of the Moral Majority were asserting that it was neither moral nor the majority. Its younger sibling, the Christian Coalition carried on conserving the "conservative family tradition" for another decade. As another extreme example, Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition and a 1988 Republican presidential contender, wrote in a letter to constituents that feminism "is a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians" (Associated Press 1992).

But then, come the new century, conservative Christian commitment to social justice re-surfaced once again. In 2004, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) unanimously adopted *For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility*, which it announced as "a milestone in the movement of evangelicals from the insularity of a revival tent mind-set in the early 20th century to the political activism of the 21st century." However, what Steensland and Goff termed *The New Evangelical Social Engagement* (2014) was only the newest expression of looking inward, upward, *and* outward, unhesitantly coupling personal salvation with social justice, having recovered a "thicker Jesus" (Stassen 2014:298). Far beyond myopic conservative focus on abortion and sexuality, it tackled war, disease, racism, patriarchy, homelessness, hunger, corruption, poverty, illiteracy, environment, urban renewal, economic development, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, religious repression, and more. Cognizant of the partisanship that had discredited religion in general, it sought to be "political but not partisan" (Douthat 2018:284). The decline of mainline Protestantism had lowered the identity threat formerly associated with social engagement, enabling evangelicals to now be socially active without fear of being mistaken for liberals, and they refused to be pegged politically. They also became more ecumenical, enjoying warming relationship with the Catholic church and welcoming contributions from the emergent church movement (for example, McLaren 2007; McLaren, Padilla, and Seeber 2009) and from Anabaptists (for example, McCartney and McCartney 2020). Their *Prayers for the New Social Awakening Inspired by the New Social Creed*

(Iosso and Hinson-Hasty 2008) were tied directly and explicitly to the Social Gospel Creed of 1908.

More practically, they developed theologies of, and manuals for social justice advocacy, understood as direct, nonpartisan engagement with governments and other institutions to influence policymaking. Seeking societal transformation, they recognized social justice as a structural issue, and the importance of informed, intelligent engagement at the systemic level, not just the individual level (Offutt et al. 2016). Historically, evangelicals had long provided social services such as schools and hospitals as an expression of their charitable care and compassion – also often an indirect form of evangelism – but had not pursued the structural, systemic transformation that would mitigate the need for their services in the first place, granting more dignity to those whom they served. Now they better understood the most effective level of engagement.

They also developed handbooks and models for social justice activism. In 2009, Mae Elise Cannon's *Social Justice Handbook* named and described eighty-three issues plus eighty-one organizations addressing them, and her most recent title is *Beyond Hashtag Activism* (2020). Analogously, *Call for Justice: From Practice to Theory and Back* (2019) is the informative and inspiring set of letters between Christian activist Kurt Ver Beek, co-founder of the Honduran organization *Asociacion para una Sociedad mas Justa* (Association for a More Just Society), and Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, exploring the challenging questions that arise when actual engagement begins. Nevertheless, like the progressive evangelicals of the 1970s, when the ecumenical World Council of Churches embarked in 2013 on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace around the world, they too found that champions of one issue would oppose another. For example, activists focused on economic and ecological injustice could be blind to racial and gender injustice (Phiri 2020). Yet there is no denying the evolution and maturation of Christian social justice activism from the era when the Salvation Army began rescuing individual victims of injustice in 1865, to when the International Justice Mission began confronting systems of injustice in 1994.

Nonetheless, most recently, conservative Christians have marshalled yet another concerted critique of social justice, with the 2018 Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel marking its launch. Initiated and led by John MacArthur, who described social justice as "the most subtle and dangerous threat" to the gospel he had encountered in his lifetime (2018), this Dallas Statement consisted of fourteen affirmations and denials, and was signed by over 15,000 church leaders within three years. Echoing the 1987 Danvers Statement, the section on gender affirms that "God has designed men and women with distinct traits and to fulfill distinct roles . . . . the husband is to lead, love, and safeguard his wife, and the wife is to respect and be submissive to her husband in all things lawful. In the church, qualified men alone are to lead" (all thirteen of the initial signers were male). Echoing the 2017 Nashville Statement, the section on sexuality denies "gay Christian as a legitimate biblical category . . . . We further deny that

people should be identified as 'sexual minorities'." The section on race and ethnicity states, "We reject any teaching that encourages racial groups to view themselves as privileged oppressors or entitled victims of oppression." In the section on the church: "We deny that political or social activism should be viewed as integral components of the gospel or primary to the mission of the church." In short, anything other than personal salvation is "not a definitional component of the gospel." Overall, the Statement is a bifurcation of orthodoxy and orthopraxy which functions well to preserve and protect the privileged.

Emboldened by the Dallas Statement, the few years following have seen a flurry of books published and videos posted severely critical of social justice, often in alarmist tones. Publishers Weekly describes Owen Strachan's *Christianity and Wokeness* (2021) as "strident," "suffused with an evangelical penchant for apocalypticism," and carrying an "overbearing, polemical tone." Of course, some critics simply reiterate critiques of progressive Christianity and include social justice as just one objection (for example, Kruger 2019; Childers 2020), but others are indignant or fearful tirades pointedly targeting social justice. Characteristic title phrases include *How the Social Justice Movement is Hijacking the Gospel* (Strachan 2021), *A Corruption of Consequence* (Rogers 2021), *An Urgent Appeal to Fellow Christians in a Time of Social Crisis* (Allen 2020), and *Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe* (Baucham 2021). The latter is pronounced by Voddie Baucham, one of the most prominent, and shrill, voices: "catastrophe is unavoidable … we have only begun to see the devastation that is coming … we *are* at war … and yes, I do mean to call these ideologies demonic" (2021:138, 205, 206, 230). As another critic railed, social justice is pursued by "aberrant, arrogant, asinine, and apostate 'Evangelicals' who don't know or believe the true Gospel and babble incoherently about a discredited, deviate (sic), and deadly social gospel" (Boys 2008).

At times, their conceptual confusion is incapacitating. For example, after quoting John Stonestreet's quip that "It's no good having the same vocabulary if we're using different dictionaries" (2018), Scott Allen defines distributive justice as "impartially rendering judgment, righting wrongs, and meting out punishment for lawbreaking" (2020:24). This is demonstrably unlike any scholarly definition of distributive justice as detailed above, and indeed closer to retributive or procedural justice. The rest of Allen's book is a continuous contrast of the biblical worldview and "ideological social justice." For Ronnie Rogers, biblical justice is spiritually retributive and potentially restorative, whereas social justice "is accomplished by favoring one group (the oppressed/minority/non-sinners) and punishing the other group (the oppressors/majority/sinners) by redistribution of wealth, power, and privilege" (2021:147). Others avoid precise definition altogether. Despite deploring "lack of clarity … (in) definition of justice" and promising to "differentiate between the concept of biblical justice and that of social justice in later chapters" (2021:5, 132), Baucham never does explicitly.

The most common theme of contemporary Christian social justice critics is a seemingly categorical rejection of neo-Marxian critical theory. Arguing that culture had displaced the

economy as most determinative of society, critical theory shifted focus from the economy to the culture industry, whose impact is more pervasive, invisible, and insidious than the economy. Having been molded into mere but contented consumers, people were said to seek their own domination – hegemony. Three sub-types of critical theory are currently more specifically relevant to Christian objections to social justice. First, critical race theory (CRT) is built on W. E. B. Du Bois' concepts of double consciousness, the color line, and the veil, is centered in the study of law and its perpetuation of racial discrimination, and is recognition of the need for rejuvenated social activism after the civil rights movement. Second, critical theories of race and racism (CTRR) are rooted in the social sciences, are more multidisciplinary in their openness to a wider array of classical and contemporary theories, and are related to much broader, historical, global issues. Third, intersectionality theory originated in feminist theory, and examines how women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity based on intersections with other arrangements of social inequality. For example, the "matrix of domination" includes class, age, location, race, and sexuality, thereby placing the poor, old, southern, black lesbian in quintuple jeopardy.

It remains unclear why any of these observations in themselves are "unChristian." Notably, the depictions given here of social scientific critical theory, critical race theory, and intersectionality theory (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2019) are seldom employed by Christian social justice critics, who instead use their own variations and applications based on the original antecedents, current contexts, and perceived consequences of these theories. Furthermore, all three theories are then typically subsumed under the umbrella of what is termed cultural Marxism, a far-right, anti-Semitic conspiracy theory which claims that Western Marxism, despite its rejection of Soviet communism, is intent on "the destruction of Western culture and the Christian religion" (Lind 2018:12). Conservative Christian scholars view it as a sinister "revolutionary reality," while secular scholars mostly view it as a benign "imaginary conspiracy" (Smith 2019), and conclude that critical theory's "critique of culture was never a springboard to a totalitarian regime. . . . There is no cultural Marxist master plan . . . [cultural Marxism] mixes wild conspiracy theorizing with self-righteous moralism" (Blackford 2015). Reviled in the 2010s by Canadian YouTube celebrity Jordan Peterson and Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik, cultural Marxism is also accused of being postmodernist, despite postmodernism's hostility toward Marxism, including the grand narratives typically supported by critical theory. Yet seemingly any perspective conservative Christians wish to condemn can be demonized by parroting a cultural anti-Marxism that fails to understand Marx adequately, or all the ways in which he was right (Eagleton 2011). Presumably all forms of even Western neo-Marxism would have long evaporated if they lacked any merit.

In all, conservative denunciation of social justice has surfaced three times in the past hundred years, first in the fundamentalism of mid-20th century, then in the Moral Majority at the end of the 20th century, and again today. The first two times it was met with a new form of

evangelical engagement, shaped by very different social and cultural conditions. What the outcome of current condemnation will be remains to be seen.

Analysis

The recurring Christian debate about social justice is clearly not purely hermeneutical, but rather steeped in ideology, morality, and politics – hermeneutics as always. Nonetheless, the sheer volume of literature on exegetical and theological readings of the biblical text mandating social justice apart from personal justification is vast. Moreover, the justice demanded in the Hebrew and Greek testaments is profoundly relational and distributive, as affirmed by two theological giants of the 20th century, the Catholic Karol Wojtyla (later Pope John Paul II) and the Protestant Karl Barth, even as both were unable to see past their own privilege as powerful white men (Brettmann 2014). By the third decade of the 21st century, even evangelicalism has recognized the centrality of the social justice imperative in scripture (Adams 2015) and developed extensive elaborations and applications of the liberation theology generated by Latin American Catholicism (Cannon and Smith 2019).

Concise analysis must begin with the words of the biblical text as translated into English. The language of the Hebrew Bible separates *mishpat* (justice), which occurs 419 times, from *tsedaqah* (righteousness) which occurs 157 times, but they are paired in the same verse 44 times. Yahweh is a "God of justice [*mishpat*]" (Isa. 30:18) who cries out to "let justice [*mishpat*] roll down like waters, and righteousness [*tsedaqah*] like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5.24). In contrast, the New Testament Greek utilizes the single word *dikaiosune* which can be translated with equal validity as either "righteousness" or "justice;" etymologically, righteousness and justice are virtually interchangeable. Hence, the rendering of Matthew 5:6 could just as justifiably be "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled." Yet in the context of Western pietistic individualism, of the approximately 300 times *dik*-stem words appear in the New Testament, only once is it regularly translated into English as justice (Col 4:1), while in Plato's *Republic* it is routinely translated as justice.

Samuel Perry observes how Bible translations "are highly contingent on temporal culture and power, being the product of manipulation by interpretive communities and actors with vested interests" (2020:68). As a case study, he then documents and details how the editorial team of the English Standard Version (ESV) "made intentional, systematic changes from the Revised Standard Version to publish and mass-market a text more amenable to conservative, complementarian interpretations. In so doing, the actors behind the ESV have engaged in more covert means of cultural reproduction, not only disseminating *their interpretation* of the biblical text, but manipulating the *text itself*" (2020:70, emphasis in original). The ESV was created to repudiate gender equality.

Theologically, more than two thousand verses must be taken into account when generating a biblical theology of social engagement (Anthony 2019), and contrary to occasional insinuations, social justice is addressed far beyond only the writings of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus (Westfall and Dyer 2016). Biblical social justice is built on comprehending that humans were made in the *imago Dei* of a social (Trinitarian) God, but descended into self-interest, and had to be commanded to love their neighbor as themselves (Kovalishyn 2019). Therefore, natural law, not "revealed law," is the footing of social justice in the Old Testament (Williamson 2012). "The doing of justice is the primary expectation of Yahweh" (Brueggeman 1997:5) – no justice, no shalom. But perhaps even more foundationally, a public theology must be grounded in classical Christology, because the divine Word first created social order – an *a priori* human solidarity. As the redemptive Word, the Son then assumed human nature and created an *a posteriori* solidarity in the church. Faithfulness to Jesus therefore requires commitment to the solidarity of social justice. Yet there remains a proclivity for theological abstractions such as all are equal before God, and personal salvation in the hereafter is all that ultimately matters, to provide rationale for the privileged to do nothing practical here and now, and for the disprivileged to distort the concrete realities of their own experience and be distracted from them. Religion then does indeed function as "the opium of the people. . . . the flowers on the chains that bind" (McLellan 2000:72), draining motivation for action, and merely mollifying the distressed.

Isaiah makes multiple references to justice, including "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Isa 58:6). Quoting Isaiah 42:1-4, Matthew later proclaims Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy: "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles" (Matthew 12:18). When Jesus launches his ministry, he reads from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue, confirming that scripture has been fulfilled in him: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18). "Captives" here means economic hostages, those detained for outstanding debt, not lawbreakers. Regarding personal salvation, Matt 25:31-46 is the Synoptic gospel equivalent to John 3:16 in soteriology. The sheep who inherit the kingdom will be separated from the goats who do not, based on who has acted compassionately toward the least: the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned. Conversely, Jesus denounces those who "on the outside look righteous to others, but inside are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt 23:28). Among all the gospels, Matthew's stands out about justice. After a microscopically detailed examination of the original language of Matthew's gospel, Amy Allen concludes that "social justice *is* biblical justice. . . . It is within this context of lived intersectional personhood that I

suggest God's justice as portrayed in Matthew's gospel is *social justice*" (2019:8, emphasis in original).

Ethically, Christian conceptions of social justice are multiform, not uniform, as Vic McCracken's *Five Views* (2014) compilation elaborates. McCracken first explains that "[i]f justice is about giving each person his or her due, social justice is simply about how *communities* give people their due" (2014:3, emphasis in original) via social practices and institutions. He then identifies four challenges in doing so:

Scarcity: "How does a just community organize itself to rightly distribute the scarce resources that all of us desire?" (McCracken 2014:8)

Diversity

Moral diversity: What is a good life?

Racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity: How should we accommodate these differences?

Gender diversity: How do we honor differences?

Conflicting Norms: Which value is most important: welfare, liberty, or virtue?

Christian Tradition: What does love of neighbor look like?

The first theory of social justice presented as Christian social ethics is libertarianism (Jason Jewell), which basically equates every form of political control with violence. Because states are seen as aggressive by nature, they must be limited or eliminated, replaced by voluntary associations or contractual exchanges. The second theory is political liberalism (Daniel Dombrowski), in which "just societies will arrange themselves to ensure that natural and economic inequalities will not hinder opportunities for those on the margins." This Rawlsian theory of justice is deemed "fully compatible with the Christian tradition" (McCracken 2014:14) of the preferential option for the poor. Third is liberation theology (Miguel De La Torre), which rejects nearly the entirety of the Western philosophical canon as justifying the status quo, and as being irredeemably racist and imperialist. The only Christian recourse is solidarity with the poor and oppressed, like Christ's own solidarity with suffering. Fourth is feminism (Laura Stivers), in which social context and epistemological starting points matter greatly for ethical theory and practice, because they call into question abstract, ahistorical approaches to justice, and the complex web of power, privilege, and patriarchy. It is concerned with the intersectionality of people on the margins, especially women. Finally, virtue ethics (Elizabeth Phillips) calls for faith, hope, and love, and a vision of the common good. These five theories of social ethics unintentionally bookend more structural views in the middle (political liberalism, liberation theology, and feminism) with more individualistic views on the outside (libertarianism and virtue ethics).

Sociologically, conservative Christian cultures are comfortably rooted in individualistic orientations to religious commitment, along with skepticism of structural analyses of social inequalities and injustice. They therefore default to charity-based personal volunteering and direct service approaches to social issues that all but preclude social justice activism, which they

code as un-American, communist, or simply political rather than religious (Delehanty 2016). For the privatized religion of many Christians, "social charity belongs to the core of their identity, social justice to its periphery" (Hughson 2013:57). While all value justice, some feel social justice is too political for the church, as if the church could be apolitical. Theological individualism emerges from a framework of "self-reflective (and somewhat self-righteous) individual, voluntary choice" (Madsen 2009:1281). It is "focused on individual decision-making (such as 'just say no' campaigns and abstinence only sex education) and on issues of individual sin (such as abortion and gay marriage)" (Delehanty 2016:55). Though theological individualism is more common among Protestants than Catholics, proponents of Catholic social teaching can be equally as conservative as evangelicals. For example, Michael Novak and Paul Adams maintain that social justice is a virtue, habit, or disposition of the individual moral agent, not a synonym for progressive government; social justice "is an attribute of citizens, not states" (2015:51). Resonating with Hayek's allegation of the vacuity of social justice, Novak insists that "the best means of raising up the poor – by far – is a strong, free and growing economy" (2015:51) and nurturing personal responsibility.

From the perspective of sociological theory, both theological individualism and collectivism are a failure to grasp the duality of agency and structure. Agency is action perpetrated by actors, while structure is patterned social interaction and persistent social relationships. According to Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, they are in dialectical relationship; neither can exist without the other. "Agents and structures are interrelated to such an extent that at the moment they produce action, people produce and reproduce the structures in which they exist" (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2019:400). Consequently, though conservative Christians may imagine otherwise, it is impossible to exist without the social structures of social (in)justice. Furthermore, according to all critical social theories in particular, though domination is structural, progress can be realized through concerted political and social action precisely because the bridge between structure and agency is dialectical (Agger 2013).

Nevertheless, some can ignore social structures, evidently. For example, Jonathan Leeman and Andrew David Naselli of the Gospel Coalition "define justice according to the Bible as *making a judgment according to God's righteousness*" (2020:15, emphasis in original). They then propose a distinction between straight-line issues versus jagged-line issues, the former having "a straight line between biblical text and its policy application" (abortion is their main example), and the latter having "a multi-step process from a biblical or theological principle to a political position" (gun rights is one of their examples) (2020:20). Straight-line issues contain *the* Christian position, whereas jagged-line issues are political issues which have freedom of Christian conscience. Notably, Leeman and Naselli deliberately deny the theological triage of essential versus important versus non-essential issues in favor of a binary approach, "because church organization is binary" (2020:23) – all in or all out. But they do accept an ethical triage of "must" as obligatory, "should" as advisable, and "may" as permissible. Characteristic of

conservativism, they repeatedly identify who should be excommunicated for their views, they use gender exclusive, generic masculine language, they cite immigration policies and tax rates as examples, and they "do not believe in moral equivalency . . . some injustices are worse than others" (2020:19). Abortion, they assert, trumps the sum of all other issues.

Other evangelical Christians are simply wary of social justice, and therefore cautious and measured in pursuing it. For example, in *Confronting Injustice Without Compromising Truth*, Thaddeus Williams (2020), together with twelve co-authors, poses twelve questions Christians ought to ask to discern what is biblical versus unbiblical social justice before engaging in it. The heart of the problem, he suggests, is locating evil exclusively either in the individual agent or the social structure, because both evil and truth reside in both.

A second example of cautiousness is Timothy Keller (2020a), who offers one of the most informed, penetrating, and balanced Christian assessments of justice articulated recently. (At the end of *Social Justice Goes to Church*, Jon Harris (2020) devotes a sixteen-page appendix to the life and teachings of Tim Keller.) Keller defines God's justice as primarily restorative and retributive, and characterizes it as radical generosity, universal equality, life-changing advocacy (for the poor, weak, and powerless), and asymmetrical responsibility. His most distinctive contribution is elaborating the latter. Reflecting the agency-structure duality, he argues that we have both a corporate responsibility for injustices that we ourselves have not committed, as well as an individual responsibility that remains stronger. "[I]ndividuals actually committing . . . wrongs always bear the greatest responsibility."

Regarding social justice in particular, Keller (2020b) critiques four secular justice theories on a spectrum from individualism (you are wholly the product of your individual choices) to collectivism (you are wholly the product of social forces and structures).

Libertarian: A just society promotes individual freedom (Nozick)
Liberal: A just society promotes fairness for all (Rawls)
Utilitarian: A just society maximizes the greatest happiness for the greatest number (Mill)
Postmodern: A just society subverts the power of dominant groups in favor of the oppressed (Marx)

Keller offers a biblical critique of each theory, arguing that all are reductionistic and fail to acknowledge transcendent, moral absolutes. More to the point here, he equates the postmodern perspective with critical theory, and critiques it as deeply incoherent by reciting the conventional self-referential fallacy as its "fatal flaw": "[y]ou cannot insist that all morality is culturally constructed and relative and then claim that your moral claims are not." Furthermore, he contends that critical theory is far too simplistic, it undermines our common humanity, it denies our common sinfulness, it makes forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation between groups impossible, it offers a highly 'performative' identity, and it itself is prone to domination. In extreme manifestations, these criticisms may be true, but that does not mean that the theory is entirely false, and Keller acknowledges that its truths should not be dismissed

entirely. It is just that biblical justice, in contrast, is more well-grounded on God's character, has a more penetrating, complex understanding of the human condition, has built-in safeguards against domination, and offers a radically subversive understanding of power.

Unfortunately, Keller does not recognize the many social conditions where structural injustice is so overwhelming that the individual has no realistic recourse, resulting in the asymmetry of responsibility being weighted toward the structural. Nor does he acknowledge that his own Christian position, like critical theory itself, is a "standpoint," or that religious doctrine itself can at times, "at bottom, [be] a way for people to get or maintain social status, wealth, and therefore power over others." But he does conclude by insisting that Christians "take up their birthright and do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God (Micah 6:8)."

Hope

Albert Raboteau (2016) compiled the biographies of seven 20th century religious radicals – "American prophets" – who strove for social justice, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and Martin Luther King, Jr. being among the better known. Raboteau's aim was to "grasp the divine pathos that moved each" of them, such that their prophetic witness would release "the efficacy of redemptive suffering" and prompt action by others (2016:xiv, 151). Tellingly, all had vexed relations with their institutionalized religious traditions, and thus relied on their own mystical experiences "when doubt about traditional doctrine and disappointment over ecclesiastical complicity with the status quo shook [their] commitment to Christianity" (2016:29). For each, contemplative spiritual practice and practical political activism were inextricable.

Will yet another "new social gospel" and distinctive "Christian humanism" be achieved in our time to "redeem Christianity" (Heinz 2020)? Will Christians yet "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent [them] into [post-Christendom] exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare [they] will find [their] welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7)? There may be no more trenchant analysis of the present and inspiring manifesto for the future than Donald Heinz's implicitly critical theoretical but hopeful *After Trump: Achieving a New Social Gospel* (2020).

James McCarty (2020) has reviewed multiple contemporary scholars from Christian social ethicist Miguel De La Torre (2017) to international philosopher Slavoj Zizek (2017) who, considering the persistence of current social circumstances, have rejected hope, and "courageously" embraced hopelessness. Hope, they argue, is a middle-class privilege, and merely encourages complacency. Other scholars, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015), have likewise invited the death of hope, but nevertheless embrace "the beautiful struggle" (Coates 2008) for its own sake, with no expectation of positive social change. Among several definitions of hope McCarty overviewed is one from Jennifer Ayres: "the disposition by which we commune with something deeper, broader, and a closer approximation of the good than our human

experience otherwise affords us" (2011:131). Hope is indeed much more than optimism, which is merely "the disposition to believe that things will work out in the end" (McCarty 2020:49).

Citing numerous other theologians and Christian ethicists, McCarty made the simple claim that "hope must not be abandoned if marginalized and oppressed people, especially those who are Christian, want to transform society into one that is more just. . . . Perpetual hopelessness is despair. And despair does not motivate action but creates inertia" (McCarty 2020:53-4). Christian hope is "the sense of possibility that generates and sustains moral agency" (Marshall 2006:xiii), an action that takes the crucified off their crosses (Pineda-Madrid 2013), and "subversive hope is the necessary core of Christianity" (Espin 2014:xv). In I Corinthians 13:13, the apostle Paul famously listed the three virtues that remain after all else fades – faith, hope, and love. The greatest undoubtedly is love, but as Christian public intellectual Cornel West has repeatedly explained, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

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