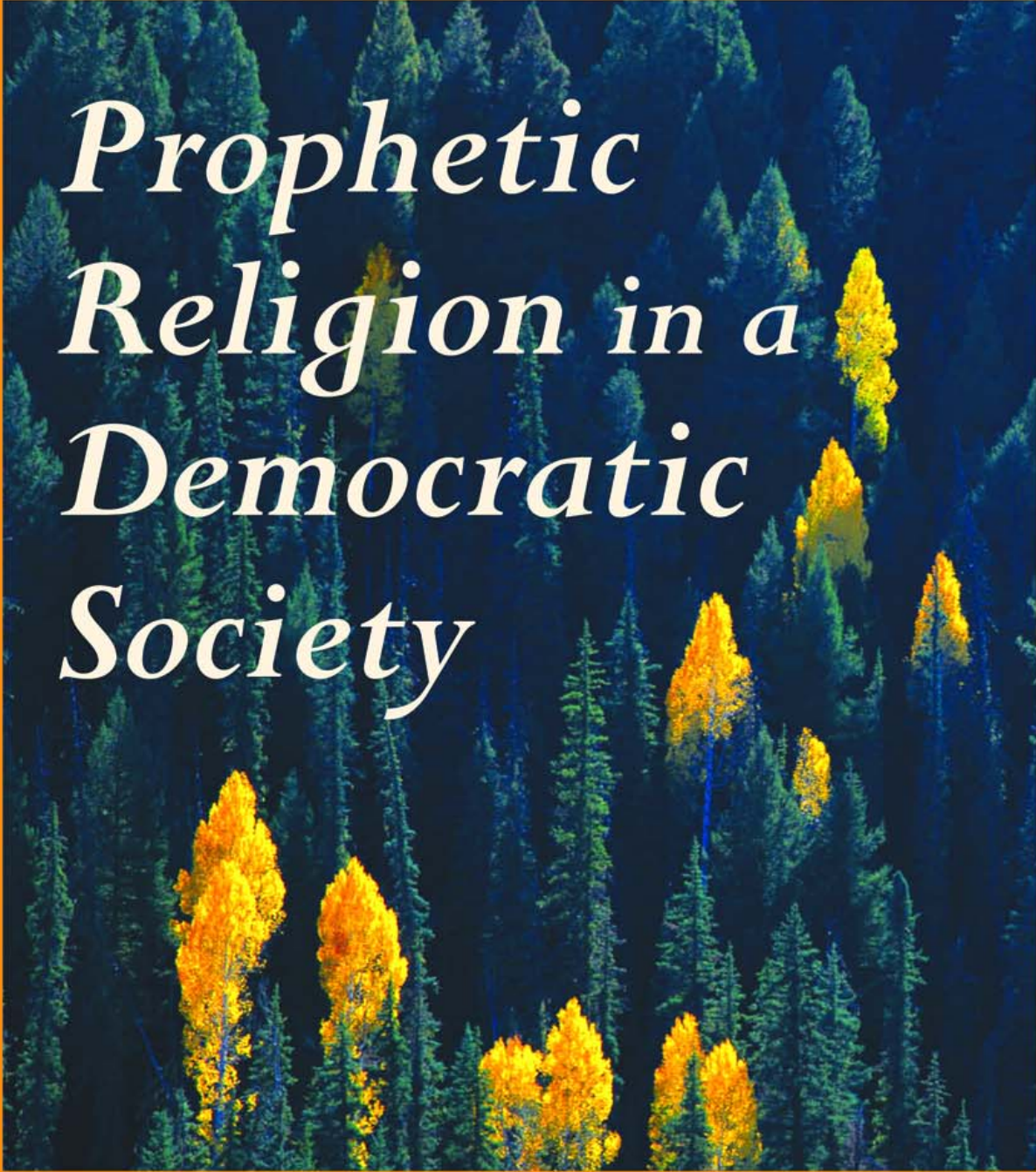


Robert N. Bellah

A photograph of a forest landscape. The background is a dense forest of tall, thin evergreen trees in shades of green and blue. In the foreground and middle ground, several trees have turned bright yellow, standing out against the darker background. The entire image is framed by a thick orange border.

*Prophetic
Religion in a
Democratic
Society*

Essays on Deepening the American Dream
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PROPHETIC RELIGION IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Robert N. Bellah

IN SPITE OF THE FACT that religion has throughout American history played a significant role in public life and that such an astute observer as Alexis de Tocqueville believed such a role was essential to the success of our democracy, that idea has not gone uncontested. The terms of the First Amendment to the Constitution have been interpreted in various ways. Some have concentrated on the first clause, that there should be “no establishment” of religion, drawing the conclusion that in our society religion should be a purely private matter. Others, emphasizing the second clause mandating the “free exercise” of religion, have seen the First Amendment as legitimating a public voice for religion. My own position is based on two assumptions, neither of which can be taken for granted—both need defending. One is the assumption that religious voices have an appropriate place in public life, an idea challenged by those who hold that believers should check their faith at the door to the public sphere and use only secular discourse when speaking in public. The other assumption is that while a variety of religious voices should be heard, public consensus should arise from a discussion involving many religious and secular views and should not be dictated by any one of them, an idea challenged by those who believe that since one and only one religion is true, one set of religious beliefs should determine both who our leaders are and what policies they should follow. I will try to steer a sometimes difficult course between what I have called Enlightenment fundamentalists on the one hand and religious fundamentalists on the other. I want to argue against the extreme secularist view that would exclude religion from public life altogether but also against a dogmatic view that would exclude all secular and religious views except one.

What I have written so far would probably be acceptable to most Americans, to all except the extremists in either the religious or the secular direction. While I firmly believe in this moderate position, there are

other considerations that help us understand why moderation is sometimes a scarce commodity in discussions of the place of religion in public life. It is of the very essence of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that they are public religions, that they simply cannot be confined to the private sphere without violating their integrity. Modern philosophical liberalism (the dominant philosophical tradition in the United States among political conservatives as well as political liberals) has tended to view religion as essentially a private matter that may form consciences but has a marginal place at best in the public sphere, where discourse on the whole should be secular. But Jews, Christians, and Muslims, if they are to be true to their deepest beliefs, must on occasion not only speak in public but do so passionately, prophetically. They may even feel the need to engage in civil disobedience if they feel that the society is violating their core commandments. It is situations such as these that cause voices to be raised and the threat of violence to loom in the background. Yet we cannot ask Jews, Christians, and Muslims to renounce their deepest religious beliefs and shut up because they are annoying fellow citizens. We can ask them to protest civilly and nonviolently, with respect for those with whom they differ, but we must also ask the outraged secularists to respond to such protests with civility and nonviolence as well. As I develop my argument in these pages, I will at moments become passionate, even prophetic, concerning, for example, poverty in the United States and the world. I hope I will nonetheless show how one can be passionate and prophetic while still respecting quite different views and maintaining the ongoing arguments and disagreements that are always necessarily present in public discussion.

Transforming Encounters and Rational Arguments

Defenders of the secularist position often hold that in the public sphere only secular views that are open to rational argument are appropriate and that since religious positions are based on revelation, they shouldn't be part of public discussion. I would like to raise a serious question about this kind of contrast between reason and revelation. If we see revelation, as I think we must, as a kind of transforming encounter, then strong secular views are often also derived from a kind of revelation.

In arguing for the validity of religious language in public discourse I want to take as my secular conversation partner Jürgen Habermas, the well-known German philosopher and democratic activist, who believes public discourse must be entirely secular but who is also respectful of religious participation, only requiring that religious views be “trans-

lated” into secular terms before being expressed in public discourse. In a recent talk Habermas referred to philosophical “classics,” works that remain contemporary regardless of when they were written, with one of his wonderful metaphors. He said, “The thoughts of a classic thinker are like the molten core beneath a volcano,” whereas their lives are merely like the hardened lava on the outside of the volcano. In the first place I would argue that those who have encountered the “molten core” of the thoughts of a classic philosopher have often been transformed in a way similar to those who have received a religious revelation. But I must also challenge Habermas’s argument in the same talk that the lives of philosophers are much less important than their thoughts. That may often be true, but he unaccountably ignores the great exception. Although for centuries when scholars mentioned *the* philosopher, they meant Aristotle, and Alfred North Whitehead famously said that all of Western philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato; it is not Plato or Aristotle who has been the very embodiment of philosophy through most of Western history. It is Socrates, who never wrote a word, whose life and above all whose death have provided the great encounter that is at the very heart of the philosophical tradition. The several Platonic dialogues that recount the trial and death of Socrates have been the New Testament of philosophy, so to speak. The willingness of Socrates to die for his beliefs and for the city of Athens of which he was proud to be a citizen helped shape the very ideal of a life of inquiry. Plato was telling his Greek audience, Look not at Achilles, the beautiful, athletic, murderous narcissist, as the ideal of the good life but at this old, ugly, stonemason who devoted his life to trying to get his fellow citizens to face the truth about their lives and was willing to die for his mission. He is the one who can show us how to live. But if philosophy has the moral equivalent of revelation, religious revelation, I would argue, has always cried out for reason. Habermas himself has a remarkable commentary on the first of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses, “You shall have no gods but me.”

From a philosophical point of view, the First Commandment expresses that “leap forward” on the cognitive level that granted man freedom of reflection, the strength to detach himself from vacillating immediacy, to emancipate himself from his generational shackles and the whims of mythical powers.¹

What could be more quintessentially revelation than the Ten Commandments? Yet Habermas finds the very germ of reason in the first of the ten. Further, Habermas has also found the germ of Western individuality in the form of the encounter between God and Moses: “*You* shall

have no other gods. . . .” Modern English translations partially miss Habermas’s point here because *you* today is both singular and plural. The King James Version says, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” using the archaic English second-person singular, the German *du*. Yes, through Moses, the commandments are addressed to the children of Israel, and ultimately to all human beings, yet they are addressed to each Israelite or each human being *individually*. Not, of course, that the individual is isolated but rather taken up and included in a defining relationship with the Lord of the universe. The utterly social and the utterly individual come together indissolubly, in the words of the great commandments.

So, I would ask, where is the dogma that defies argument? The transforming encounter, whether secular or religious, has a validity all its own, one that is not rationally deduced but simply is. A reader of an Ayn Rand novel who suddenly sees that the only thing in life worth doing is pursuing his or her own self-interest is as immune to reason as the thunderstruck children of Israel at the moment of the reception of the Ten Commandments. But no sooner has the transforming encounter occurred than the argument begins. Even the grammar of the First Commandment has led to a great deal of argument, so that its exact meaning is still in controversy. Nor can we with complete certainty interpret what it meant at the time the text was written down. And how it should be applied, then, now, or ever, is a source of never-ending controversy. The hermeneutic enterprise as described by Hans-Georg Gadamer, with its three moments of understanding, interpretation, and application, requires rational argument at every stage.

The very idea, which some secular scholars affirm, that theology depends on revelation but not on reason, is refuted by a visit to any theological library, where thousands of books can be found arguing rationally about almost every term in the Bible. No term has attracted more argument or more controversy than the absolutely central term, *God*, itself. And if the theologians aren’t agreed, neither is the general public. Nearly 90 percent of Americans answer yes to the question of whether they believe in God, but when asked to define God, their answers are remarkably various. Another example: For Christians an absolutely central belief is that Jesus is the Son of God. I recite that every Sunday during the Nicene Creed, which is part of the liturgy of my church, and I believe it. But what exactly does it mean? How are the three members of the Trinity related? It would be hard to imagine how much ink has been spilled to explain it, and every new theology gives us a new interpretation of the Trinity or, less often, rejects the idea for some reason or other.

Since the religious life is no more lacking in rational argument than any other sphere of human life, whenever religious views are expressed that bear on issues in the public sphere, it is legitimate to argue with them not only in terms of their implications for the common life but also as to the adequacy of their expression of religious truth. If in my view a commitment to radical individualism not linked to an equally radical commitment to the common good undermines the very existence of a democratic society, then I can make that argument on purely secular grounds. But if that position is put forward on biblical grounds, I am equally entitled to argue that the Bible, taken as a whole, does not support such a view. In short, argument is argument, and once something is in the public sphere it can claim no privilege of revelation. No one, secular or religious, has to prove the validity of his or her transforming encounters. But as soon as one draws publicly relevant conclusions from those encounters, then one must defend them in public discourse.

The Meaning of Religious Neutrality

Before offering an example of how religion can contribute to public discourse, let me discuss one point where I agree with Habermas and many secularists, namely, the necessity of the neutrality of the modern democratic state with respect to strong views held by particular groups. If we can speak of a modern democratic state as “secular,” the very meaning of *secular* in this context is neutrality, for the neutral state is prohibited from enforcing any secular orthodoxy just as much as any religious orthodoxy. By the same token, the state must guarantee the access to participation in the public sphere of individuals and groups whatever their secular or religious beliefs. Such participation is conditioned, however, on one fundamental norm, namely, the renunciation of violence. In the United States today we have sporadic incidents of eco-terrorism, usually acts of violence against property but always running the risk of violence against persons. Though some extremists defend such acts as a form of speech, they are just as unacceptable as acts of religious terrorism, such as religiously motivated terrorism against abortion clinics, and just as much a violation of the rule of law that makes a democratic society possible.

Beyond the renunciation of acts that are in violation of law, however, the cultivation of everyday practices, what Tocqueville called habits of the heart, that express civility and mutual respect between citizens even when their views are widely divergent, is probably also a necessity for a viable democratic society. Here we are dealing not with legal enforcement but

with social consensus. The speech of the intolerant and the disrespectful must be tolerated legally—in the United States in accordance with the First Amendment—though discouraged in practice by modeling tolerance and respect even in situations where one’s opponents do not reciprocate. Martin Luther King Jr. was a great teacher in recent American history, not only about the substance of civil rights but also about the importance of non-violent persuasion in furthering them in the public sphere.

Jürgen Habermas, who is, as I have said, a committed secularist though one deeply respectful of religion, has argued convincingly that a state guaranteeing the freedom of the individual is not dependent on a pre-existing “unifying tie” deriving from cultural resources from an authoritarian past. Rather, the “unifying tie” can emerge from the actual practice of democratic freedom and participation in public debate. Such an idea is not only of theoretical importance but also a practical necessity in a world where many societies emerging from authoritarianism are trying to institute democratic regimes today. Still, such transitions are never easy—they are not completed simply by carrying out a free election. They require an extended period of time during which democratic habits and customs can become second nature and during which a variety of setbacks must be expected. Habermas has spent his whole adult life attempting to further the internalization of democratic norms in postwar German society, something that is always in process, even in an old democratic society such as the United States.

History Makes a Difference

But there is another consideration that perhaps Habermas does not sufficiently emphasize: neutrality of a democratic state is always conditioned by its past—and in particular by its religious past. To put it another way, neutrality may not always be what it seems, for the very understanding of neutrality will depend on cultural preconceptions, not entirely conscious, that derive from a long history. To take the American case, freedom of speech and religious freedom were not simply the projects of eighteenth-century leaders deeply influenced by Enlightenment philosophy, as the American founders certainly were, but by a public made up in significant part of dissenting Protestants, Quakers, and above all Baptists, who had suffered from religious establishments, sometimes, for example, requiring them to pay taxes to support churches to which they did not belong, and were committed to ending them. Thus the disestablishment of religion in the early American republic was not the product of intense anticlericalism (even though some of the founders were privately anti-

clerical) but of an alliance of secular and religious publics with a common end in view. As a result, no significant American religious group rejected the republic on religious grounds.

Even though both secularists and religious dissenters wanted a neutral state when it came to religion, the very particularity of American history meant that the neutrality of the state and of the civil society was strongly influenced by a Protestant, even more specifically, a dissenting Protestant, cultural atmosphere. For a very long time the “wall of separation” of which Jefferson spoke (this image had no legal standing) was much lower and much more porous than Jefferson had hoped. The majority Protestant population continued to believe that it lived in a Protestant country even though it accepted the separation of church and state. As a result, Catholics and Jews, who immigrated to America in the millions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were not for a long time, perhaps not until after World War II, fully integrated into American life, even though their legal rights were, not always but usually, protected. Thus those who have imagined that the recent appearance of religion in American political life is something new, unheard of in the American past, simply do not know much about American history. When the Christian right first emerged as a political force in the 1980s, I got calls from reporters asking me if I wasn’t disturbed by the presence of religion in American politics. My response was, Have you forgotten Martin Luther King? I could have mentioned many others in American history, but that usually made my point.

Another fact not always noticed by secular observers is how powerfully the Protestant presuppositions of American culture have influenced all other religious groups, such that Catholics and Jews have been, not entirely but significantly, “Protestantized.” I would venture to imagine that the same fate awaits American Muslims and Buddhists as well. If the United States, thankfully, does not seem to face the kind of interreligious hostility that appears to be on the increase in Europe, it may not be because we are more tolerant but rather because the dominant culture has succeeded to a considerable degree in homogenizing religious differences.

It has been my concern for many years that a one-sided cultural tradition in the United States that emphasized individualism and negative liberty, that is, the protection of the individual from state interference, has obscured another precondition for a successful democratic society—namely, the solidarity, the concern for the common good, what can be called the positive freedom of all to participate in social, political, and economic life that is equally necessary for a successful democracy. Without solidarity and positive freedom, there is a danger of what Habermas

has referred to as “the transformation of the citizens of affluent and peaceful democratic societies into solitary, self-interestedly acting monads who merely turn their subjective rights like weapons against one another.” In Europe some critics see the depletion of the solidarity upon which a successful democracy depends as the result of secularization, that is, the erosion of religious traditions that promoted solidarity as a religious obligation. In the United States it would be hard to make such an argument. It would seem that there has been a deficit with respect to solidarity that has deep historic roots in both our secular *and* our religious traditions.

Our early history helps explain this element of American exceptionalism. Our geopolitical isolation, with no strong nation on either continental boundary, meant that for a long time we did not need a strong military establishment, something our founders greatly feared, or even a strong state. In the early nineteenth century, Hegel famously said that the Americans had no state at all. Tocqueville, visiting us in the 1830s, noted the absence of bureaucrats, so ubiquitous in European societies. Until late in the nineteenth century it was still possible for individuals to head west to take up new farmsteads or start new small businesses with little in the way of governmental regulation. Even in my own state of California, which achieved statehood in 1850, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century there was virtually no government, in the sense of executive agencies capable of carrying out policies, though of course police and judicial functions existed. This meant that the state legislature time and again passed laws that were never implemented because there was no agency to put them into effect. It was not until early in the twentieth century, under several Republican reform administrations, that the apparatus of a modern state was created in California.

The growth of a modern state in the United States has occurred in fits and starts, largely as a result of foreign wars or domestic crises, in the teeth of a deeply entrenched antistate or, as Americans would say, anti-government ideology. Since in the modern world the social needs that can be met only by solidarity have long outstripped the capacity of private charity to meet them, public provision has grown everywhere, even in the United States, but to a markedly reduced degree in this country. For example, we consent to a poverty level that is two or three times higher than in any other advanced industrial nation. We are the only advanced democracy without a national health care system. And we have a degree of income polarization that is more characteristic of third-world nations than can be found in Europe or East Asia.

My point, however, is that besides the exceptional nature of American history to which I have alluded, the weakness of public provision as an

expression of social solidarity in the United States is not the result of a secularizing erosion of notions of the common good but in part of a religious tradition that never emphasized, except in moments of emergency, the common good but on the whole reinforced an individualistic ideology. Dissenting Protestantism was always suspicious of the state and emphasized the self-sufficiency of the saved and the prime necessity of individual salvation. The Christian symbol of the Body of Christ, so central in churches with a strong liturgical tradition, such as Roman Catholicism, was often marginal in Protestant thought. To the degree to which all religious groups in the United States have become Protestantized, the religious resource for solidarity has been weakened.

American history is not simply a history of radical individualism. John Winthrop's famous sermon on the *Arbella* just before the Massachusetts Bay Pilgrims disembarked, from which the often-used phrase describing us as a "city on a hill" comes, is a powerful expression of a solidarity that is at once political and religious: "We must be knit together in this work as one man, we must entertain each other in brotherly affection, we must abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. . . . We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community . . . as members of the same body." In stark contrast we must consider the words of a recent interview recounted in Robert Wuthnow's *Loose Connections*. A man in his late twenties who works as a financial analyst describes the individualism that "you're just brought up to believe in" as follows: "The individual is the preeminent being in the universe. There's always a distinction between me and you. Comity, sharing, cannot truly exist. What I have is mine, and it's mine because I deserve it, and I have a right to it."² It would be hard to imagine anything more secular, more opposed to the teachings of Christianity, than this young man's statement. But as the Catholic theologian Francis Schüssler Fiorenza notes, there is indeed a resonance between this statement and common beliefs among conservative Christians today. Schüssler Fiorenza writes, "It is my guess that despite a Christian critique of modern society as secular and irreligious, modern social values have surreptitiously become identified as Christian values. Has not a kind of capitalistic cult of individual self-reliance, a worship of individual achievement, and a trust in one's own ability to save oneself crept into the belief system" of some Christians such that "this individualism, self-sufficiency, and localism become the idols to whom the Christians have begun to offer their sacrifices and burnt offerings?"³ Although I think Schüssler Fiorenza's observations are apt, I do not agree that he is describing an invasion of

modern values into Christianity but rather one kind of Christianity that has long propagated a highly individualistic ethic, one well described just a century ago in Max Weber's most famous essay, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Christian Concern for the Poor

So much for my defense of the right of religious people to have equal access with secularists to the public sphere. The next question is, if we have equal access, what are we going to say? Is the present state of public discussion in the United States so healthy that all religious people have to do is jump in and take sides? That does seem often to be what happens when religious people enter the public fray: just one more set of contentious voices, more often shouting than listening. But if religious people are to enter the public sphere, isn't there something different that they have to offer, something that might not be just one more set of discordant voices but something that might raise the whole level of the conversation or, we might say, something that might make possible a conversation rather than a shouting match?

As an illustration I want to take the example of poverty in the teachings of the Bible, supplementing them with reflections from other traditions as well. Both the Old Testament—the Hebrew Bible—and the New Testament have a lot to say about poverty—much more than you might think by listening to what some Christians of late have to say about moral values. The Christian tradition has never ceased to be concerned with poverty, most notably modern Catholic social teachings. Pope John Paul II was insistent in reiterating this teaching, which he called “the *option or love of preference* for the poor,” what we generally refer to as “the preferential option for the poor,” in his 1987 encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern). The first thing we have to recognize about the biblical teaching about poverty is that there is a lot of anger there. Much poverty comes from the oppression of the poor and weak by the rich and strong, and according to the prophets, God detests that. The prophet Amos (2:6–7) has this to say, and I could quote many more such passages:

Thus says the Lord:

“For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver
and the needy for a pair of shoes—
they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and turn aside the way of the afflicted.”

Similar anger is expressed in the New Testament, nowhere more clearly than in that great hymn of Mary, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), which has been so central to the liturgy of the church. Mary begins by saying, “My soul magnifies the Lord, / and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” and then a little later she says:

[God] has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 he has filled the hungry with good things;
 and sent the rich away empty.

So it is clear that God really hates the unjust and humiliating poverty that the rich and powerful inflict on the poor. Yet that is not the whole biblical teaching about poverty. Much as God hates poverty and wants the poor to be lifted up (Mathew 25: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and so on), he also positively values poverty. Luke’s version of the Beatitudes (Luke 6:20) begins with Jesus saying, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.” We might see that as the reversal that is implied in the Magnificat: the poor are suffering now, but they will be rewarded in heaven. But that can’t be the whole of it; why are the poor “blessed”?

There is another key passage that sheds further light on the biblical meaning of poverty, a passage that has been a stumbling block for many. It is the story in Luke about the young ruler who comes to Jesus and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (18:18) And Jesus tells him to follow the Ten Commandments. The young man replies that he has done that all his life. “When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘there is still one thing lacking. Sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” But when the young man heard this “he became sad; for he was very rich” (18:22–23). And it was that answer that led Jesus to utter the famous words “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (18:25).

That is such a hard passage that there have been many attempts to avoid its clear meaning. I heard one of them in a sermon in my own parish, given, I’m glad to say, by a visiting priest, not our own rector. This priest said, “We must remember that Jesus was always preaching one on one. He intended those words only for this particular young man, not for everyone.” What a lovely escape from the clear but troubling meaning of

Jesus' words. "Resist not evil," "turn the other cheek"—how often do those of us who call ourselves Christians go against not only clear but central teachings of Jesus? The story of the rich young man is plainly addressed to all of us. Jesus is calling us to voluntary poverty, something very different from, but not unrelated to, the poverty of the oppressed and the humiliated. Both voluntary and involuntary poverty involve a profound criticism of wealth. What is that criticism? Jesus makes it clear in another famous saying: "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13 in the Revised Standard Version). The New Revised Standard Version says, "You cannot serve God and wealth." Yes, the passage means that, but the Greek New Testament didn't use the Greek word for wealth; it used the Aramaic *mammon*, untranslated, because *mammon* sounds like a pagan god, and Jesus is indeed saying that the worship of wealth is idolatry, unfaithfulness to God. The rich are in danger of worshiping their riches, indeed, of worshiping themselves: If I have all this money, why do I need God? But the poor, voluntary or involuntary, know they need help, know they depend on God, and in that respect are "blessed," are close to God.

For a long time the church handled this central biblical teaching of voluntary poverty by handing it over to the religious orders, where the religious took the vow of poverty as well as chastity and obedience. Saint Francis is perhaps the most vivid example as he totally renounced the riches to which he was heir. The religious were the vicarious voluntary poor for all of us who couldn't bear to follow the teaching literally. That was a way of affirming the teaching that was much better than ignoring it, which is what most Christians of all persuasions do today, but maybe we are called to a new understanding of voluntary poverty in today's world, one to which I will return later.

Involuntary Poverty

I want to talk about the current reality of involuntary poverty, such an overwhelming reality in today's world, but a reality that gets only sporadic attention and even less action. Let me first ask why there was such an enormous outpouring of concern and charity for the victims of the tsunami in Southeast Asia? The worldwide response and the American response were quite moving; the event was obviously cataclysmic and the death and suffering enormous. More recently there was great concern for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, and many foreign nations offered assis-

tance. But compared to the day-in and day-out suffering and death—death by AIDS, death by hunger, death by diarrhea even—the suffering and death caused by tsunamis and hurricanes are only a small part of the whole picture, but the whole picture doesn't arouse anything like the response to these highly telegenic catastrophes. The UN report on world poverty issued on January 17, 2005, Martin Luther King Day, noted that although the tsunami in Southeast Asia killed more than 150,000 people, what they call "the 'silent tsunami' of global poverty kills more than 150,000 children *every month from malaria alone*."⁴ Part of the intensity of our response to catastrophes is that they arouse feelings that cold statistics never can. But even with the tsunami, the U.S. response was surprisingly small. In absolute terms our government gave less than some others and in per capita terms—we are still the richest country in the world—we gave far less than many other countries. This is hardly surprising, as our contribution to the alleviation of world poverty is well behind almost all other advanced countries. Even worse, we learned that the \$350 million pledged for tsunami victims would be taken from funds already committed to aid undeveloped nations. We will want to ask why we do so little abroad, as we will also be asking why we do so little at home, but first I want to look at the larger picture, not of particular and highly visible catastrophes but of continuously unfolding and largely invisible global catastrophe.

The World Bank has estimated that in 2001, "1.1 billion people had consumption levels below \$1 a day and 2.7 billion lived on less than \$2 a day. These figures are lower than earlier estimates, indicating that some progress has taken place, but they still remain too high in terms of human suffering, and much more remains to be done."⁵

Let's think about this. The world's population is something over 6 billion, so 2.7 billion living on \$2 a day or less is above 40 percent of the world's population. When we know all the things that go with such poverty—short life expectancy due to poor diet, famine, and disease, including the AIDS epidemic that hits the poor hardest, plus illiteracy, economic and political vulnerability, and also vulnerability to violence, especially in weak or failed states where violence by armed gangs against civilians is widespread (think Sudan or Congo, where 4 million people have died as the result of the ongoing civil war, but also inner cities in America where many more young men are killed by gunshots every day than our soldiers in Iraq)—then we can begin to imagine the gigantic tsunami that engulfs close to half of the world's population but cannot be dramatized the way a great natural disaster can. No matter at what length

I might describe the misery that much of the world lives in, it wouldn't have the same impact as the pictures of that huge wave washing away villages in Indonesia or Sri Lanka or of New Orleans engulfed in flood.

So let me move to the next question. Why is there so much poverty, with all its attendant ills, in so much of the world? Isn't it just "natural"? Didn't Jesus say, "The poor you will always have with you"? I wouldn't want to dismiss this answer. We will never win the "war on poverty" any more than we will ever win the "war on terrorism." But everyone, including the World Bank, thinks we could do more. If you look at the UN report of January 17, 2005, that I referred to earlier, you might think we are hardly fighting the war on poverty at all. The UN report thinks that if the developed nations gave even 50 cents of every \$100 of revenue, that could create a significant reduction in world poverty. That is 0.5 percent (half of 1 percent) of national revenue. A few rich countries are already giving that much, and several more are getting close to it. But how much do you think the United States gives? When a poll asked Americans if we were giving too much, not enough, or just the right amount to aid developing countries, a majority said we are giving too much. Then when asked to tell the pollster how much we do give, the estimate was 10 to 15 percent of revenue! But in fact until recently it was 0.1 percent (one-tenth of 1 percent), until the Bush administration, under intense international pressure, raised it to 0.15 percent (about a hundredth of what the American public thought we are spending). OK. If nations had to show up at the last judgment as recounted in Matthew 25, would the United States be with the sheep or with the goats? Can you imagine our leaders saying, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?" And not just the leaders. If the poll I quoted is accurate, most Americans don't know or don't care how little we are doing for those in need in the world.

But it's worse than that. It's not just that we are largely ignoring our poor neighbors in much of the world; we are engaged in policies that actively promote poverty. It's called globalization. We should remember how recently most of the world lived in a largely subsistence economy; people were poor, but except for a few commodities they had to purchase on the market, they were largely self-sufficient. But the global market has been putting tens of millions of farmers and artisans out of business for decades by outproducing them and underpricing them, leaving them with no recourse but to move to the slums of vast and ever-growing cities, making a semblance of a living out of the bottommost rungs of the market economy. Economically, globalization means the continuous expansion of the free market into every corner of the world. In the long run, that is sup-

posed to make us all prosperous. I will have more to say about the long run in a minute.

The global free market is largely imposed on the world by powerful international organizations. It is not the United States, at least not directly, that sets the terms of that economic globalization throughout the world. Rather it is transnational bodies, in particular the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But not only is the United States an enormously influential member of these two bodies, but they have committed themselves to free-trade and free-investment policies that are more characteristic of the American economy than any other.

It is not necessary to invoke the rhetoric of the antiglobalization protesters, who make an appearance on our television screens every time some meeting of world leaders occurs, to see that there are serious problems when we impose our policies on other nations. I will only cite Joseph Stiglitz, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics and chief economist for the World Bank for three years at the end of the 1990s, who often felt like a lone voice when he challenged policies of the bank or its sister institution the IMF for the effect they had on workers. One aspect of the “Washington consensus,” as the current received wisdom at the highest level of global economic policymaking is significantly called, is the demand for “labor market flexibility.” Stiglitz characterizes this as having the “not so subtle subtext” of lowering wages and laying off unneeded workers. Europe and East Asia have found ways of partly, though not completely, resisting these policies, but weaker nations have not been so lucky. Often it is the very “creative financing” that we have seen at Enron and other American corporations for which workers have paid the most. As Stiglitz says:

In East Asia [especially during the 1990s] it was reckless lending by international banks and other financial institutions, combined with reckless borrowing by domestic financial institutions—combined with fickle investors—that may have precipitated the crisis. But the costs, in terms of soaring unemployment and plummeting wages, were borne by workers. Workers were asked to listen to sermons about austerity and “bearing pain” just a short while after hearing, from the same preachers, sermons about how globalization and opening up capital markets would bring them unprecedented growth.⁶

While some parts of East Asia are recovering, in other parts of the world things are not going well at all. In Peru, for example, “economically, the country is now more or less where it was in the 1960s, yet the

labour force is twice as large. Peruvians are twice as likely to be unemployed now as in 1975, and their salaries are worth today half what they were then. Nearly 50% of the population live in poverty and a fifth in extreme poverty. Twelve million live on less than a dollar a day.”⁷

Some have argued that these are but the growing pains of the global economy and that “flexible labor policies” will make the economy grow in the long run. There are two problems with this approach. One is that it comes perilously close to the logic used in the Soviet Union about building socialism: the sacrifice of a generation or two now will be compensated by the advances later on, a morally questionable argument that can be used to justify any amount of present suffering. But the second problem is that there is no firm evidence that present suffering will be alleviated later on. Recently scholars have been calling attention to the fact that the economics of globalization is strong on theory but weak on empirical evidence. What empirical evidence there is is mixed: Participation in the global economy is good for some countries but disastrous for others over very long time periods.

What this tells us is that economic globalization is, like Marxism, a dogma that is believed on faith, not evidence. Further it is a hegemonic dogma based on one primary example: the United States. Since we are so successful (or apparently so—our huge indebtedness at every level is a real threat to our continued prosperity), why don’t other countries copy us? But it is not only our example and the influence of international organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF, over which we exercise more than a little control, that pressures other nations toward our economic model. We have, especially since the Cold War began, tended to equate democracy and the free market, so that in judging other countries as democratic, a primary symbol of acceptance in the world community today, we require them to have a certain kind of economy as well. It is ironic that the leaders of major European countries, including Britain, Germany, and Spain, at the moment are ruled by parties dedicated to democratic socialism (or now in Germany by a coalition containing such a party), parties that have never embraced the ideology of the free market wholeheartedly, though they are now under pressure to do so. It would be highly problematic today, however, for weaker governments to mention the word *socialism* even when preceded by the adjective *democratic*. One of the most unfortunate results of our tendency since the Cold War to make the free market and democracy into a single package is that when free-market policies falter, there is the possibility that doubts will arise not only about the free market but about the democratic system as well.

What I am saying is that what the rich nations of the world, led by the United States, are doing to the poor nations of the world is what Amos called “selling the needy for a pair of shoes, and trampling the head of the poor into the dust of the earth.” Only we are doing it with sophisticated theories that happen to be in our interest and at the expense of the most vulnerable. And unfortunately what we are doing abroad we are also doing at home. In America we still celebrate Martin Luther King Day every year, but many of those doing the celebrating would have hated him when he was alive, for he was our American Amos, calling us to account for our personal and national sins. It is all very well to say that King had a dream. Prophets have dreams, and he was a prophet, not a dreamer. We should remember that, as Jesse Jackson noted in the *Chicago Sun-Times* on January 18, 2005, “He was arrested, stoned, knifed, wiretapped, scorned and hated during his life. On his last birthday, he spent the morning organizing an interracial coalition for a poor people’s campaign that would march on Washington and demand a real war on poverty. That afternoon, he talked with his staff about his opposition to the war in Vietnam. He gave his life marching in Memphis for sanitation workers who were on strike.”⁸

The neoliberal economics that we propagate abroad has been selling the needy and trampling the head of the poor into the dust at home for thirty years or so. What we have seen in the United States is a systematic dismantling of the public services that help the poor, most notably in our public education system and in our health system, while income has been dramatically redistributed to the wealthiest. The figures I have comparing household income distribution from 1977 to 1999 give a sense of the trend that continues to this day. Only the top 40 percent of households gained in after-tax income during that twenty-year period. The bottom 20 percent actually lost 12 percent of income, while the top 20 percent gained 38 percent and the top 1 percent gained 120 percent. Again, these seem like dull statistics, hard to dramatize as we can dramatize a natural catastrophe. But for many of us the results have been catastrophic. In short, Americans tolerate a level of poverty—in 2003, 13 percent overall, with 18 percent of children below the poverty line—that no other advanced nation allows. Our poverty percentage is two or three times higher than in other wealthy nations. It seems that we don’t care about poverty at home any more than poverty abroad, that we are the most careless nation in the world. We pride ourselves on our generosity, but except for momentary responses to disaster, we are systematically the most ungenerous of nations.

Let me take an example close to home for any middle-class American family: education. I came from a family of very moderate means and went all through primary and secondary education in the Los Angeles public schools, graduating from Los Angeles High School in 1945. I applied to only one college, Harvard, and was accepted with a full scholarship (otherwise I could never have gone). In the first few months I was at sea compared to the prep school boys (there were only boys at Harvard then), but by the end of that year I was getting better grades than they were. My public high school preparation put me in a position to do very well at one of the best universities in the country in competition with those who had the best secondary education money could buy. In 1945 California was number one among all the states in its public education system. Today it is forty-sixth or forty-seventh, down there with Mississippi and Alabama.

I'm not saying that it is impossible for a bright California high school graduate to go to a good college today, but it is surely much harder than in 1945. Let's think about why. It's not only the decline in the quality of our public education system. College education has become much more expensive than it used to be, partly because the cost of higher education has risen faster than inflation but also in significant part because both federal and state governments have reduced support for higher education dramatically in recent decades. Even good scholarships don't really cover the costs. Consequently, many families of modest means don't even think of sending children to college or consider sending them at most to community college. For the past twenty years, college education for the lowest-income quartile has dropped by 12 percent.

There are many ways in which students coming from upper-middle-class families have an advantage over those from families of lesser income. For one thing, they are more apt to go to excellent public schools in affluent suburbs where there is much voluntary support from parents or to good private schools. Private schools are strongly oriented toward getting their graduates into good colleges, whereas college counselors are so few in public high schools that they can do little for students. Parents are even more important than counselors: if the parents know what schools are desirable and have the means of taking the child in the junior year of high school to visit a number of possible schools, they have a much more realistic idea of what to expect than public school students without such help and advice.

But there are structural features of the admission process that help affluent, well-prepared students relative to those from less privileged backgrounds even if they are very bright. Colleges compete for good students as their own ranking depends on the average SAT scores of those they admit. Scholarships these days are often "merit-based," as opposed to

“need-based,” rewarding those who are already privileged, who have the advantage of playing an instrument or being fluent in a foreign language. Schools compete for such students with aid packages that are not based on financial need. All schools try to maintain need-based scholarships, but the competitive pressure often warps even need-based scholarships so that they favor the less needy. And of course there is the continued existence of so-called legacies, affirmative action for the well-heeled: children of graduates have an advantage over others, not as big as it once was but still significant. In short, we see a whole higher education system warped toward taking care of those who are already the most advantaged. And it is simply a fact that when the most affluent get more than their fair share, the poor or near-poor will get less.

So those of us who come from well-off backgrounds will on average get a better college education than those of equal ability who come from less well-off backgrounds. Should we feel guilty? Isn't it natural to work the system when it's set up in your favor? Yes it is, and there is no point in guilt for its own sake. The guilt that we must inevitably feel if we know that systematic unfairness is immoral should be turned toward changing the system that creates such systematic unfairness. Income polarization and educational polarization lead toward a replication of a world divided between wealth and poverty right here at home. One segment of our population has the best education, health care, and recreation in the world, and another segment might as well be in an undeveloped country. Life expectancy in many of our inner cities is lower than in Bangladesh.

What We Want to Believe

Now we come to the real problem. Why do Americans accept what has been happening to us over the last three or four decades so tamely? I'm afraid it's because we have come to believe the stories we have been told: that in America because some people have become very rich, we can all become very rich. Why has a change in the tax code that favors the top 1 percent not created much outrage? A recent poll tells the answer all too vividly. When asked whether they are in the top 1 percent of income, 20 percent of Americans said yes, and 19 percent more said they expected to be in their lifetime. In a society where 40 percent of the people can be in the top 1 percent of income, statistically impossible but apparently psychologically possible, then who needs to worry about the other 60 percent, much less the misery at the real bottom?

Let's think about what has happened to our society in the last hundred years or so. Status differences based on the race or class or gender you

were born into have greatly declined—not disappeared, to be sure, but declined—and that is surely to the good. But when all hereditary differences of status are disappearing, how can we tell who is better than whom? The one thing that has not disappeared, that has become more important than ever, that is close to being all-important, is money. We tend to rank people by income, so getting a higher income becomes an obsessive preoccupation, almost the sole preoccupation. The philosopher Albert Borgmann describes vividly how we Americans see the differences in income today as a road map of where we will be going tomorrow:

What the middle class has today the lower class will have tomorrow, while the middle class aspires to what the rich have now. The goals of tomorrow do not consist of vague conceptions and promises; they are realized and lived by those above my standing in the economic order. We all identify our lot and aspirations with those above us. . . . The scale of income provides a principle of selecting those who will pay for economic declines. In letting the poor and powerless suffer primarily, the allegiance of the more prosperous to the status quo can be secured. . . . Class formation is prevented by the upward orientation of most people and by their refusal to make common cause with those below them against those above them. I believe that it is this shifting and blurred outline of social injustice that profoundly discourages so many of the poor and less educated from participation in politics and gives rise to the limited politically active and attentive public.⁹

If you want to think about what life is like at the bottom, look at the employees of Wal-Mart, America's biggest corporation and largest employer. Work discipline at Wal-Mart is almost like life in the gulag. Talking to a fellow employee about anything unrelated to work is called "stealing time" and is punished, only one of many such rules. You can say people couldn't get out of the gulag, but they are free to leave Wal-Mart. They are and they do. Wal-Mart has a yearly turnover of 50 percent. For most corporations that would be a catastrophe, but for Wal-Mart it is a price it is willing to pay if it keeps labor costs low. In a society where good jobs grow ever scarcer, there will always be those who, in desperation, will work at Wal-Mart—for a while. Many Wal-Mart employees work for minimum wages with no health benefits. They overburden the health care system by having to resort to emergency rooms for their ongoing health care. Since they can't provide for their families on a minimum wage, they need food stamps and other public benefits. So when you think you are

buying cheap at Wal-Mart, remember that you are paying in taxes for those cheap prices. Wal-Mart is a kind of state socialist enterprise that can exist only if there is a state to pick up the pieces it leaves behind. And in China, where many Wal-Mart products are made, the workers who produce those products are not paid enough to be able to buy anything at the new Wal-Marts that are opening there. Globalization effectively internationalizes poverty, with those at the bottom always paying the most for a progress that promises to eventually reach them but somehow never does.

Wal-Mart can treat its employees as it does because we (and China) allow it. The 1986 pastoral letter of the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, said, "The ultimate injustice is for a person or a group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were nonmembers of the human race" and asserted as a basic human right "*the creation of an order that guarantees the minimum conditions of human dignity for every person in the economic sphere.*"¹⁰ U.S. labor laws have been gutted over the past several decades so that they no longer help in creating such an order; instead they actively undermine it.

Voluntary Poverty

But let me shift from sociology and economics and go back to our starting point, biblical teachings on poverty. How can we conceive of a society in which most people's life project is reaching ever-higher levels of income? Isn't this just what Jesus called the worship of mammon, which he said was incompatible with the worship of God? Isn't this what John Paul II called "*all-consuming desire for profit*" in his 1987 encyclical? Even a purely secular ethics might conclude that making an ever-higher income your primary life goal leads to an inadequate form of life. But what is the alternative? I know that there are great systematic pressures on people to increase their income—it's not just a personal moral decision. Making sure one doesn't slip into involuntary poverty with all its horrors in today's world is surely not a motive we can criticize. But is there any possibility in today's world of reaffirming the biblical injunction to choose voluntary poverty, a richer form of life and one closer to God?

There still are and I hope there always will be religious orders where it is possible to make the vow of poverty and thus provide a demonstration experiment for the rest of society. But what about those of us who can't quite say yes to Jesus' injunction to sell all we have and give to the poor yet who feel the power and justice of that injunction? It is still possible in our society and even easier in many other advanced societies with better social support systems to turn our backs on the compulsive search for

wealth and choose a life of economic sufficiency rather than search for ever-greater luxury. Anyone who chooses to become a public or parochial schoolteacher, a public-interest lawyer, an employee of a nongovernmental organization, or even, increasingly, a college professor is choosing a life of voluntary poverty, in that none of these occupations will ever lead to great wealth, but all of them have nonmonetary rewards that can provide a fulfilling life. I don't want to romanticize. Some of these occupations are so badly paid—I think of public schoolteachers—that they approach involuntary poverty in their consequences, the need for a second job to make ends meet, for example.

There used to be a word for what professionals could expect in the way of income, before it became popular to see professionals as candidates for great wealth: that word was *sufficiency*, enough to make life comfortable for those whose primary vocation was to serve the public, not to get rich themselves. What I am suggesting is that a life based economically on sufficiency rather than the expectation of ever-increasing income is, in today's world, a form of voluntary poverty. Thinking of a life based on sufficiency instead of wealth frees us to take on all kinds of work that serves others, not just ourselves.

I am also concerned with the relationship between time and money. To some extent they are interchangeable. I know that many public-interest jobs are very demanding and can lead to burnout if one isn't careful, but a life concerned with acquiring more and more things is extremely time-consuming. We know, for example, that top professionals and managers work more hours a week than anyone else in our society, although many at the bottom end are working two or three jobs to make ends meet. This is an issue that concerns all of us, perhaps particularly college students. For those who have the luxury to attend a four-year college, there is potentially great freedom to develop as a person, to gain in knowledge of the natural and social world, to learn new languages, to understand art and literature, and to pursue studies with more practical ends in view. But if one is working twenty or thirty hours a week, the richness of college life is greatly limited. If that is the only way one can stay in school, that is one thing, but if one is working those long hours to get the money to maintain a car and to buy modish clothes, the latest electronic equipment, and all the rest, it unnecessarily (I know that the question of what is necessary lies at the heart of this whole discussion) deprives students of one of the great benefits of a college education. They are exchanging a lifetime of cultural riches for the immediate gratification of the latest gadgets or designer jeans.

Let me use this issue to link my discussion of voluntary and involuntary poverty to the issue of creativity. Genuine creativity requires leisure, which, in its original meaning, is not the absence of work but the possibility of a fulfilling form of life. I know there are forms of demanding work that involve creativity, but much demanding work at the top as well as the bottom of the economic scale is not creative or is creative only in the service of small ends. Genuine creativity requires time to think, time to contemplate, but also time to take one's mind entirely off one's creative concern and just walk in the woods or listen to one's children. We know that great ideas often burble up in dreams or at a totally unexpected moment because one has left one's unconscious alone long enough for it to be productive. So a life of sufficiency, of, in modern terms, voluntary poverty, might not only have the benefit of allowing one to undertake a life of service to others but might also allow time for genuine creativity in art or thought or whatever field.

But this brings up another problem: economists are always anxiously scanning the index of consumer confidence. A high level of consumption seems to be the very basis of our form of economy. If everyone took up a life of voluntary poverty, wouldn't our economy collapse? Some Christians of late have taken a vow not to spend anything for Christmas shopping but to make presents themselves for those they most care about so that Christmas would not be a pagan festival of consumerism (mammon). But if everyone did that, many retailers would go broke—only Christmas sales keep them out of the red for the year. So maybe a life of voluntary poverty is unpatriotic, even immoral. But isn't there another possibility? Isn't it possible that an economy based on continuous and incessant growth is itself a danger, both ecological and sociological?

Faith and Action

Life is fragile, a matter of precarious balances. The uniqueness of our planet's place in the solar system has often been noted: if we were much closer to the sun our planet would be too hot for life, if much farther away, too cold. Life requires energy—for billions of years, solar energy, but just the right amount of energy, not too much and not too little. When earth became too hot 250 million years ago and again 65 million years ago, for reasons that are still in dispute but involved both sudden global cooling and prolonged and extreme global warming, 70 to 90 percent of land and sea species died off. Humans are not content with the energy coming from the sun now: we are using at a rapid rate solar energy stored

over hundreds of millions of years in the form of petroleum and natural gas. And we are using it in ways that have created alarming climate changes but also great waves of social disturbance for two hundred years. It doesn't take a Jeremiah to see that we are disturbing the precarious balance of life with global warming and the precarious balance of society with global poverty. Maybe a life devoted to the all-consuming desire for profit, as John Paul II put it, is not a healthy life but a form of life that we will need to change if we are to salvage that precarious balance before it is too late. These are questions that face all of us today. They won't go away, so we had better try to answer them.

What I have done with the issue of poverty by moving from involuntary poverty to voluntary poverty is to show that ethical issues are also spiritual issues. Yes, we must care for the poor, and there are far too many of them in today's world, but poverty is not just an issue for the poor. Poverty raises a spiritual issue for the rich as well. Are riches good for us? In particular, is making the quest for riches the virtual meaning of life good for us? And if we in the rich countries value our riches above all else, can we really be serious if we claim to care about the poor? In short, poverty is an ethical issue but also a spiritual issue, and our response to it must be both caring and wise.

Although I have taken a Christian example here, I want to stress that I could have drawn from any of the great traditions. Both Judaism and Islam have a strong obligation to care for the poor, and they join with Christianity in stressing that poverty is not just an issue of charity but also one of justice. If one believes that we are all God's creatures, then we must all be treated with dignity and respect. Nothing violates dignity and respect more than involuntary poverty. Buddhists too have shown compassion for the poor, and they join Christianity in emphasizing voluntary poverty as an ideal and a practice.

There is much more to be said about how the religious communities could help our society think about the enormous problems of care that we face today. The poor we have had always with us, so on poverty our resources for reflection are ample. Environmental degradation has become a conscious issue so recently that religious resources for dealing with it are not as numerous as with poverty. But the two issues are related and equally important, so we need to think hard about how to reformulate the ethics of our religious traditions to help us deal with the environmental crisis.

Let me end by discussing the place where the religious traditions can most deeply contribute to the common life. We do need to bring a wider

perspective into the public sphere by joining the conversation with all comers. But I believe that the place where believers have most to offer is in worship, in spiritual practice. In the great religions, worship is not “private”; rather, it is public in the sense that it is open to all and concerned with all, not in the sense that it is state-sponsored. Worship is the source and end of all our activism. Worship is the place where we most consciously connect with ultimate reality and gain the strength to go on with our tasks in a difficult world. Above all, worship is the place where our vision can come alive and be reborn. Earlier I used Jürgen Habermas’s image of the “molten core” of classic philosophical thought. I think that is a good image to help us think about worship. It is there that we come in contact with the molten core of our faith; it is there that our religious imagination can be intensified so that we can see “sacred visions” to share with others. There are plenty of activists at work on many causes, and believers must from time to time be activists too. But if the faithful of whatever tradition neglect their defining religious practices, what will they have to say to the world? What difference can they make?

As a sociologist of religion I know that religions and spiritual traditions have often served mainly to reinforce commitment to the status quo: to quiet dissent, not to ask difficult questions. But I also know that it is from religious and spiritual communities that, time and again, there have arisen the great questioners, those who look beyond the taken-for-granted assumptions of their societies and consider them in the light of ultimate reality. Sometimes they have renounced their societies, and sometimes they have denounced them. Probably the faithful need continually to move between renunciation and denunciation. But they do so in the full light of day. They demonstrate to the larger society their alternative realities by the way they live. The public sphere would be enormously impoverished without them. None of them have the sole answer, but perhaps together, and learning from one another, they can help move us from the impasse we have reached to a form of life that will be less destructive and more fulfilling for all on our planet.

