

David Aberbach
Given at the London School of Economics,
Department of International Development, March 4, 2015

‘Divine Scroungers: Scripture, legislation and the poor in Western literature’

The oxymoronic title, ‘divine scroungers’, refers both to the importance of the Bible in the history of development - that’s the ‘divine’ part - and, since the Middle Ages, the role of parliament in legislation on the poor - which is where the idea of the poor as scroungers comes in.

The background to development in the West until 1939 is largely defined by two sets of poor laws, with two, at times overlapping, but often-conflicting images of the poor: poor law in the Bible, mostly in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and Poor Law passed through parliamentary legislation, mostly from the early 16th century.

I am going to talk about how the uneasy relationship between biblical and parliamentary poor law is reflected in English literature, mainly in the time of Shakespeare, when the first secular legislation on the poor was codified, and in the time of Wordsworth and Dickens, when the Old Poor Law became unworkable as the Industrial Revolution transformed society: the population expanded, cities grew, and with the added pressure of war with France in the two decades before 1815, local parishes could not cope with the growing number of poor people needing help; and after 1815 there were the problems of returning veterans, of inflation, and of workers’ unrest. The result was the highly vilified New Poor Law of 1834, which was nevertheless the legislative antecedent of the welfare state from 1948 on.

As I say, biblical and parliamentary poor laws represent two conflicting pictures of the poor in the history of development in the West, both deeply rooted in Western culture from the Middle Ages. I believe these conflicting pictures are still with us in varying degrees, and will always be with us.

I will be talking mainly about England, the first country in the world to develop a secular legislation on the poor, paid for by taxation. This was in the late 16th century, at the same time as the growth of the first secular national theatre, close to this very spot in London.

However, in view of the largely theocratic nature of European governments prior to the French Revolution and the continued influence of the Church after 1789, what I have to say applies to other European countries as well, and might have more general application. I only recently joined the International Development department here and will stick mostly to the little I know. In the course of time, I hope to learn from many of you, colleagues and students alike.

First, let me amplify what I mean by the conflict in ‘divine scroungers’, by looking separately at biblical and parliamentary poor law:

Biblical Poor Law

1. First, biblical poor law. In the Bible, the poor in their suffering and humility are beloved of God. Their poverty could almost be described as their good fortune: they are closer to God and further from sin than the rich. The poor have various rights and privileges designed to limit the extent of their poverty. It is more to the rich man's benefit to give than to the poor man's benefit to receive. Not once in the Bible is the need of a poor person questioned. Nor is there even the ghost of a suspicion that a poor person may be an able-bodied faker and malingerer. The Bible nowhere suggests that charity might be abused, encouraging laziness among the working classes and an anti-work mentality, demoralizing them and making them useless to society, dependent on charity. In other words, there is none of the usual later legislative concerns.

Biblical poor law prior to the 20th century was familiar to most churchgoers but not today, so I will read out part of it:

‘If your brother becomes poor, you must support him as though he were a stranger or settler, and allow him to live with you. Take no interest from him, and you will fear the Lord, and your brother will live with you... If your brother becomes poor and is sold to you as a slave, you must let him go at the Jubilee’ (Leviticus 25:35f.).

‘Every three years you should pile one tenth of your harvest by the gate. And the Levite, as he has no land, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow shall come and eat and be satisfied... After six years, creditors must write off debts... there shall be no needy person among you... you must not be hard-hearted and tight-fisted, but lend your poor brother what he needs. Don't let the mean thought cross your mind that the seventh year is near, don't be stingy; you must not give your brother nothing. He will cry against you to God, and you will have a sin. You must give him, and don't feel bad when you do because God will bless you in everything you do. For the poor shall never cease from the land. Therefore I command you: open your hand to your brother, to your poor in your land’ (Deuteronomy 14:28-15:11).

‘No man may take millstones as a pledge, for he takes the man's source of livelihood... When you lend something to your fellow man you must not enter his house to take his pledge. You must stand outside and the man will fetch the pledge out to you. And if he is poor and gives his garment as a pledge, you must not keep the garment overnight. You must return the garment before sunset so that he can sleep in it, and he will bless you, and it will be righteousness (*tzedakah*) before the Lord your God’ (Deuteronomy 24:6, 10-13) .

Uniquely in ancient literature, in the Bible the poor are *loved*. As it is a righteous deed to help the poor, the poor person is actually performing a useful service in being poor. The poetry in the Hebrew Bible, especially the Psalms and the prophets, follows the legislative spirit, but with poetic passion, for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. In the Book of Isaiah, for example, justice to society's unfortunates is demanded.

Woe to those who make bad laws,
who write injustice
to twist law from the poor,
rob them of their rights –

widows their prey, orphans their spoil!

Give your bread to the hungry.
Take the poor into your home.
Clothe the naked.
Don't ignore them, your own flesh.
Then your light will break as the dawn.
Your healing will be quick.

Passages such as these were frequently cited and recited over the ages by parish priests, reminding their congregations of their duty to the poor. Wordsworth, writing at the start of the Industrial Revolution, reminds us how deeply embedded was respect for the poor and the sense of spiritual elevation through charity. In his description of an old Cumberland beggar, the poet describes almsgiving as a source of well-being, and an emotional need for the givers:

Him from my childhood have I known, and then
He was so old, he seems not older now;
He travels on, a solitary man,
So helpless in appearance, that for him
The sauntering horseman-traveller does not throw
With careless hands his alms upon the ground,
But stops, that he may safely lodge the coin
Within the old man's hat; nor quits him so,
But still when he has given the horse the rein
Towards the aged beggar turns a look,
Sidelong and half-reverted. She who tends
The toll gate, when in summer at her door
She turns her wheel, if on the road she sees

The aged beggar coming, quits her work,
And lifts the latch for him that he may pass.
The post-boy when his rattling wheels o'ertake
The aged beggar, in the woody lane,
Shouts to him from behind, and, if perchance
The old man does not change his course, the boy
Turns with less noisy wheels to the road-side,
And passes gently by, without a curse
Upon his lips, or anger at his heart.

This Christianity in action must have been the norm in many parts of England until Wordsworth's day. In its high valuation of the poor Christian Scripture follows the Hebrew Bible, but is even more uncompromising in its low view of the rich. Jesus, following the Hebrew Book of Proverbs (11:16), links wealth with ruthlessness and sin: 'it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven' (Matthew 18: 24); the rich have cause to weep the curse of wealth (James 5: 1-3); and in the story of the poor man, Lazarus, and the rich man who neglects him, it is Lazarus who in the World to Come is welcomed to 'Abraham's bosom' while the rich man suffers the torments of hell (Luke 16).

Perhaps the classic literary illustration of the elevated view of the poor in Christian tradition is the Bishop in *Les Misérables*, who persists in seeing Jean Valjean, the convict who has just emerged from 19 years in jail, as man capable of higher achievement and spiritual greatness, precisely because he is among the poor. And, of course, it turns out that the Bishop is right.

In the Jewish tradition, the superiority of the poor man over the rich man is affirmed in Yiddish schnorrer jokes, which Freud was so fond of telling, in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. A schnorrer is a species of beggar, and in one of the best-known schnorrer jokes, set in Paris over a century ago, a schnorrer tries countless times to see Rothschild. Finally he stands outside Rothschild's mansion and screams, "My family is starving to death and Rothschild refuses to see me!" Finally Rothschild tells his servants to let the man in. He gives the schnorrer thirty francs. "Here you are, and let me tell you that if you hadn't created such a scene I would have given you sixty francs." The schnorrer replies: "My dear Baron, I don't give you advice about banking, so you don't give me advice about schnorring."

The schnorrer would appear to be Rothschild's superior: Rothschild can only give him money, he can give Rothschild a place in the World to Come! This joke reflects a sociological reality in Jewish culture and history - the high value attached to the poor in Scripture, tradition and custom. The Hebrew Bible reverses the generally low status of the poor in the ancient world by associating poverty with holiness: in the poor law in Deuteronomy, chapter 14, the poor - the widow and orphan, the lowest elements of society - are grouped with the Levites, the elite spiritual leaders of the people: through them all God is sanctified.

To stress the divine imperative of charity, the poor law in the Book of Deuteronomy is in Jewish custom since ancient times read publicly on the final day of the three pilgrim festivals, on Passover and Pentecost and especially on Tabernacles, when in an agricultural society a reminder of poor law was needed as the winter season was approaching. The sanctity of charity is stressed even further on the pilgrim festivals in the custom - following the final exhortation in the reading from Deuteronomy (16: 17), to give to the poor, 'Each as he is able, as the Lord's blessing allows you to give' - to have the Memorial Day (*Yizkor*) for the dead on the last day of each of the three festivals, when the poor law is recited, as the best way to remember dead loved ones is by giving charity.

A technical detail might be added: Deuteronomic poor law has the highest concentration of Hebrew double verbs in the Bible: for example, instead of the word '*titen*' - you shall give (to the poor), the Hebrew has '*naton titen*' - you shall surely give. This surely emphasizes the imperative of giving, which was literally a matter of life and death. The urgency of biblical poor law was heightened even further in the dramatic conditions in which this passage was publicly read in ancient times: by the High Priest or king in the Temple in Jerusalem in the presence of huge numbers of pilgrims both from within the land of Israel and from the diaspora.

The result was a raising of the status of the poor: in one Talmudic legend the Messiah is depicted as a beggar at the gates of Rome awaiting the divine call to redeem the world. In other words, any beggar could be the Messiah - a belief which became part of Jewish folklore until the 20th century - it is alluded to in Ansky's play, *The Dybbuk*, written during World War I - and helps to account

in modern times for the attraction of socialism to many assimilated Jews who had lost faith in their religion.

Contrast this high valuation of the poor with the generally disdainful attitude to the poor in the Roman Empire, in which wealth and status were valued most. Biblical compassion toward the poor was perhaps the most basic reason for the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the largest slave society in history, until the Empire became Christian in the 4th century CE. At that point, Roman law incorporated Christian poor law: until then, the Roman historian David Daube points out, ‘The have-nots, the vast majority of citizens, were right out of it’ (Daube 1969: 72). The Christianization of the Roman Empire totally transformed attitudes toward the poor, writes Aneliese Parkin:

‘No one [in the pagan Roman Empire] claimed to love the destitute until the rise of Christianity as a power in the late empire, when patronage of the poor became an ideological and political force’ (Parkin 2006: 68).

So, to sum up the effect of biblical poor law on European civilization: The divine fiat in Jewish and Christian Scripture rang through the ages, in the pulpits and at home, to narrow the gap between rich and poor, and to preserve human dignity, with the view unique in ancient civilization of the equality in God’s eyes of all human beings - created ‘in God’s image’.

Parliamentary Poor Law

2. Now let’s turn to secular parliamentary Poor Law, starting mainly from the 16th century: here, in contrast with the Bible, the poor are, at times, an object of suspicion, resentment and fear; often they are treated as lazy able-bodied scroungers who must be made to work. In *Oliver Twist*, written in the years after the New Poor Act of 1834, when hundreds of workhouses were being built in England, Charles Dickens satirizes the jaundiced view of the poor as scroungers, living idly on public funds in the comfortable workhouse:

‘...the poor people liked it! It was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar Elysium, where it was all play and no work. “Oho!” said the board, looking very knowing: “we are the fellows to set this to rights; we’ll stop it all, in no time.” So, they established the rule, that all the poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. With this view, they contracted with the water-works to lay on an unlimited supply of water; and with a corn-factor to supply periodically small quantities of oatmeal; and issued three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays. They made a great many other wise and human regulations, having reference to the ladies, which it is not necessary to repeat; kindly undertook to divorce poor married people, in consequence of the great expense of a suit in Doctors’ Commons; and, instead of compelling a man to support his family, as they had hitherto done, took his family away from him, and made him a bachelor! There is no saying how many applicants for relief, under these last two heads, might have started up in all classes of society, if it had not been coupled with the workhouse; but the board were long-headed men, and had provided for this difficulty. The relief was inseparable from the workhouse and the gruel; and that frightened people’ (ch. 2).

This most un-Christian disdain for the poor – on the part of Church officials, too! - seems to have spread among the European middle and upper classes in the late Middle Ages, particularly when the poor, afflicted by war, crop failure, famine, disease, taxation and unemployment, abandoned their land and wandered in search of help.

In the growing capitalist Europe of the late Middle Ages, the ideology of Scripture at times buckled under economic realities. The Hundred Years War (1337-1453), followed in England by civil war (the War of the Roses, 1455-1485), was a time of economic disruption, food shortages, famine, epidemics, and high taxation. By the early 16th century, many parishes, overwhelmed, were unable to care effectively for their poor, and there were widespread beggar riots in Europe, including England.

As the gap between rich and poor widened, the rich were disinclined to see the poor as their equals, created ‘in God’s image’: how could they be urged, as in the gospels of Matthew (19: 21), Mark (10:21) and Luke (18: 22), to sell all they had to give to the poor as a sign of faith in Jesus Christ? The early 16th century poor were seen as a threat to European society. They were no longer the beloved of Jesus - ‘Christ’s paupers’ among the ‘Communion of Saints’. Their poverty was no longer the image of the savior on the cross. One feels at times that the transition from a Church-based theocratic society to a modern rational - at times Machiavellian - secular state required a total transformation of the biblical view of the poor as beloved of God: a pauper is a pauper, not the agent of messianic redemption; his needs must be taken into account only insofar as he poses a threat; charity is nothing more than an expedient, perhaps even cynical, payoff, to keep the poor quiet, certainly not to encourage them to achieve higher things.

The development of parliamentary Poor Law in Elizabethan England coincided with an exceptionally vile image of the poor. Newly-created grammar schools taught the children that the poor were ‘crooked, reprehensible, ignorant, venal, homeless and mean-spirited’ - they would do best by killing themselves. An entire literary genre emerged in the 16th century whose purpose was to unmask fake beggars; one of the best-known of these was the *Liber Vagatorum* (Book of Vagabonds, 1510). In mystery plays of the period, almsgiving was extolled while the poor were ridiculed; this ridicule was even echoed by humanists, though humanism respected the individual. ‘The Poor People’s Complaint’, a popular ballad of 1585, laments the lack of sympathy for the poor in desperate need of charity:

We ask it for God’s sake, but none will come near us.
We crave it for Christ’s sake, yet no man will hear us.

Neglect of the poor can occasionally be glimpsed in Shakespeare’s plays, despite censorship, for example in *King Lear* and *Coriolanus*, and I will talk more about this a little later.

So here we have a paradox: a European culture built on Scripture which teaches to love the poor, with an expedient secular legislation expressing resentment, fear, a desire to control and manipulate and suppress the poor! There is some overlapping of biblical poor law and parliamentary poor law - parliamentary poor law in effect endorsed the parish system of tithes - but the two sets of laws come from different worlds: biblical poor law from the largely agricultural society in ancient Israel, moving from paganism to a monotheist creed; and

parliamentary poor law from Europe in the process of being transformed from a medieval Christian continent to modern secular state-based societies. Biblical poor law responds to the plight of the poor; parliamentary poor law responds to public opinion and budgets, to the forces creating modern society: social change, the effects of war, the late medieval voyages of discovery, secular learning and the growth of science, growing urbanization and secularization of government as the Reformation spread.

The Reformation brought about a desacralization of poverty and charity. Yet, in an agricultural society, parliamentary Poor Law was still hallowed by biblical custom, which was so deeply engrained in English life that poets could refer to it with great subtlety, yet be understood by illiterate peasants.

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which dates from the same time as the Poor Law of 1598, the shepherd Silvius expresses his love for the shepherdess Phebe in agricultural imagery taken from Leviticus 19: 9-10:

So holy and so perfect is my love,
And I in such a poverty of grace,
That I shall think it a most plenteous crop
To glean the broken ears after the man
That the main harvest reaps. Loose now and then
A scatt'ered smile, and that I'll live upon.

III v 99-104

The agricultural laws of Leviticus seem an unlikely source for Shakespearean love poetry. Yet, in a Bible-based, predominantly agricultural society, most people would have been familiar with these laws from Church:

'When you reap, do not cut the corner of your field, nor gather the ears of corn which drop at the time of reaping. Do not pick the leftover grapes, nor gather the grapes which fall at picking-time. Leave them for the poor and the stranger' (Leviticus 19:9-10).

Shakespeare's audience, especially those who lived in the countryside where famine was frequent, included beneficiaries of the laws of gleaning. Certainly they would have known the story of Ruth, the classic biblical illustration of the agricultural laws in action.

And so, biblical poor law idealizes and dignifies the poor and elevates the act of giving into a divine act. Parliamentary poor law reacts to actual circumstance, to the fact that the problems of the poor at times spiralled out of control and were a potential menace to society. Biblical poor law is consecration; parliamentary poor law is rationalization and regulation.

I would like to suggest that English writers, especially those writing in times of heated parliamentary debate about welfare, such as Shakespeare and Wordsworth, try, in effect, to undo the negative image of the poor. Writers generally, not just in England, tend to share the biblical spirit of sympathy and are critical of parliamentary legislation on the poor. Literary responses to

the poor appear to be particularly impassioned in moments of severe national threat and upheaval, when the fate of the country is in the balance and the poor are at the centre of parliamentary debate: this is especially clear in the age of Shakespeare, when the so-called Old Poor Law was codified, and in the age of Wordsworth, when the Old Poor Law became unworkable after the advent of the Industrial Revolution. The three outstanding moments in English history in the last 500 years when the country faced invasion, from Spain in the 1590s, France in the 1790s, and Germany in the early 1940s, were also moments when parliament was most intensely concerned with devising a better way of dealing with poverty and the poor.

Shakespeare

King Lear (c. 1606), written in the early years of the Elizabethan poor law, when English poverty and vagabondage were rampant, represents a humanistic peak in its story of a king who, like Job, loses everything to rediscover his true moral role and divine authority among his poorest subjects: 'I have ta'en / Too little care of this'. This can be seen as the core of Shakespeare, speaking for and to the first truly national theatre audience in history - consisting mostly of poor largely illiterate workers (the 'groundlings') - and the most direct challenge in all English literature to the axiom of the divine right of kings, while indirectly affirming the biblical elevation of charity and the love of the poor.

In fact, as Shakespeare must have known, the more frequently heard clamor of medieval and early modern European parishes - foreshadowing more recent national and local governments, alarmed by deficits and alleged abuse of welfare - was that they were taking *too much* care of the poor; they were discouraging initiative and enterprise, letting the poor take advantage of Christian love and wilfully remain poor - at parish expense. Poor Tom of Bedlam and the handful of other poor creatures on the blasted heath in *Lear* are hardly going to break the exchequer. What of whole teeming fields of poor folk escaping famine or plague, begging Christian charity in underfunded parishes, and at times violently attacking local people? This was the reality in much of 16th century Europe, especially in the 1520s and 1530s, a time of dislocation and migrancy, beggar revolts and seething religious conflict. Poor Law was passed in panic, with limited effectiveness, with the aim of reinforcing deference and subordination in a troubled time.

Neglect of the poor can occasionally be glimpsed in Shakespeare's plays, despite censorship, for example in *King Lear* and *Coriolanus*. Elizabethan and Jacobean theater came to maturity in the age of Shakespeare, during the protracted war with Spain and threat of invasion (1585-1604), when theatre could be defended as a vehicle for patriotism and national unity - including the common people.

Government legislation in the Poor Law of 1598 and 1601 aimed to control the growing number of poor people in the realm, and theatre for the first time became a medium in which even the poor could occasionally see the truth about themselves, in their suffering, want, and exploitation. Population growth led to inflation, and the 1590s were particularly a time of misery and migration from rural to urban centers, particularly London. In the century prior to *Hamlet* (1600), the price of grain in England went up six times while wages increased only three times (the same trend was found elsewhere in Europe); and whereas London in the 1590s is estimated to have had twelve times as many beggars as it had in the early years of Henry VIII, its population rose only four times during this period (Lis and Soly 1979: 72, 78). The wars against Spain and Ireland

were paid for by increasing the tax rate. Harvests failed in 1595-8, and there was famine in the north of England and in parts of the south. By this time, poverty was 'top of the agenda' of the Elizabethan parliament (Slack 1988: 126). Shakespeare's audience would have recognized these conditions in his plays of the late 1590s. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo remarks to the starving apothecary who risks his life selling poison in his desperation:

Art thou so bare and full of wretchedness,
And fear'st to die? Famine is in thy cheeks,
Need and oppression starveth in thy eyes,
Contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back.

(V i)

A Midsummer Night's Dream vividly portrays the effects of famine, in Titania's attack on Oberon's evil magic:

The ox hath therefore stretch't his yoke in vain,
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted, ere his youth attain'd a beard:
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock,
The nine men's morris is fill'd up with mud;
And the quaint mazes, in the wanton green,
For lack of tread, are undistinguishable:
The human mortals want their winter here;
No night is now with hymn or carol blest...

(II i 93-102)

In these hard times, the Poor Law of 1598 and 1601 became 'the centre-piece of Elizabethan social policy' (Hindle 2000: 153). By 1600, London's population reached about 200,000 (*ibid.*, 41); but the civil parish of rural England consequently became a microcosm of state authority. Legislative recognition of state obligation to the poor is perhaps reflected in *King Lear* (1606). On the heath, Lear becomes aware for the first time of the 'poor naked wretches', a large part of his kingdom. Now no better than they - perhaps worse, being unaccustomed to life as a 'bare, fork'd animal' - he enters their lives in his fall to their level, a true king, ironically, when he gives up the crown. Life at the court is petty and artificial alongside the naked poor exposed to the elements, abandoned by their sovereign, in a state of nature. Now, one among the poor, Lear is exposed to his failure as king. He acknowledges as few rulers do his unfulfilled duties to the poor. From now on, Lear speaks with new wisdom and compassion, admitting that ancient and infirm though he is, he cannot shirk his divinely-appointed tasks. There is also the implicit irony that the king, speaking of Christian charity to a wholly Christian audience, is a pagan king in a pre-Christian age. His compassionate outpouring is human rather than specifically Christian:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en

Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the Heavens more just.

(III iv 28-36)

Lear's fall into poverty makes him, in the short time left to him, a king of truth, justice and compassion. His newly-discovered feeling for the poor opens the way for his reconciliation with his daughter Cordelia, the embodiment of love.

Yet, much pre-modern literature on the poor tends to have a temporary, conditional, exceptional quality: a true Christian king might express the compassion of Lear, but in fact there is only one, pagan Lear. Charity and moral responsibility should be adhered to by monarchs with allegedly divine sanction. For the most part, Shakespeare's kings and queens have little concern for the masses whom they rule.

The question of state responsibility for the poor figures prominently in the opening of *Coriolanus* (c. 1608), a scene which those who remembered the 1590s would have recognized in their own lives: a society brought down by famine and war. The Romans are desperate with hunger. Menenius, a nobleman, insists that the state cares for its people, which a citizen angrily rebuts. By putting the criticism in the vanished Roman era, Shakespeare slips in a critique of his own age, with its failures to deal effectively with the needs of the poor:

'Care for us? True, indeed! They ne'er cared for us yet: suffer us to famish, and their storehouses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there's all the love they bear us' (I.i. 75-81).

Wordsworth

In the age of Wordsworth, nearly 200 years after Shakespeare, the English poor could claim, as in *Coriolanus*, that they were abandoned by their rulers. But not by their poets. Wordsworth could be described as the first modern poet of the poor, a poet of rural beggars and indigents, inspiring later English writers, including Clare, Dickens and Orwell, who reacted strongly against the humiliation suffered by the poor and aimed through their writings to narrow the gap between rich and poor.

The Bible is a primary source of Wordsworth's outraged reply (not published in his lifetime) to the Bishop of Llandaff who in an anti-revolutionary sermon in 1793 argued that the gap between the rich and the poor was natural. Wordsworth, then (at 23) a radical, insisted instead that, as he put it, 'the extremes of poverty and riches have a necessary tendency to corrupt the human heart', and the consequent necessity for 'a system of universal representation' and 'the suffrage of every individual'; he went further: a society's failure to reduce the gap between rich and poor justified revolution such as that in France.

Though the poor everywhere were badly housed and fed, the rural North of England, which Wordsworth knew best, was less vulnerable to extremes of poverty than the South. Northern industrial towns created jobs for the poor in the nearby countryside and kept wages up.

Wordsworth was strongly aware, however, that war with France was economically disastrous to the poor: between 1793 and 1813 prices doubled; there were food riots from 1795-1801; and the General Enclosures Act of 1801, limiting public land to which the poor had access, worsened their conditions. Wartime shortages led to increased claims for relief. Parishes were hard pressed in the face of large-scale opposition by taxpayers. In 1798, as conditions worsened, the clergyman Thomas Malthus published his *Essay on Population*, arguing that population increase meant an increase in hunger.

In the same year, 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*, which is partly a reaction to the social inequities, privations and anxieties of the age. For Wordsworth, the period 1795-1797, when he lived in the West Country, was the crucial period in his artistic development: it was then that he decided to be a poet rather than a mathematician. During these years, Wordsworth became a poet of the suffering poor, perhaps the first in Western poetry: the mad mother, the distraught sailor, Simon Lee, Goody Blake, Alice Fell, the old Cumberland beggar, forsaken women, convicts, vagrants, and outcasts, and many others, reflect popular concern in the 1790s over the increasing numbers of poor people. The poet watched the price of staples, of oats, bread and potatoes, rise dangerously. His letters describe the wretched poverty and ignorance of the country people and the inadequacies of the old system of parish relief.

In 'The Old Cumberland Beggar,' begun in 1796-7, Wordsworth presents the poor as a vital part of society, an incentive to goodness. From the poet's childhood, the beggar is familiar, a solitary wanderer rousing charitable feelings among those who know him. Wordsworth is not here celebrating sentimentally the life of the open road, but rather giving a deeply Christian response to the divine in the impoverished individual. The small vital acts of charity and love, forming a unique bond between beggar and society, are undermined by legislation. The Poor Laws, in Wordsworth's view, deprived the poor of dignity and the better-off of opportunities to fulfil the biblical charitable ideal. To Wordsworth, true charity lies in personal relations - not the workhouse or soup-kitchen. He was well-aware of the dark, dirty, crowded conditions of many workhouses, such as those depicted by Crabbe in *The Village* (1783). Government, Wordsworth observes scathingly in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', regarded the poor as a trouble to society to be swept away with a broom into the workhouse or the grave. Wordsworth defends the beggar against the charge of uselessness:

... deem not this Man useless – Statesmen! ye
Who are so restless in your wisdom, ye
Who have a broom still ready in your hands
To rid the world of nuisances; ye proud,
Heart-swoln, while in your pride ye contemplate
Your talents, power, or wisdom, deem him not
A burthen of the earth!

I think it is no accident that Wordsworth emerged as a champion of the poor precisely in the years of parliamentary debate over poor relief. I believe something similar is going on in Shakespeare, for Shakespeare also wrote at a time of severe economic and military crisis, a time of extended parliamentary debate about what should be done. Two peaks of English poetry associated with two peaks of parliamentary legislation, the so-called Old Poor Law and the New Poor Law.

Conclusion

As I began with one paradox, of ‘divine scroungers’, I will end with another: that biblical poor law is determined to end poverty - ‘there shall be no needy person among you’ - while at the same time admitting that ‘the poor shall never cease from the land’: no poor law will ever solve the problem of poverty entirely. And in fact, theocratic states, for all their high valuation of the poor, tend not to provide for the poor as well as secular capitalist states, which humiliate the poor by questioning their legitimacy and subject them to means tests. In other words, a poor person would generally do better as a ‘scrounger’ in a capitalist state than ‘divine’ in a theocratic state. It may well be that in the time of the Bible, scriptural poor law worked, probably better than any other ancient system of aid for the poor. But in an age of capitalism, international trade, secularization, incessant war and population upheaval, it had to give way to parliamentary Poor Law.

For all its faults and cynical elements, parliamentary Poor Law generally worked until the Industrial Revolution. Elizabethan Poor Law of 1598 and 1601 was among the most effective prior to modern times; and at the very least it put an end to large-scale famine - in contrast with other European countries, including pre-Revolutionary France. Despite substantial differences in various regions, writes Dorothy Marshall (1982: 78), ‘Many people lived out their lives near to subsistence level with only the Poor Law, stretched like a safety net, to save them from starvation in old age or illness’.

Yet, as we see in many developing countries today, and even at times in developed countries, when the state fails the poor, the Church discovers a renewed sense of purpose, and biblical poor law in its compassion and reverence for the poor takes on renewed significance.

References

Daube, David (1969) *Roman Law: Linguistic, Social and Philosophical Aspects*. Edinburgh University Press.

Hindle, Steve (2000) *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c. 1550-1640*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Marshall, Dorothy (1982) *Industrial England 1776-1851*. London: Routledge & Regan Paul.

Lis, Catharina and Hugo Soly (1979) *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe*. Hassocks: Harvester Press.

Parkin, Aneliese (2006) “‘You do him no service’: an exploration of pagan almsgiving” in M. Atkins and R. Osborne (eds.) *Poverty in the Roman World*. Cambridge University Press.

Slack, Paul (1988) *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England*. London: Longman.