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The Christian as Revolutionary

GUY R. VANDERPOOL

All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.
(W.H. Auden, "September 1, 1939")¹

Wherever true Christianity spreads, it must cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches! And riches naturally beget pride, love of the world, and every temper that is destructive of Christianity. Now, if there be no way to prevent this, Christianity is inconsistent with itself and, of consequence, cannot stand, cannot continue long among any people; since, wherever it generally prevails, it saps its own foundations.
(John Wesley, 1789)²

For all the displays of the national flag, singing "God Bless America," official reassurances regarding the economy, talk of military victories in Afghanistan, and claims that America has a "just cause," we live in a broken world. The collapse of Enron revealed greed, misrepresentation, and corruption in corporate life. While wealth multiplies for a few, more than 31 million are poor. Thirteen million, five hundred thousand of them are children. In 2001 the number of Americans who requested emergency shelter grew an average of 13 percent; 22 percent were families with children. The number of homeless people who are employed is increasing; incomes have not risen enough to pay rent. About 3,000 homeless people are in Nashville, Tennessee. Some 200,000 residents of middle Tennessee rely on emergency food distribution to have enough to eat; over 41,000 of them live in Nashville. More than 39 million Americans cannot afford health insurance.³

Though President Bush received broad support as an upholder of "family values," he has championed war, bestowed favors on the wealthiest citizens, and curtailed civil liberties. He finances the development of "thermobaric" bombs and other inventions for killing human beings, but will not give poor people enough child care and transportation assistance to retain jobs.⁴ The president has repudiated international treaties and agreements designed to reduce environmental pollution, control nuclear weapons, decrease small arms sales, and limit anti-ballistic missiles. He withdrew the United States from peace talks between North and South Korea and Israel and Palestinians. U.S. military operations in Afghanistan killed innocent civilians, forced refugees into camps without access to critical supplies, multiplied lethal mines in the Afghan countryside, and turned that nation into a battlefield of warlords. The president's invective against a supposed "axis of evil" has alienated states whose friendship is vital to the United States.

How should I respond to this shattered landscape? I must first realize with Gustavo Guitierrez that sin is manifest “in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes. Sin appears, therefore, as the fundamental alienation, the root of . . . injustice and exploitation.”⁵ I have failed to forge loving relationships with disadvantaged people. America’s middle and upper classes share my guilt. “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov 14:34).

I must not be party to violent and oppressive corporate and official policies. I must think of myself as a stranger and pilgrim—even an “alien and exile” like the prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus who had no home (1 Pet 2:11; Luke 9:58). I must distance myself from the American political and economic system lest I take part in its sins and share in its plagues (Rev 18:4).

I must not only avoid hurting; I must struggle to bring about tolerance, justice, and peace. In a nation that attributed its wealth and military force to God’s favor, the prophet Isaiah saw only idolatry and “grinding the face of the poor” (Isa 3:15). In a previous issue of *Leaven*,⁶ Billie Silvey emphasized Luke’s por-

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trayal of Jesus’ role of liberation. When John the Baptist’s disciples asked, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus replied, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are

raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Luke 7:19–23). When a lawyer asked him how to inherit eternal life, Jesus described a Samaritan who rescued a beaten man (Luke 10:25–37). When a ruler posed that question also, Jesus told him to sell everything he owned, give the money to the poor, and be a disciple (Luke 18:18–23). I cannot serve both God and wealth. The things I prize are abominations in the sight of God (Luke 16:13–15).

RELIGION SUBORDINATED TO CAPITALISM

Why do I fail to see Jesus as a liberator? Why am I looking for a savior who will let me cherish my possessions? Why do I keep asking who my neighbor is? It is because my economic status defines my religion. German philosopher Karl Marx explained:

The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.⁷

With the wealthy farmer in Luke’s gospel (Luke 12:17–21), I think that what I possess is mine. Being part of a capitalist society makes me a possessor and consumer. If I were a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, I would not count possessions as mine, but as God’s. I would then be free to sell my property and personally feed the hungry, clothe the naked, provide shelter for homeless people, help the sick, welcome strangers, and visit prisoners. Jesus warned that whether I do these things will determine whether I receive eternal life or eternal punishment (Matt 25:34–46).

I cannot dole out a little to the poor and oppressed; I must become one with them. Brazilian archbishop Dom Helder Camara wrote that in the last judgment, we will be measured “by our treatment of Christ, of Christ who hungers and thirsts, who is dirty, injured and oppressed.” Christ is any person “who needs justice, who has a right to justice, who deserves justice.”⁸

I must not discriminate against women and racial minorities; must not withhold adequate wages, health insurance, food, clothing, and decent housing from immigrants, refugees, and the poor. “Thus says the Lord,” wrote Amos, “I will not revoke the punishment; . . . because they sell the righteous for silver, and the

needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way” (Amos 2:4–7). Lipscomb professor Jesse Bankhead states that Amos was describing how corrupt merchants and judges forced poor farmers into debt slavery, then took their land without giving them a chance to pay. Do I pay employees meager salaries, deprive them of health benefits, charge high interest and rent, and foreclose on property? Do I vote for politicians who fight against a living wage, favor corporations over workers, incarcerate aliens, and deny care to the elderly and the dispossessed?

Isaiah denounced landowners who forced out the poor (Isa 5:8). I live in a roomy place while thousands are homeless or crowded into dangerous apartment complexes.

Isaiah also attacked makers of “iniquitous decrees” and “oppressive statutes” (Isa 10:1–2). In spring 2001 Tennessee legislators refused to give Nashville city employees a living wage and increased the profits that money lenders make from so-called “payday loans.” Such actions betray Jesus. He is the one who does not make enough money to live on, who is forced to pay 400 percent interest plus other fees for an advance on his next paycheck.

Do I believe the national welfare system is evil? If so, I need to realize that jobs available for welfare recipients rarely pay enough to cover their transportation and child care expenses. If I eliminate welfare payments without giving adequate support, I “trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land” (Amos 8:4).

Karl Marx pointed out that in capitalist societies, religion both dulls the poor to suffering and assures the rich that God favors moneymaking. “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.”⁹ Do I thank God for my money without thinking of people who have none? Am I in the habit of blaming poverty on laziness, immorality, and addiction rather than on my greed, exploitation, and indifference?

The church praises economic success. Most of its leaders come from the middle and upper classes. Having prospered through supposed individual effort, they transfer their exaltation of wealth to church activities. The funds they allocate to “benevolence” are often comparable to crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table for starving Lazarus (Luke 16:20–21). Church leaders rarely skimp, however, when spending money from the treasury on themselves and their flocks. They maintain recreational facilities and summer camps, treat the body to sumptuous meals and entertainment, and retain therapists who can treat bourgeois angst. God calls us from self-indulgence to share our food with hungry people, share our homes with homeless people, and share our clothes with ragged people (Isa 58:6–7).

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Political acculturation is a companion of social and economic acculturation. That is to say, I appropriate my favorite public policies into my theology. Am I too consumed with hatred of “big government” to see that it has a better record of relieving suffering than the church does? Am I trying to divert attention from the church’s failure by opposing government programs that provide comprehensive care for disadvantaged people? Have I forgotten that my parents or grandparents required New Deal assistance to recover from the economic depression of the 1930s?

RELIGION SUBORDINATED TO NATIONALISM

Christians also tend to be ardent patriots. We adorn our assemblies with flags, “prayers for the nation,” and praises for the military forces. Few voices remind us that Jesus called us to be peacemakers; unheard long since is the prophet’s cry that God “shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peo-

ples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa 2:4; cf. Mic 4:3-4).

It is easier to entrust American interests to military power than to moral principles. A senator declared in 1946, "God almighty in his infinite wisdom has dropped the bomb in our lap . . . now with plenty of vision and guts and plenty of atomic bombs, the U.S. can compel mankind to adopt a policy of lasting peace . . . or be burned to a crisp."¹⁰ Though the Cold War proved the folly of using those weapons, nuclear jingoism¹¹ is enjoying a revival in President Bush's refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, in his denunciation of the anti-ballistic missile treaty with Russia, and in his secret plan to strike at least Russia, China, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Libya, and Syria "in the event of surprising military developments" and certain other situations.¹²

The United States, moreover supports dictators who defy liberty and economic rights. The United States trains foreign soldiers who brutalize dissidents. The United States sells weapons abroad, even though this encourages war. The United States imposes economic sanctions on Cuba and Iraq, even though these measures cause disease, malnutrition, and death. Do I think that backing the war on terrorism is my religious duty? Have I wondered about the contradiction between dropping bombs and dropping food, aiming at ammunition dumps but destroying grain warehouses, targeting anti-aircraft emplacements but hitting hospitals? Do I tolerate free exchanges of views on these questions? Am I content with church services that venerate the nation and ignore victims of United States military strikes and "detainees" being interrogated in American jails?

As a pilgrim and stranger, I must try to resist encroachments of patriotism on religion. I must protest government actions that cause suffering and destruction. Church members usually cite Romans 13 when discussing the Christian's role in politics, but Paul wrote it at a time when the state permitted Christianity to spread. The book of Revelation seems more applicable in our days. Through John, the risen Christ warns disciples not to trust national power and prosperity:

"Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come." And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives. (Rev 18.10–13)

If I think that this passage only applies to "rich people," then capitalism has probably blinded me to my own quest for authority and gratification.

WHAT MUST BE DONE?

I must see the disparity between my status and that of disadvantaged people.¹³ Thus convicted, I must work in four areas.

First, I must urge the church to cast off its self-concept as a "benevolent" institution and lead a struggle against war, exploitation, and poverty. I must challenge the church to be a refuge for homeless people, for the unemployed, for immigrants, for minorities, and for dissidents.

Second, I must raise social consciousness in my place of work and school.

Third, I must relieve suffering myself. I must seek, as Isaiah did, for an ear and a voice like one who is taught (Isa 50:4). Testifying in behalf of victims and giving them material assistance are high expressions of Christianity. Instead of praising war against terrorism, I must try to offset its causes—"poverty, alienation, disaffection, and ethnic hatred."¹⁴ I must awaken the poor to their condition, to their dignity, and to the need to eliminate what causes poverty. I can teach the poor to read and expose them to material like the following.

Pedro's family is hungry. The people work and are hungry. Is it just that Pedro's family should be hungry? Is it just that the people are hungry? How can we rescue the country from this condition?¹⁵

Fourth, I must recognize that the church has limited ability to cure suffering, even if this becomes a primary task. Because government is capable of doing so, I must support political candidates who press for the success of principle in foreign affairs and for taking care of disadvantaged people in the United States and abroad. I can also apply for positions in government and the private sector that contribute to peace and justice.

A student asked last year, "How can people put success and money ahead of the well-being and care of others?" She spent the spring break helping orphans in another country. Like her, I must tear down my idols of economic security and patriotism and worship only God. I must count everything I have gained as loss and press on for the prize of the upward call of God, who would send me, as he did Isaiah and Jesus,

. . . to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. (Isa 61:1–3)

A life devoted to following Jesus will have little room for pride. I must confess, with Bertolt Brecht,

Nothing that I do entitles me to eat my fill.
By chance I was spared. (If my luck leaves me
I am lost).

They tell me: eat and drink. Be glad you have it!
But how can I eat and drink
When my food is snatched from the hungry
And my glass of water belongs to the thirsty?
And yet I eat and drink.¹⁶

GUY VANDERPOOL

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ENDNOTES

- 1 From W.H. Auden, *Another Time* (Random House, 1940); available from <http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmID1391>.
- 2 Quoted in Michael S. Hamilton, "We're in the Money! How did evangelicals get so wealthy, and what has it done to us?" *Christianity Today*, 12 June 2000; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/007>.
- 3 The Federal Government's poverty level for a four-person family is \$17,650 per year. The sources of data in this paragraph are Elisabeth T. Harder, "Housing for Homes," Washington Comment, Mennonite Central Committee Washington Office, 25 January 2002, available from <http://www.mccb.org>; "Poverty USA," Catholic Campaign for Human Development, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, available from <http://www.usccb.org/cchd/povertyusa/povfacts.htm>; Sue Fleming, "Report: One in Six U.S. Children Lives in Poverty," *Reuters*, 19 April 2001, available from <http://www.reuters.com>; "Short Takes," *The Other Side* 38, no. 2 (March and April 2002), 8.
- 4 Marion Wright Edelman, Children's Defense Fund, quoted in Dwight Lewis, "Opinion," the *Nashville Tennessean*, 3 March 2002, 21A.
- 5 Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 175.
- 6 Billie Silvey, "It's Not What You'd Expect," *Leaven* 6 (1998): 119–120.
- 7 Quoted in Roger A. Johnson, Ernest Wallwork, Clifford Green, H. Paul Santmire, and Harold Y. Vanderpool, *Critical Issues in Modern Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 150.

- 8 Ibid., 218-219.
- 9 Ibid., 157.
- 10 Senator Edwin Johnson, quoted in William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59.
- 11 "Jingoism," a term meaning unreasoning and belligerent nationalism, entered the English language in late 1877 when the British public's anger over Russian policy in the Balkans expressed itself in song: "We don't want to fight/yet by Jingo! if we do/We've got the ships, we've got the men/And got the money too." Norman Rich, *Great Power Diplomacy, 1814-1914* (New York: McGraw-Hill, c. 1992), 224.
- 12 Paul Richter, "U.S. Works Up Plan for Using Nuclear Arms," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 March 2002; available at <http://www.latimes.com/>.
- 13 Boff, *Liberation Theology*, 24.
- 14 George J. Tenet, U.S. Director of Central Intelligence, "The Worldwide Threat in 2000: Global Realities of Our National Security," statement before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2 February 2000; available from http://www.odci.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/archives/2000/index.html.
- 15 From *To Live Is to Struggle*, a textbook published in Brazil by the Movement for Basic Education during the 1960s, quoted in Johnson et al., *Critical Issues in Modern Religion*, 224.
- 16 From "To Posterity," *Selected Poems*, 173, 175.

