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The First World Church's Response To The Demands Of The Poor, Or Voices Of Liberation And A Mute Response

Introduction

The story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" is a familiar one. Recount the details of that story now as you heard it as a child.

When we were growing up the "bad guys" in this story were the three bears. Goldilocks was the good person—at least the innocent one. No one ever challenged this interpretation. We heard it and we accepted it as fact. The bears were bad and Goldilocks was a poor innocent victim.

But we are no longer children. The fact is the bears were minding their own business. One might assume that they were good neighbors and friends of many in the woods. It is possible that if "Goldie" had knocked on the door, asked for food, she would have been well received. But the bears weren't at home and she went right into the house uninvited. She ate their food, broke their furniture, and slept in their beds. And the bears were perturbed. The bears understandably couldn't see how this was mutually beneficial. They were angry and poor little innocent Goldilocks ran for her life.

This is a strange story. Every American child grew up hearing this story. Everyone who is familiar with the story thought less of the bears and felt sorry for the little girl. Yes, we

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felt for the little bear, but mostly we were afraid for Goldilocks. Isn't it ironic that the one stuffed animal many of us took to bed while we were growing up was a "teddy bear"? This story depreciates bears, yet many of us consistently slept with them—even if stuffed. One of today's most popular series of children's books concerns the lives of the Berenstein Bears. Yet this almost universal story, "The Three Bears," continues to degrade bears. Goldilocks exploited the bears, yet is presented as the innocent one. The bears lived in peace, in their own environment, but had their lives and resources used.

Please consider this American children's story as applicable to First and Third World relations. First World European and Anglo-Americans have been taking porridge and exploiting people for many centuries. Slavery, colonization, imperialism, urbanization, ghettoization, militarism, capitalism, classism, racism, sexism, and transnational business—all are varying forms of so-called, innocent First World people taking from Third World folk. First World leadership has created a mythology that enables that leadership to rape the earth and oppress the poor while appearing to be innocent, or at least, not directly involved. Let's explore how this is happening.

Who Makes Up The First and Third Worlds?

At the turn of the century our world population exceeded one billion. In 1975 four billion people lived on the earth. By the year 2000, 6.2 billion individuals will occupy our planet. The most recent United Nations estimate is that the population of the world will level off at ten and one-half billion by the year 2110.

> The population is very unevenly distributed over the world's land space, and people have very unequal

> access to the food, energy, and materials needed to provide shelter, security and human development. Eighteen percent of the people live in countries with a developed technology and market economy. These are the twenty-four richest nations, and their per capita GNP stood at $U.S. 7,046 in 1980. Nine other developed countries, characterized by a centrally-planned economy and containing nine percent of the world's people, have an average per capita GNP of $3,091. The remaining, developing countries have seventy percent of the world's population and a per capita GNP of $890.[1]

The labels "First," "Second," and "Third" Worlds are not used to suggest priorities of right or status. They function only as designated terms for a sequence of historical emergence. Thus the *First World*, the twenty-four developed, market-economy countries (Australia, Japan, Canada, France, Sweden, United Kingdom, the United States, etc.) provide space for eighteen percent of the world's population. The nine (previously) centrally-planned economies, the *Second World* (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, U.S.S.R., etc.) house nine percent of the world's population. The rest of the world's people, seventy percent, make up the *Third World* (Mexico, Brazil, Kenya, India, China, Korea, Zimbabwe, etc.).[2]

By whatever measure one might use, life in the First World is much easier than life in the Third. Life expectancy, the physical quality-of-life index (PQLI) and grain consumption is significantly greater in the First World. First World peoples are predominately White. Third World peoples are mostly non-White. The vast majority of the hungriest and poorest countries in the world export food to North America.[3]

There are great differences between the First and Third

Worlds, differences in land space, distribution of food, and opportunities for human development. The majority have less, while a small minority of persons and countries have significantly more. If one looked no further it would appear that a standard behavior of the First World is based on self-interest and self-survival. It seems reasonable to assume that selfishness and insensitivity to others' basic human needs is maintained by a part of the globe characterized as the "First World."

This paper seeks to examine these two groups of peopl—the First World and the Third, the non-poor and the poor. The "non-poor" are "those with low infant mortality rates and high life expectancy, those above the poverty line, or more simply, those who are well fed."[4] The poor are those persons who experience "high infant mortality and low life expectancy due to lack of food, clothing, and shelter."[5] The poor have an "unequal access to the food, energy and materials needed to provide shelter, security and human development."[6] They are not the well fed!

Further, this paper will explore the response of the First World Church to the demands of Third World peoples. The "vast majority of people in North American mainline churches and synagogues consider themselves 'middle-class.' "[7] Hence, it will be assumed that the non-poor are mostly that middle class group who have low infant mortality, high life expectancy, and enough sustenance to be above the "poverty line." The majority of mainline churches and the majority of the non-poor (in the U.S.) are those persons who are neither radically poor nor extremely rich, economically speaking, and who can be classified as the *middle class*. Paulo Freire describes the middle class as being like tourists who go back and forth between the rich and poor.

> The so-called middle class does not have control over the means of production of society. In this sense, the middle class is obviously not the dominant class, the dominating class. And for this reason the middle class can go back and forth between the dominant class and the oppressed. And because they have the freedom to make little journeys back and forth, like tourists, then they feel themselves without guilt.[8]

Freire argues that middle class people are not free. They may think they are but they are not. They are not poor but they are not as unrestricted as they may assume. They are "tourists" traveling between the elite and the oppressed. Their cooperation with the elite in their ongoing avoidance of the demands of the poor will be explored in this paper. They, the middle class, are a significant sector of the non-poor and contribute to the silent response experienced by the poor as they demand justice.

(*There was one little girl, but three bears. Goldilocks ate her fill and was rested. The bears had their food eaten, their furniture broken and bed linens soiled. Goldilocks and the three bears: a story of First and Third World people!*)

What Are The Demands of the Poor?

Voices are being heard today from persons who are demanding justice and liberation. Their voices are loud and clear. They are saying "enough is enough." Women work in jobs comparable to men and receive inequitable compensation. Women are raped and courts find them guilty of "inviting sex." Children are abused and ignored. Boys and girls are undernourished and underfed. Ten thousand people, most of whom are children, die each day of starvation and malnutrition. Every seventy-two hours the same number of persons who were killed

at Hiroshima die from malnutrition or starvation. Men, women and children walk the streets homeless and have no future. Signs saying "Whites Only" are still displayed in South African towns and cities. Land is being seized in El Salvador. The untouchables of India experience life as just that—untouchable. Bombs and military hardware are built while families' security systems fall apart. Our water is polluted, our air is poisoned, our environment is being raped.

The voices of women and children and of men—voices of the poor, voices of the oppressed—are demanding that this stop. They are demanding that the oppression end. They are saying and have been saying that justice and liberation are the only acceptable goals of our life together on this planet. Feminist voices have been and are demanding liberation. Womanist voices demand justice. Anti-apartheid voices demand equality. Liberation theologians demand freedom. Advocates for children's rights, environmentalists, homeless men and women, and pacifists are demanding for things to change. They want a transformation of society. They want people and institutions to be different. And things are changing. "For Whites only" signs are coming down. Walls between countries and peoples are falling. Oppressive beliefs are being questioned. Cruelty and manipulation are being examined by the masses and understood for what they are. Trees are being replanted. Drug czars are being tried in court. Racist laws are being challenged. Marches are held and pastoral letters circulated. But there is more to be done. Global justice, which will happen as a result of redistribution of power and wealth, is what is required. Global justice is a priority for the poor of the world.

The poor are demanding what is rightfully theirs for they

> are no longer doomed to illiteracy, thanks to social consciousness; no longer confined, like medieval serfs,

> to a vocabulary of six hundred words, thanks to mass media; no longer socially unaware, thanks to the mobility provided by new means of transportation and close contact with peers at work and school. The good news is that, thanks to labor unions and (for those who cannot get paying jobs) the United Nations human rights covenants, the poor need no longer accept a role as a reserve labor force, to be used at will and then discarded when technology enables a more efficient production of goods and services. Because of conscientization, they are not a *lumpen* proletariat. Together with others who experience hardship, like the elderly and the disabled, the poor can now be aware that they have human rights. Once organized, they experience power in having a voice and in sharing in group influence.[9]

The poor are not a powerless people. They are not victimized to the extent that they are doomed. They are reaching out to take what is rightfully theirs. Their voices are growing stronger, their desires known.
(Baby bear found someone sleeping in his bed and he was angry. Papa Bear was angry. Mama Bear was angry. Goldilocks had to run for her life.)

What Is The Response Of The Non-Poor, First World Church?

This is not the first time oppressed people have demanded justice. A little more than twenty years ago, on May 4, 1969, James Forman presented "The Black Manifesto" to the congregation of Riverside Church, New York City. The objective in issuing the Manifesto was "to force the racist white

Christian Church to begin the payment of reparations which are due to all black people."[10] "Fifteen dollars for every black brother and sister in the United States" or $500 million dollars was demanded as reparation for "people who have been exploited and degraded, brutalized, killed and persecuted."

The demand for reparations was based on the fact that

> white America has exploited our resources, our minds, our bodies, our labor. For centuries we have been forced to live as colonized people inside the United States, victimized by the most vicious, racist system in the world. We have helped to build the most industrial country in the world.[11]

The reparation of five hundred million dollars would have established among other things: a southern land bank for black farmers, black-controlled publishing houses and television networks, a research center focusing on the problems of black men and women, training centers for black leadership, funding for organizations assisting welfare recipients, a national black university, etc.[12]

The program of the Black Manifesto was designed to go beyond anything that preceded it. Gayraud Wilmore correctly observed:

> What the Manifesto, in fact, contained was the organizational and communication apparatus for institutionalizing black power in the United States. It was a comprehensive plan for the development of racial pride, solidarity, and self-determination as the first step toward a systematic control of the black community—its institutions, resources, and skills.[13]

When James Forman walked down the aisle of Riverside Church and demanded justice for every Black person in America, he shocked more than the congregational members of that prestigious New York City church. He, in a prophetic and alarming way, got the attention of the religious and political establishment of the country. He and others in a variety of locations, both in the United States and beyond, precipitated a "storm of outrage from white clergy and laity."[14] And yet while the religious establishment heard, maybe for the first time and certainly more directly than before, the dramatic claim of injustice, the impact of the Manifesto was short-lived.

> Despite numerous expressions of penitence from denominational headquarters and the National Council of Churches, no major church body actually acknowledged the legitimacy of the demand for reparation...or fulfilled the specific demands made in the various communications with Forman. The prophetic confrontation—a modern day re-enactment of Amos before the temple at Bethel—only momentarily perturbed America's three great religious communities.[15]

The response of the non-poor church to the demands of the oppressed in 1969 was a silent one. And in 1990 things are not significantly different. In fact,

> some popular religious expressions in this country...seem to be, not an answer to the cries of the poor, but rather a hardening of hearts against them. Witness some of the preaching of the new religious right which is heard and seen in the electronic church and which celebrates capitalism, affirms the arms race,

> justifies racism and keeps women subservient, claiming to give life but all the time undermining the will to respond to the organizing poor.[16]

Evidence indicates that First World countries as well as First World churches display decision-making based more on self-interest than self-sacrifice. Political and religious leaders representing First World peoples would argue that we are a generous lot. More than two-thirds (69%) of all Americans think the United States is an extremely generous nation. But that popular opinion does not reflect reality.[17]

In 1974, the developed countries as a whole gave one-third of one percent of their total GNP in economic foreign aid to developing nations. Among the seventeen First World countries, the United States ranked fifth from the bottom in percentage of GNP given as development assistance. Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Norway, Denmark, Australia, Belgium, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan distributed more in their percentage of GNP than this country.[18]

In 1980, the United Methodist Church, representing one example of a mainline Protestant First World church, possessed property valued at twelve billion dollars. One and a half billion dollars was expended through its local and national organization. Only 202 million dollars or 13.6% of that income was earmarked for benevolences. That same amount represents 1.6% of their property holdings.[19] Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that First World nations and many First World churches are not generous in their response to Third World economic needs. They are, in fact, withholding.

For the most part, the church in the United States is a rich institution. Yet it continues to turn a deaf ear to the demands of the poor. We six percent of the world's people, from

which the First World American Church draws its membership, consume forty percent of the earth's resources. We Christians happily participate in a national lifestyle that ignores the hungry and homeless while we eat more and consume with an unsatiable appetite. We of the non-poor church accumulate and demand more while the poor live with less.

Jim Wallis of the Sojourner community in Washington says that we are witnessing today a religious body that has fallen into idolatry.

> The church today is trying to serve both God and mammon, and the attempt has divided our loyalties. In a world where most people are poor, a rich church is living testimony of idol worship. The mere possession of such wealth is proof of serving money. We did not become affluent by sharing with the poor, but only through accumulation. The Bible calls that slavery, a relationship of bondage. Our accumulation has put us in servitude to mammon. A wealthy church cannot testify to dependence on God. God's people (in the First World Church) have forgotten to whom they belong, forgotten what it means to worship the Lord.[20]

There are exceptions to this characterization of the First World Church and its idolatrous tendencies. The predominately African American Church, which should be characterized as "in the (First) world but not of it," is such an exception. Historically, Black radicalism and Black religion have been significantly interwoven.[21] The civil rights activities of more recent years and the ongoing demand of social and economic justice, grounded in the Black Church experience, illustrate an exception to my general argument about First World churches. The actions taken

by individual congregations and some predominately white denomina- tions, as well as certain Roman Catholic and Jewish bodies, demonstrate degrees of exception to the more pessimistic picture. A recent study of World Methodism by Earl Brewer and Mance Jackson, Jr. highlights some movement among U.S. Methodists, in concert with African, Asian, European, Pacific, and Latin American Methodists toward greater sensitivity about the poor and oppressed of the world.[22] But, overall, the First World Church has not heard the demands of the poor. It would be extremely difficult to disprove the claim that, for the most part, the majority of the Christian religious bodies of the First World have ignored these demands. Their response has been virtually nil. The voices of those demanding liberation and justice have not been heard by the supposedly Christian non-poor.

(It never occurred to Goldilocks that the porridge did not belong to her. She was hungry and she ate. She was sleepy, so she picked out a bed. And while running home she was probably confused by the bears' anger.)

Why This Response?

There could be many different explanations for why the non-poor church chooses to respond to the poor in this way. This paper offers only a few based on sociological analysis and theological exploration.

Sociologists advance the secularization thesis as an interpretive paradigm for many of the things happening in and to religion in the modern world. While many disagree with the consequences of the paradigm, most agree that religion has changed in the developed and developing countries of the world. Many even contend that there has been a decline in the influence of religious institutions, as well as a decline in the

number of people for whom transcendental concerns are an everyday affair—especially in the Western world.

Meredith McGuire, a recent president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, advances several processes of societal change which affect the situation of religion in the modern world: institutional differentiation, competing sources of legitimacy, rationalization, privatization, and individuation.[23] Indivuation is of critical importance in the development of the First World. It is that "process by which the individual and his or her concerns come to be seen as distinct from the social group and its concerns."[24] It fosters an overemphasis on the individual while avoiding social structural concerns and issues. It provides an environment wherein the average pew sitter, as well as denominational executive, can avoid the systemic reasons for oppression and poverty. It becomes, in the words of John Wilson,[25] an agent of "de-politicization" and fosters an ignorance of the demand of the collective poor.

> To the extent that religious beliefs exalt the individual, define change in individual rather than social structural terms, and stress the will of the individual as the main determinant of behavior, unfettered by social circumstances, they will de-politicize the consciousness of those who adhere to them, and seriously question the efficacy of political conflict or social reform.[26]

This occurrence within the secularized modern world, and particularly the First World, helps in part to explain a muted response to the liberation demands of the poor. First World non-poor church members can hear the expressed needs for individual salvation and soul saving, but remain oblivious to societal changes and reform. They will participate in a discussion about

a person's scrupulousness and honesty. They will support inspirational literature advancing personal growth written by Norman Vincent Peale or Robert Schuller. They will argue for individual respectability through self-improvement. *But they will miss altogether the significance of social arrangements, powers and planning which continue to oppress many in and beyond this society.* They will never enter a dialogue advocating the redistribution of resources and shared power with other peoples of the world because their collective ears do not recognize that kind of terminology. Individuation has significantly contributed to their inability to hear and adequately respond!

In *Habits of the Heart* (1985), Robert Bellah and associates argue that participants of American society speak two different languages. A sense of and commitment to community helps to inform the one language while individualism (expressive and utilitarian) fosters the other. Their research centered primarily on White, middle-class America and not the African American community. They discovered that most White Americans articulate a language more representative of individualism and one far removed from a more communal understanding. Those "habits of heart," wherein the American citizen or religionist once expressed strong church and community ties, are today significantly absent among many in our First World communities. Utilitarian and expressive individualism have radically lessened communal commitment in American life. The individual and her needs come first. The larger society and those who are demanding liberation and social changes are simply not being taken seriously.

Paul King, Kent Maynard, and David Woodyard agree that Bellah and his colleagues "have presented a clearer vision of the isolation that excessive individualism has created."[27] They affirm Bellah's suggestion that "individualism may have grown cancerous."[28]

> The energies devoted to becoming distinguishable individuals have been directed toward excessive self-interest, which finally alienates and isolates persons from one another. For many, if not most, any impulses toward social solidarity are stillborn. The determination to be self-reliant and assume responsibility for self-enactment leaves many with diminished capacity for community. None of us would want to say we do not need others for a coherent and purposeful life. But, when bonding and caring are something to be achieved rather than assumed, the flaws in individualism begin to emerge. There is an increasing suspicion that the quest for a common good and the creation of social orders which would sustain it are a futile exercise. We may no longer believe we can do anything to create a world where 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5:24).[29]

King and his associates disagree with *Habits of the Heart*, however, when that study assumes that our present condition is the consequence of "having lost faith in the best of our national and religious heritage."[30] Our excessive individualism and resultant vaporous sense of community will not be changed by restoring our traditions and mores. Making old habits into new habits of the heart will not bring about social renewal. Our concern for the poor and the oppressed will not come about by re-enacting the romanticized "good old days."

King, Maynard and Woodyard agree with the analysis and desired future Bellah provides. They think Bellah and his colleagues accurately describe the feelings of many in the middle class. But they maintain that that analysis and desired goal needs

to be coupled with "an exploration of our underlying economic and class realities."

> In our own thinking about the situation of the middle class, we have been drawn instead to models that try to examine what the middle class as a *sector* thinks about things, and the degree to which that meshes with actual social and economic circumstances. We have also sought to explore models that offer new images, ideological stories, on which the hope for the future laboring class coalitions could be built.[31] (1988:7).

King and his associates argue that American society operates within an economic system which values private ownership and perpetuates the logic of individualism. It is a market economy which is run by an elite class of persons—those who privately own the means of production. This small minority of persons increasingly benefit from a concentration of power and accumulated wealth.

> In our society, roughly 80% of the income arising from production is paid out in wages and salaries, while the other 20% is property income in the form of rent, interest, and profit. This property income is paid to those who own the means of production. For example, in the United States today, fully 60% of that ownership is concentrated among 1% of the population. In fact, 90% of the population owns no such assets at all. Therefore, one fifth of all income goes to a very small segment of the population.[32]

This small elite class effectively controls our surplus production. They have accumulated wealth which enables them

to accumulate more. They control our present day means of production and will be the only ones able to create future means. Hence, over time, they will increase their wealth and resultant economic power. Those who do not privately own the means of production—-the poor, the working class and the middle class—-do not benefit from this economic arrangement. In fact, the needs of the vast majority of the American people are virtually ignored because those who significantly benefit from the economic system are not needful. The elite have their piece of the economic pie and it tastes just right.

(*The third bowl of porridge discovered by Goldilocks was not too hot, not too cold, but just right!*)

The primary source of economic injustice, according to King, Maynard, and Woodyard is "the concentration of ownership of production assets and the consequent ability to use those assets to further the narrow aims of the elite rather than the well-being of the society."[33] The middle class blindly adheres to a private property ethic and individualism that reinforces the position of the elite. They support a set of beliefs that in reality renders them powerless. They do not, like their brothers and sisters among the poor and working class, own the means of production. Hence, they along with the poor are being economically exploited by an elite class. That exploitation will not change until a "reorganization of control over and direction of the production process" fundamentally shifts.[34]

King and his colleagues go beyond *Habits of the Heart* and its survey of middle class attitudes, values, and public/private life. They examine economic realities and political powerlessness and advocate a solidarity of a laboring class to confront this "cancerous" individualism. They propose a social or collective heroism, growing out of a new economic coalition, which will create a more just and inclusive society. Drawing on the liberation theme of one of "the great exceptions to individualistic religion in

American history: the experience and achievement of the Black Churches of America," King and associates transcend Bellah and describe a way of implementing Bellah's desired future. Their suggested alternatives will be highlighted below. The point here is that one of the reasons middle class church men and women (the First World Church's non-poor) do not hear or respond to the poor is because their individualistic value system and assumed economic rewards do not foster that option. Self-interest personally expressed, or economically construed, does not allow for much altruism. Middle class values and attitudes about the private and public life can and do mute the voices of those not holding those values. Economic and class realities have to this point separated, rather than united, the middle class and those who stand outside the advantages of the elite and middle class.

Both Bellah and King have accurately pinpointed the relevant problems of excessive individualism and economic exploitation in American society. Their analysis helps to explain some of the reasons for First World indifference to the Third World poor. But a third sociological variable must be added—racism. It is that variable that C. Eric Lincoln characterizes as our "Continuing American Dilemma."[35] The majority of First World people, both in the United States and beyond, have a European background. They are predominately White. Third World peoples are predominately non-White. One of the foremost causes of First World lack of concern for the Third World poor is racism. As James Washington puts it, "the ideology of white supremacy is the stepchild of modern Western Christianity."[36] When European Christians first came into contact with other races, particularly with Africans, racism came into being. The dilemma continues. It is one that cannot be reduced to a question of economics or individualism. Its problematic is racism. Many non-poor persons respond to the poor the way they do because most of the poor are not White. It is just that simple. Early in

our century W. E. B. DuBois said that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line . . ."[37] Lincoln warns that the problem persists. He testifies that we seem incapable of learning from our past mistakes.

> It was not very long ago that racism expressed in differential housing, black unemployment, segregation in education, and in most other practical aspects of our common existence caused our cities to be laid waste, our schools to become battlegrounds, and forced the official, belated recognition that the American dilemma was still intact. But in spite of the hard lessons of the sixties, we still managed to profess surprise and shock when racial violence erupted in Miami in the seventies, even though the misery in the black ghettos was more pronounced than ever; even though the Ku Klux Klan was resurgent all over the country; and even though the North had managed to outdo the South in devising ever new stratagems for maintaining the segregation in the public schools.[38]

The problem persists because we perceive ourselves as a "nation under God" and claim to be a Christian community while perpetuating a perplexing American phenomenon. It is a "strange rapprochement between church and society which continues to embarrass the faith, vitiate the society, and saddle both with a burdensome dilemma that seems to persist despite the fervor of our religion or the ardor with which we pursue our commitment to democracy."[39] We say one thing, even using religious words and images, and do another. We speak of love, but act out violence and hatred. We argue for a myth of freedom and equality, but practice discrimination based on race individually and institutionally. It is no accident that the "eleven o'clock

hour on Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week." Racism has been, and continues to be, one of the paramount reasons First World White, non-poor Christians ignore the demands of the poor.

Thus, sociological analysis suggests at least three influencing factors for First World ignorance of oppression: individualism, racism, and economic exploitation. A theological discussion would offer another description of our First World condition.

Traditionally, that description would be centered on the term sin. For many, sin or sinfulness would involve only a personal or individual dimension. It would characterize sin as a personal transgression, an individual violation and/or act of infidelity against God. While it is true that our biblical tradition reveals a personal dimension of sin, sin that is knowingly and freely chosen, there is yet another important biblical aspect. Sin can be and often is social. The prophets often describe the sinful nature of humankind as collective blindness. Gregory Baum describes social sin as

> ...group-egoism, and the pursuit of a national life that betrays the covenant and violates the divine command. Peculiar to this collective sin is that it is accompanied by so much self-delusion and self-flattery that the people involved in it are not aware of their transgression...(This is) the biblical notion of blindness'... (It is) understood as infidelity to God and destructive communal action, which is largely due to false consciousness. This sin is an illness. It destroys us while we are unable to recognize its features and escape its power... Social sin, then, is an evil act of a person or persons that adversely affects the life of society... It is not produced by deliberation and free

> choice (like personal sin). It produces evil consequences but no guilt in the ordinary sense...it is of blindness.[40]

Baum further describes various levels of social sin which he contends account for the multiple forms of oppression one encounters in North America. Subjugation of women, institutionalized racism, economic domination and exploitation of the poor, and devastation of natural resources are among the social injustices he highlights and says stem from our collective blindness. They are complexly related to the economic systems of this country (a claim supported by the King, Maynard and Woodyard study) and cannot be addressed by conversion of the individual citizen or solitary political leader. The structures of domination and oppression are multi-layered and intermeshed. They will need to be unraveled and confronted by many people in varied forms. These problems cannot be solved by individual analysis and personal commitment to do better. Our notions of sin and other concepts of theology must be deprivatized and dealt with in ways rarely before considered.

Baum advocates a "critical theology" to begin the process of social change and justice. It is the task of critical theology, says Baum, "to discern the structural consequences of religious practice, to evaluate them in light of the church's normative teaching, and to enable the church to restructure its concrete social presence so that its social consequences approach more closely its profession of faith."[41] He would agree with Lincoln that the Church and First World people need to do what they profess. Yet Baum's theological analysis along with Lincoln's sociological description find that we tend to say one thing and do another. On occasion we articulate a gospel that hints of liberation, but we rarely translate that gospel into economic, political, and ecclesiastical reality. Most of the time the non-poor of the First

World refuse to respond to the demands of the poor. The voices of liberation are not heard, or when they are heard, they are systematically ignored. This is our predicament. What are we to do?

What Are Our Alternatives?

What alternatives can we envision that will turn this around? What will need to happen to move the First World Church from self-absorption to mutuality?

The esteemed sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin, spent most of his life describing the social and cultural dynamics of Western society. In his latter days he explored ways that society gone astray might be reconstructed. Sorokin felt that the basic deterioration of the modern world was moral. He spent his last days trying to discover some universal ethical norm that would enhance common consensus and collective transformation. He chose altruism as that overarching central variable. "At the present," said Sorokin, "there is no value or norm, whether relating to God or to the institutions of marriage or private property, that is equally accepted by all and regarded as universally binding in all."[42] Sorokin argued that the norm might be found in the properties of "love-energy." Thus, says Comte, altruism, the "unselfish regard for the welfare of others"[43] was the needed corrective element for social reconstruction according to his analysis. A more recent sociological analyst of Western social decay, Robert Bellah, suggests that American society has within it a sacred canopy or "civil religion" that has the potential for constructive societal change. The prophetic elements of our civil religion (as opposed to its priestly dimension), Bellah argues, have those ingredients which might yet call this nation to a greater level of unity and communal cooperation. That calling will come when this country and its leadership look realistically

at our contradictions (saying one thing, and doing another) and destructive myths, and then provide societal changes to correct these offenses. That goal may yet be realized when we: admit our genocide of native Americans, see slavery for what it was—an American Holocaust, understand the war in Vietnam as indicative of our usual imperialistic posture in the world, and view our militarism and nuclear proliferation as a sure way to world destruction. Like an evangelist, yet with sociological credentials, Bellah asks us to embrace or be embraced by a transcendental religiosity of universal dimension, an American civil religion which will save the soul of our people and set us free to live in world harmony.

Critics of Bellah argue that it is not the prophetic elements of civil religion but the priestly ones that often come forward when the national altar call is given. The worship of our nation and the blind assumption of greatness, achievement, and superiority is more often than not evidenced on the American scene. Others, like Charles Shelby Rooks, demand that "all discussion of civil religion is unreal and incomplete until it includes both an understanding of Black civil religion and Red civil religion and the ways both are also the stuff of the American dream."[44] He calls for a Red, Black and White civil religion that affirms our diversity and constructs a true pluralism in Western society. It must be a pluralism based on an "American mosaic theology" a "theology which is founded upon the mosaic of our plural experience rather than upon a common unifying principle."[45] Rooks surpasses Bellah when he articulates a vision appropriate for the First World based on the reality and diversity of our religious, social, economic, and political pluralism. He calls for an American Civil Religion, but one grounded in the beauty of a mosaic rather than a single definition of reality.

Marie Augusta Neal, in many ways, incorporates the

thinking of all three scholars, Sorokin, Bellah, and Rooks. She advocates a global civil religion. A prophetic civil religion that calls the First World and its political leaders to account. It recognizes the persistent presence of racism and economic exploitation exacerbated by national self-interest. Neal's religiosity is globally-oriented and motivated by concerns of social justice. "What characterizes this religion," she writes, "is altruism." It is "the disinterested love of the other"[46] which calls for justice and peace and makes possible a true dialogue among First and Third World peoples. It is the only viable response of the First World Church to the just demands of the Third World poor. Neal advocates an altruism that can be incorporated into public policy.

> If politics is the act of the possible, and social ethics the pragmatic application of how to be good within those possibilities, then it would seem logical and feasible, given an adequate food supply, a tapering population, and an already existing world economy of transnational corporations, that an ethic be devised based on the disinterested love of those in need. It will be an ethic of altruism rather than of self-interest, centered in human caring rather than in rules of fair play. It will call for a network of human commitment rather than a hierarchy of command and control. With a new division of labor between men and women in the church, such an ethic could be developed there on the basis of experience. From there, it can move into the public sector.[47]

To realize this goal or produce this motivation based on altruism, Neal proposed a new theological method. That method involves what she calls a "socio-theology of relinquishment." She

advocates a "pedagogy inspired by a theology of relinquishment, a theology for letting go our grasp on the things the poor need for their development."[48] This new theology would be one that assumes a developed theology of world community. She highlights five necessary elements:

(1) An affirmation of participatory decision-making as the dominant method of formulating public policy, founded on a relationship among members of all adult working groups that is circular rather than pyramidal.

(2) An assumption of altruism as the basis of public virtue instead of self-interest as natural virtue.

(3) A pedagogy for teaching and learning about God that includes action for righting social wrongs as well as reflection on human experience.

(4) Deliberation on a new international economic order, since the present order, for all its potential natural and human resources, falls far short of providing for human needs.

(5) A shift of emphasis from who God is to where God is in considering the immediate future.

Thus Neal suggests a significant alternative to our present predicament—one developed within a theology of relinquishment. She advocates that we begin with shared decision-making as we construct public policy; that we assume a posture of altruism; that we consider a new international economic order; and that our understanding of God be broadened. These beginnings, she maintains, will move us in a direction that takes seriously the just demands of the poor.[49]

Neal proposes an ethic of altruism and a theology of relinquishment. She contends that the First World can be motivated to relinquish its power and resources as the Third World justly demands those commodities. Her hope is that a

worldwide civil religion will come into existence that will make this a reality. Her ideas are radical. They are radical because they solicit a social action calculated to benefit others more than oneself or one's own. Biblically, we identify this motivating force with the word love. There is historical evidence which suggests that certain individuals and groups have displayed this disinterested love. Altruism and acts appearing to be grounded in a theology of relinquishment have surfaced, on occasion, in the past. But today one wonders if such a proposal is possible.

Given the escalating worldwide conditions many people experience daily-—poverty, hunger, disease, war, alienation, and oppression—-is not something more needed? Surely something else is necessary, in view of the fact that those who presently harbor both power and wealth show no interest in redistribution. What is required, says King, Maynard, and Woodyard, is a new social heroism, reciprocity, not simple altruism.

King and his associates argue that social equality and justice "will take more than individual initiative or altruistic alms. It will require a restructuring of classes based on an understanding of the reciprocal interests of all in the laboring class."[50] Thus their appeal is one that includes economic interests as well as an ethical goal like altruism.

As highlighted above, they argue that the middle class in American society, by themselves, are basically powerless. They have an ever-present sense of economic instability. They have acute feelings of estrangement. They don't possess the means of production and thus are economically controlled by those who do—the elite. They feel isolated and uncertain. (Teenage suicide and substance abuse in our country point to that reality.) The middle class is continually searching for identity with an almost frantic pace. The only solution to these problems of economics, power, and identity is one that will involve us in a social heroism. Heroism is not one characterized as an individual act

of bravery, but one that requires collective action. Action that will enable us to "reclaim control of our collective destiny and to work for change." These writers warn that this will not be easy.

> To alleviate the dilemmas of the middle class will require, ironically, that we give up seeing ourselves as a separate class. Because of the economic changes in America, particularly over the last century or so, we in the middle are far closer to the working class and the poor than we often think. To be sure, there are real differences, but there is good evidence to show that the middle layer, the workers, and the poor represent different constituencies in a larger laboring class. If our similarities outweigh our differences, and we are growing more similar with time, then only by recognizing common interests do we stand a chance of making changes. This isn't one more call for the middle class to be generous to those less fortunate. It is a recognition that as a laboring class we all share a common plight. Only by working together as a political coalition can each constituency hope to change its life collectively.[51]

These scholars, one an economist, another a sociologist, and the third a theologian, say we must move beyond altruistic ideals to reciprocal economic interest. This common interest and collective advantage will flourish from a coalition among the poor, the working class and the middle sector, or layer of society. Historically, the civil rights and the feminist movements give precedent to this desired coalition. Jesse Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" illustrates a current model. A laboring class coalition based on reciprocal interdependence can produce, according to

King and associates, a more secure and more human social system for everyone.

Many in our society try to discredit such a coalition, especially the elite. The elite, those one percent of our population who own sixty percent of the country's assets, surely fear a laboring class alliance. They are corporate heads. They own the larger portion of revenue-producing private property. They benefit from private corporations and transnational business. They create mergers and reduce competition. They articulate an ideology that benefits themselves and undercuts any coalition that would challenge this economic arrangement. Such people become richer while the middle sector and working class become poorer.

As stated earlier, King, Maynard, and Woodyard maintain that the real advantage of the elites is not their ownership of property.

> It is rather the concentration of the private ownership of the means of production that confers immense power on a few, and powerlessness on most. This concentration tends to take the institutional form of corporate business and thus subordinates the common interest of the society to the special interest of business corporations.[52]

The real enemy of economic justice in the American First World is the group of persons who control, through ownership, the means of production. They have the power and the resources. They exploit the non-elite. And only when the middle sector, working class and poor come together to challenge that economic arrangement will there be a possibility of change and economic equity. A laboring class, according to King and his colleagues, must unite and confront the real opponent of societal

change and justice.

The authors of *Risking Liberation* offer both ecclesiological and eco-political suggestions for bringing about change. They admonish the church to become an agent of social heroism. Building on Walter Brueggemann's notion of "prophetic imagination," they argue for the church to transcend neutrality, ambiguity, and its usual support of the status quo. They point to the basic Christian communities of Latin America as liberation models for church and community-centered prophetic action. King and colleagues advocate new understanding of religious symbols grounded in the Exodus story and the liberating Christ of the New Testament. They explore some of our present day forms of idolatry and articulate the political meaning of the resurrection. Here is a new liberating insight into the use of sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper. For example, these authors declare that

> what makes the Eucharist liberative is its alliance with the future and its power over oppression and our numbness. It is the premier celebration of the death of death. At the table we declare that the Pentagon is dead, Wall Street is dead, imperialism is dead, structural indifference to human suffering is dead. And what is alive is the one who said, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed' (Luke 4:18). What happens in the taking of the body and blood of Christ, who is our future, is the 'unmaking of injustice' (Balasuriya) and an empowerment for resistance.[53]

Finally, King, Maynard, and Woodyard raise four questions of an eco-political nature. They propose plausible alternatives though not a utopian blueprint. They assert that these questions at least begin the journey toward discovery of liberation and justice. Addressing these questions, they contend, will move us in the desired direction.

(1) What are those institutional arrangements that are most limiting and dehumanizing?

(2) Are there some individual moves that will allow us to create an authentic rather than a derived identity?

(3) Are there counter-institutions that can grow out of that individual behavior and create an effective alternative to those limiting and dehumanizing institutions that are now dominant?

(4) Can we develop or recapture symbol systems that will give rise to new ideological stories that will allow us to engage in social heroism?[54]

Thus a laboring class coalition, motivated by social heroism, grounded in the liberating themes of a prophetic church, will begin the process of economic and social justice. King, Maynard, and Woodyard, pragmatically, move beyond Neal's altruism and advocate a restructuring of classes based on an understanding of the reciprocal interests of all in the laboring class. They advocate power and not powerlessness. They advocate social heroism and not exclusively individual initiative. Economic justice not short-lived redistribution. They advocate change. The alternative they describe is one that demands a prophetic church, a radical multi-class political alliance, and a long term social heroism. They demand the risking of liberation!

King, Maynard, and Woodyard direct our attention to the fact that none of us is completely powerless. We can choose, based on a healthy mutuality, to formulate and produce a just

world. We can collectively advocate change that will benefit every woman, man, and child, and not just a select few. This can be our desired strategy, and one we can choose to follow.

NOTES

[1]Marie Augusta Neal, *The Just Demands of the Poor: Essays in Socio-Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 41-42.
[2]*Ibid.*, p. 138.
[3]*Ibid.*, pp. 42-44.
[4]Alice F. Evans, Robert A. Evans, and William B. Kennedy, *Pedagogies For The Non-Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 232.
[5]Neal, p. 101.
[6]*Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.
[7]Evans, Evans, and Kennedy, p. 232.
[8]Freire in Evans, Evans, and Kennedy, pp. 226-227.
[9]Neal, p. 66.
[10]Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, *Black Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), pp. 83-84.
[11]*Ibid.*
[12]Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), pp. 204-205.
[13]*Ibid.*, p. 205.
[14]*Ibid.*, p. 206.
[15]*Ibid.*
[16]Neal, p. 103.
[17]Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians In An Age Of Hunger: A Biblical Study* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), p. 50.
[18]*Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

[19]Earl D. C. Brewer, *Continuation Or Transformation? The Involvement of United Methodists in Social Movements and Issues* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), p. 37.
[20]Jim Wallis, *The Call To Conversion: Recovering The Gospel For These Times* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 71-72.
[21]This is one of the theses in Wilmore's *Black Religion*.
[22]Earl D. C. Brewer and Mance C. Jackson, Jr., *Wesleyan Transformations: A Study in World Methodism and World Issues* (Atlanta: ITC Press, 1988).
[23]Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987), pp. 221-254.
[24]*Ibid.*, p. 237.
[25]John Wilson, *Religion in American Society* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978).
[26]Ibid., p. 358.
[27]Paul G. King, Kent Maynard, and David O. Woodyard, *Risking Liberation: Middle Class Powerlessness and Social Heroism* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 5.
[28]Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. viii.
[29]King, *et al.*, p. 5.
[30]*Bellah*, et. al., p. 5.
[31]King, *et al*, p. 7.
[32]*Ibid.*, p. 50.
[33]*Ibid.*, p. 87.
[34]*Ibid.*, p. 88.
[35]C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984).
[36]James M. Washington, "Jesse Jackson and the Symbolic Politics of Black Christendom." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1985) 480:89.

[37]W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Nashville: Fisk University Press, 1979), p. 6.
[38]Lincoln, p. xvi.
[39]*Ibid.*, p. xviii.
[40]Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), p. 198.
[41]*Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.
[42]Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Reconstruction of Humanity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), p. 48.
[43]Cited in Lauren Wispe (ed), *Altruism, Sympathy and Helping: Psychological and Sociological Principles* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), p. 304.
[44]Charles S. Rooks, *Rainbows and Realities* (Atlanta: ITC Press, 1985), p. 94.
[45]*Ibid.*, p. 111.
[46]Neal, p. 35.
[47]*Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.
[48]*Ibid.*, p. 107.
[49]Neal, pp. 108-109.
[50]King, p. 57.
[51]*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
[52]*Ibid.*, p. 82.
[53]*Ibid.*, p. 170.
[54]*Ibid.*, p. 186.