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Poverty and American National Priorities

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Our topic is poverty and American national priorities. Professors like definitions and I am teaching at a law school this year where lawyers *really* like definitions. Let me begin, however, *not with* a definition of poverty, something that dominates a lot of discussions in economics and theology. Let's stipulate that a depressing number of our fellow citizens live in poverty or near poverty, rendering them vulnerable to all manner of woe, both self-wrought and beyond their control, including disparities in arbitrary talents and the hazards of an increasingly financialized market which leaves them socially isolated. Let's also stipulate economic inequalities, while not vicious in themselves (moral equality doesn't demand economic sameness), too often serve as proxies for a scandalous political inequality in a democratic rather than plutocratic society. Whatever one thinks about tax rates, means testing, or minimum wage laws, our best social

scientists have long told us that our political process alienates the poor. With secular thinkers like John Rawls, I agree that a democratic society cannot tolerate such inequality. No doubt, those are contested stipulations. But I want to focus on the second part of our title: American national priorities. This signals an interest in America as a *nation*, rather than simply as a state, a current political administration, or even public policy.

Institutions and public policies reveal the character of our nation. We are asking about the character itself, the republic for which it stands as I used to say in elementary school; that is, to name priorities. Priorities are things that merit attention before competing alternatives. We need to step back and think about the ends we seek as a nation and the means we are willing to use to achieve them. Priorities signal what a society cares about, what it takes to be the most important things, what it will tolerate and what it will not tolerate. National priorities, as I understand it, signal what we care about, what we value, or to use an Augustinian notion, what we love. What are the loves of our nation? Some progressive Christians condemn American priorities full stop: nothing is really theologically interesting about America, other than its many sins of individualism and secularism. We are at a low point our democratic social experiment. But I worry prophetic critique of consumerism, greed, and Congress is easy, by my lights. Something is wrong with our politics when a 38% tax rate is described as “social darwinism” and a 39% tax rate is called “socialism.” We certainly need religious critics: especially those who challenge not just our supposedly disenchanting world, but our joyless world of the pursuit of mammon. What is hard is working, or better yet, organizing to fulfill—here I risk platitude—the unfilled promise of American dreams of liberty *and* justice *for all*, without being hijacked by libertarianism or feel good philanthropic capitalism. In its most sublime moments, leaders like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed the commitments of our nation in terms of a shared identity

and equal fate, of common bonds of affection and purpose, or what has been called the “common good.” Goods held in common, constituted by relationships where none flourish until all flourish; such a political society allows us to perfect our moral natures in community with others, as both givers and receivers.

I don’t need to lecture this audience about the common good or the rich tradition of Catholic social teaching on poverty and “integral human development” (a tradition that the new Archbishop of Canterbury, and many American Protestants, cite as a major influence on their thinking). I don’t need to tell you about the many biblical admonitions against economic exploitation expressed in the “preferential option for the poor.” Indeed, historians of late antiquity now tell us that early Christians practically invented notions of care for the poor as a counter-cultural critique of Roman society. Christians were to be lovers of the poor, not lovers of the glory of Rome and its military dominance. Early Christians like Augustine offered a dramatic social imagination that claimed all people for the people of God. In recent decades, Catholic theologians (among others) have argued against pietistic and individualistic notions of charity that do not confront underlying structural causes of poverty. I suspect I also don’t need to emphasize how far we are from embodying these virtues or alternative economic models.

We live imperfect lives, just as early Christians did, and we should not have nostalgia for their economic systems or, I might add, some of their theologies of almsgiving that imagined commerce with a faceless poor as a way to salvation. This said, I think their ecclesial priority on poverty puts to shame the contemporary church in America preoccupied with abortion, same-sex relations, and its own moral failures. Imagine a world where poverty was debated with only half the intensity of homosexuality in America and the Catholic Church. Now, for many, especially Catholics, these too are properly seen as matters of social justice. And I agree some of the really

tough questions include the relation of these priorities to other goods and challenges: how do we do moral triage in a fallen world? How should we marshal our energy faced with overwhelming demands that tempt us to despair: climate change, war, debt, torture, racism, and sexism, just to name a few. All are linked to poverty. But should we combat poverty even if it lowers the GDP, or marginally risks our national defense? Or, a very difficult question that interests me, at least, is how to coordinate our obligations to the global poor, often at the edge of life and death, truly destitute, with whom we now have various economic relations, and the needs of our fellow citizens? If you are a utilitarian like my colleague and friend, Peter Singer, who also invokes Aquinas in his demanding notion of obligations to the poor who have rights against us, it doesn't make moral sense to donate to a homeless shelter in Roxbury; it may be too expensive relative to 25 cent water hydration tablets that do more good in developing countries. For many citizens, utilitarian calculators are the only way to think about priorities. I am afraid our President indulged this vision last week when speaking about pre-school education in Atlanta, he claimed that "hope is found in what works" (*New York Times*, A14, 2/15/13). These are big questions: the relation of global justice to social justice, of duties to persons to duties to institutions, of works of mercy to works of justice. And, of course, they raise fundamental questions about the relation between morality and other goods in life, not to mention, familiar issues raised by theodicy: why does a good God permit all this suffering in the world?

As an Augustinian, I am wary of revolutions and claims about newness. Things can always be worse. We should be attentive to what Reinhold Niebuhr called the ironies of American history in our efforts to combat poverty. But I think we do stand at a decisive moment in our nation's history, not to mention church history. Public conversation today, as in times past, needs to be replenished by deeper stories about our interconnectedness. We would do well to tap

into our religious vocabularies in breaking the spell of economic interests narrowly defined. We need more religion in public life, more religious conversation in public life, not less, in order to keep this conversation going.

Poverty is a tremendous political challenge, especially as politicians seek the coveted independent, middle class voter, confident in an American exceptionalism and self-reliance. Most of my students share a confidence in public-private partnerships which might combat unbridled capitalism; microfinance and social entrepreneurship are their buzz words, even as many go off to Wall Street, ostensibly to make enough money to help the poor later in life (especially their former poor undergraduate selves by giving to Princeton to support professors like me). Many of them think “God helps those who help themselves” is a basic New Testament passage; studies also show many Americans think Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. Both the right and left claim their policies help the poor. Yet critics of President Obama, on the left and the right, have worried he does not tell us what our republic stands for, at least in any way that might bind the wounds that ail our body politic. Much of this criticism has focused on questions about national security and the burdens of sacrifice, but his recent State of the Union address tried to evoke a sense of solidarity calling for “new ladders of opportunity to the middle class for all who are willing to climb them.” But, to my mind, he did so in a way that implied these ladders would not cost us much and can be built from the top down. I am not here to bash Obama, let alone praise Republican alternatives. Hilary Clinton was right to say that Obama can’t be MLK and LBJ at the same time. But few elites in our culture even utter the word poverty. Few politicians make it a priority. It is notable that Obama chose to speak of poverty after basically avoiding the word in his first campaign, though there might be a glimmer of consensus on equality of

opportunity. We should not fear party politics, or political compromises. But we should chasten its hold on our imagination for the possibilities of our common life.

Let me come to an end. Thinking about economic justice is not only an empirical issue. We *should* ask our best social scientists and economists to analyze our markets for their distortions, understand how this state of affairs was created, and study proposals and experiments in living from the left, right, and center. Consider, for example, the work of the MIT Poverty Action Lab just down the road from here. For the sake of our democracy, we should work to sponsor coalitions that might hold our politicians accountable for the poor. Such activity is a moral challenge, and for communities of faith, a profound spiritual challenge. For Christians, it is to take seriously the biblical ethic that we are not our own but Christ's, that we receive all we have as a loan, that we love God in loving our neighbor, that we find ourselves in care for others and being cared for by others, even as we should continue to distinguish the evangelical ethic of the church from the civil community in a just society.

We risk moralism in talking about poverty, pitting us against them, alienating the wealthy, or valorizing poverty with tales of sentimentality or priding ourselves in ways that risk reinforcing relationships of domination in our society. This is something Christians are particularly prone to do in their theologizing about suffering and charity. The poor become objects of our pity, we become nice and self-congratulatory, blinding us to our complicity in systems of injustice even when we are not direct agents of wrongdoing.

There is a long history. Christians have seen poverty as a religious ideal, as a punishment for wrongdoing, as central to our worship of God, and as peripheral. It has imagined the poor as beggars for charity and as plaintiffs for justice. Today, no more than 5 to 10 percent of religious

giving in the United States goes to charitable uses such as helping the poor. Augustine knew we would never find the kingdom of God this side of eternity; he counseled a spirituality for the long haul, sometimes resigned to a tragic world. His notion of original sin can tempt Christians to wallow in our shame, to mourn, and pray. But Christians shaped by his heirs, including many of my fellow Calvinists, also led the fight to end slavery and racial segregation, not to mention a host of innovative arrangements to relieve poverty, in their affirmations of a love that does justice to all who bear the image of God. They argued Jesus not only changes hearts, as George W. Bush famously declared, but focuses attention on the abused, the weak, the outsiders of history through concrete action, not abstract utopianism. Their actions, and your attendance here, inspire hope. Much depends on whether our generation can energize religious traditions to move beyond vague concern, paralyzing despair, or just mild guilt about the state of the world. Most Augustinians worry about pride; for every one of Obama's "yes we can," they mumble, "no we can't." We should remember the sin of sloth. I worry about my own sloth in not doing more to make poverty an American national priority. We should remember these are human structures, results of human choices. Nothing is as permanent as we think. They can be changed, even by sinners like us.