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Abstract: The notion of the 'holy poor' ceased to figure significantly in the literature of most developed countries after World War II but continues to resonate in countries where poverty is widespread and the Church has grown. This paper explores 1. the origins of the 'holy poor' in the Hebrew Bible, and its consequent betrayals and survivals; 2. the discrepancy between the image of the poor in English Poor Law and English literature from Shakespeare to Orwell; and 3. the continuing relevance of Scripture to literature on the poor in post-1945 developing countries, in Nigeria (Achebe), South Africa (Coetzee), Egypt (Mahfouz), and Brazil (Lispector).

The historical origins of the notion of the 'holy poor' are found particularly in the 6th century BCE kingdom of Judah, whose class structure was shattered by defeat by Babylonia and exile to Mesopotamia, and the entire nation was impoverished. The suspension of the State for most of the 6th century, the collapse of class identities, leaving poverty an overriding common denominator, defining the nation, fatefully spurred the editorial growth of the Hebrew Bible: 'The Book', an anthology of twenty-four books written at different times and for different purposes, most of

which (unlike later monotheist Scripture) were not originally written to be preserved as sacred texts but became so at an unknown point by integration within the canon. Through the Bible, monotheism evolved as an international community of faith, independent of territory, and particularly welcoming to the poor. The Bible stresses the entitlement of the poor - above all, the categories of slave, orphan, widow, and stranger, as well as the infirm and aged - for aid or sympathetic consideration from those better-off, more as a sacred privilege than an obligation. The biblical view of the poor is unique compared to later systems of welfare: there are none of the usual European legislative concerns, under pressures of capitalism and industrialization. The poor as a class are never accused of criminality or suspected of deceit, nor are they subject to means tests. On the contrary, being humbled by poverty and uncorrupted by wealth, they represent hope in a world broken by empires. The unambiguous biblical love for the poor was contested in rabbinic literature and virtually abandoned in medieval Poor Law legislation, which, in its focus on the 'undeserving', the 'sturdy beggars' and frauds, degraded the poor into a nuisance and a threat, and a drain on public resources. Up to a point, literature follows legislation in portraying the poor as immoral and threatening, but from the 16th century - most especially after the New Poor Law of 1834 - it tends to maintain sympathy with the poor, often openly (as in the case of Wordsworth and Dickens) in opposition to Poor Law; it exposes serious inadequacies in the treatment of the poor as an implicit betrayal of the biblical elevation of the poor. In England, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* , Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, and George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, reflect stations in what is often treated as a calvary of Poor Law. In post-1945 developing countries, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Nigeria), Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K*. (South Africa), Mahfouz's *The Harafish* (Egypt), and Lispector's *The Hour of the Star* (Brazil) bring out various forms of identification with Scripture that the West has largely forgotten - though central to its history.

Scholarship on development has little on the portrayal of poverty in fiction, poetry, and drama, and the depiction of the poor as a general subject has been relatively neglected in literary studies.[1] The crucial influence of the Bible on perceptions of the poor, either for emulation or rejection, is often overlooked: in the literature on development, attention to the Bible is largely confined to liberation theologians such as Gutiérrez;[2] literary scholars (notably Auerbach in *Mimesis*) can write of the representation of reality in Western literature without reference to the biblical view of poverty and its influences; Polanyi, in his discussion of Poor Law and the market economy in *The Great Transformation* (1944), omits mention of the Bible and its far more powerful critique of potentially harmful effects to human nature of

[1] In support of the study of literature for insight into development, see Lewis *et al*. (2008) and Aberbach (2013); and on literature and poverty in individual countries, see for example Jones (2008), Howden-Chapman and Kawachi (2006), Herman (2001), Freedman (1999), and Smith (1980). For changing views on inequality and meanings of poverty, see Atkinson (2015), Milanovic (2015), Wallerstein (2013), Scott (2012), Sachs (2005, 2009), Hazell (2009), Beier and Ocobock (2008), Chari and Corbridge (2008), Frohman (2008), Grusky and Kanbur (2006), Herman (2001), Allen and Thomas (2000), de Soto (2000), Sen (1980, 1999), Slack (1988, 1998), Carroll (1996), Jütte (1994), Mollat (1986), Himmelfarb (1984), Price (1981).

[2] 'In the Bible poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God' (Gutiérrez 1988: 165). Liberation theologians emphasize the fact that the early followers of Jesus - all, like Jesus, observant Jews - were fiercely loyal to the saintly biblical image of the poor, especially as described in the prophets. Deeply embedded in pre-modern Western civilization is the image of the 'suffering servant' in Isaiah, interpreted as a prophecy of the crucifixion and an affirmation of Church commitment to the poor: '…he bore our sickness, suffered our pain. He was the victim of our sins. We were healed because he suffered...' (Isaiah 53: 3-4). The image of Jesus as symbol of the poor is described memorably by the 17th century clergymen-poets, John Donne - 'through Thy poor birth, where first Thou/ Glorifi'st poverty' ('A Litany' xviii) - and George Herbert: 'Man is God's image; but a poor man is/ Christ's stamp to boot' (*The Church Porch* 64). On the idea of the poor as 'God's emissaries' in Christian society, see Braudel (1994: 327).

excessive zeal for trade at the expense of values;[3] Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (1999) has nothing on the Bible or the poor, though his stress on justice in promoting self-respect derives in large measure from biblical ethics relating to the poor;[4] Wallerstein (2011, 2011a), in his account of the growth of the world-economy from 1600 to the 1840s, has practically nothing on the Bible. National identity in the Bible is associated with poverty, the memory of slavery in Egypt and the high value of freedom, recalled particularly in the Passover festival;[5] though the story of the exodus inspired many liberation movements, including the

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[3] In the most detailed account of international trade in the Bible (Ezekiel ch. 27), of the Phoenician city of Tyre prior to its destruction by Babylonia (c. 600 BCE), wealth gained for its own sake is associated with moral failure, pride and arrogance, violence and corruption. Marx in his Paris Notebook of 1844 describes poverty as a moral advantage: 'the passive bond which allows man to feel the greatest wealth - the *other* man - as need' (Marx 1994: 82). This idea - essentially a secular form of 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' (Leviticus 19: 18) - is often found in literature, in the book of Ruth or *King Lear*, for example, or Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea* (1797): '*denn nur im Elend erkennt man/ Gottes hand und Finger, der gute Menschen zum Guten/ Leitet*' (only in misfortune do we see God's hand lead good men to goodness) (ii 51-3). Perhaps the most famous example in literature is Bienvenu's act of charity to the desperate Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, in which the greatest wealth is, indeed, to do good to others, and Valjeans consequent success as a factory owner allows him to do good in return.

[4] *Mishpat* (justice) and associated Hebrew words with the same root, appear over 400 times in the Bible; law in the Bible applies equally to rich and poor alike, but is notable in its defence of the poor, who are at a disadvantage against the rich and powerful (e.g. Psalms 10: 18; Proverbs 31: 9; Jeremiah 22: 16). This is an essential difference between the Bible and European Poor Law which, to a large extent, aims to defend the rich against the poor: 'In the midst of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the state and ecclesiastical authorities of Europe engineered poverty from a state of holiness and reverence to one of disease and disorder managed through a blend of charity and repression' (Beier and Ocobock 2008: 9).

[5] Although Egypt is remembered in the Bible as a 'house of slavery' (Exodus 13: 13), some of the closest parallels to biblical laws on the poor are found in Egyptian literature of around the 7th-6th century BCE, which warns against robbing the poor, the oppressed and disabled; against encroaching upon the property of the widow; and which recommends debt relief of two thirds and tolerance for the widow gleaning in the field (Pritchard 2011: 246ff., 352). The Bible does not regard high morality as exclusive to monotheist faith, nor that this faith is a guarantee of high morality.

American War of Independence, Isaiah Berlin in *Four Essays on Liberty* has no mention of the Hebrew Bible.

Yet, the Bible is the *fons et origo* of the moral elevation of the poor in Western and much Eastern civilization, and in all countries which adopted the Bible as Scripture. It is unique in the ancient world in its conception of charity as a religious obligation,[6] and its unambiguous sympathy and love for the 'holy poor'. Much European literature, and the literature of developing countries, which condemn inequality and seek redress for the injustices done to them, trace their genealogy to the ancient prophetic literature of social protest, kept alive in the Judaeo-Christian tradition: '… medieval and modern arguments in favor of the "rights of the poor" are based on the teachings of the Scriptures.'[7] Even as secular education grew as part of the modern state after 1789, the Bible and its humanitarian precepts and laws remained for many Europeans the blueprint of life; and much European literature was true to the spirit of biblical equality, justice and compassion. Until the Industrial Revolution, and even after, biblical agricultural laws were widely observed, mainly in the system of tithes, and in the principle of the entitlement of the poor to aid; though perhaps the most valuable gift of the Hebrew Bible to the poor is the Fourth Commandment, to keep the Sabbath.[8] The Bible was in effect the Bill of Rights of the poor, who consequently had an interest in maintaining their rights and dignity granted by divine authority; the upper classes and governments less so, especially after Scriptural influence began to wane in the late Middle Ages. The Bible stands out in seeing poverty from the

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[6] Penslar (2001: 90).

[7] Geremek (1994: 245). The illiberalism of the Hebrew Bible – its condemnation of idolators and adulterers, Sabbath-violators, thieves, homosexuals, urban victims of rape, witches, greedy materialists, children who curse their parents, and various other categories - judgements which secular liberal societies tend to reject - is generally overweighed in developing countries by its liberalism toward the poor, its emphasis on justice and kindness to the poor. Symptomatic of the affront to the dignity of the poor in developing countries is the fact that since 1945 the Bible has grown there in influence and diminished in the more economically successful countries.

[8] Even the atheist French revolutionary and Soviet governments were unable to ban the Sabbath.

viewpoint of the poor;[9] it is partly for this reason that writers and artists have found in the Bible such a rich source of inspiration. The Bible can be said to belong to the poor who - consistently and uncannily awestruck, entranced and delighted by the same texts in the hundreds of languages in which the original Hebrew was translated from the ancient world to the present - were more loyal to the Bible than the rich. For the working class, the Hebrew Bible in translation - the 'Old Testament' in Christian tradition - contained 'the kingdom within, which the Powers of the World could not touch. [… In the Old Testament they found] an allegory of their own tribulations'.[10] Post-1789 political systems and ideas, however secular and even atheist, which defend the poor and aim to improve their lives - Jacobinism, Babouvism, Blanquism, Saint-Simonism, Fourierism, Chartism, Socialism, Marxism, and others - have precedents in the Hebrew Bible.

The 'holy poor' in the Hebrew Bible

The picture of the poor and poverty in the Hebrew Bible is fundamentally different from that in most cultures and countries that adopted the Bible as sacred Scripture. The poor in the Bible have an aura of holiness and moral purity, while later cultures are often critical of the poor; lip service is paid to the notion of the 'holy poor', but the poor tend to be maltreated and suspected of being a threat to society. Much literature in societies nominally Christian, Muslim or Jewish, sets the low status of the poor ironically against their Scriptural elevation.[11] The Bible seeks to make

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[9] For examples of first-person declarations of poverty in the Hebrew Bible, see Psalms (9: 1; 25: 16; 69: 30; 88: 10, 16); Job (30: 16, 27); Lamentations (3: 1).

[10] Thompson (2013: 55, 431).

[11] See, for example, Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and Hugo's *Les Misérables*, both of which set religious ideals of charity in England and France respectively against the sordid realities of Poor Law and the workhouse. In literature on the Jewish and Muslim poor, a similar tendency is found among some writers, e.g. Mendele Mocher Sefarim, the leading Jewish novelist of the half-century prior to 1917 (Aberbach 1993b), and Mahfouz who, in works such as *The Harafish*, exposes the gulf between Islamic ideals and the corrupt realities in the treatment of the poor. On the view of poverty in the Abrahamic religions see, for example, Taylor (2000), Bonner (2003), and Sacks (2005).

poverty history - 'There shall be no needy person among you' (Deuteronomy 15: 4); yet in some ways its view of poverty and the poor is, *faute de mieux*, singularly favorable. The ungodly may be 'imprisoned by poverty', but poverty for the faithful is liberation: a furnace burning away immorality as a crucible purifies silver of dross.[12] Poverty brings the poor closer to God, to a state of holiness, in contrast with the rich who are often morally corrupt, their wealth a cause of harm. The poor are fortunately denied the accumulation of wealth for its own sake, which impoverishes the moral spiritual life - ultimately the richer, more satisfying existence. The poor are fortunate, too, in being further from sin than the rich who are prone to arrogance, corruption, and idolatry, leading to national defeat and exile. The poor in the Bible are, in effect, the salvation of the entire society, including the rich, who are otherwise doomed by the moral taint of their wealth. The power of the rich is fleeting; the sufferings of the poor will be rewarded. Poverty is no shame; neither can charity be excessive. It is more to the rich man's benefit to give than to the poor man's benefit to receive. Charity in the Bible is *imitatio dei*: God deals justly with the widow and orphan, seeks freedom for slaves, and loves the stranger, providing him with bread and clothes (Deuteronomy 10: 18); humans should do the

[12] Psalms 107: 10; Isaiah 48: 10. The editorial perspective of the Hebrew Bible may be gauged in its vocabulary: in the entire Bible, covering a period of at least 500 years, there are only four references to markets (Proverbs 7: 8; Ecclesiastes 12: 4, 5; Song of Songs 3: 2) - in none of which is anything bought or sold - and over a hundred references to holiness, including a dozen to the people of Israel as a whole, e.g. 'a kingdom of priests and a holy people' (Exodus 19: 6). No one in the Bible is ever urged to *buy* anything - only to *be* something better. Many different crafts and trades appear in the description of the building of the Tabernacle in the book of Exodus, but this highly specialized work is done voluntarily; we never encounter a client who commissions work for a fee. To seek wealth for its own sake is regarded as a mortal sickness, with Samaria (Amos ch. 6) and Tyre (Ezekiel ch. 27) two examples: formerly rich, now destroyed. These ideas have continued to the modern period. Kipling wrote of the British Empire at the height of its power and wealth, that an empire neglectful of its ideals and moral obligations was doomed: 'all our pomp of yesterday/ Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!' ('Recessional', 1897).

same.[13] No one owns anything permanently.[14] Land must not be sold in perpetuity, 'for the land is Mine and you are strangers and sojourners with me'.[15] In the Hebrew Bible, God is never described as God of the rich but 'fortress of the poor' and 'father of orphans and judge of widows', personally attending to their needs.[16] The poor 'rejoice in the Holy One of Israel' (Isaiah 29: 19) - never the rich. This is Scriptural reality in all monotheist faiths, and it has had enduring fascination, not just among the poor who naturally seek a more equitable distribution of wealth but also among many others who accept the need to narrow the gap between rich and poor. Perhaps the main precedent set by the Bible for secular Western legislation and literature on the poor is that they are *entitled* to aid from those better off.[17] The Bible for centuries affected customs and policies toward the poor in agricultural societies: it was not unusual for landowners to leave a portion of their crops for the

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[13] On charity as an attribute of God, see also the Psalms (132: 15; 145: 15, 16).

[14] The biblical view that 'The earth is the Lord's' (Psalm 24: 1) is taken up by John Locke in the *Two Treatises of Government*: land propriety does not give the owner authority except by 'the Consent of the poor Man, who preferr'd being his Subject to starving' (i 43; also see ii 27f.). Locke opposes enclosures on these grounds: if consent is needed to enjoy the benefit of common land, a man can starve 'notwithstanding the Plenty God had given him' (ii 28).

[15] Psalms 24: 1; Leviticus 25: 23. The Children of Israel, once freed from slavery, can never again be enslaved, for they are 'owned' by God (Leviticus 25: 55). Marx distorts this verse in *Capital*, with reference to the proletariat enslaved by capital: 'Just as it was written upon the brow of the chosen people that they were Jehovah's property, so does the division of labour brand the manufacturing worker as the property of capital' (1934 i 382). In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx describes the process of modern economic woes as the holy becoming profaned (*alles Heilige wird entweiht*), recalling prophetic diatribes (e.g. Amos 2: 7, Zephaniah 3: 4, Ezekiel 22: 26). Atheist socialism, in Marx's imagination, is the restoration of the holy.

[16] Psalms 9: 10; 25: 9, 16-18; 68: 6; 132: 15; 146: 7.

[17] Some thinkers on modern development, notably Amartya Sen (1980, 1999), regard entitlement as the central problem of poverty. The literature on poverty illumines Sen's distinctions in the character of poverty in the past as opposed to now: in the past, food was lacking, now the poor cannot buy it; in the past, poverty was defined by the vagaries of nature; now by inequality.

poor, and the tithes paid to the parish priests, partly to be distributed to the poor, followed biblical law.[18] In European agricultural society, biblical custom was so deeply engrained that poets could refer to it with great subtlety, yet be understood by illiterates.[19] The poor have tended to love the Bible, as the Bible loves them, in striking contrast with European Poor Law.

Why are there no deceitful poor in the Bible?

Why does the Bible not conceive of a deceitful poor person, or poverty associated in any way with crime? Why does the Bible have no examples of abuse of laws relating to the poor, or criticism of the poor, as in virtually all other legal systems, including the Mishna, the first systematic code of Jewish law? In the Bible, the poor

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[18] See, for example, Marshall (1982: 74) and Loyn (1986: 255, 256).

[19] In *As You Like It*, which dates from the same time as the English Poor Law of 1598, Shakespeare alludes to biblical love of the poor in his use of agricultural imagery taken from the laws in the book of Leviticus to describe the love felt by the shepherd Silvius for the shepherdess Phebe:

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'red smile, and that I'll live upon.
(III v 99-104)

have clearly defined rights and privileges limiting the extent of their poverty.[20] Not once in the Bible are the needs of the poor questioned, nor as a class are they associated with wrongdoing of any kind. There are no feckless 'undeserving' poor in the Bible; the poor are 'deserving', no questions asked. Nor is there even the ghost of a suspicion of fraud and law-breaking among the poor, of the poor as sociopaths, able-bodied fakers, malingerers, 'welfare scroungers' and chronic parasites who attach themselves selfishly to a community and drain it. The absence of fakery in poor law presented as extending at least over a half-millennium - from Moses to Ezra - is the biblical equivalent of the dog that does not bark in the night. What accounts for the unusually sympathetic view of the poor in the Bible?

[20] Biblical laws on the poor are simple and clear, evidently the fruit of centuries of harsh experience: good government above all, based on justice, with kindness and good-neighborliness on the local level; observance of the agricultural laws (Leviticus 19:9-10, Deuteronomy 14:28-15:11), tithes and charity, the Sabbath, *Shemitah* - i.e. abstinence from working the land on the seventh year (Exodus 23: 10-11), the produce being left to the poor; and the *Yovel* (Jubilee), every fiftieth year (the seventh seventh year) when slaves were freed, debts were waived, and land reverted to its original owner (Leviticus 25: 39f.). The laws never changed, for they were sanctified by divine authority and their inclusion in Holy Scripture which, nevertheless, by emphasizing a history of chronic transgressions of the nominally monotheist kingdoms, does not arouse confidence that the laws were uniformly and consistently observed. Defeat and exile are often blamed on injustices perpetrated against the poor. On the immoral behavior and punishment of the rich, see, for example, Isaiah 5: 8-9; Jeremiah 5: 27-9; Micah 2: 2; 3: 2-3. Still, in moments of defeat and exile - in the late 8th century BCE and the early 6th century BCE - which the prophets interpret as punishment for national sin, rich and poor alike are accused of collective guilt (e.g. Isaiah 9: 16; Jeremiah 5: 3-5; 6: 13). Even taken as an exaggeration, the prophetic denunciation of a people steeped in idolatry, in every town, under every tree (Jeremiah 2: 20, 28), must have been directed mostly against the poor; yet the poor as a class are not blamed, whereas the rich are blamed, as is the nation as a whole.

A number of factors seem to be involved:

1. Recurrent defeats of the monotheist states over many centuries (in 721 BCE, 597 BCE, 586 BCE, 70 CE and 135 CE) are linked to the evolution of the Bible, its composition, editing, preservation and canonization, much of which took place in periods of exile and recovery when, in the absence of territorial sovereignty, the power of the Word to ensure national survival was greatest. For most of the 6th century BCE, the State survived as a memory. In a world turned upside down, exile and its economic consequences hit all classes. As recorded in the Hebrew Bible, the disaster of defeat and exile was national, and economically had a levelling effect; many of the rich became poor and, indeed, the powerful elite were the first to be exiled to Babylonia, in 597 BCE in the time of King Jehoiachin (II Kings 24: 14). In the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations (traditionally attributed to the prophet Jeremiah), the entire nation - princes and priests, women and children, rich and poor, young and old - shares the suffering and humiliation.

Great and small will die in this land.
They will not be buried, nor mourned.
(Jeremiah 16: 6)

It seems that at least part of the surviving upper class, strangers in a hostile land, in reduced circumstances, were allied to prophets and former priests such as Ezekiel, in the determination to preserve much of what later entered the biblical canon.[21] Normally, writes Orwell, 'The poor do not praise poverty.'[22] The Bible is different. The sensitivity of the Bible to the poor might reflect the fact that poverty was, at least in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the kingdom of Judah, a national condition. Even before, the nation was 'afflicted and poor' (Zephaniah 3: 12), and certainly

[21] A modern parallel might be found in Mickiewicz's epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), written in exile in Paris after the failed Polish revolt against tsarist Russia in 1830, and whose immediate readership was the exiled Polish aristocracy in Paris.

[22] In 'W.B. Yeats' (1943) (Orwell 1984: 238).

afterwards.[23] The Judeans for most of the 6th century BCE had no functioning monarchy, priesthood, Temple, and army; its landowning class and craftsmen were depleted and uprooted; though conditions changed with time, a substantial number of the exiles were enslaved and put to forced labor (II Chronicles 36: 20); and the nation, branded with 'the disgrace of hunger' (Ezekiel 36: 30), could be defined by its poverty.[24] In the book of Haggai (1: 6), one of the last prophetic works, dating from the late 6th century, poverty is endemic:

You sow much and harvest little.
You eat but not enough.
Your drink doesn't get you drunk.
Your clothes don't warm you.
And the money you earn
runs through the holes in your purse.

[23] On the historical background of the biblical prophetic era (c. 750-500 BCE), see Aberbach (1993a). The memory of the 6th century trauma of the impoverishment of the Judean upper classes was preserved in Scripture and prayer; in the fast days commemorating the destruction of the Jewish state (the book of Lamentations being customarily read on the Ninth of Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple); and perhaps also in the custom of secret charities for wealthy individuals who have fallen on hard times, recalling the Second Temple office for secret charity (*lishkat chasha'im*) (Mishna *Shekalim* 5: 6), and in the tradition that the Messiah would be disguised as a poor man or beggar (see Zachariah 9: 9; Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 98a).

[24] Allusions to national disgrace appear dozens of times in the Bible (e.g. Psalms 44: 14; 79: 4; 89: 42, 51), but 'disgrace of hunger' (*herpat ra'av*) only once (Ezekiel 36: 30). The Hebrew root for 'disgrace' here, *herpah*, is the same as the roots for 'to curse' (*le-haref*) and 'winter' (*horef*), suggesting not just physical debilitation but also a feeling of being cursed amid wintry alienation in exile. The memory of extreme degradation is preserved in the Bible: rich and poor alike were evidently reduced to cannibalism. See Lamentations 2: 20; Leviticus 26: 29; and especially Deuteronomy 28: 53-57.

Theological reasons for the national disaster were not hard to find, and the Bible is practically a charge sheet against the unholy people of the Holy Land - but not against the poor. In exile, the urgent need for national unity was impressed further upon the Babylonian Jews through their recognition that the exiles of their fallen sister kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE, destroyed by the Assyrians, were unlikely ever to return to the land of Israel; most had evidently assimilated in Mesopotamia.[25] Wisdom dawned when all other alternatives were exhausted by national defeat and exile. The depopulation of both kingdoms might have had the effect, as after similar disasters in other periods (notably the Black Death of the mid-14th century), of raising the status of the survivors, including the poor. The Hebrew Bible evolved as a tool of national survival, in the knowledge that the fate of the Israelites - to become 'lost tribes' - might befall the Judeans too. To preserve national unity it was best to avoid or downplay social conflict, which could weaken the chances of national survival and return from exile.[26] As poverty was a national condition, and the prophets held the entire nation responsible for the punishment of exile, there was no point in attaching specific blame to the poor for their poverty or singling out those who in their distress might have turned to theft or deceit; the agricultural laws had in

[25] The poverty of the exiles is alluded to in imagery of stolen or failed harvests: 'You will sow your seed in vain, and your enemies will eat the produce' (Leviticus 33: 16; see also Deuteronomy 28: 33, 38-40). 'I will hedge your ways with thorns' (Hosea 2: 8). The prophets identify a more profound poverty in the spiritual life, a 'hunger not for bread, a thirst not for water' (Amos 8: 11), and vulnerability to assimilation within the attractive dominant world of idolatry; recently-discovered Mesopotamian documents pertaining to the exiles shows nothing, apart from their names, that identifies them as Jews (Pearce and Wunsch 2014).

[26] The Bible was on one level an attempt to unite culturally two politically defunct kingdoms which, for the duration of their existence, were ceaselessly at war with one another. In their ideal collective religious identity, symbolized by the Tabernacle, they are united: the chief craftsmen are Bezalel of the tribe of Judah in the South and Oholiab of the tribe of Dan in the far North (Exodus 35: 30-35). The Bible in effect joins fragments of their cultures to create a collective memory of their past. The basis of this unity is a monotheist faith betrayed by both kingdoms, but viable once the kingdoms were destroyed. The Assyrians, though idolatrous villains, are described as 'the rod of [God's] wrath' (Isaiah 10: 50); and the Babylonians and Persians, too, carry out God's will; these empires give the Bible its imagery of an empire of faith, based not on war and plunder but on justice and lovingkindness (Aberbach 1993a).

any case lost much of their practical application in exile.[27] To the contrary, love of the poor was equivalent to love of the nation, and commitment to its survival.[28] The poor, in the prophetic view, *were* the nation:

Why do you oppress my people,
And grind the faces of the poor?
(Isaiah 3: 15)

2. The revolt of the kingdom of Judah against Babylonia in 587 BCE, leading to the destruction of the State, was to a large extent, a revolt of the common people (the Hebrew *dalat ha'am* might be translated 'the poor of the people') - the middle and upper classes had been exiled a decade earlier.[29] Much of the Hebrew Bible was

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[27] As the Hebrew Bible was edited in the hope of a return of diaspora Jews to the land of Israel, its accounts of laws pertaining to the poor would have reminded the exiles that the laws were still valid and would protect them should they return. There is irony in the fact that intense concern with welfare often seems to occur, perhaps naturally, when least affordable - e.g. in Germany after World War I, or England after World War II. Generosity toward the poor in the Hebrew Bible was especially needed in conditions of exile, when laws on the poor - especially those relating to agriculture, tithes, and the Temple in Jerusalem - had lapsed, or were no longer fully enforceable, when exile could be interpreted as punishment for maltreatment of the poor and generosity toward them as a necessary condition for the return from exile. Even so, the survival of Holy Land-based poor laws in Scripture, even as mere symbols of divinely-ordained good will toward the poor, had huge influence in later times in societies that accepted the authority of Scripture.

[28] The notion of the love of the poor as a higher form of love is not unlike Adam Smith's idea of self-love as akin to the love of God, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759): 'It is not the love of our neighbours, it is not the love of mankind, which upon many occasions prompts us to the practice of these divine virtues. It is a stronger love, a more powerful affection which generally takes place upon such occasions, the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur and dignity, and superiority of our own characters' (III iii 4).

[29] II Kings 24: 14f. Some of the poor 'who had nothing' were reportedly allowed to stay after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BCE (Jeremiah 39: 10; 52: 16). According to II Chronicles (36: 20), Nebuchadrezzar 'exiled the survivors of the sword to Babylonia where they were slaves to him and his sons until the Persian kingdom [i.e. until 539 BCE].'

edited by and for the exiled survivors of this revolt and their descendants. The Hebrew Bible evolved for use mostly by the common people, preserving memorably the world they had lost. It seems to contradict the assumption, as Marx puts it in 'The German Ideology' (1845), that 'In every epoch the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas, that is, the class that is the dominant *material* power of society is at the same time its dominant *intellectual* power'.[30] In Jewish life, the 'ruling class' was to an unusual extent the religious leaders and teachers, and the Bible was read (or heard) and preserved mostly by the poor.

3. From the viewpoint of the faithful among the impoverished exiles, divine punishment was inflicted not just on their own nominally monotheist kingdoms of Israel and Judah but also on the Mesopotamian empires that had defeated, exiled and enslaved them: Assyria was destroyed by Babylonia in 612 BCE, and Babylonia, in turn, by Persia, in 539 BCE. An exiled Judean of eighty who lived to hear of Cyrus' Edict of Return of 538 BCE, giving the exiles the legal right to return to their homes, would have lived through the fall of the two most powerful empires the world had yet seen, the inventors of the very idea of imperialism. As a child, he might have heard the prophet Nahum rejoice at the fall of the Assyrian capital, Nineveh, in 612 BCE:

All who hear of it clap hands in glee…
for over whom did your evil scourge not pass?
(Nahum 3: 19)

He would have lived to see Cyrus, like earlier conquerors the 'anointed' agent of the divine hand in history, this time bringing justice and charity:

If the sky rains justice
and the earth flowers with charity,
with fruit of victory,
I, God, make all this.
(Isaiah 45: 8)

[30] Marx (1994: 145).

The Mesopotamian empires that had destroyed the monotheist kingdoms were gone forever, but the slaves of the mighty had survived. The prophets were no longer marginal figures, driven away as Amos was, or imprisoned like Jeremiah, but national spiritual teachers whose prophecies were part of holy Scripture, for their consistent message of warning and hope seemed to fit and make sense of the extraordinary twists of history. Particularly at this moment of renewal, when 'those who sow in tears reap in joy' (Psalms 126: 5), poverty amid justice seemed preferable to wealth amid corruption, the poor were favored as the 'saving remnant' of the nation, being on a higher moral level than the rich: the prophet is anointed 'to bring the poor good news' (Isaiah 61: 1).[31] The measure of a society is the treatment of the poor and the unfortunate, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. To a people whose surviving aristocracy and wealthy classes had become impoverished, this was a teaching of national encouragement and hope. Exile would soon end, and the joy and music of marriage celebrations be heard: '… again will be heard in the towns of Judah and the markets of Jerusalem the sound of rejoicing and happiness, the voice of groom and bride.'[32] In these historical circumstances, the sacred texts emerged as a new marriage contract, a new covenant, absolutely binding. In the minds of the prophets, the poor, not the rich, were the hope of the nation and of humankind.

4. The editing of the Hebrew Bible (as opposed to the writing of the individual books in the Bible) was linked, both in the biblical and talmudic eras, to the national hope of return from exile.[33] Social chaos, national guilt and longing for a just world appear in the following lines from the book of Isaiah (ch. 59), dating from the time of the Babylonian exile in the late-6th century BCE:

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[31] This passage is quoted by Jesus at the start of his ministry (Luke 4: 17f.).

[32] See Jeremiah 7: 34; 16: 9; 25: 10; 33: 11. The words from Jeremiah are customarily sung at Jewish weddings.

[33] In the Babylonian Talmud (*Berakhot* 8a), God declares that charitable deeds, together with Torah study and prayer, redeem Israel - and God too - from exile.

Far from justice and righteousness
we search for light, but all is dark
and we walk in shadows
like a blind man groping his way by a wall…
we seek justice in vain,
salvation, but it is far away.

For our sins are many and clear to you.
They speak against us and we know them.
Justice is turned away.
Righteousness stands afar
and truth stumbles in the open…

To blame the poor in such catastrophic circumstances was impossible. The land was ruined, the Temple destroyed, class differences were at least temporarily obliterated by exile and poverty. The focus for blame in the Bible is idolatry and moral corruption (in which the ruling class, the priesthood and the rich are worse offenders than the poor). Atonement, as taught by the Five Books of Moses and the prophets, was possible only by observing the Law. The hope of redemption from exile lies in charity and good deeds to the poor. The noblest prospect of freedom to be won, the worthiest form of government, involves putting the poor first. The poor are *needed* - to regain the divine light of love: the hungry to be fed, the naked to be clothed, the captives to be freed; to break the chains of wickedness and re-establish justice: 'Arise, shine, for thy light is come' (Isaiah 60: 1).[34]

[34] Isaiah ch. 56, denouncing fast days and calling for charity to the poor instead, is read, of all days, on Yom Kippur in the synagogue service.

The betrayal of the poor in Poor Law and literature

In its subversion of the social order, the Bible is 'a highly incendiary document' - 'political dynamite'.[35] It turns the social structure on its head, creating a champagne glass of salvation of which the pious poor have the most and the impious rich have the least, the first are last and the last first. The difficulty of maintaining biblical ideals as capitalism and the secular state grew was itself an incentive to question Scripture and pull down its holy image of the poor. Practically every society for which records have survived, mainly from the Middle Ages onward, but also in the ancient world, uses the language of doubt and contempt in questioning the legitimacy of the poor, attempting to expose their fakery, with the aim of reducing poor rates. Much cultural history presents the poor in a negative light. Though biblical laws on the poor and parliamentary Poor Law overlap, the two sets of laws belong to different worlds: unlike parliamentary laws, which came from fallible human beings, subject to error, correction and change, biblical laws on the poor were believed to come directly from God, and therefore perfect, timeless and unchanging. Biblical laws applied to the largely agricultural society in ancient Israel, moving fitfully from paganism to a monotheist creed; whereas parliamentary Poor Law was legislated as medieval Europe was violently reshaped from a Christian feudal continent into modern secular state-based societies. Biblical law responds to the plight of the poor; governmental Poor Law, 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, urbanization, population growth, and secularization of government as the Reformation spread. In economic crisis, the poor were seen less as a biblical blessing than a curse, a frightful bogey-man, or an albatross of parish dependence, tainted with immorality, burdening taxpayers with self-inflicted evils. Poor Law, harsh and punitive, was designed to shame the poor and make them work. The emerging secular state, which legislated against the poor, could only nominally, if at all, retain the ideal of unambiguous Christian love and charity. Poor Law was in fact a hard-nosed response to political and economic realities.

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[35] Hobsbawm (2001: 270); Brewer (1977: 51).

Friedrich Nietzsche, son of a Lutheran minister, might be seen as the philosophical high priest of an extreme form of Poor Law rationalization. Nietzsche applied a distorted Social Darwinist notion of 'survival of the fittest' to morality and its Judaeo-Christian 'evolution'. He attacked biblical morality, taking the 'Protestant ethic' to an extremity whose twisted logic is prophetic of Nazism: Judaeo-Christianity is the triumph of weak over strong, slave over master, decadence over nobility, mediocrity over greatness, self-hatred over manliness. Nietzsche believed that love and compassion, charity and pity, are tyrannies which bring destruction and death; morality is corruption, socialism is retrograde, wisdom is self-interest, democracy is degeneration, charity is stupid, fair is foul.[36] The devaluation of the poor and weak in Nietzsche's philosophy was already inherent in European culture, in ancient Greece and Rome and in centuries of Poor Law.

Poor Law tends to divorce itself from the biblical image of the poor - often while hypocritically leaning on Scriptural authority. The wealthy aristocratic minorities dominating European trade, politics and culture did not want to be told by the Church that the despised and abject poor, not they, would inherit the kingdom of heaven. The rich fought their biblical image. Why should they see the poor as their equals, created 'in God's image'? Why should the bottom of the pyramid be better than the top? How could they be urged, as in the gospels of Matthew (19: 21), Mark (10:21) and Luke (18: 22), to risk perishing in righteousness and give all they had to the poor as a sign of faith in Jesus Christ?[37] Was it not insulting for them to be associated in

[36] On Nietzsche's views on the allegedly corrupting influences of Judaeo-Christianity, see *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *On the Geneaology of Morals* (1887), and *The Antichrist* (1888).

[37] In Oscar Wilde's story, 'The Happy Prince', the prince follows Christian teachings by giving up everything to help the poor: 'sacrifice is close to suicide' (Ellmann 1987: 410). The prince, though, is an exception. The rich, Oscar Wilde quipped famously in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 'know the price of everything and the value of nothing.'

their 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);[38] to have cause to weep the curse of wealth (James 5: 1-3); to be told that they, unlike the poor, were to be denied 'Abraham's bosom' and suffer the torments of hell (Luke 16)?[39]

Much European literature, evidently starting in medieval Arabic and spreading throughout Europe, concerns fraudulent beggary.[40] From the 13th century, but especially after 1348, the European poor were seen as an urgent problem; from 1350-1500 their numbers rose steeply, with consequent fear of popular revolts; by the 16th

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[38] Christian denigration of wealth, though offset by Protestantism, is central in literature. In Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (ch. 31), Jesus is described as the father of socialism, a 'class-conscious working man… union carpenter…. agitator, law-breaker, firebrand, anarchist'. There is a literary tradition of attacks on the worship of money and possessions, e.g. Ben Jonson, *Volpone*; Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzzlewit*; Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*; Emile Zola, *Money*; William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*; Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (see Kahan 2010).

[39] A common assumption in gospel-based Evangelical Christianity is that 'the rich were in greater spiritual danger than the poor, more subject to temptations and so more liable to damnation' (Hilton 1988: 102-03). John Wesley and other Evangelical Christians followed the Bible in associating wealth with a decline in faith. Even enlightened secularists as different as Robespierre and Marx saw poverty as morally superior to wealth. The rise of capitalism seemed to undermine the view of the superiority of the poor. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber observes that the medieval glorification of apostolic poverty, though true to the biblical spirit, was an obstacle to capitalism. Protestantism on one level represented an attempt to justify the attainment of wealth not for its own sake but in a calling, accidentally, as a sign of divine blessing and a responsibility to do good. The growth of capitalism diminished the importance of personal charity to the poor - even a rich man would have only limited ability to help those in need - and enhanced the importance of public charity, a point made by Spinoza (*Ethics* iv, Appendix xvii), writing in the leading financial center of the 17th century; the inability of most people to offer real help to the poor, and that therefore they should not feel guilty, is elaborated a century later by Smith (*Theory of Moral Sentiments* III iii 9, 18) - again, in the leading financial center of the time.

[40] See Geremek (1987: 195-210; 1994: 51-2), Freedman (1999: 64, 140, 289, 292), Farmer (2002: 11, 89) and Hitchcock (2004). On unfavorable images of peasants, see Freedman (1999: 133-173). The obsession with fraudulent beggars in Poor Law is contrary to the biblical spirit: there are no beggars in the Hebrew Bible, nor even a Hebrew word for beggars and begging. The closest expression is to 'seek bread' (Psalms 37: 25; 109: 10).

century the harsh view of the poor was increasingly enshrined in Poor Law. These changes are reflected in literature and popular culture: Chrétien de Troyes, in *Yvain* (12th century), and the anonymous author of *Aucassin et Nicolette* depict peasants in grotesque bestial imagery; the 13th century poet, Rutebeuf, similarly, mocks the poor and the blind of Paris; sermons, fabliaux, and medieval carnival plays often make fun of the peasants; the poems of Neidhart (early 13th century, but popular until the 16th century) also mock the peasants. The poor man is accursed in *The Romance of the Rose*: 'Anything poor, wherever it may be, is always shamed and despised. Cursed be the hour in which a poor man was conceived, for he will never be well fed, well clothed, nor well shod; he is neither loved nor advanced in fortune' (1995: 37). Similarly, Chaucer starts his Man of Law's tale (late 14th century) with a prologue declaring that poverty is no sacred virtue but a shameful misfortune, to be scorned and hated: 'O hateful harm, condicion of poverte!'[41] The wise man is skeptical of gospel 'truth' that poverty is the gateway to the Kingdom of Heaven; instead, 'Bet is to dyen than have indigence' and 'Alle the dayes of povre men been wikke' (stanza 3). In the 15th century, French and German literature are generally hostile to the peasant. The leading medieval French poets, Eustace Deschamps and François Villon distrust and vilify the poor. The German poem 'Edelmanslehre' recommends robbing and murdering them. Deschamps' contempt for the poor and his appeals for their repression are 'the literary equivalent of the judicial measures being taken

[41] Orwell chose this as the epigraph to *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). Chaucer's late-14th century contemporary, William Langland, author of *Piers Ploughman*, stands out for the empathy and quizzical insight bred of his own lowly birth and poverty and the strength of his religious faith; yet, Langland also makes frequent attacks on the many types of allegedly 'undeserving' poor.

with regard to beggars',[42] an insight applicable to the entire literary genre of 'false beggars' as the cultural arm of European Poor Law, breaking radically with Scripture.

By the early 16th century, beggary was widespread, a 'social plague', the 'chief evil' of the age.[43] The years 1527-1534 saw harvest failures and famine. Hunger drove the masses to violence: in Spain (1520-1), the Netherlands (1520-35), Germany and England (1525-6), and France (1529). Systematic legislation dealing with alms and the poor - often lasting over two centuries - was forced though in dozens of European towns; and in the decade or so after 1530, several countries reformed their Poor Law: the Netherlands (1531), England (1531/6), France (1534), Scotland (1535), and Spain (1541).[44] Much Poor Law was passed in panic, with limited effectiveness,[45] less for the benefit of the poor than to control and police their movements, and force them into low-paid work. Poor Law was aimed to protect the ruling elites, to reinforce deference and

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[42] Geremek (1987: 199). In Poland, Geremek observes (1994: 194), the struggle to root beggary out first appears in 15th century literature.

[43] See Pirenne (1958: 530) and Geremek (1994: 190).

[44] On Poor Law legislation in the early 16th century, see Lis and Soly 1979: 87-8, 92). For a time-chart of poor relief reforms from the 15th to the 18th century, see Jütte (1994: 201-03). Most were passed in the 16th century. The crisis of the migrant poor in the 16th century was linked to the growth of towns – by 1600 Europe had twelve towns with over 100,000 people (Lis and Soly 1979: 53): the hungry poor in depressed agricultural areas gravitated for aid to the towns, which were forced to decide on policy toward them. In these circumstances, the Bible was not a pragmatic guide.

[45] Ironically, in the late medieval period, Europe saw itself as the 'poor neighbour' to countries which in the 20th century were looked upon as the backward 'Third World' - including India, China, and Black Africa - but at the time of the Reformation promised untold riches, inspiring the first European voyages of discovery (Arnold 1983: 7).

subordination in a time of unrest and revolt.[46] From the 16th century, the state was increasingly forced to accept the role of redistributor of wealth and defined by its power and obligation to provide for and control the poor.[47] The Reformation, insofar as it promoted separation of Church and State, tended to desacralize poverty and charity. Literature suggests a correlation between the failures of government - often resulting from war, corruption, or incompetence - and blame of the poor. A whole literature emerged whose purpose was to unmask false beggars: a notable example was the *Liber Vagatorum* (Book of Vagabonds, 1510), whose German edition (1528) had an introduction by Luther. There is little Scriptural authority for the assault on pauperism in the teachings of Luther and especially Calvin.

Cervantes' picaresque novel, *Don Quixote* (1606) and John Gay's satire, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) include notable portrayals of the poor as lazy vagrants, rogues, tricksters, and fakes. Seventeenth-century writers, including John Donne, and Thomas Hobbes, follow the denigratory thrust of Poor Law in distinguishing between the 'deserving' productive poor and the 'undeserving' idle

[46] On Poor Law as an instrument of containment of the disorderly poor, see Beier (1983: 16, 36) and Wrightson (1982: 181). In Hill's view (1980: 119), the prolonged depression of the 1520s and 1530s, together with Poor Law, flogging and houses of correction, broke the spirit of the poor.

[47] On changes in the role of the state in the 16th century, see Nelson (2010: ch. 2).

poor.[48] Robert Burton, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), contests with erudition and, at times, overwhelming passion the biblical elevation of the poor. He draws mainly on classical sources (e.g. Horace, Seneca, Juvenal, Lucan) but also biblical ones to show 'filthy poverty' in the worst possible light.

From Shakespeare to Dickens: literature vs. Poor Law

At every stage in the development of English Poor Law, from its parliamentary codification in the Elizabethan age until its abolition in 1929, literature tends to reject the ugly images of the poor inculcated by Poor Law and popular opinion, in favor of a sympathy for the poor closely allied to biblical ideals and owing an incalculable debt to the entry into mainstream culture of the Bible in translation, particularly the King James version (1611). In the early years of the so-called Old Poor Law (1598, 1601), Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1603?) stands out in depicting extreme conditions of the poor, exposed to the elements in a freezing hovel in a storm, suggesting an answer not in revolution but better monarchic governance. In its unflinching

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[48] In a sermon of May 8, 1628, Donne spoke of the poor as the naked suffering image of Christ, but then recalled the gist of Poor Law in language drawing on Scripture but having no shred of Scriptural justification: charity given to an able-bodied man dissipated in drink, idleness, and unbelief, is 'to give the children's bread to dogs' (Donne 1954: 76-7). Hobbes, in *Leviathan* (1651), accepts the distinction between the idle and the productive poor, and insists - this is during the time of the English civil war - that only civil war is worse than beggars. The solution to unemployment is emigration. In reply to the question what will happen when the world fills up and resources are scarce? Hobbes gives a characteristically grim answer: 'the last remedy of all is war; which provideth for every man, by victory, or death' (Part 2, ch. 30, par. 19). Defoe was similarly unsympathetic to the poor. In his pamphlet, 'Giving Alms, no Charity' (1704), addressed to Parliament, Defoe criticizes charity as an encouragement to a life of vagrancy and dependence, creating a mass of 'clamoring, unemployed, unprovided for poor people, who make the nation uneasy, burden the rich, clog our parishes' (1704: 9). In Ireland, Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' (1729), the most infamous satire in English, purported to 'solve', through the legalization of cannibalism, chronic Irish poverty and infant mortality. Swift's 'solution' to Irish poverty was a savage mockery of mercantile rationalization devoid of Scriptural compassion.

portrait of the conditions of the poor and the injustices to which they are subject, *King Lear* recalls the book of Job. Job, whose cruel punishment by God leads his comforters to suspect - foreshadowing Calvinist attitudes to economic failure two millennia later - that he must have sinned, insists in his defence that poverty is the human condition, not a punishment for sin, nor an 'iron law that chains the will of God'. In a rare passage in pre-modern literature describing the reality of hunger, lack of shelter, and despair, Job declares that the poor, like himself, are abandoned by God without cause:

The poor come out of hiding
to scavenge the dry land for their young.
They reap in fields not theirs.
They glean in the vineyards of the wicked.
They lie all night naked, exposed to the cold.
Drenched by mountain rain,
they hug the rock for shelter…

Starved, they clutch at the sheaves,
squeeze oil from terraced olive trees.
In thirst they tread the grapes.
The dying groan in town, the sick cry for help,
but God is deaf to them…
(24: 2-8, 10-12)[49]

King Lear dates from a time when English poverty and vagabondage were rampant. It 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' (III iv 32-3).[50] This is the heart

[49] On the Job motif in King Lear, see Aberbach (1979). Job can be read as a corrective to the idea of the 'holy poor': for Job is wealthy but righteous, and he uses his wealth to help the poor (29: 16; 31: 13-20).

[50] On the unique representation of poverty in *King Lear*, see Carroll (1996).

and soul of Shakespeare, speaking mostly to poor largely illiterate workers (the 'groundlings'), and the most direct challenge in English literature to the axiom of the divine right of kings. *King Lear* emphasizes instead the divine obligation of kings - while indirectly affirming the biblical elevation of charity and the love of the poor.[51] Shakespeare turns round the usual condemnation of false beggars in his moving portrait of Edgar, Gloucester's son, betrayed and hunted, exposed to the elements, 'brought near to beast', himself forced, as others did, to act the part of mad Poor Tom to save his life. Edgar makes violent pretence of insanity, mutilating himself, cursing and entreating in hope of frightening people into giving charity:[52]

[51] The birth of secular theater coincided with the death of Elizabethan religious theater, in 1576. It is possible that plays such as *King Lear* represented a compromise between the new secular humanistic theater and - in its stress on redemption through suffering, love and charity - and the traditional religious theater which presented biblical scenes and stories. In emphasizing humanistic values, including the poor, diminishing religious differences and aiming to create a common ground for the nation as a whole, rich and poor alike, Shakespeare followed Tudor policy.

[52] Literary depictions of false beggars tend to follow popular opinion and legislation in their hostility to those who seek alms illegitimately. Well-known authors of 'rogue literature' in the Tudor era included: Robert Copland (?- 1515), Thomas Harman (mid-16th century), Robert Greene (1558-1592), and Thomas Dekker (c.1572-1632). Robert Burton, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621: 209), gives examples of 'counterfeit men', expressing sympathy as poverty has driven them to the degradation of feigning disease, dismemberment, blindness, paralysis, testifying to a degree of misery that makes suicide attractive. In more recent literature, false beggars appear in the writings of Hugo, Chekhov, Orwell and Silone, among others.

The country gives me proof and precedent
Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,
Strike in their numb'd and mortified bare arms
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary;
And with this horrible object, from low farms,
Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills,
Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers
Enforce their charity.
(II iii 13-20)[53]

Through Poor Tom and others exposed on the heath, Shakespeare contests the spirit of Poor Law in elevating the poor and restoring biblical feeling for them. Bunyan, too, in *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), the most widely read book in English after the Bible, presents a sympathetic view of the poor in opposition to legislation, notably the Act of Settlement of 1662, which allowed a parish to expel beggars not born in that parish. Bunyan, instead, recalls the biblical dignification of the poor: Jesus loves poor pilgrims in search of grace, he has stripped himself of glory for the poor and has 'made many pilgrims princes though by nature they were beggars born, and their original had been the dunghill'.[54] In his children's poem,

[53] Poor Tom is a type of 'Abraham-On Poor Tom and Bedlam'; see Carroll (1996: ch. 6).

[54] Bunyan (1976: 86). Bunyan's allegorical images are recalled as late as the Beveridge Report of 1942, which led in 1948 to the creation of the National Health Service in Great Britain. Beveridge does not portray welfare as charity given to the poor in a Christian spirit but, rather, as a socially-approved means to obtain freedom - a freedom that must be won, not given or forced - from 'five evils': Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness (1942: 170, 172). The poor are not blamed for their poverty - in wartime particularly, blame would have been out of place - but Beveridge recommends that they be given responsibility to use welfare not to become dependent on but independent from the state.

'Of Physick', Bunyan writes of the beggar who pleads his poverty and 'They within doors do him an alms deny', and turns out to 'resemble them that pray/ to God for mercy and will take no nay.' To Bunyan, low birth was a matter of pride, and the very lack of formal education meant that the poor were freer inwardly and more open to divine inspiration.[55]

Though the poor had good reason to distrust and fear Poor Law, the legislation on the poor could be accounted a major success of the Tudor era. Despite substantial differences in various regions, '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'.[56] Elizabethan Poor Law was effective until the second half of the 18th century, when the population increased and the Industrial Revolution began to drive large numbers from the country into newly-developing cities. War with France and famine in the 1790s created a new mood of hostility toward the poor.[57] At this time, William Blake observed the paradox

[55] Bunyan's children's writings were a new genre in English in the 17th century. On Bunyan, see Hill (1990).

[56] See Marshall (1982: 78). According to Slack (1988: 206f.), English Poor Law, for all its failings, was a 'major achievement' as England emerged as the only Protestant country with a welfare system paid for by taxation. Even the workhouse, starting from Bridewell (mid-16th century), could rouse gratitude among the poor as it was 'infinitely preferable to what their situation would have been outside' (Higginbotham 2012: 7). In addition to parliamentary Poor Law, the calendar had fixed days for ritual begging, such as St. Bartholemew's Fair, May Day, Shrove Tuesday, Guy Fawkes Night, and Christmas, when beggars used 'the rhetoric of Christianity, hospitality and nationalism to prise open the closed hands of the financially secure' (Hitchcock 2004: 208). The workhouse in literature is commonly associated with Dickens' scathing social criticism; for a more balanced view, of gratitude for charitable kindness combined with repugnance at being buried alive, see Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, ch. 8.

[57] Between 1793 and 1813 prices doubled; there were food riots from 1795-1801. On the economic downturn and its effects on the poor during the Napoleonic wars, see Marshall (1982: 80) and Lees (1998: 80-1).

of famine amid plenty, ruin amid prosperity. Blake became the poet of Thomas Paine's dissidence in *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*: governments, monarchies and aristocrats are frauds and impositions on the poor, mad and stupid in wasting resources on palaces, courts and wars, which could be better spent on welfare and education for the poor. As hardships multiplied - the cost of living went up while wages went down; Parliament passed Acts for over 3000 enclosures which often led to insolvency; exploitation of women and children increased in factories - Blake recalled the prophetic demand for justice in accusing King and Priest for allegedly desiring famine and plague, to reduce the population, keeping the survivors in low-wage servitude:

Shall not the king call for famine from the heath,
Nor the priest for pestilence from the fen!
To restrain, to dismay, to thin
The inhabitants of mountain and plain –
In the day of full-feeding prosperity
And the night of delicious songs.

Shall not the counsellor throw his curb
Of poverty on the laborious
To fix the price of labour
To invent allegoric riches?

The Song of Los (1795) [58]

[58] On the social background to *The Song of Los*, see Bronowski (1972: 97-9).

By the mid-1790s, economic conditions were so bad that Parliament could not heed Burke's warning to parliament, in 'Thoughts and Details on Scarcity' (1795), that its most useful function was as an agent of restraint, a curb to panic, before the 'invisible hand' of natural regulation did its work. The Speenhamland poor relief experiment began in 1795, linking the poor rate to the price of bread, and leading to increasing numbers of workers dependent on charity as employers felt it unnecessary to pay a fair wage. At the end of 1796, in 'Ode to the Departing Year', Coleridge, living in the poverty-stricken West Country, sounded the tones of a modern Jeremiah (without the hope), in addressing England facing famine and invasion by France. The nation was cursed, doomed to defeat:

Abandon'd of Heaven! Mad Avarice thy guide,
At cowardly distance, yet kindling with pride –
Mid thy herds and thy corn-fields secure thou hast stood,
And join'd the wild yelling of Famine and Blood!
The nations curse thee!

In 1798, as conditions worsened, the clergyman Thomas Malthus published *Essay on Population*, arguing that the poor, rapidly increasing in numbers, were an impossible burden on society, to be dealt with through population control and stringent legislation.[59] Blake bitterly mocks Malthus in *Vala, or The Four Zoas*:

[59] In contrast with Continental Europe, where the poor were given charity, the English system of poor relief came from local taxation: largely for this reason, as conditions worsened amid war, famine, and economic transformation, the argument in England over Poor Law during the Speenhamland era (1795-1834) was so fierce. David Ricardo, the leading English economist of the early 19th century, opposed spending on the poor as he opposed all forms of public spending, fearing this would encourage excessive population growth and force more expenditure at the public expense (King 2013). Harriet Martineau, a disciple of Malthus, contributed to the debates leading to the New Poor Law of 1834 in stories which stressed the burdens of the rate-payers as the rates increased, rather than the struggles of the poor to survive. The 'honest poor', writes Martineau, work ever harder for ever-decreasing wages while their unscrupulous neighbors simply ask and get what they want from the parish (1832-34, *The Parish*, 55, 114, 122-23).

… when a man looks pale
With labour & abstinence, say he looks healthy & happy –
And when his children sicken, let them die. There are enough
Born, even too many, & our earth will be overrun
Without these arts.
('Night the Seventh' 118-122)[60]

Wordsworth emerged in the 1790s as the leading Romantic poet of the poor, of rural beggars and indigents, protest and outrage. He asserts the values of the traditional rural economy,[61] and the biblical elevation of the poor, aiming to restore sympathy for the poor, to sweep away their parasitic image. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth tells of his time in France during the Revolution in 1792, when his sympathy with the 'hunger-bitten' poor awakened.[62] A radical in his early 20s, he believed that 'the extremes of poverty and riches have a necessary tendency to corrupt the human heart'; there was need for 'a system of universal

[60] Blake's condemnation of Malthus is echoed by William Cobbett, in the 1832 Appendix of *Rural Rides*: Malthusians are 'constantly at work preaching content to the hungry and naked. To be sure, they themselves, however, are not content to be hungry and naked.' The character of Mr. Micawber in Dickens' *David Copperfield* is a living challenge to Malthusianism: 'He is the personification of unthrift; he goes on begetting children for whom he cannot provide; he refuses to toe the misery-line; he accepts charitable loans that he cannot possibly hope to repay; he finally has to emigrate on someone else's money; yet Dickens loves him beyond words' (House 1969: 84). Marx in 1865 wrote that the *Essay on Population* is 'a libel on the human race' (Meek 1957: 18).

[61] '… the final years of the eighteenth century were a last desperate effort by the people to recompose the older moral economy as against the economy of the free market' (Thompson 2013: 73).

[62] Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1850 version (IX 509-32). The 1805 version has slight variations.

representation' and 'the suffrage of every individual'.[63] A society's failure to reduce inequality justifies revolution such as that in France.[64] While living in the West Country (1795-1797), Wordsworth chose to be a poet of the suffering poor, of social rejects such as 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. The poet's letters describe the wretched poverty and ignorance of the country people.[65] Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy, shared his distress at the misery of the peasants, their homes not far different from those of savages.[66] Dorothy's journal refers to frequent encounters with the poor: for example, a young widow who has also recently lost three of her children; a half-mad old beggar; a child-beggar; a barefoot beggar-woman with a two year child; a legless soldier; and, the basis of 'The Leechgatherer', an old beggar bent double who has lost most of his family and lives by gathering leeches (then used for medicinal purposes). Many poems in *Lyrical Ballads* (first edition, 1798) depict the poor realistically, based on eyewitness accounts, in direct English closer at times to prose than poetry. The old Cumberland beggar was a familiar type in a rural world of small parishes:

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[63] On the anti-revolutionary sermon of the Bishop of Llandaff and Wordsworth's unpublished reply, see Gill (1989: 71-3). William Blake, similarly outraged at the Bishop's attempt to justify social inequity, called him 'State trickster' and 'Presumptuous Murderer' (Keynes 1957: 384). Even so, the Bishop later recommended (as did Thomas Paine) that responsibility for the poor should shift from the local parishes to the central government and be paid for through a national tax, an idea that became the basis for the welfare state (Soloway 1969: 82).

[64] Wordsworth's sympathy for the French Revolution was confined to the hope that it would improve social conditions. He was appalled by the excesses of the Revolution, some of which he observed personally. It may be that his experience of human aberration and violence contributed to his high valuation of ordinary everyday life in his poetry. In *The Prelude*, he expresses admiration for the arch-conservative, Edmund Burke.

[65] Wordsworth (1967: 154).

[66] *Ibid*., 162

Him from my childhood have I known, and then
He was so old, he seems not older now;
He travels on, a solitary man…

Wordsworth is not celebrating sentimentally the life of the open road, but responding to the small vital acts of charity and love, forming a unique bond between beggar and society. Poor Law, in Wordsworth's view, robbed the poor of dignity and the better-off of the chance to fulfil the biblical charitable ideal.[67] 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, prison-like structures depicted by Crabbe in *The Village* (1783). 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!

[67] Wordsworth's insistence that the beggar is better off free than in the workhouse prison is close to one of the arguments against poor relief: that charity corrupted 'the independent nature of the poor' (Fowler 2008: 17). Compare Adam Smith's observation in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (IV i 10), that the beggar, in his fleeting moments of security, is richer than a king.

Wordsworth inspired later English writers, including Clare, Dickens and Orwell, who reacted strongly against the humiliation of the poor and demanded social justice. In his concern for the disruption and break-up of family life by industrialization - 'a rapid decay of the domestic affections among the lower orders of society'[68] - Wordsworth also anticipated Marx's attack on factories and their owners for adding social alienation to the woes of the poor.[69]

Dickens' writings on poverty from *Oliver Twist* (1837-38) on, can be read as commentary on Wordsworth, 'we have all of us one human heart' ('The Old Cumberland Beggar'). Dickens, a leading campaigner for the poor, made his name in the 1830s, a period of economic upheaval and a low point in the image of the poor, the age of the New Poor Law of 1834.[70] *Oliver Twist*, set in the 1820s, is a semi-satiric attack on the harsh treatment of the poor as England became increasingly industrialized.[71] The workhouse is the setting for the opening

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[68] Letter of January 14, 1801, to Charles James Fox (Wordsworth 1984: 41-2).

[69] Marx acknowledged that England was unusual in having taken large-scale political measures against pauperism but shared with many writers and thinkers of his time hatred of the 1834 New Poor Law. In 1844, he attributed this legislation to a mistaken parliamentary view that 'pauperism is a *misfortune which is the workers' own fault*, and which for that reason is not to be prevented, as a calamity, but is rather to be suppressed, to be punished, as a crime… [England] adminsters only that pauperism which is desperate enough to be captured and locked up' (Marx (1994: 103, 104). In *Capital* (1867), using imagery similar to the opening diatribe in the book of Isaiah, Marx in effect accuses capitalism of murder, 'soiled with mire from top to toe, and oozing blood from every pore' (Marx 1934: 555, 843). In Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), capitalism as it was in practice, c. 1840, is seen, likewise, as a form of murder, in reaction to which violent acts and revolution are, perhaps, to be expected.

[70] On Dickens' fiction in the context of the growing awareness of poverty in the early industrial age, see Himmelfarb (1984).

[71] On *Oliver Twist* as an expression of the Benthamite reformist culture of the 1830s, see Brantlinger (1977: 44ff.).

chapters in *Oliver Twist*, with the mother's death, the infant's loss of identity, the prison-like clothes, the arbitrary naming as Oliver Twist.[72] The workhouse was already widely condemned as being as mixed, disorderly, squalid and miserable as ever, with no distinction between classes of paupers. Children were, as always, particularly vulnerable, thrust into a world of able-bodied unemployed, abandoned women, vagrant thieves, the infirm, the traumatized, prostitutes, lunatics, crying babies, the aged and the dying. Dickens directs his satire at workhouse treachery and deception towards the poor, its criminalization of them from birth. Not yet a year old, Oliver is already a 'juvenile offender' in 'care' of corrupt parish officials, genuine offenders who get away with theft and the neglect and maltreatment of their charges. The parish destroys Christian sympathy for the poor - in the name of Christianity! The workhouse, Dickens emphasizes, was a Christian institution and, as represented by officials such as the arrogant, uncaring Bumble, an indictment of Christianity.

In *A Christmas Carol* (1843), however, Dickens reaffirms Christian love for the poor in the person of Scrooge, whose penitence at the end of the story is as heartfelt as his miserliness is heartless at the start. The Spirit of Christmas Present shows Scrooge a pair of starving children: Ignorance and Want. Scrooge asks, 'Have they no refuge or resource?' (ch. 3). The Spirit replies with Scrooge's own cruel words: 'Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?'[73] Scrooge is haunted, too, by words spoken at the start of the story by his impoverished nephew and overworked clerk, Bob Cratchit: many would rather die than go to the workhouse, to which Scrooge gives the Malthusian reply, 'they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population'; when the Spirit of Christmas Present rouses Scrooge's compassion by showing him Bob Cratchit's neglected family and the crippled child, Tiny Tim, and Scrooge realizes to his horror that the child might

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[72] At the time *Oliver Twist* was written, in the late 1830s, hundreds of workhouses were built (Digby 1982: 16). The last one closed after World War II. On the strict workhouse restrictions, see Lees (1998: 147ff.).

[73] The allegorical representations in *A Christmas Carol* of Ignorance and Want re-appear in *Les Misérables* as foster-mothers of crime (Hugo 1983: 621).

die, the Spirit returns to him his own cruel words: let him die, 'and decrease the surplus population.' Dickens' view of Poor Law, even if it kept the poor alive, was consistently of a vile beast breathing threatenings and slaughters. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1856), the aged pauper, Betty Higden, refuses to surrender to the prison of parish Charity. Dickens comments sardonically: 'It is a remarkable Christian improvement, to have made a pursuing fury of the Good Samaritan' (Book 1, ch. 8).[74] Betty Higden sews her burial money into her clothes to avoid the ignominy of a pauper's burial:

'… she heard the tender river whispering to many like herself, "Come to me, come to me! When the cruel shame and terror you have so long fled from, most beset you, come to me! I am the Relieving Officer appointed by eternal ordinance to do my work; I am not held in estimation according as I shirk it. My breast is softer than the pauper-nurse's; death in my arms is peacefuller than among the pauper-wards. Come to me!"' (Book I, ch. 8).

Orwell: the disgrace of poverty in Paris and London, 1929

If Shakespeare represents a world in which the Old Poor Law was born; Wordsworth, the troubled shift starting in the late 18th century from agriculture to industry, when a New Poor Law become necessary; and Dickens, widespread repulsion by the New Poor Law of 1834, Orwell represents the end of English Poor Law after World War I, and effectively the end of post-1789 Western literary preoccupation with the scandal of extreme poverty in conditions of economic growth. Like other impoverished middle class artists, Orwell did not need to live with poverty. He did so to experience what it is like to be poor, to speak with greater insight, authority, and outrage of the need for change: 'Poverty is what I am

[74] Dickens evidently borrows from Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) the image of the rich abandoning the compassion of the Gospels and using economic 'law' to persecute the poor with the relentlessness of the Furies in the *Eumenides* (*Mary Barton*, end ch. 18)

writing about', he states baldly in the opening of *Down and Out in Paris and London* (completed by the end of 1930, but not published until 1933), and that meant immersing himself in the filth, the hunger and humiliation of the poorest in society. Born in India to a middle class family, Orwell was sent to Eton, after which he was a policeman in Burma for five years. Burma roused his sympathy for the working classes, for whom in England he had felt snobbery and contempt. He set out to be a writer by sinking himself in the life of the English poor and destitute, which he describes in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937: ch. 10) as 'a sort of world-within-a-world where everyone is equal, a small squalid democracy - perhaps the nearest thing to a democracy that exists in England.' Orwell the old Etonian was aware, and somewhat ashamed, that despite improvements in the life of the English working classes, he and his class were privileged. His height alone - Orwell was over six feet tall - was a reminder of his advantages: boys of 11 and 12 in industrial schools were on average five inches shorter than their public school counterparts.[75]

For several months in 1929 - the year in which the New Poor Law of 1834 ended, and responsibility for the poor was transferred from parishes to county and county borough councils - Orwell lived as a tramp in Paris and London, gathering material for *Down and Out in Paris and London* .[76] Orwell found no evidence for collective blame of the poor for their alleged vices, for laziness or deceit; instead, there was constant hunger, anxiety and humiliation. Though he had escape channels – his parents in Southwold, and his Aunt Nelly in Paris – he stuck to his determination to live among the oppressed, to be one of them, to take their side against injustice. In 1932, at the height of the Depression, he visited Wigan in the North of England, after which he wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier*. These early

[75] On comparative heights of the classes, see Hobsbawm (1969: 164). John Clare, the peasant poet, was five foot tall, over a foot shorter than Orwell.

[76] On legislation pertaining to the poor in Orwell's time, see Lees (1998: 330ff.). It is noteworthy that Orwell's account of poverty in *Down and Out in Paris in London* was published at the height of the Depression but describes experiences from 1929, shortly before the crash.

books expose the underside of capitalism, a huge badly paid or unemployed urban workforce, on a subsistence level in menial labor, in Paris, or as tramps in English workhouses, or as laborers out of work in the Depression. As a *plongeur* in a Paris hotel or a London tramp, Orwell entered his roles totally, eating, sleeping, working, and tramping with the very poor, who seem, in his account, to have largely accepted him as a posh Englishman down on his luck. His fanatical craving to live his part as a down and out ruined his health and contributed in bringing on the tuberculosis which eventually killed him. In Paris, Orwell learned what hunger meant when he was robbed of his savings:

'Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition, more like the after-effects of influenza than anything else. It is as though one has been turned into a jellyfish, or as though all one's blood had been pumped out and luke-warm water substituted. Complete inertia is my chief memory of hunger; that, and being obliged to spit very frequently, and the spittle being curiously white and flocculent, like cuckoo-spit. I do not know the reason for this, but everyone who has gone hungry for several days has noticed it' (ch. 7).

With the help of a friend, he found work in a hotel, poorly-paid and exhausting, but enabling him (and countless others in similar jobs) to survive from day to day. Slaving in a filthy, crowded kitchen from dawn to late at night, he would collapse in his bug-infested bed, waking to drag himself back to work again. His respite came on Saturday night when, like everyone else, he got drunk.

Orwell's exposé of interwar poverty and the poor can mislead. From the mid-Victorian era the most extreme forms of poverty, chronic hunger above all, could be eradicated; and in England much had changed for the better: 'British workers in the 1930s had a significantly higher living standard than their ancestors had experienced in the 1860s… [and] a much better social safety net'; the 1914-18 war had stimulated a huge increase in trade union membership, which reached 8

million by 1919.[77] Orwell alludes to these improvements in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, in praising the English working class home which had come a long way from the living conditions of the poor before the Industrial Age: 'A windowless hut, a wood fire which smokes in your face because there is no chimney, mouldy bread, "Poor John", lice, scurvy, a yearly childbirth and a yearly child-death, and the priest terrifying you with tales of hell' (end ch. 7). Although Britain had lost its pre-war economic pre-eminence, its economy compared favorably with other countries.

However, Orwell emphasizes not these improvements but the injustices that remained, the privation and misery that still defined the lives of many poor people, even and especially in the wealthiest countries. England and France were among the most advanced countries in the world, yet their capital cities swarmed with hungry people. The power and wealth of the British empire in the late 19th and early 20th century highlighted its neglect of the poor. In 'For England' (1904), the poet William Watson attacked the empire: the 'starved and stunted human souls/ Are with us more and more'.[78] For many, the hope aroused by the benefits of industry and capitalism was largely unrealized by Orwell's time. Orwell wrote that in post-World War I conditions, only socialists and idealists envisaged a world

[77] See Boyer (2004: 312, 313) and Eichengreen (2004: 321).

[78] Brooks and Faulkner (1996: 340). Kipling's *Kim* (1902) is unusual as an English novel about Indian life under British rule by an Anglo-Indian native immersed in and fascinated by India. It portrays Indian poverty not as a trigger for reform, as in much 19th century English fiction, but as part of the natural flow of everyday life, to be accepted as it was - in all its majestic joyful color, religious richness, endless variety, tragedy and sadness. Victorian 'Condition of England' novels were widely read in the empire but there was a time lag between reform in England and parallel reform in the colonies. Orwell, born in India nearly 40 years after Kipling, was similarly sympathetic to the poor, but devoted his life as a writer to improving the conditions of the English working class. His first novel, *Burmese Days* (1935), based on his experiences in Burma in the 1920s, aims to expose not the impoverished conditions of the Burmese but the corruptive effects of British imperial rule.

without poverty.[79] Living among London tramps, Orwell came to see begging as a profession like any other, only badly paid. There were few 'sturdy beggars'. In the world of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, hunger is general, the chief diet being bread and margarine: 'nearly every tramp is rotted by malnutrition'; in one workhouse, the tramps strip naked for a medical inspection for smallpox; and Orwell sees that 'nearly everyone was undernourished'.[80] Malnutrition, in Orwell's view, has demoralized them and destroyed their manhood. They are also emotionally starved: most are male, isolated physically and socially from women. Dressed as a tramp, Orwell sees that women are repulsed by him, as by a dead cat. The poverty of the down and out is a sign of sin: 'the English are a conscience-ridden people, with a strong sense of the sinfulness of poverty' (ch. 36).[81] Lodging-houses, like prisons, are a punishment for wrongdoing: in some, the inmates sleep on the bare floor. The houses are actually open only at nights – for 14 hours from 8:00 pm - while for ten hours during the day the gates are locked and tramps are expected to be on the road.

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[79] See Orwell (1970: i 36-43). The socialist historian, R.H. Tawney, in a study of equality dating from the time Orwell wrote *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), observes that in England 1% of the population owned two-thirds of the country's wealth and that three-quarters of the population had less than 100 pounds at death; English society was a pyramid whose hierarchical tiers were formed by class, not ability (Tawney 1994: 13, 67).

[80] In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, chs. 27 and 36. In 'How the Poor Die' (1946), Orwell recalls being treated in a hospital for the poor in Paris in the late-1920s, reminiscent of pre-modern hospitals, a place of filth, torture and death.

[81] The notion that poverty is associated with sin has no authority in the Bible. Though Orwell accepts that most of the tramps he encountered were genuinely in need, he adds in Chapter 31 of *Down and Out in Paris and London* a contribution to a longstanding tradition in English literature of describing fraudulence among the poor (see Hitchcock 2004). However, he is not outraged by the frauds; they are no less poor for being frauds, and are simply doing what they can to make a living.

Orwell immerses himself in a world of squalor and boredom, in some ways hardly better than in the pre-industrial age: with filthy, bug-infested, putrid sheets, grimy basins, constant noise; separation of families; bullying officials, the invariable presence of the disease-ridden and the deformed; enforced idleness, particularly the confinement of tramps indoors on Sundays; the policy of forcing tramps to be constantly on the move, for it is prohibited to enter a lodging-house more than once a month; confiscation of money and tobacco, and the vulnerability to theft and to being cheated: pawnbrokers rarely give tramps a proper price for their belongings; shopkeepers cheat them of the full value of their meal tickets; and they are constantly humiliated, especially by missionary charities such as the Salvation Army with its military discipline and its shelters with signs, 'The Lord will provide': 'It is curious how people take it for granted that they have a right to preach at you and pray over you as soon as your income falls below a certain level' (ch. 33).[82]

The 'holy poor' in the literature of developing countries, 1945-

In the literature of late-20th century developed countries, 'the poor', holy or not, practically vanish; but in the literature of developing countries, where the Church grew strikingly, the biblical image of the poor has had powerful influence. Among writers who draw on the Scripture in their depiction of the poor are Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), J.M. Coetzee in *The Life and Times of Michael K.* (1974), Naguib Mahfouz in *The Harafish* (1977), and Clarice Lispector in *The Hour of the Star* (1977).

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[82] Orwell's objections to the humiliation of Salvation Army charity recall similar criticisms by W.H. Davies, *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (1908: ch. 21), Jack London in *The People of the Abyss* (1903), Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle* (1906: ch. 23), and Bernard Shaw in *Major Barbara* (1907). Though Orwell was a socialist, he admired the English style of the King James translation of the Bible, and cited it in 'Politics and the English Language' (1945) to illustrate the difference between good and bad English.

The binding of Isaac in Achebe's Things Fall Apart

Things Fall Apart was written in the 1950s, as British colonial rule in Nigeria ended, but is set about 60 years previously, in the 1890s, when it began. Achebe looks back at the world of his father and grandparents, when tribal rule collapsed, at the end of Victorian era. Achebe's father was a Christian missionary and his uncle a tribal chief. Born with his feet in both tribal and colonial camps, he learned as a child to love both the Bible and Ibo tribal culture. The richness and originality of his style comes from these dual influences. Among questions Achebe raises in his novel is: why did so many Africans willingly join the Church, as his father did, though it was the religion of the imperial subjugators and exploiters? In particular, how does Nwoye, son of a tribal chief, become Isaac, a Christian missionary? One answer is that the British opened the eyes of many Africans to their poverty and backwardness, to the value of better education and modern medicine; women, in particular those maltreated by their husbands, wanted to escape the control of patriarchalism; children, too, Achebe writes, were at times revolted by tribal customs; to the point that as time passed they increasingly came to prefer the more egalitarian way of life taught by the missionaries, and the faith symbolized by the central biblical reference in the novel - the story of Abraham's binding of Isaac (Genesis 22).

Achebe performs a delicate balancing act: he lovingly recalls the rich tribal culture while making clear the social and psychological forces which made his father abandon this culture and become a Christian missionary. The African Church was destined to outgrow by far its parent Church in England, but in the colonial era there was a popular saying: 'When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. Then the white man said "let us pray". After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible.' Achebe, though critical of colonial intrusion, violence and arrogance, acknowledges the power of missionary Christianity to change lives for the better. The novel gives a detailed description of West African culture, rich in beliefs, customs and oral

literature. It is not Achebe's aim to attack the tribal way of life; rather, he describes it on its own terms. However, in the late 19th century, in the words of the title, taken from Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming', the tribal way of life fell apart as Christianity spread.

The religious culture of the colonial power took root for reasons largely having to do with the 'grim struggle against poverty and misfortune' (Achebe 2001: 20) in a drought-plagued land where crop failure and famine are regular visitors. The tribal leader, Okonkwo, is famous as wrestler, known as 'Roaring Flame', in a clan of nine West African villages (Umuofia), with about 10,000 men. These villages are a microcosm of Africa, in the process of being forced into the British empire. How did it come about that African tribes took the Bible to their hearts, loved it and remained loyally devoted to it - far more than in England, where knowledge of the Bible and its authority steadily declined?

The story begins with Okonkwo, an energetic sharecropper, doing all the work and getting paid one-third of the harvest. Having to support his mother and two sisters, he is at first too poor to marry. His enterprise and hard work pay off and, after twenty years, he is admired as a 'great man', a rich, powerful farmer and warrior. Okonkwo's 'wealth' is set out not without irony: he has two barns full of yams, two titles, three wives, eight children (of whom six are sons); and five heads of his enemies, whom he had killed in tribal wars, hang as decoration on the walls of his huts. Similarly ironic is the description of Okonkwo's 'strength', for it is futile against the arms and organization of the white colonialists and, as even some natives gradually come to feel, weak against the moral values of the Bible. Okonkwo has an obsessive fear of weakness, associated with his father, a miserable failure in life, repellent in death. Consequently, Okonkwo hates gentleness and idleness and any compromise or admission of weakness. These traits prove fatal: when the tribal land becomes part of the British empire, even the greatest warriors are exposed in their subservience to the colonial power. At the same time, ironically, the Christianity brought by imperial conquest teaches the love of the poor and the defeated, the virtues of meekness and kindness, and salvation from sin - and this poses an even greater challenge to warrior-based native authority.

In the tribal world Okonkwo is rich. But according to the main indicator of poverty - infant mortality - he is among the very poorest. His second wife, Ekwefi, has had ten pregnancies and only one, his daughter Ezinma, has survived. Another tribal leader, Uchendu, is even more unlucky: he had six wives, lost five of them and buried 22 of his children.[83] Achebe refers by way of explanation to African medical lore, the image of medicine as an old woman with a fan, the 'medicine-house' for worship of gods, the medicine man with remedies which Achebe, university educated, an employee of the BBC in London, presents from the tribal viewpoint, a logical extension of communal beliefs, part of a rich culture, without judgement, yet implicitly primitive and futile. The medicine man mutilates dead children to discourage their spirits from becoming *ogbanji*, wicked children who, after death, re-enter the womb to cause further deaths.[84] The Christians naturally oppose this custom and others which they regard as evidence of backwardness, of what Joseph Conrad describes as the 'heart of darkness' - though Conrad in fact finds the 'heart of darkness' less in Africa than in Europe and in emissaries of 'enlightenment' such as the corrupt megalomaniac, the ivory trader Kurtz.[85]

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[83] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (2001:56, 99).

[84] *Ibid*., 57, 134.

[85] Achebe saw Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an expression of anti-African racism; it is far more an attack on colonial arrogance, greed, and criminal exploitation of slave labor (in this case by Belgium); and the corruption of European cultural ideals. Also, in depicting graphically such tribal customs as infant murder and child sacrifice, and the treatment of the outcast, of women and the sick, Achebe lends credence to the view of Marlowe's formidable aunt who, at the start of *Heart of Darkness*, encourages her nephew to go to Africa with the aim of 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways.' Native Africans who converted to Christianity and themselves became missionaries, such as Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart*, in effect adopted the view of Marlowe's aunt.

In Achebe's novel, there is much opposition to the missionaries. Colonialism brings the humiliation of foreign rule, the questioning and attenuation of local customs, theft of resources, even extermination of some of the natives. When the Africans retaliate by burning down the Church, the colonials use their superior firepower to control them. These are small rumblings in the history of imperialism - lodged neatly in a book by the Commissioner, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* - but seismic to the natives. Yet Achebe is far less critical than Conrad of colonialism. Gradually, the natives, for all their suspicion, recognize that the missionaries actually do bring enlightenment; among other things, they build hospitals with better medicine. The reader looks in vain for such benefits of colonialism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Many Africans in *Things Fall Apart* are drawn to Christianity. Some even convert - without coercion. Some of the converts are mothers tormented by the deaths of their babies, whose corpses are then mutilated, adding an extra sorrow to their grief; others have the misfortune to bear the curse of twins, which are put live in pots and, still crying, are abandoned in the forest.[86] To these Africans, Christianity is less a colonial curse than a comfort and salvation. Okonkwo's own wife, Ekwefi, after losing nine children, joins the Christians; we are told of another mother, Nneka, who bears *four* sets of twins, all killed according to tribal custom; she too becomes a Christian.[87] Things fall apart, but there is also reconstruction: the missionaries bring schools, medicine, better farming methods. Achebe reminds us that the tribal world is threatened constantly by drought and floods, disease and famine. He puts an Ibo folk tale in the mouth of Okonkwo's unnamed third wife, as told to their son, Nwoye:

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[86] *Ibid*., 45, 91.

[87] *Ibid*., 56, 111. Similarly, in India under British colonial rule, most Hindus who converted to Christianity came from the lower castes and untouchables, the powerless and disenfranchised.

'He remembered the story she often told of the quarrel between Earth and Sky long ago, and how Sky withheld rain for seven years, until crops withered and the dead could not be buried because the hoes broke on the stony Earth. At last Vulture was sent to plead with Sky, and to soften his heart with a song of the suffering of the sons of men. Whenever Nwoye's mother sang this song he felt carried away to the distant scene in the sky where Vulture, earth's emissary, sang for mercy. At last Sky was moved to pity, and he gave to Vulture rain wrapped in leaves of coco-yam. But as he flew home his long talon pierced the leaves and the rain fell as it had never fallen before. And so heavily did it rain on Vulture that he did not return to deliver his message but flew to a distant land, from where he had espied a fire. And when he got there he found it was a man making a sacrifice. He warmed himself in the fire and ate the entrails' (39).

Beautiful though this story is to Nwoye, it seems to lead him nowhere. He has the greatest love for Ibo tradition, and Okonkwo wants him to be his successor as chief. Gentle and sensitive, drawn to the poetry and humanity of Scripture, Nwoye disappoints his father. He commits the ultimate betrayal: he converts to Christianity. Okonkwo beats him and he leaves home. Later he becomes a missionary and converts his mother and siblings. Achebe makes clear that Nwoye is influenced less by the coercive power of colonialism than by the moral power of Christianity. Education, too, promotes conversion: the missionaries build schools where children learn to read and write. In the mission schools, the Bible is the main text for study, an influence that shines in the novel, in its texture, the feeling for language and style. In a society that already appreciates good stories, the art of language and conversation, the Bible is a source of wonder and wisdom.

Yet another reason for conversion is greater equality of the sexes. Achebe gives a voice to women's grievances in the tribal world. The women realize quickly that challenge to their traditional way of life, however humiliating, opens the prospect of a better future, with improved health and education, and better life chances. In

the tribal world, women are totally dominated by their husbands. Marriage is dictated by men. Wife-beating is common, for the slightest reason. Okonkwo beats one of his wives for not cooking lunch in time; he shoots his gun at another when he is angry at her. The Church becomes a haven for men and women who for various reasons are outcast (*osu*) in tribal society. Shunned by the tribe, they are welcomed in church. They are comforted by the Christian message that human beings are created equal in the eyes of God. Achebe makes clear the psychology leading to conversion of Okonkwo's son, Nwoye. Nwoye is drawn to Christianity as a force independent from and even opposed to imperialism. A tipping point for Nwoye is the child sacrifice of his friend, Ikemefuna. Several years previously, Ikemefuna's father took part in a murder in another village. As part of his punishment his son was taken away. Ikemefuna never learns why this has happened to him. Okonkwo was chosen to join a tribal delegation dealing with the case. He was given charge of Ikemefuna, who became inseparable from Nwoye. The two boys bonded like brothers. Then the village chiefs decided that Ikemefuna must be sacrificed. This was done in a forest ritual. Nwoye, shattered by this loss, found in Christianity a religion that would not tolerate child sacrifice - as in the story of Abraham and Isaac: Nwoye changes his name to Isaac. [88]

Yet, in *Things Fall Apart*, the father is, in a sense, the sacrificial victim. Okonkwo opposes the white government and Church, then commits a murder and hangs himself, a tribal Jesus, degraded and scourged, who dies - is it for the sins of the tribe or those committed against the tribe? Colonialism is not romanticized: it is a source of humiliation and rage, of tragedy and the violent breakdown of tradition. But there is also the modernization of tribal society - not exclusively along Western lines - making possible the synthesis represented in Achebe's novel.

[88] Okonkwo is warned, 'Do not bear a hand in his death', an echo of the angel who appears to Abraham (Genesis 22: 12); the unwanted children abandoned in the bush, similarly, recall the abandonment of Ishmael (*ibid*. 21: 15).

The poor and the lost paradise in Coetzee's The Life and Times of Michael K.

Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K.* continues a tradition of describing the poor in language of great richness: it recalls the depiction of peasants by Wordsworth, Turgenev, Manzoni, Hugo, Carlo Levi, and Steinbeck, for whom the poorest are beacons of a humanity threatened by so-called civilization. On the surface, Coetzee tells a simple tale of a homeless vagrant , Michael K., in South Africa during the violence of the apartheid era. Michael finds his way to a deserted farm. There he becomes a modern Adam, tending the land with his own hands, growing his own food. He recreates briefly a blessed state of communion with the earth. The name Michael K. echoes Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*, an outsider and victim who does not give up. Michael K.'s 'life and times' from childhood, spent in an orphanage, consists of a string of Kafkaesque run-ins with bureaucracy and authority: police, soldiers, petty officials, people behind desks in hospitals and railway stations - but in Third World conditions in time of war and social collapse. Yet Michael K.'s story is also one of spiritual growth in defiance of poverty. Biblical echoes are frequently heard in Coetzee's meditations on the nature of power, wealth, and consumption, on the bond of human beings with the earth which feeds us and the tragic consequences which follow the violent severing of this bond.

Michael K. works as a low-paid gardener in Cape Town. His sole relative is his ailing mother, who put him in the orphanage when he was a child and whom he now looks after. Michael lives a life of isolation, a Robinson Crusoe on the island of himself. The country's essential services, its utilities, welfare, hospitals, transport system, break down. He loses his job. A person can be shot just for walking the streets. Travel from one town to another is a bureaucratic nightmare, taking weeks. Officials paid to provide services routinely humiliate the poor, waste their time, and often deceive them, rob them and endanger their lives. Hospitals overflow with war casualties. The hospital in which Michael's mother dies is a place of neglect, dehumanization and death:

'For months Anna K. had been suffering from gross swelling of the legs and arms; later her belly had begun to swell too, She had been admitted to hospital unable to walk and barely able to breathe. She had spent five days lying in a corridor among scores of victims of stabbings and beatings and gunshot wounds who kept her awake with their noise, neglected by nurses who had no time to spend cheering up an old woman when there were young men dying spectacular deaths all about.' (1983: 5).

In all this time, no one even brings her a bedpan. After six days she leaves this purgatory, preferring to be sick outside the hospital.

K. flees on foot. He builds a kind of rickshaw on wheels using a wheelbarrow and bicycle and pushes his dying mother in the direction of the provincial town of Prince Albert where she was born. She dies on the way and Michael, carrying her ashes in an urn, continues to Prince Albert. He finds an abandoned farm and scatters his mother's ashes on the earth. Living in a cave-like dwelling by day, he emerges at night to cultivate the soil. He plants pumpkin and melon seeds he has found, and grows his own food. Michael finds his greatest pleasure when he waters the field, 'because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature' (59). He feels a 'cord of tenderness' with the earth and the danger that human corruption and violence break this cord (65-6, 109).

Michael does not belong to the world of war surrounding him: he plants seeds, the army plants mines. He resists the idea of ownership while the army violently asserts territorial control. He returns to a state of nature, living like a lizard, a sparrow, a mouse, a squirrel, an ant or a bee. Nothing he touches belongs to him. Yet, the earth, belonging to no one, belongs to all. When, hungry, he takes from a field, he is obeying instinctively a divine law: 'It is God's earth, he thought, I am not a thief' (39).[89] The pumpkins he grows are not his - they 'weren't mine', he says, 'They came from the earth' (139) - but as a human being in need of sustenance he has a right to eat them, and the privilege of blessing them.

[89] On the rejection of private property in the Bible, see Leviticus (25: 23); also Psalms (24: 1).

In contrast with other African fiction, such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, in which the Church, however tainted by missionary colonialism, nevertheless brings benefit to the natives, the Church in *The Life and Times of Michael K*. seems to have no role. Michael is determined in any case to escape the humiliation of charity. Yet, there are many biblical echoes in his transformation. He is a kind of Adam returned to paradise or fallen from paradise, a 'handful of dust' (161) – recalling the passage 'dust you are and to dust shall return' (Genesis 3: 19); his travels on foot recall the Israelites in the desert, eating his 'manna', his 'bread of freedom' (146, 150); building his own temporary home as the Israelites did ; cultivating the land and making it bloom; and many other phrases recall the Bible; he has, for example, 'a time for everything', an echo of the book of Ecclesiastes. There is also something Jesus-like about Michael: he too is in his early 30s, a man of suffering and endurance, stigmatized by society, a suffering servant of peace in time of war, who in turning the other cheek unwittingly discovers a philosophy of life which some treat as a sickness or absurdity and others recognize, rightly or wrongly, as profound wisdom.[90] Children keep entering the story, as if to remind us of the Christian association of childhood innocence with the kingdom of heaven. In one scene, children play on Michael 'as if he were part of the earth' (84). Michael K. has an instinct for turning punishment and humiliation to affirmation, his disabilities to a form of creation, his ashes to hope. In a world of murderous Cains, he becomes an Adam, recreating paradise. Even his harelip, which he has from birth and could easily be corrected, becomes a mark of individuality. In childhood, when his teacher punishes the class by making everyone sit in silence, hands on heads, almost as if preparing them for a life of confrontation with the police, Michael allows this punishment to lull him into a delicious state of drowsy contemplation. Humiliation becomes a source of insight also after Michael's mother is cremated by the hospital, without his permission. He is given the ashes, coldly. When he starts tending the land, he realizes the ceremonial use of these ashes - and his calling in life:

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[90] Coetzee follows a long literary association of poverty with a higher morality and the crucifixion: Dostoyevsky in *Crime and Punishment* (1865) and *The Idiot* (1868-9) and Flaubert in 'The Legend of St. Julian Hospitator' (1877) assert the traditional links between poverty and Christ-like goodness and self-sacrifice and the supreme value of individual acts of charity.

'[He] set about clearing a patch a few metres square in the middle of the field. There, bending low so that they would not be carried away by the wind, he distributed the fine grey flakes over the earth, afterwards turning the earth over spadeful by spadeful. This was the beginning of his life as a cultivator' (59).

Michael K. is a victim but an unusually resourceful one: he builds the vehicle on which he transports his mother; he uses the lens of a toy telescope to make fire; he makes a catapult and a sling to catch birds; he mends a pump; he builds his own home with a pit for fire, and a vent-tunnel for smoke. Michael K. seems to have escaped the fate of Kafka's K., in returning to a paradisal moment before history and before human beings corrupted the earth.

Then history catches up with Michael K. Soldiers looking for terrorists discover him. He is thrust back into the world of Kafka, of cruel officials and unfeeling bureaucrats. Now he resembles less the character of Joseph K. and more Kafka's hunger artist, a man who starves himself in a public performance.[91] Michael K. is put in a camp but refuses to eat. This is not a hunger strike but, like Kafka's hunger artist, a loss of appetite: Michael K. hungers for freedom, he resists history and human depravity.[92] In the camp hospital, an unnamed doctor observes him with growing sympathy, sensing in him an original soul, beyond the reach of the law of nations, in touch with timeless existential truths crushed in war. Perhaps Michael is an idiot. Even so, he seems to have transcended his time. The doctor realizes that food to Michael is an expression of humanity. If humanity is lacking, he is not hungry.

Moments in the book when Michael does eat tend to stand out: when someone, often a stranger, offers him food in a spirit of kindliness and humanity; and particularly when he eats the food he has grown himself. At the hospital where Michael's mother is dying an anonymous man generously gives him money to buy a chicken pie; he eats it

[91] On the hunger artist in Kafka and other writers, see Ellmann (1993)

[92] For a comparable resistance to History, see Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*.

with appetite and joy. When food is not blessed, when it is not the bread of freedom, he cannot eat. His eating disorder becomes symptomatic not just of the rampant poverty and injustice in South Africa and other countries in the world, but is also an inadvertent form of protest. 'I am not in the war' (138), he says at one point; and more than that, he seems not to belong to history but to have rediscovered and re-entered a form of existence pre-dating and transcending history. The doctor, witness to much of the violence and cruelty tearing the country apart, imagines that he might become K's disciple, follow him and learn his secret of achieving a primordial state of blessedness. The paucity of his needs is a source of strength, empowering him to rediscover the essence of human existence. After K. escapes from the camp, he returns to Cape Town where the book ends as he plans to start again, this time better equipped with seeds, to realize more fully his purpose in life as a modern Adam, cultivating the earth.

The Koran and the poor in Mahfouz's The Harafish

Like other writers on the peasantry (e.g. Clare, Hugo, Chekhov, and Silone) Mahfouz takes a religious ideology teaching compassion for the poor and shows how in practice that ideology fails: Islam does not effectively protect the poor and is defeated by poor governance.[93] The Muslim faith of the common people, the

[93] In the Koran (7th century CE) true piety is expressed in charity to society's unfortunates, the widow and orphan, the destitute, the vagrant beggar and slave (e.g. 2: 172). The Koran follows the Hebrew Bible in seeing poverty as morally superior to wealth and the poor as closer to God than the rich (though unlike the Hebrew Bible, the Koran is not built around the miraculous life of one man, a model of faith); the Koran, too, emphasizes charity as a God-given commandment, the gateway to paradise and - likewise, in contrast with European Poor Law - does not conceive of a class of parasitic poor toward whom almsgiving is unjustified. (The Sikh holy book, *Guru Granth Sahib* [1706], influenced by Islam, teaches, similarly, the equality of all, the importance of giving to the poor, and the dangers of greed, attachment to possessions, and self-centredness.) However, in the increasingly capitalist world of the late Middle Ages, Islamic countries joined Christian Europe in hostility to the poor (Geremek 1987: 209, n. 213), an attitude reflected in the writings of Mahfouz, where the rich often show contempt toward the poor, in breach of the teachings of Islam.

harafish, helps them endure hunger, humiliation, poor living conditions, high mortality rates, corruption in government, poor life chances; yet, as was often the case in European countries, their very faith paradoxically allows their leaders to manipulate them, making them relatively passive and ineffectual in agitating for their own interests. Islam, Mahfouz implies, helps the *harafish* survive and gives their lives meaning and spiritual richness, but it also holds them back from asserting the freedom of choice which might lead to genuine and lasting improvements in their lives.

Mahfouz, a career civil servant, empathizes with the impoverished masses, in their faith, their fundamental goodness, intelligence and desire for a better world and, given good leaders, in their power to create one. The Egyptian poor are the centre of *The Harafish*, one of Mahfouz's late works, published in 1977, when he was in his sixties. It opens with an abandoned baby crying in an alley, found and adopted by a blind man of God: the *harafish* are similarly abandoned by their rulers, and led by blind faith in a world of corruption and poverty. The abandoned baby, Ashur, becomes the founder of a powerful and influential family.

Mahfouz's work in government administration in Cairo, like Kafka's as an insurance assessor, gave him good knowledge of people - of how things work - or don't work, of why people succeed or fail, and particularly of good and bad government, and how bureaucracies can improve or ruin people's lives. Though Mahfouz had a Western education in the British colonial period - he studied philosophy and European literature - the poor were always prominent in his writings. He was fascinated by the question how they came to be so poor, downtrodden and poorly governed, and why they tended to remain so. For he regarded the poor as a jewel in the mud. Even after winning the Nobel Prize, Mahfouz remained among the poor in Cairo. *The Harafish* is the work of a master with a lifetime of achievement behind him. Set in some indeterminate earlier time, with no reference to historical events, but clearly set in Egypt, the story reads like a legend or fairy tale, with timeless universal significance. This is how things are and always have been, sanctioned by fatalistic teachings of Islam as taught in the Koran schools - the only schools in the book.

For most Egyptians, poverty is, as always, inescapable, manifested in familiar indicators which are constant in the novel: high infant mortality, malnutrition, disease, low life expectancy, poor education and medical care, widespread superstition, discrimination against women, poor governance with widespread corruption. In years when the Nile fails to overflow, there are poor harvests and famine. Babies are often abandoned by mothers who cannot feed them. Hunger, disease and superstition are widespread. Medicine is based on superstition and folk remedies; there are no trained doctors. Housing is often unsafe and inadequate, and tens of thousands of homeless people live in the cemetery. Among indicators of poverty in the novel are wife-beating, a custom allowed on the grounds that wives owe obedience to their husbands. These are described in detail. A husband is criminally charged only if the wife dies. Children too are normally beaten, both at home and in school.

Without actually calling for revolution, Mahfouz clearly identifies chronic Egyptian poverty with poor governance. The *harafish* are usually governed by corrupt 'notables', who control the clan chiefs and run protection rackets and deal in crime, drugs and prostitution. There is no separation of government and the judiciary. The notables are usually in league with the religious leaders. The police are corrupt, the courts are rigged, and justice is usually in the hands of the clan chiefs. Lip service is paid to the notion of justice for the poor, yet the 'notables' have a belief not unlike Calvinism, that the rich and influential are favored by God and deserve power. The basis of government is the clan, the clans are led by chiefs whose authority usually rests not on their ability and wisdom but on intimidation, bribery, and sheer brutal power. The *harafish* is chronically discontented by poor governance but, it seems, psychologically incapable of changing its existence through rational means. The basis of clan leadership is not a popular and fair election process with candidates trained in government, law or business, but a physical contest in which the rivals fight it out. Here is a typical fight for leadership, a possible satiric allusion to the coups that have beset modern Egyptian history:

‘The circle opened out, leaving Ghassan and Dahshan alone in the ring: two sturdy bodies tensed and ready to spring, they brandished their sticks like magicians. Ghassan jumped forward and Dahshan attacked. Their sticks clashed, turning around each other, whirling with cunning grace. Each player struggled for a touch, blocked, parried, and ducked, their tension and determination mounting as the fight reached its climax. The infernal heat of the sun fell on their heads in benediction. With a sudden swift lunge, Ghassan caught Dahshan off his guard, struck home, and touched his collarbone. Wild with enthusiasm, his supporters cried, “Ghassan! Ghassan! God bless Ghassan!” Dahshan slumped, panting, swallowing his disappointment. Ghassan held out his hand and said, “My brother!” Dahshan shook it, muttering, “My chief!” (2: 13).

A half-dozen contests of this kind occur in the novel. Most of the victors, however good they are as wrestlers, turn out, not surprisingly, to be poor leaders. In much the same way, Mahfouz the civil servant implies, good governance is not usually achieved by the brute force of an army or a charismatic leader.

The *harafish* are the main victims of incessant clan warfare, permanently in conflict with the ‘notables’ of their own clan, the rich and powerful who might believe in justice and equality - but only for themselves. Mahfouz describes the entire clan system as a calamity. The only good that can be said of it is that it cannot be mistaken for anything other than it is: ‘The wicked are harsh but honest teachers.’ A clan chief is asked by his wife, a woman from a humble background, why he does not help the *harafish*. He replies, ‘I despise them.’ She points out, ‘But they’re poor and miserable’; to which he replies, ‘That’s why I despise them’ (7: 47). The *harafish* are treated by their leaders as women or children, with no minds of their own, easily deluded and controlled; at times they run amok, goaded into wild frenzies of destruction, though, without leadership, to no advantage of their own.

The suffering of the *harafish* is accepted as 'the inescapable blows of fate'. This is their trap - but also their consolation: 'Why do people laugh, dance in triumph, feel recklessly secure in positions of power? Why do they not remember their true place in the scheme of things, and their inevitable end?' (7: 3). The Muslim clergy are not unlike some of their pre-modern Christian and Jewish counterparts in their wariness toward non-religious education. In a predominantly religious society, the privileged have little interest in the spread of education beyond the Koran schools; they do not want people to think for themselves, to believe in free will and self-improvement, above all that they have the ability and initiative to create a better world for themselves.

In the course of many generations in the novel, hardly anyone in a position of authority seems to care at all about the poor. Yet, sometimes fate brings a blessing to the *harafish*. In the first story in *The Harafish*, good governance become possible, with tragic irony - when plague wipes everyone out. Ashur, a humble carter, is led by a dream to leave with his family before the plague strikes. They live in a cave for several months and there Ashur begins to question the notion of historical inevitability, for he realizes its danger. Many people could have been saved if they had left in time. 'Why did the alley's inhabitants give in to death and believe that human beings were powerless? … people bring their sufferings upon themselves' (1: 38). Ashur and his family return to find the alley deserted; they move into the house of a former clan leader. As the starving and unemployed people slowly drift back after the catastrophe, Ashur distributes the abandoned wealth around him to them. He pays for public facilities: a fountain, a trough, a mosque. Then he is arrested by officials who are themselves looting. Imprisoned for a year, he emerges and becomes clan leader by popular acclaim. He sets an example by living modestly in a basement flat, working as he did before, as a carter.

'He obliged all his followers to work for a living, thus eliminating the thugs and bullies. Only the rich had to pay protection money, which was used to benefit the poor and disabled. He subdued the chiefs of neighboring alleys and gave our alley a new dignity. As well as the respect of the outside world, it enjoyed justice, honor and security at home' (1: Epilogue).

Yet even Ashur, the best of the clan leaders, a legendary figure in his lifetime and for generations after, is faulted between the lines. Extraordinary circumstances should not be necessary to break the cycle of fate and allow a good clan leader to emerge. Ashur's selfless devotion to the *harafish*, though rare and admirable, is limited in practical terms. He evidently builds no school or hospital; he creates no welfare system for the poor; nor does he try to create a democratic system of governance that will limit corruption.

Isaiah Berlin, in 'Historical Inevitability' (1953), attacks systems of thought which claim the inevitability of everything, in the belief, as Berlin puts it, that 'everything is caused to occur as it does by the machinery of history itself - by the impersonal forces of class, race, culture, History, Reason, the Life-Force, Progress, the Spirit of the Age' (1975: 50-1). The omission of Religion is strange. What of systems of faith which teach acceptance of destiny or fate? In *The Harafish*, Mahfouz, presents the case both for and against historical inevitability.

Mahfouz regards the rich and powerful as more rational than the common people. One of the 'notables', a local sheik, points out: 'I don't trust our people's imagination. They believe good began and ended in an obscure past and they don't distinguish between dreams and reality. They think with their emotions and their judgments are clouded because of the wretched conditions they live in. They think an angel came down from the skies every now and then to protect their ancestors' (4: 43). Ashur is such an angel, a legend after his mysterious

disappearance, possibly murdered by an envious rival; and as time passes he becomes the focus of almost messianic hopes, that he will return and uproot the evil in the world. Such beliefs help the *harafish* accept their fate but also make them a potential danger to the 'notables'.

At moments, when out of sheer moral outrage the *harafish* erupt spontaneously with the force of a flood or earthquake, destroying everything in their path. One such moment occurs at the end of the book, when the once-powerful family of Ashur is reduced, like hundreds of thousands of other Egyptians, to living in the Cairo cemetery. But then miraculously, Ashur, the namesake of the original hero of the *harafish*, and practically a reincarnation of him, challenges the corrupt clan leader, Hassuna. Hassuna's gang of thugs, about to kill Ashur, are stopped by the *harafish*:

'The *harafish* poured out of the lanes and derelict buildings, shouting, brandishing whatever weapons they had been able to lay hands on: bricks, bits of wood, chairs, sticks' (10: 45).

Surging forward like a flood, enraged by a history of chronic injustice and generations of oppression, the *harafish* drive away their corrupt leaders and their lackeys and make Ashur the new clan chief. In moments such as this, Mahfouz reveals the potential for an 'Arab Spring', indeed for revolution of any and all peoples denied good governance in a modern world, in which lack of effective health and welfare, transport, water and electricity supplies is no longer an 'act of God' - but a crime.

The love of the sacred poor: Lispector, The Hour of the Star

Macabéa, the central figure in Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star*, is linked by her unusual, ironic name with the Apocrypha - works which remained 'on the outside', unincluded in the biblical canon: her name recalls 'Maccabee', or 'hammer' in Hebrew, the name of the heroic ancient Israelite family that fought the Syrian-Greeks and won a victory commemorated to this day in the festival of Hanukkah. In her poverty, there is nothing heroic about Macabéa, the embodiment of inequality and injustice, trapped by pervasive Latin American poverty. At 19, with her life theoretically ahead of her, she in fact has reached the end. She is destined to be like all the other poor, as Orwell observed in Marrakesh in 1939: 'They arise out of the earth, they sweat and starve for a few years, and then they sink back into the nameless mound of the graveyard and nobody notices that they are gone. And even the graves themselves soon fade back into the soil'.[94] Lispector writes of Macabéa to ensure she is remembered.

As in the Scriptural view of the poor, Macabéa is associated with sanctity, dignified by a past of which she is ignorant. So ancient is she as to be 'biblical' (1992: 30), and biblical allusions (for example, to Moses and the 'divinity of words' [79] and Pharaoh) are scattered throughout her story. Macabéa might be compared with Ruth in the Bible inasmuch as she, too, is spiritually elevated by privation. She comes from the impoverished northeast of Brazil to Rio to find work and joins the anonymous mass of exploited, undernourished women struggling to survive. In Brazil, the inferior status of woman is in part the residue of a slave society. Macabéa is defined by being 'on the outside': a poor, single Brazilian woman in Rio de Janeiro, without family or friends, she symbolizes millions, rich in humanity, poor in education and life chances, vulnerable to harm.

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[94] Orwell (1984: 30). Compare Psalm 103: 15-16: 'The days of man are but as grass: for he flourisheth as a flower of the field. For as soon as the wind goeth over it, it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more.' These lines were included in the Choral Evensong with the Interment of the Ashes of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Westminster Abbey, December 12, 1947; the Webbs, both socialists, were among the founders of the London School of Economics.

Lispector, in her immense sympathy for the poor, brings to mind the pre-Holocaust Yiddish literature of Eastern Europe, where most of the world's Jewish population was concentrated, and where millions lived in almost medieval conditions which were made worse by anti-Semitic persecution.[95] Yiddish was the main language of the Jewish milieu where she was born, in Ukraine during the Russian civil war and the horrific pogroms of 1918-21. She may be alluding to a once-famous Yiddish story - Isaac Leib Peretz's 'Bontshe the Silent' - in the references to the one luxury Macabéa allows herself - sips of cold coffee. Bontshe, tormented but stoical in life - he is called 'Bontshe the Silent' as he never complains - arrives in heaven to be greeted by all the heavenly hosts as a paragon of virtue. Asked what he would like, all he can think of is a coffee and a roll, this being the height of luxury he can imagine. Macabéa shares with Bontsha a 'legacy of misfortune'; she is ground down by life but does not know it: if she did, she would be a 'suicide case' (58).

The male narrator struggles in choosing Macabéa, for she differs from countless others perhaps only in the extent of her naiveté, protecting her from seeing how sordid and disadvantaged her life is. The narrator is troubled by Macabéa's poverty: he is well-to-do, as are his readers; her story will never reach the poor. Her life is not romanticized - it is ugly and narrow and full of privation. The narrator finds his own life intertwining with hers and yearns to share her life, her nothingness: 'I want to walk naked or in rags' (19); through Macabéa, 'I utter my cry of horror to existence' (33). Macabéa's life is illumined 'so that you may recognize her on the street' (19). But what is her life? She never loses faith, and even her sorrow is 'an abortive form of happiness'; and her emptiness 'replenishes the souls of saints (35, 37). Faced with the question, 'Who am I?', Macabéa replies: 'Since I am, the solution is to be' (33); she seeks the glamor of Greta Garbo and Marilyn Monroe and awaits her hour of stardom.

[95] On poverty in the literature of eastern European Jews, see Aberbach (1993b).

Yet, Macabéa is unneeded and unwanted, her existence 'one long meditation on nothingness' (37). Her anonymity is such she goes unnamed for nearly half the book. She is taken up by a petty thief, Olimpico, himself impoverished, a self-important loser, who callously sees Macabéa as being lower than himself. Her name, he says, has the sound of a skin disease, to which she replies:

'I agree but it's the name my mother gave me because of a vow she made to Our Lady of Sorrows if I should survive. For the first year of my life, I wasn't called anything because I didn't have a name. I'd have preferred to go on being called nothing instead of having a name that nobody has ever heard of, yet it seems to suit me - - she paused for a moment to catch her breath before adding shyly and a little downhearted - - for as you can see, I'm still here… so that's that' (43).

Lispector seems at times not so much to tell Macabéa's story as to hang out the scraps of her life. Fragile from birth, she is prone to typhoid fever, calcium deficiency and lung disease. She loses her parents at two. Even their names are lost to her. Raised by an unloving aunt, she kisses the walls as child. She has three years of school. Of languages other than Portuguese she knows nothing. In Rio, alone and starved for food and for love, she shares one room with four other girls in a slum in a red-light district. Earning less than the minimum wage, she works as a typist. Dogs are better-fed than she is (26).[96] She lives on hot dogs and coffee, soft drinks and mortadella sandwiches. Sometimes she eats paper: her body is 'drier than a half-empty sack of toasted breadcrumbs' (38); and she coughs with a persistent cold. All sorts of ordinary things are luxuries to her: coffee with milk, cod liver oil, lipstick, and just to have a future, to live…

Macabéa's world in Rio consists of a boss who exploits her, a boyfriend who abandons her, a workmate who steals her boyfriend. Yet, as the narrator observes, happiness was in her nature:

[96] In literature on the poor, human life is often described as cheap as beasts. In *Germinal* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, animals are described as being better-fed than the poor.

‘Macabéa didn’t worry too much about her own future: to have a future was a luxury. She had learned from her favourite radio programme that there were seven billion inhabitants in the world. She felt completely lost. But it was in her nature to be happy so she soon resigned herself: there were seven billion inhabitants to keep her company’ (58).

Macabéa sees a doctor once in her life, and he diagnoses pulmonary TB. This is a doctor of the poor. She is so ignorant of medicine that she cannot see what a rotten doctor he is, a parasite on the poor:

‘He saw medicine simply as a means of earning a living. It had nothing to do with dedication or concern for the sick. He was negligent and found the squalor of his patients utterly distasteful. He resented having to deal with the poor whom he saw as the rejects of that privileged society from which he himself had been excluded. It had not escaped him that he was out of touch with the latest trends in medicine and new clinical methods, but he had all the training he was likely to need for treating the lower orders. His desire was to earn enough money to do exactly what he pleased: nothing’ (67).

Lispector, like a defense attorney, and using the narrator as a mouthpiece, articulates all that Macabéa thinks and feels, but cannot express. When the doctor diagnoses her as having TB, and tells her to ‘get the hell out of here’, the narrator, a man, exclaims:

‘Yes, I adore Macabéa, my darling Maca. I adore her ugliness and her total anonymity for she belongs to no one. I adore her for her weak lungs and her under-nourished body. How I should like to see her open her mouth and say:
- I am alone in the world. I don’t believe in anyone for they all tell lies, sometimes even when they’re making love. I find that people don’t really communicate with each other. The truth comes to me only when I’m alone’ (68).

The narrator insists, 'I alone love her' (27), he longs to be Macabéa's parent, to look after her. Malnourishment has left her with 'ovaries as shrivelled as overcooked mushrooms':

'Oh, if only I could seize Macabéa, give her a good scrubbing and a plate of hot soup, kiss her on the forehead and tuck her up in bed. So that she might wake up to discover the great luxury of living' (58).

The narrator reveals the extent of her degradation on what turns out to be her last day on earth. Here we find something of Lispector's relationship to Macabéa. For Lispector knew that she, too, was about to die, and *The Hour of the Star* would be her final work. As Macabéa lies dying at the end of the story, feeling supremely happy for she is 'born for death's embrace', the narrator confesses that 'Death is my favorite character in this story': 'She is finally free of herself and of me… I have just died with the girl… I now understand this story…'; the narrator joins her in death: 'Macabéa has murdered me' (85). The identification of narrator and character seems to be why the narrator, obsessed with Macabéa, has such trouble with her, with her solitude, her privations and stunted sensuality, her blessed ignorance, the randomness and meaninglessness of her life, and the absurdity of her death. Lispector seems to be aiming for a distillation of the truth in all its horror and degradation but in all its magnificence and hope, culminating in Macabéa's last words, 'as for the future…' (84). In Macabéa, Lispector seeks the wealth of an impoverished human being in an impoverished narrative. In a foul rag and bone shop of humanity that is Brazil, a land of fabulous natural resources blotted by *favelas*, Lispector reaches for a summing up, a final affirmation, involving as she calls it, 'the greatness of every human being'. The ancient biblical purity and holiness of the poor is rediscovered in Macabéa: 'in her poverty of body and soul, one touches sanctity' (21).

Conclusion

We have considered the origins of the notion of the 'holy poor' and its vicissitudes, in Poor Law and in the literature from ancient to modern times. The idealized biblical view of the poor might have had particular meaning in the 6th century BCE, after the destruction of the Judean kingdom and the Temple in Jerusalem, the exile to Babylonia, and the general impoverishment which followed, breaking down barriers of class and wealth. The elevation of the poor was the elevation of the nation. It is mostly in conditions of exile, or the threat of exile, that the Hebrew prophets attack inequality, injustice and the maltreatment of the unfortunates of society, as causes of national disaster: the rich are at fault, their wealth having led to moral corruption, and the punishment of exile. Whether or not this was in fact the case, the link between morality and survival raised the status of the poor. The Bible presents these as fundamental truths for all time, which modern economists starting with Adam Smith call into question, though all, whatever their differences, in their own ways continue the biblical insistence on justice as an essential precondition for eliminating extreme poverty. Yet, the Bible itself has much evidence that, despite its elevation of the 'holy poor', the poor were often neglected and maltreated. Later monotheist societies were left chronically vulnerable to hypocrisy: for in seeking to control the poor and reduce poor rates by investigating suspected fraud, they inevitably broke with the spirit of biblical laws defending the poor. The biblical ideal is, in effect, the prototype of all later ideals which promised, and failed, to give the poor a better life. Christian Europe adopted Scriptural authority but, in practice, Poor Law betrayed the poor, as did secular ideologies, including democracy, socialism, revolution, and capitalism.

After the mid-19th century, however, disillusionment with ideology accompanied radical improvement in the conditions of the poor in the West. Literature on poverty and the poor became part of a social revolution brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, at the juncture between agricultural and urban society, imperial monarchy and democracy. Literature in

some ways took over the traditional Scriptural defence of the poor, as a cultural arm of the state and its legislative commitment in fighting poverty. Post-1789 literature tends to side not with thinkers such as Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, and Friedrich Nietzsche who find fault with the poor, but with those such as Thomas Paine, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx, who adapt biblical compassion and concern for the poor into modern social systems of thought. The resounding call at the end of Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848) for the workers in all countries to unite was also a call, in the revolutionary spirit of 1848, for mass poverty to end.

Love of the 'holy poor', though impractical, is imprinted in the fabric of Western literature as are the practical measures in the Bible: agricultural poor laws, charity for the poor, and passionate commitment to equality before the law and social justice, to narrow the gap between rich and poor and preserve human dignity - these tenets survive in literature, though often with the accusation of moral failing. Whereas in much of the West after 1789 the Bible became increasingly irrelevant theologically, its influence spread in many parts of the developing world, transmitted as part of 19th century imperial expansion but taking on a postcolonial life of its own. The dynamism of African Anglicanism contrasts with the decline of the Church in England; the relevance of Roman Catholicism is more strongly felt in Latin America than in European Catholic countries, including Italy. Since 1945, the influence of Scripture is felt strongly in the literature of developing countries, as illustrated in works by Achebe, Coetzee, Mahfouz and Lispector. There is irony in the fact that Western economic systems which often degrade the poor tend to benefit them far more than theological systems which speak of the pure and holy poor. Where biblical influence is greatest today, in Africa and Latin America, where ideas of liberation theology and the power of the Church are greatest - that is where poverty predominates in the world today. Where poverty is limited Scriptural influence is similarly limited. Scripture itself anticipates this development, for it associates wealth with the corruption and

abandonment of faith;[97] the poor are more loyal to their faith than the rich. Though signs of decline should not be exaggerated,[98] in traditionally Christian European countries where extreme poverty was eradicated, Christian observance weakened and Church attendance declined. Scripture is often most meaningful among the poor in fragile or failed states, where rule of law is weak or has collapsed; and in some of the notable literature of the Third World, the Bible remains a living force, a source of meaning for the present and an agent of progress. Literature illumining the poor as individuals continues to be the enemy of inequality and injustice; not coldly but with deepest passion, with outrage, fury, satire, compassion, disgust, and horror - at the people and institutions, sacral and secular, which let poverty fester; often it speaks not just to its time, but also with the voice of the downtrodden of the ages.

[97] See, for example, Deuteronomy 32: 15, Matthew 6: 24.

[98] Trentmann (2016) observes that religion, commerce and consumerism have had a remarkable inter-connected growth; in early 21st century Western Europe, Christians outnumber agnostics by 2-1; ex-Communist East European countries where the Church was suppressed, became both richer than under Communism and began again to attract Christian believers; similarly, in the Arab world, oil wealth aided the Islamic revival; and in China, economic growth was accompanied by a growth in Buddhism *(ibid*., 607, 609).

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