

Our
gods have
failed us¹

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Something is rotten in our western society. We know it, we see it all around us, yet we don't know what to do about it. Instead of activating us, the situation seems to paralyze us. A society that has chosen to live an autonomous (i.e. self-governing) life is now staggering toward its autonomous death. And such a death can only make us feel quite helpless.

Am I too gloomy, too pessimistic? I don't think so. In our cities the garbage trucks are busily picking up the leftovers of our consuming society. They are gathering the remnants of our half-eaten cakes and' cream tarts. And at this very moment the refuse carts in Bombay and Ethiopia are collecting the bodies of men, women, and children who died last night in the streets and fields of hunger and misery.

In our own "great" society thousands of workers are forced to perform monotonous, mind-killing tasks only to serve the prefabricated, dehumanized needs of our modern leisure activities. We see the dead fish and the darkening shadows in our streams and lakes, results of the endless and meaningless hunt for new detergents and chemicals. We witness costly preparations for future space flights, but little if any preparation for the future of America's black youths. The young make their hopeless protest against this repressive/ tolerant technocratic society in which nonsense consumption is a national duty and in which increased production has become a self-legitimizing issue. At the same time other young people try to escape the one-dimensional consumer society by turning themselves into drug-dreaming, zero-dimensional consuming animals. The riots, campus fights, and demonstrations of the sixties were, I believe, only the partial eruptions of a much greater, more explosive volcano underneath.

How could we have let things go this far? What is at the root of all these destructive developments, these seriously unbalanced situations in our rationally balanced society? And what should our position, our christian attitude, be in such a world? Isn't everything we do, including all our labour, a confirmation of the very direction of that society, a further establishing of the establishment, a compromise with what we reject? Would it not be better for Christians simply to abandon the whole system and escape from it? These are serious questions, and our answers had better be serious as well.

In attempting to find possible answers we would do well to remember that the challenge of assessing the world's socioeconomic predicament is not a new one. Of course, I realize

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that this problem today has new dimensions which are characteristic of our time. -But it would be foolish to ignore [9] the fact that the christian church throughout the ages has been wrestling with its assessment of economic life. We can learn from this struggle, for it will help us understand that the communion of saints goes beyond not only the limits of our day and age, but also the borders of our present closed society. In that communion we are not one-dimensional but four-dimensional. We are living before the face of the Almighty God, as well as in front of a cloud of witnesses comprising the saints of all ages.

I will divide this essay into three parts. In the first place I will try to present an overview of the evaluation of socio-economic life by the early christian church, the medieval church, and the church of the Reformation. Second, I will lay out three biblical givens and will outline how modern man has responded to them in his socioeconomic life. Third, I will evaluate present socioeconomic life and outline the Christian's attitude in modern industrial society.

"No servant can be the slave of two masters. You cannot serve God and money."

"Sell all that you have, give it to the poor and follow Me."

"You who have great possessions, weep and wail over the miserable fate descending on you. You have lived on earth in wanton luxury, fattening yourselves like cattle, and therefore the day of slaughter has come."

"The love of money is the root of all evil."

These texts from the New Testament refer to the temptations of money and riches. How did the early christian church read these Scripture passages? Especially during the period between the second and sixth century, the early church adopted a negative attitude toward socioeconomic life. This aspect of life was generally considered to be something sinful in itself. You could not participate in it as producer, consumer, or merchant without defiling yourself one way or another. To be a radical Christian you indeed had to sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor; you had to reject everything beyond the bare necessities of life.

There is undoubtedly a neoplatonic influence behind this attitude. Neo-Platonism holds that sin is somehow closely linked to matter and the human physical body. More importantly, however, that lifestyle led to a *dualistic* approach to economic life, for economic life had to go on. The common man with a family could not easily withdraw himself from his job and other economic activities. Therefore, according to the clergy, he was obligated to sin; he was delivered to a life of defilement. It is significant that during that period we see the [10] rise of cloisters and monasteries.

These institutions were considered areas of the church where radical Christianity was practical, and as such their inhabitants could do penance for all those other Christians who were forced to defile themselves with economic activities. *There simply could be no*

escapism without dualism; a double morality was inherent in the early church's view of economic life.

This outlook on socioeconomic life, however, underwent a significant change during the Middle Ages. To be sure, no change took place in the church's opinion of the many temptations facing a Christian participating in socioeconomic life. A medieval legend tells us of a traveller who, visiting a cloister, found a host of devils sitting in corners, windows, and staircases. But when he went to the marketplace, he saw only one devil comfortably and lazily perched on a high pillar. The moral of the story was that a cloister needs an army of devils to tempt the monks; in the marketplace, however, there is no need for them since everyone working there is already a devil. The story indicates that medieval Christians had not changed their basic evaluation of economic life. The change occurred in the sense that economic life now could have a useful though minor place in the Kingdom of God, *provided* that it was sanctified (made holy) by the sacramental means of grace of the church.

The scope of this essay does not allow a detailed elaboration of the medieval scholastic view of society. It is important, however, to point out that the scholastic doctors saw society as a static whole in which everyone had to remain in his "God-given" place. Within this context we can also understand the scholastic regulation of economic life by the doctrines of the just price (*justum pretium*) and the prohibition of interest. These doctrines served as instruments to maintain the static character of medieval society. They prevented the merchant class from obtaining a more important and dominant position than could be admitted in a society of Christians.

In summary, the basic approach of medieval people to socioeconomic life was not negation but *sanctification*. There remained, however, a deep distrust of all dynamic tendencies in socioeconomic life.

Finally, we must examine the attitude of the church of the Reformation. And I believe that attitude can be of special importance for us in our far more complex and bewildering society. A first, though minor, aspect in the reformers' assessment of socioeconomic life was their protest against the medieval domination of society by the institutional church, a [11] church which laid many burdens on believers, yet exempted itself from these burdens. To quote Saint Bernard when he gazed at the splendour of the buildings, pastures, and dominions of the church: "Oh vanity of vanities, yet no more vain than insane! The Church is resplendent in her walls, beggarly in her poor. She clothes her stones in gold and leaves her sons naked."

The basic assessment of socioeconomic life by the church of the Reformation was neither negation nor sanctification but vocation. The church did not start with the sinfulness of economic life, but with the confession that it is an integral part of God's creation. Therefore, the reformers, especially Calvin, rejected the notion that socioeconomic life was sinful in itself. Instead, the reformers emphasized that all of life fell within the scope of Christ's redemption. Economic activities were no less holy, no less sanctified than spiritual or ecclesiastical activities. According to the reformers, economic life should

break its scholastic shackles and begin its own development in harmony with its own peculiar character.

At this point some readers may object: "Don't you know that it is precisely this development of economic life according to its own laws which has led society into its present chaos? And wasn't the early church (and perhaps the medieval church too) closer to the truth than the church of the Reformation, at least in its practical views?"

Such a reaction, though understandable, would be premature. For there is another side to the Reformation's approach, a side less known perhaps, but essential for an understanding of the sixteenth century's evaluation of economic life. This second aspect is just as relevant for us today as the assertion that economic life, as a part of God's creation, must have its own growth and development. In Andre Biéler's book, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, we find a clear picture of Calvin's thought about economic life. Calvin took his starting point in God's creation of mankind and of the earth's many resources. In many respects God indeed created men very differently. But this inequality was not an inequality in value. On the contrary, he created men differently so that they might communicate with each other as equally valuable beings and might serve each other, also in economic matters. Men created with different capacities, talents, needs, insights, and potential skills are equally obligated to interact. And that means an obligation to maintain solidarity, for that is the purpose of economic life as a whole. It ought to be *l'expression de la solidarité humaine et signe de la communion spirituelle* ("the expression of human solidarity and a sign of spiritual communion"). Only [12] in that way does it have meaning. Economic exchange and interaction should be the expression of the fact that God gave the riches and resources of his earth to *the whole of mankind*. They must serve the community of *all* men. That is the first condition we find in Calvin's approach.

The second condition concerns the idea of *stewardship*. Vocation (or calling) is not just an empty term. It involves a *mandate*. God's mandate to man is to love God and neighbour. Man may not use the earth's resources as if he were the ultimate possessor and sole owner. *Every private possession has a social mortgage which you have to pay off before you may use it for yourself*. In a beautiful passage Calvin illustrates what this means for the relationship between the rich and the poor: The pope is not Christ's deputy on earth; the poor are. For Christ said that he would consider anything done on earth in favour of his poor children as done to himself. So the poor in this world have the task of reminding the rich that Christ is still hungry and suffering among them. His hunger, nakedness, and suffering will continue as long as the rich neglect the needs of the poor.

Economic life, then, is a creation of God and forms an integral part of man's calling. As such, economic life is entitled to have its own development. But it may never be divorced from its *purpose* and *destination* to be an expression of genuine solidarity between men, nor from its *obligation* to serve God and neighbour, an obligation which is inherent in the calling to stewardship. The moment economic life is severed from this purpose and from this obligation, it turns into a deadly and devilish temptation, a cause for sin. Then money indeed becomes a Mammon, and man bows in reverence before that god.

Earlier in this essay I asked why our world is in such a deplorable socioeconomic situation. I believe we have found at least a partial answer. The evils, miseries, and irrationalities do not originate from economic life itself. No, they are a result of man's deviation from the true goals of and laws for economic development. Man declared the autonomy of economic development and proclaimed economic progress to be a universally valid end *in itself*, regardless of its direction and irrespective of human or natural sacrifices.

The idea of an autonomous development of economic life has deeply influenced our western societies. Since the end of the sixteenth century a number of ideologies have taken hold of western economic thought and have dominated the development of our culture. These ideas include the morality of "no moral rule beyond the letter of the law" and the [13] morality of the prevalence of self-interest in all economic matters. Out of this new morality arose, for instance, the enclosure movement in which the lives of many in rural England were uprooted only because the common land on which they lived could yield greater economic returns to the landlords by turning them into private possessions. That same morality caused the Industrial Revolution to become an industrial dehumanization; any understanding of the social mortgage in the hiring of labour was structurally absent. The goal and destiny of economic life was not christian solidarity but the realization of human self-interest.

You may have noticed that, in dealing with the important view of the reformers, I referred to only a partial explanation of our problems. I did so because I do not believe that we can rely solely on Calvin's approach in our evaluation of our own social and economic development. Since the Reformation, this development has undergone influences other than the simple desire for economic autonomy.

In order to understand our own times, I should like to draw your attention to *three basic biblical rules* which together explain man's relation to God and to his theoretical and practical pursuits. Although these rules are more or less wellknown to many, I believe that looking at them side by side will provide us with a better understanding of ourselves and our times.

The *first* basic rule is that *every man is serving god(s) in his life*. This rule is known as Augustine's law of concentration. Augustine wrote the famous words about the unrest in every man's life, an unrest which is only removed if he finds God. The God we have as our resting point in life can be the living God. But we can also seek the resting point of our lives (our happiness and goals) within the creation. We can seek it in material wealth, in our intellectual capacity, or in progress by means of technique. When, for example, Richard Nixon declared a few years ago that the spirit of Apollo Eleven was able to bring peace among all nations, his words betrayed a belief in the saving power of technique. To give another example, when we reject anything that our minds can't comprehend, then our intellect has become our ultimate resting point and the origin of our security. In such a case we indeed choose our god.

The *second* basic rule is *that every man is transformed into an image of his god*. The choice of a god, of a real resting point in our lives, is not without consequences. Christians have the promise to be renewed by the Holy Spirit according to the image of the living God. But all those who choose another god - whether they bear the name "Christian" or [14] not - are transformed into an image of the god of *their* choice. The apostle Paul describes this law in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans. Paul speaks about those who exchanged the splendour of the living God for other gods: birds, beasts, and creeping things. And Paul continues: "For that reason God has given them up to the vileness of their own desires and the consequent degradation of their own bodies; they are now behaving like animals themselves!" (Rom. 1:24-25) They have become the image of their god. Likewise, when we choose progress by means of technique to be our god (as the foundation of our final hope and trust in life), we should not be surprised to find ourselves transformed and deformed into an extension of a machine. When human intellect and our own *ratio* (reason) become our deepest source of trust and knowledge, we will ultimately rationalize ourselves as well. Then the love for our husbands, our wives, and our families might well disappear because it cannot stand the test of rationality. Marriage and family are, after all, not qualified by reason but by truth and fidelity.

The *third* basic rule is *that mankind creates and forms a structure of society in its own image*. In the development of human civilization, man forms, creates, and changes the structure of his society, and in doing so he portrays in his work the intention of his own heart. He gives to the structure of that society something of his own image and likeness. In it he betrays something of his own lifestyle, of his own god. A biblical reference for this third rule can be found in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Revelation, where the inhabitants of the world are commanded by their beast-god to make an image of him, an image which can speak and is able to direct their lives.

I sincerely hope that you will be able to see the direct relevance of these three biblical laws about the relation between God, man, and society. In our western civilization, we have first given our trust to the powers of economic growth, science, and technique to lead us in all our ways; we are still following these powers as our infallible guides. But, correspondingly, we have turned ourselves into images of these gods, and we find these traces of ourselves back in the structures of our present-day, growth-possessed society. For we cannot deny that our society displays a powerful *belief* in the full, self-sufficient autonomy of economic development as the source of both private and social happiness. Of human reason, technical progress, and autonomous economic development we say: "Behold your gods, who are able to deliver you from any house of bondage and bring you into the promised land of welfare!" And now in modern cultures, we [15] are confronted with the consequences of this religious choice. This does not mean that western civilization made that choice in all *its fullness*, denying any form of Christianity. Our society still knows some feeling of responsibility, some sense of freedom, some unrest about the present unbalanced situations.

Nevertheless, it is true that western man - and we are all western men and women - has already made many basic religious compromises, although he has not rejected the living

God in all spheres of life. Western man has often sought and still seeks his resting point for his daily life in his intellectual capacity, in his technical progress, and in the level of his income. To a large extent he finds the meaning of his life in a chase after financial gain and luxury.

It is these religious choices which have scarred western man and his culture. Western man has been at least partially transformed into the image of these gods. And the image of these gods is reflected in the structure of our society. That structure has in many respects become economic, rationalistic, and technocratic.

Here, I believe, lie the deep roots of our present miseries, imbalances, and severe claustrophobia. In the area of industrial labour, for example, our real problem is not that many workers are treated as dehumanized robots. That is old hat already. No, the deepest misery lies in the fact that many of these labourers no longer experience such a work situation as dehumanizing. Instead, they feel they are quite happy and reject any possibility of obtaining real responsibility. Since they often think of work as simply a means to earn money, they look on responsibility as a burden. Here we witness a transformation of man into the image of the modern gods. This transformation is partially due to his own choice, but it is also the result of the compelling influence of a culture which worships and adores technique and progress.

We see a parallel development in the structure and direction of the modern business enterprise. There the root problem is not just merciless competition, unethical dealing with workers and consumers, and lack of genuine concern for and solidarity with others. Those are evils that have their origin in a much earlier history and are a direct consequence of the proclamation that economic development is fully self-sufficient and autonomous. No, the root problem is that the modern enterprise in the pursuit of its goals not only tends to captivate men's bodies but also their souls and minds. There is an enormous pressure on every leading person within the corporation to adapt his lifestyle and *his life view* to that of the corporation and to identify his personal hope for the [16] future with the goals of the enterprise. Love is transformed into loyalty to the enterprise, faith becomes dedication to its goals, harmony turns into a duty to eliminate any conviction which might disturb the development pattern of the enterprise. I believe Galbraith was right when he wrote:

If we continue to believe that the goals of the industrial system - the expansion of output, the companion increase in consumption, technological advance, the public images that sustain it - are coordinate with life, then all of our lives will be in the service of these goals. What is consistent with these ends we shall have or be allowed; all else will be off limits. Our wants will be managed in accordance with the needs of the industrial system; the policies of the state will be subject to similar influence; education will be adapted to industrial need; the disciplines required by the industrial system will be the conventional morality of the community. All other goals will be made to seem precious, unimportant or antisocial. We will be bound to the ends of the industrial system. The state will add its moral, and perhaps some of its legal power to their enforcement. What

will eventuate, on the whole, will be the benign servitude of the household retainer who is taught to love her mistress and see her interests as her own, and not the compelled servitude of the field hand. But it will not be freedom. U.K. Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967), p. 398.]

However, Galbraith fails to see the religious roots of that threat to freedom. In other words, he fails to see that to a large extent western man has tied his salvation, his deepest happiness, to what economic growth and technical progress can give to him. It is this faith that expresses itself in the structure of our institutions and societies. These gods, in turn, are now shackling and binding their servants. They transform their adherents into slaves.

However, there is more. The enterprise also exercises an increasing spiritual domination over the *consumers*. A large enterprise cannot afford a major insecurity in the level of consumer demands. Therefore, it has to create a secure and stable demand. The wishes of the consumer become more and more *prefabricated* wishes, made serviceable to the universally valid progress of sales and technique. Consumers' sovereignty is gradually replaced by consumers' dependence. The master becomes a slave.

Our third and final illustration is the problem of our severely damaged environment. What constitutes our greatest misery in this vital aspect of our world? Again, it is not that we wreaked such havoc on our ecosystem. During the Industrial Revolution and afterwards, there was also a severe degree of air and water pollution. Our most fundamental [17] problem is that our society has a built-in tendency to continue such pollution and waste, a tendency which is often much greater than the will to curb it. To be sure, there is much protest and publicity about the environmental damage. But this protest resembles the protest of the victims of the seven plagues described in Revelation 16. The victims suffered severely but refused to change their lives. For it becomes increasingly clear that *a real struggle against further deterioration of the environment will be possible only if western man will be satisfied with a much lower rate of growth of his income and perhaps with a much lower income than he now has.*

To quote Galbraith once again, "A rising standard of living has the aspect of a *faith* in our culture."² And faith has great tenacity. I believe that western man will do his utmost to achieve both economic goals. He will try to improve the environment without giving up his attempts to improve his consumption level. In economic terms, however, this means a structural trend toward continued heavy inflation. For inflation is not a mere defect in the mechanism of our economy, but a consequence of the desire to spend more than is economically possible.

I believe we are now ready to complete our picture. Why are so many young people engaged in a deep and helpless protest against society? It is, I think, because they intuitively feel that their freedom and spiritual independence are at stake when they stay in society. There is an analogy between their protest and the struggle of the existentialists

² John Kenneth Galbraith *The New Industrial State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967), p. 164.

against the domination of positivism in science. Positivism equated human existence with a collection of natural, biological, and physical qualities. Like the existentialists who want to escape the inhuman positivistic fate, modern youth refuses to be put into the box of a closed society which often treats living men as social animals, workhorses, consuming rabbits, and computerized atoms. They no longer believe that man will be saved, made thoroughly happy, by a total dedication to the goals of sales promotion and technical progress.

I would like to conclude with some comments about the Christian's approach to socioeconomic life. What must we do? Flee from it? Compromise with it? Or is there a third way out of the pressing dilemma?

I believe that the basic difficulty lies in the fact that the *direction* of modern society is indeed a *religious* direction. That should be clear when we observe the effect of the three biblical laws mentioned earlier. It becomes clear also when we notice that strange mixture of rationality and irrationality within our society. Our methods and processes are all very [18] rational and efficient, but they serve goals which are often irrational and unexplainable. We insist on further expansion and growth in the production and consumption of unnecessary and prefabricated luxuries, even when the price is a dehumanization of labour, a destruction of the environment, a manipulation of ourselves as consumers, and a woeful neglect of other people who lack the bare necessities of life. Such a strange combination is only understandable after we have *enslaved* ourselves to these irrational goals and have given them a meaning in themselves, irrespective of their consequences.

Should we escape then, perhaps join the underground movement, and help prepare a coming revolution? I don't believe that is a christian approach, and I would like to give three reasons.

In the *first* place, I must remind you of the connection between escapism and a double morality which we already observed in our discussion of the early church's attitude. We cannot take the luxury of an escape when we know that many others have no such possibility. That would be unethical; it would be a flight. It would also be a betrayal, for escapism is always a denial of the solidarity of sinning.

Second, I should like to remind you that evil is not situated in socioeconomic life itself. The ultimate horizon of our daily work is not an unavoidable subjection to the aims of a closed society. If we believed that, we would be thinking as onedimensionally about our daily life as those who unconditionally love the gods of our age. For no human endeavour can remove the creational order of economic life. We cannot eliminate the fact of God's calling to our daily work; we cannot neutralize the meaning of vocation as a way to render service to our neighbour.

The *third* and most fundamental objection to flight and withdrawal from present society or to its revolutionary overthrow is that such courses of action would betray a serious misjudgement of the real roots of the crisis. The decisive question is not how we shall

escape from being put into a box or from being treated like rabbits or atoms. That may be the decisive question for an existentialist who loves his spiritual independence above all, but it can never be decisive for a Christian. A Christian should know that the fundamental problem does not originate from a wrong societal structure but springs from the *hearts* of men who made that structure. It is man himself who chose his gods and enshrined them in the midst of society. We may flee from that society, but we can never escape our own hearts. Here we find the limit of every escapism and therefore the limit of [19] our hope for other and better societal structures without a change in the religious heart direction of western man.

Let me formulate the same answer in a more positive way. I believe that the living Word of God is present in our western civilization as a detecting power. It detects the origins of the troubles, miseries, and irrationalities in that civilization. It also discloses that man's declaration that God is dead must necessarily be followed by the death of a culture, the death of humanity in man. The Word of God also has its revenging presence. *Man cannot choose another god and remain the same.*

But the Word of the living God is also present in our society as a *liberating* power. Wherever that Word is accepted the social mortgage of our own wealth to the hungry and needy will be paid off. The balance between wealth and nature can be found again. Men will no longer allow their deepest convictions to be manipulated simply to attain practical economic goals.

Our western societies have not made an irreversible choice for the gods of wealth and technique. Moreover, some still hesitate, some still have a sense of stewardship in the control of the environment. Some of the young reject an economic and technocratic way of life and seek a possible alternative. And that alternative is a real one, for there still is a bifurcation, a fork in the road. At the crossroads, however, the right direction is only indicated by the signpost of the living Word of God.

Clearly, I also believe in the *directing* power of the Word of God. When we follow that Word on its path through our present culture, there is still much that can be done and there are still many possibilities for genuine christian witness. This witness is not without promise; for wherever the Word of God is heeded, there is his promise of what Francis Schaeffer calls a "substantial healing" of man and society. This healing begins in our own lives, showing itself in the Shalom that follows our responsible personal choice between obtaining our own luxuries and providing the needs of the hungry, both here and in other countries. But it also expresses itself in society, for the structures of society are a mirror of our own belief, bearing the image of our own hope, trust, and convictions. For instance, every trade union that values the restoration of human responsibility in daily work above the race for more dollars for its members is working as a power of substantial healing, making labour meaningful again in larger enterprises.

The Gospel points men to a more opened-up society, a better administered environment, at least a partial [20] redemption of our social mortgage. Last, there is the power of the witness of the church. Certainly the church can't point out the way to go by imitating the

service of the gods of this age with luxurious and expensive church buildings. The vocation of the church is to demonstrate in its own style of living that the redemption of Christ is also changing all our socioeconomic relations. In the christian community something has to become visible of the holiness and the harmony of the economics of the Kingdom of God.

A basic rule of that Kingdom is that happiness lies more in giving than in receiving, that a man can become rich in Christ by giving away his treasures. In that community social, economic, and racial differences, rather than causing separation, have to intensify genuine communion and solidarity, transforming that community into a place of real and substantial healing for all who are hurt and broken by an idolatrous culture. Thus we may live today in the perspective of the great day of our Redeemer, a Redeemer whose distant footsteps can already be heard amid the noise of our present society.

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