Historical anticipations of critical theology

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Why Social Theory Matters for Theology

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Introduction

The use of social theory in contemporary Canadian critical theologies is part of a long and broad tradition in Christianity of conversation with various ideas and forms of knowledge in the surrounding culture. For example, the Gospel of John (1: 1-18), the Acts of the Apostles (17:16-34), and the epistles of Paul (Romans 1:18-2:16) suggest early efforts to preach the good news of Jesus Christ in terms understandable in the dominant culture of the Mediterranean world. Within a few decades, many early Christian theologians were regularly employing ideas from current philosophical and religious systems, including Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Stoicism.

In the context of Christians' refusal to worship the Roman deities and emperor and the Roman Empire's campaigns of persecution against them, many Christians sought to demonstrate that Christianity was no threat to Rome because what it taught was consistent with the best teaching of the philosophers. In the second century, Tertullian criticized pagan philosophy as the source of heresy. But even he "could not avoid quoting the very philosophy against whose pretensions he had spoken so violently" and, therefore, he demonstrates "the continuing and unavoidable, if not always acknowledged or even conscious, influence of philosophical ideas on Christian doctrine" (Pelikan, 1971, p. 50). For 1200 years, Platonic philosophy was Christian theology's main partner in the conversation about God, humanity, and the world. After the Crusades brought medieval Europe into contact with Islamic culture — which had preserved Aristotelian philosophy — in the 13th century, theologians such as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas brought Aristotle into the conversation. The Protestant Reformers of the 16th century were similarly indebted to nominalist philosophy, and in subsequent centuries theologians have continued Christianity's engagement with philosophers from René

Philosophy is not the only form of knowledge with which Christian theology has been engaged. Since the 17th century and the rise of modern science in Europe and North America, the natural sciences have also become an important, if ambiguous, conversation partner for Christian theology. On one hand, the success of science in explaining natural phenomena has tended to relegate the role of religion to the inner life of the individual. On the other hand, the Christian credal affirmation of God as creator and governor of the world seems to require articulating, in conversation with scientific knowledge, a faith in a God who cares for and is involved with the world. The parallel development of capitalism and industrialization in the same period generated a body of economic theory with which Christians have also been in conversation. This conversation has likewise been ambiguous. For example, as witnessed in the tendency of some Protestants to regard material success as evidence of being among God's elect, some Christians have interwoven religious and economic thought in ways that justify capitalism's production of plenty for the few and privation for the many. By contrast, others have placed theology and economic theory in a mutually critical conversation. As a result, they have found wanting not only those economic structures and systems that perpetuate injustice and inequality but also those theologies that neglect the extent to which justice in all personal and social relations in this world are central to the gospel.

Critical theologies are examples of this latter approach. In their concern for just social relations, they are rooted not only in modern economic theory but also in elements of the Bible and the history of Christian theology and practice. Exodus tells of God's defeat of the political and economic order of Egypt and liberation of the enslaved and exploited Hebrew people, and Israel's prophetic traditions typically reflect a critical perspective on religious practices that ignore the material needs of the poor (e.g., Amos 5:21-24 and Micah 3:5-12). Further, the gospels report that Jesus warned of the dangers of insensitivity to the poor and taught that care for the poor is central to discipleship (e.g., Luke 16:19-31 and Matthew 25:31-46). In Christianity's first few centuries, its leaders sometimes justified the possession of wealth in terms of its right use, as seen in Clement of Alexandria's sermon "The Rich Man's Salvation." They also sometimes used the Church's own wealth to aid those in need, as demonstrated by Bishop Ambrose of Milan's relief to victims of a late fourth-century Goth rebellion against Roman authority.

Like that of the Mediterranean world under Rome, the dominant world view of European Christendom in the medieval and Reformation periods assumed that the established order of the world could not be changed. Church efforts on behalf of the poor, therefore, emphasized charity rather than the transformation of the social and economic system. Nevertheless, some episodes in Christian history offer more pointed challenges to the prevailing order. The increase in trade and the rise of a monetary economy in Europe in the late 12th and early 13th centuries led to the growth not only of cities, but also of the gap between rich and poor. In this context, the voluntary poverty advocated by Francis of Assisi, combined with preaching
and ministering to the needs of the poor and sick in the cities, served several functions. It was a spiritual discipline, a critique of the dominant economic system, and a way of living in solidarity with those whom that system had made and kept poor. Later, when the work of the Protestant reformers generated hope for the overthrow of all oppressive yokes, political and economic as well as religious, the German Peasants' Revolt of 1524-25 demanded justice from the princes on explicitly Christian grounds. When both the peasants and the princes turned to violence, the revolt was bloodily suppressed and a more thorough examination of the relation between Christian faith and justice in this world was postponed (Cole-Arnal, 1999, pp. 12-43; Gonzalez, 1984, pp. 190-91,301-07, and 1985, pp. 41-42).

Modern Social and Economic Changes and Christian Responses

Christian critiques of unjust social and economic systems developed more fully in the 18th and 19th centuries in the wake of the social changes wrought by the rise of capitalism and industrialization in Europe and North America. Through the 17th century, the economies of Europe and North America had been based primarily on agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, and trade in the goods that these activities produced; farm families, craftspeople, and servants had done most of the labour, and most of the population had lived in rural areas. By the 16th century, European colonial expansion had added slaves and indentured servants to the labourers; slaves, raw materials, and agricultural products from the colonies were added to the list of goods traded. In the late 18th century, the industrialization of manufacturing developed and spread. Along with its spread went the related social and economic changes, such as the rapid expansion of cities, displacement of people from farms, unemployment and impoverishment of many of those displaced, and increased alienation of poor and rich. Criticism of these social evils appeared in poetry, fiction, philosophy, and politics as well as in Christian concern for the plight of the poor under the new social and economic conditions. Among its most important expressions was the struggle for the abolition of slavery, which had become a deeply entrenched and strenuously rationalized element of the social and economic system of Europe and the Americas. The 1814-15 Congress of Vienna ended the slave trade by European nations, and the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and 1865 Union victory in the Civil War ended slavery in the United States. The struggle for political and economic justice for freed slaves and their descendants, however, continues to the present (Cragg, 1970, pp. 154-55; Cole-Arnal, 1999, pp. 46-49; White, 1990).

In England and North America, a key factor in Protestant Christianity's engagement with the social and economic evils of the day was the rise and the wide influence of evangelicalism. From its origins in the early 18th century until its fragmentation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, evangelicalism was a multifaceted and dynamic religious movement. With roots in both English Puritanism and German Pietism, it encompassed various religious beliefs and practices within
shared fundamental convictions: salvation was seen as God's free gift, accepted and actualized by people through personal repentance, conversion, and holy living; repentance and holy living were regarded as more important than doctrine, and all matters of Christian belief and practice were guided by the Reformation principle of sola scriptura.

Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and George Whitefield were among evangelicalism's most important early exemplars, and, while it influenced all Protestant churches to some extent, Methodism became one of its primary channels. In the mid-18th century, at its end, and at the start of the 19th, the religious revivals of the First and Second Great Awakenings in North America both expressed and spread the influence of evangelicalism. And as evangelicalism grew, it became concerned not only with individual holiness, but also with the ways in which social institutions could be conformed to the sovereignty of God and redeemed life in Christ. As the 19th century unfolded, evangelicals became increasingly involved in the abolition, temperance, and Sunday observance movements. They were engaged in domestic and foreign mission work, in charitable enterprises such as hospitals and orphanages, and in relief work for those most severely victimized by the ill effects of an unregulated industrial capitalism. They also promoted co-operation among evangelicals in the various churches. In the United States this co-operation led to the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in the late 19th century and the Federal Council of Churches early in the 20th. In Canada it led to the church union movement and, ultimately, the formation in 1925 of The United Church of Canada (Cragg, 1970, pp. 141-56, 179-85; Noll, 1992, pp. 91-113, 166-90; Grant, 1996, pp. 159-60).

North American evangelicalism was also characterized by its millennial eschatology, that is, the hope that the thousand-year reign of peace and justice described in Revelation 20 would be established in history. Through the mid-19th century, evangelicalism accommodated two types of millennial expectation. One type (now described either as millenarianism or premillennialism) expected that the millennium would be inaugurated by the return of Jesus Christ and a catastrophic end of the present world order. The other type (known either as millennialism or postmillennialism) expected the gradual realization of God's purposes in history and the return of Jesus Christ at the end of the millennium. The two types reflected different views of the relationship between divine initiative and human effort in bringing the redemption of the world to its completion. The former held that redemption comes about almost exclusively through God's action, while the latter allowed a greater role for human effort in bringing God's redemptive work to completion. Postmillennialism was the dominant form of millennial expectation among evangelicals, who regarded events such as the Protestant Reformation, the Great Awakenings, the abolition of slavery, and church union as signs of the progressive realization of God's purposes in the world. They also regarded their efforts to Christianize the social order, including the economic order, as the means by which the redeemed co-operate with divine initiative to advance the coming of the kingdom of God. In harmony with the prevailing ideology of inevitable
progress that characterized European and North American culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Christians confidently expected that human endeavor would continue to bring the kingdom closer and closer (Grant, 1996, pp. 159-78).

By the late 19th century North American evangelicalism was becoming fragmented, due to evangelicals' divergent responses to social and intellectual crises. These crises included the challenges to the authority and interpretation of the Bible that stemmed from the development of historical biblical criticism, the emergence of theories of biological evolution, and the use of the Bible by some Christians to defend slavery and the subjugation of women to men. For a time, many Protestants had been able to consider themselves both evangelical and liberal, but by the early 20th century those who continued to call themselves evangelicals maintained only some of the characteristic emphases of 19th-century evangelicalism, while those who came to call themselves liberals maintained other emphases. Conservative evangelicals embraced premillennialism more exclusively, looking to Christ's return to establish God's reign on earth, while liberal evangelicals adhered to postmillennialism and continued to expect the growth of righteousness on earth until the start of Christ's reign (Airhart, 1992, pp. 123-44; Noll, 1992, pp. 363-89).

Contemporary Protestant critical theologians are descended from these latter heirs of the earlier evangelicalism, especially from proponents of the Social Gospel. The Social Gospel arose from the interaction of religious traditions and social and economic changes in North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It continued the evangelical commitment to a sanctified society through political reform, outreach to the urban poor and immigrants, and attempts to address the causes as well as the effects of poverty and unemployment. As capitalism and industrialization in North America expanded, the Social Gospel also criticized both the results and the principles of the new economic order: ostentatious living, class alienation and antagonism, competition and the profit-motive, and the unchecked power of organized capital.

Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist pastor and professor who is the best known representative of the Social Gospel in the United States, accurately described the movement's view of the relation between Christianity and the economic order: "[T]he Kingdom of God includes the economic life; for it means the progressive transformation of all human affairs by the thought and spirit of Christ. And a full salvation also includes the economic life; for it involves the opportunity for every man to realize the full humanity which God has put into him as a promise and a call." He also recognized that an adequate critique of the economic order required a critical approach to Christian theology: "So we must begin at both ends simultaneously. We must change our economic system in order to preserve our conscience and our religious faith; we must renew and strengthen our religion in order to be able to change our economic system" (Rauschenbusch, 1912, pp. 458-60).

Within a few years after Rauschenbusch wrote these words, the First World War shattered the ideology of inevitable progress, and a little over a decade later the Great Depression scattered what pieces of it may have remained. Despite the
chastening of their optimistic expectations, many North American Christians remained committed to the view that salvation is not just an inner, spiritual, and individual matter, but it rather encompasses the whole world, including the social and economic order. The Social Gospel had reached its apex around the turn of the 20th century, and thus had been largely associated with liberal evangelicalism as reflected in Canada, for example, in the work of Salem Bland, Beatrice Brigden, Nellie McClung, and J.S. Woodsworth. After the war, the emerging crisis or neo-orthodox theologies of Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others undertook a theological reconstruction. They rejected liberalism's easy optimism and highly positive assessment of human abilities to realize God's purposes, and they did so in a way that emphasized the social dimension of faithfulness to God. As Douglas John Hall observes: "What troubled these theologians was not merely a doctrinal concern for the purity of biblical and Reformation faith, but a theological-ethical concern for the world beloved – and therefore judged (krisis) by God." Barth’s Römerbrief (first published in 1918 and later translated into English as The Epistle to the Romans) was immensely influential "not only because of its critical theology but also because of its sociopolitical critique – and the two are inseparable" (Baum, 1999, p. 11). After the war and during the Great Depression, which many regarded as proof not only of the fallacy of inevitable progress but also of the failure of capitalism, some Canadian Christians used elements of evangelicalism, liberalism, and neo-orthodoxy as they analyzed the crisis and articulated the meaning of the good news in that context (Allen, 1971, pp. 302-312; Cole-Aral, 1999, pp. 132-134; Schweitzer, in Baum, ed. 1999, pp. 49-60).

Theological Rationale for Engagement with Social and Economic Theory

One important expression of this effort among Canadian Protestants was the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order (FCSO), established in 1934 in Kingston, Ontario, as “an association of Christians whose religious convictions have led them to the belief that the capitalist economic system is fundamentally at variance with Christian principles; and who regard the creation of a new social order to be essential to the realization of the Kingdom of God” (Legge, 1992, p. 41). The FCSO’s 1936 book Towards the Christian Revolution, edited by R. B. Y. Scott and Gregory Vlastos with essays by themselves and six others, discussed the theological, philosophical, and economic rationale for Christian social reconstruction. The writings of pastor and theologian Richard Roberts before and during the Great Depression provide another significant example of the attempt to achieve a Christian society. Roberts, the minister of a downtown Toronto church at the start of the depression, was involved in efforts to mobilize the young United Church of Canada’s resources to respond to people’s needs, and was moderator of the United Church from 1934-36. Although not a member of the FCSO or in complete agreement with its views, Roberts nevertheless wrote the brief foreword to Towards the Christian Revolution. In it he commended “the reading of this book to all

A key element of the background for contemporary critical theologies is the theological rationale for the importance for the Christian life of engagement with the social and economic order and knowledge of its structures, systems, and processes – in short, the case for why social and economic theory matters for Christian theology. For centuries, Christian theologians have engaged in conversation with philosophy, science, and other forms of knowledge to help make the faith intelligible to the times or to interpret it to other cultures. Critical theologians have employed social and economic theory, in part for these reasons, but more importantly to make specific normative claims about the content of Christian faith and its application in life. Taken together, Richard Roberts and members of the FCSO represent some of the typical ways in which North American Protestants, during a pivotal period in Christian theology, grounded their concern for just social and economic relations in several related theological sources. Eugene Forsey, then Lecturer in Economics and Political Science at McGill University, noted in *Towards the Christian Revolution*:

The insertion of a chapter on economics into a religious book ought not to need either explanation or defence. The field of religion is the whole of life. That should be explanation and defence enough. There are still, however, many who insist that the business of religion is the development of Christian character in the individual and that if only we can produce enough sanctified individuals economic problems will solve themselves. But Christian character does not develop in a vacuum. It is forged in the struggles of daily life; and most of the daily life of most people is spent in the effort to satisfy economic wants. The struggle for bread is not the only thing in life, nor the highest thing. But it is basic, for without bread there is no life. (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, p. 98)

**God's Sovereignty over All of Life and the Mission of the Church**

Forsey and his colleagues articulated their conviction that "religion is the whole of life" explicitly in terms of their understanding of God's sovereignty over all. A minister in Bedeque North, Prince Edward Island, J.W.A. Nicholson maintained that "Nothing human is alien to God.... From the lowest animal need to the loftiest aspiration of the soul, whatever contributes to the enrichment of the individual without impoverishing another, belongs to the social plan and must conform to the divine purpose" (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, p. 178).²

This conviction of God's sovereignty over all also held implications for the understanding of the Church and its mission in the world. "It is never to be forgotten," argued Richard Roberts, "that the Church appears in the New Testament under the figure of the Body of Christ" and that "the Christ who in Jesus
became incarnate in a body of flesh continues in the Church incarnate in a body of people." As the Body of Christ, therefore, the mission of the church is

to assimilate to itself more and more of the unredeemed tracts of life, assimilating first the nation and in turn being absorbed into it until the whole nation has become a body of Christ.... And the Church's work in the world will be done when the School, the University, the Workshop, the Market-place, the Studio and the Farm know that they belong to one another and work together in the unity of life in God. (Roberts, 1926, p. 169)

While maintaining that the "Church is concerned therefore with life as a whole," Roberts cautioned that "the Church should not try to impose its own will upon commercial or political institutions." Nevertheless, he affirmed that "it belongs to its duty to declare what the regulative spirit and principle both of commerce and government, of education and art should be.... It has indeed the duty to criticize and even to condemn – if that be necessary – policies, whether economic or political, that violate or deny the values of life as it understands them" (Roberts, 1926, pp. 169-70).

**Biblical Traditions on the Social Dimension of Righteousness**

In addition to their convictions about the sovereignty of God and the mission of the church, biblical traditions were also important to Roberts and the members of the FCSO in their conception of the relation between theology and social and economic theory. Like many of their contemporaries, they understood various elements of biblical traditions as teaching that the relationship between God and humanity was both personal and social, and, therefore, that both individual and communal life were to conform to the requirements of divine righteousness. R.B.Y. Scott, at that time Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis at United Theological College, Montreal, argued in *Towards the Christian Revolution* that in the biblical view humans are a unified "psycho-physical organism" such that their "physical and...spiritual welfare ought not to be sharply contrasted." Further, the Exodus covenant between God and God's people established "an ethical brotherhood within the community corresponding to the justice and mercy of its God. Social morality was thus not incidental, but fundamental" (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, pp. 78-79).

With this unified material and spiritual, social, and personal understanding of human well-being, the Hebrew prophets later also understood God as Lord of all: Lord of nature and history as well as the community. In the contexts of injustice among the people and exile by other nations, there arose not only the affirmation that God wills social righteousness but also the expectation that God "would intervene, directly or through his representative the Messiah, to establish a social order of justice, neighborhood and peace [Isaiah 9:1-7; 11:1-9; 65:17-25] .... One of the greatest prophetic voices declares that the Messiah's mission is that of an
emancipator of the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives and the oppressed [Isaiah 61:1-31" (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, p. 89).

The ministry of Jesus must therefore be understood within the context of this prophetic tradition. Scott called particular attention to Luke 4:16-21, the account of Jesus reading from Isaiah in the synagogue and taking the prophet's words as his commission.

This deliberate acceptance of a Messianic role which included the championship of the poor and disinherited, is an important consideration in view of the statement frequently made by comfortable Christians that Christ left economic matters alone and the church should do the same. It is quite true that Jesus did not propound an economic doctrine distinct from his religious message. But he took on himself the mantle of the prophets, and declared that the divine revolution on which they had staked their hopes was now at hand, providing that, through penitence and faith, men were ready for it. (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, pp. 89-90)

Similarly emphasizing the social dimension of Jesus' fundamental proclamation, and citing contemporary British New Testament scholar C.H. Dodd, Roberts characterized this proclamation as the message "that God had recently given the human race a new start, and that it was God's purpose to create a new human commonwealth, wide as the world, in which all the existing distinctions of race and class would vanish, and which would be held together by a cohesive principle different from that of any known political society" (Roberts, 1926, p. 75).

A central element of that prophetic tradition of God's establishment of the divine order of justice and peace was the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God, itself a social and political image of the relationship God wills for the world. Scott's FCSO colleague Edis Fairbairn, then minister at Canfield United Church, cogently summarized the interrelation of these elements of biblical teaching: "In the social element of Hebrew law, in the prophetic demand for social righteousness, and especially in the gospel conception of the Kingdom of God, we have a social norm linked with the most compelling religious authority, the will of God" (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, pp. 78-81, 89, 185). And the social norm embedded in the idea of the kingdom has a specific content, namely "the abolition of poverty, oppression and economic injustice" (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, p. 90). As a social norm, however, on one hand the kingdom of God provides no set program that can be readily identified with any actual human social, political, or economic order. On the other hand, all actual human, social, political, and economic orders are to be judged by the standard of the kingdom of God.

For the Kingdom, to Jesus, was something which transcended the categories of space and time, and yet might be realized within them; something which had its roots in the Divine Reality, but which might grow up in the sight of men.... It results in a particular kind and quality of human life. But as life is embodied in an organism, so the Kingdom is to "come on earth" in an actual structure of social relationships, if it ever is to be more than a
subjective ideal.... We shall not make the mistake of identifying any particular social order (which is necessarily tentative and approximate) with the final reality of the Kingdom itself. Nor shall we make the other mistake, perhaps more common, of asserting that Christianity is a matter for individuals and has no special relevance to the way society is organized and the way the economic system works. (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, pp. 94-95)

The social character of the kingdom of God is also clear from the manner in which Jesus proclaimed it. Fairbairn maintained that Jesus "called men to follow him, not primarily in personal purity of life and saintly sweetness of disposition, but in loyalty to a Kingdom of God to be implemented in brotherliness towards men" (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, p. 187).

Roberts argued that Jesus understood that his "destiny lay not in a life of local preaching or in the founding of a sect, but in some active and large fashion on the plane of the public life of the nation." His mission, therefore, required that he journey to Jerusalem, the centre of national life and of that which "denied to the human spirit its inheritance in the Kingdom of God." His purpose was to "win His own people into the Kingdom of God so that – in the spirit of the finest prophetic hope – they might become its torch-bearers" to all humanity. His entry into Jerusalem "was in a sense a political demonstration, a public protest against the subordination of man to political systems, a public demand for the subordination of political systems to humane ends." Jesus went to Jerusalem to call the people to choose, hoping that they would make the right choice.

Drawing on the epistles of Paul, as well as on the Gospels, Roberts also maintained that the redemption achieved in Jesus Christ is both personal and social. "Jesus was not only the anticipation of the human future, but the revelation of the divine nature," and as such is an active anticipation that quickens the divine spirit in creation and moves it towards its ultimate fulfillment. Jesus Christ brings about not only a new person, but also a new society and a new creation. In Ephesians 2, for example, Roberts observed that "St. Paul speaks of the new society, the divine commonwealth into which the new man is embodied; and it is plain that he conceives of it as the ultimate human society, transcending all frontiers of race and superseding all other human societies whatsoever" (Roberts, 1929, pp. 46-60,78-86).

**Salvation as Both Social and Personal**

Consistent with this conception of biblical traditions, Roberts and members of the FCSO also understood the redemptive work of Jesus Christ as integrating the spiritual and the material, the personal and the social. This view of salvation necessarily entailed a view of sin, repentance, and holy living as both personal and social. John Line, then Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion at Victoria College, Toronto, indicated the similarities and differences of this view with that of the evangelicalism out of which it had, in part, grown:
Radical Christianity will have a doctrine of sin that is no less emphatic, and its
diagnosis of man's predicament will be in terms of sin. But it will reclassify
human acts and differ from Evangelicalism both by inclusion and exclusion
in what it categorizes as sinful. It will include whatever in disposition
or conduct is unbrotherly, whatever sunders men or is contrary to love and
loyalty. It will judge as sinful all acts and processes that yield affluence, or
even sufficiency, to some while impoverishing others, or that cause power to
be used in unreciprocal ways over the will and freedom of others.... Cognate
to the doctrine of sin will be the call to repent and to bring forth fruits
meet for repentance.... It will lay on men their responsibility for the acts of a
society of which they are a part, and it will bid them repent of all acts and
conditions by which society sins against any of its members. The fruit of
repentance will be the will to transform these conditions. (Scott &
Vlastos, 1936/1989, p. 47)

Similarly, Fairbairn observed that "Where is, indeed, a good deal to be said for
the doctrine of original sin, socially construed." He also quoted American theolo-
gian John Bennett's distinction between sin as deliberately chosen and social evil as
systems in which we find ourselves enmeshed, and Bennett's distinction be-
tween the means necessary for overcoming each: "Deliberately chosen evil can
only be overcome by an inner change of persons, by real repentance and moral
conversion," but "evil which is not deliberately chosen...can only be overcome by a
variety of means which include knowledge of cause and effect and large scale
changes in institutions and in external circumstances by social action" (Bennett,

Line also affirmed evangelicalism's conception of "salvation or justification
which is made possible for the individual not through effort of his own but through
the work and sole merit of Christ," and its belief that "after receiving the gift they
owed God all things, especially full obedience of heart and life." But he criti-
cized the "abundant deficiencies" of evangelicalism as it had been lived in practice,
especially its "tendency, under the influence of nineteenth-century pseudo-indi-
vidualism, to isolate the individual in his religious relation and present his good as
something essentially realizable within himself." Thus, evangelicalism maintained
that just as salvation was unmediated by any action of priest or church, "still less
would it need to be mediated through the individual's social interactions."

While this tendency was consistent with evangelicalism's emphasis on the
gracious, unmerited character of salvation, its result, Line argued, was such that
many Christians had "not felt impelled to understand or accept responsibility for the
trend of social forces, even though they have produced collective conditions and
habits that are contrary to the religious spirit." Against such social complacency,
Line argued that "it is plain that as the life of man is now organized it is not enough
to seek to save the separate souls of individuals; humanity can be saved or lost in its
collective self. So that Evangelical Protestantism must widen its stakes to include
ends of collective as well as individual righteousness, a gospel of social as
well as personal salvation, if it is to meet the needs of the time" (Scott \& Vlastos, 1936/1989, pp. 28-34).

Similarly, R.B.Y. Scott affirmed that "Christianity is the message of life abundant, and all that cramps and destroys life is Christianity's enemy. Included within its message of deliverance from sin and its evil fruits is the promise of deliverance from other men's sins and the collective sins of society" (Scott \& Vlastos, 1936/1989, p. 95). Richard Roberts also pointed to the recent "reawakening of the sense of social responsibility" in Protestantism, and that it "does not sit easily upon our fundamental individualism." And although in response to this reawakening, as he suggested, the "best we have been able to do hitherto is to add a Christian social theory as a sort of postscript to our evangelical orthodoxy," he maintained that much more needed to be done.

But this is a position which cannot be accepted as final, though we shall have to consent to it until Protestants have received what is, after all, the essential Christian experience, which is both personal and social at the same time, so that men will not be able to disentangle their relation to God from their relation to society. And that experience when it comes will be a vision of life as a whole, dramatized under some image of a City of God, of a divine commonwealth of men and women who seek together the true ends of life. And this new faith and experience will when it comes inaugurate a departure more momentous and far-reaching than the Protestant Reformation. (Roberts, 1926, p. 181)

Such a momentous departure, however, would not unfold inevitably from natural human potential, as supposed by the earlier liberal theology. John Line, for example, criticized both social gospel utopianism and the ideology of inevitable progress, arguing that "salvation would not come through gradual or continuous improvement, but would require some radical reversal of [human] concepts and habits." He affirmed that salvation requires "fundamental spiritual reorientations" and "the regeneration of the individual spirit and the re-creation of social life." This critique of theological liberalism, however, did not entail acceptance of "all the tenets of Barthianism." Line and others specifically rejected "its doctrine of the disparity of God and man and of the form of obedience or submission due from man to God," but shared "its realism with respect to the plight of a world that has turned from God. It will agree that man has not the means to save himself but must look to forces in the universe and in history that are not his to command" (Scott \& Vlastos, 1936/1989, pp. 39-40, 48).

While thus denying the inevitable progress toward a redeemed society that liberalism has espoused, Line and others nevertheless affirmed that a redeemed society is possible by God's action. And foremost among God's actions for the redemption of the world is God's action in Jesus Christ. As the earlier evangelicalism had subordinated doctrine to discipleship, Line similarly argued that assent to particular Christological doctrines "is no substitute for surrender to the inherent authority of Jesus as the embodiment of love's graciousness and of love's sover-
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It is in this form that the church needs a revival of faith in the deity of Jesus" (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, p. 49). And as the earlier evangelicalism had maintained that in Christ sanctified, regenerated life is possible for individuals, so too did some of its heirs maintain that in Christ sanctified, regenerated life is possible for societies. Redemption means sanctification as well as justification, actual holy living as well as the forgiveness of sins, and it means this socially as well as personally. As Roberts expressed it:

There is a plane and a succession of nature of which Adam is the origin and the archetype: there is a plane and a succession of spirit of which Jesus is at once the beginning and the end. In Jesus, manhood is joined to deity; and in Him God was starting a new race.... [T]he real achievement of Jesus lay not so much in the accomplishment of a specific task as in the kindling of His own life in men and women. (Roberts, 1926, p. 81)

As the earlier evangelicalism affirmed that the kindling of Christ's life in persons bore fruit in individual behaviour, so too did Roberts and others affirm that it would bear fruit in social structures and relationships. In Line's words, this social understanding of the "fruits meet for repentance" calls us to "repent of all acts and conditions by which society sins against any of its members. The fruit of repentance will be the will to transform these conditions" (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, p. 47).

God's Graciousness Both Here and Hereafter

Line and his colleagues did not, however, regard the transformation of earthly social conditions as the totality of God's redemptive purposes. As the earlier evangelicalism had affirmed that God is both the judge and the hope of the human person, so too did they not only envision "God as judging the world and taking sides" but also aim to "give men a heaven to dream of through dramatizing the life of man as it will be when he has learnt that the purposes in which he becomes united with his fellows are those that make his own life meaningful." In the tradition of postmillennial evangelicalism, their eschatological expectation was neither purely this-worldly nor purely other-worldly, but inextricably linked God's promised future with its possible realization, however partial, in the present. And, Line reassured:

Nor need one fear that this social or terrestrial consummation will displace the older eschatological teaching. In the Old Testament it was when communion with God became so real that men felt a kinship between themselves and God's eternal nature that the hope of immortality was born. So in our time men will have less scruple about extending God's graciousness into the hereafter when the circumstances of their lot are a more convincing witness that God is not altogether neglecting them here. (Scott & Vlastos, 1936/1989, pp. 48-49)
A Living Tradition of Critical Theologies

In their interpretation of biblical traditions, their conception of salvation and eschatology, and their understanding of the sovereignty of God and the mission of the church, Richard Roberts and members of the FCSO, such as John Line and R.B.Y. Scott, articulated a theology for which conversation with social and economic theory was essential for the task of realizing God's redemptive purposes in the world. Since the Second World War, the religious diversity in Canadian society has increased and the dominance of Northern European forms of Christianity decreased. These changes have made it more difficult to achieve public consensus on common cultural assumptions, or to assume that a Protestant understanding of a sanctified society should shape public life. The experience of these decades has revealed the shortcomings of the drive to Christianize the social order in Canada. Not least among the shortcomings have been its failure to address the experience and perspectives of women (Legge, 1992, pp. 47-68), and the way in which its unexamined assumptions about the compatibility of Christianization and Canadianization contributed to the Protestant churches' participation in Aboriginal residential schools (McKay & Silman, 1995; Miller, 1996). Another shortcoming has been that throughout most of the 20th century, theologians who have been concerned about social salvation have tended to neglect the place of creation in God's care for the whole world. As reflected elsewhere in this book, critical theologians today are addressing these and other concerns. In doing so, they stand in the traditions of those like Richard Roberts, the members of the FCSO, and the many others who have understood God's care for the world as requiring our engagement with the social and economic order.

Notes

1 The 1936 edition of *Towards the Christian Revolution* includes the foreword by Richard Roberts, but the 1989 edition does not; and the 1989 edition includes the helpful introduction by Roger Hutchinson. I cite one or the other edition as appropriate, and both editions when referring to material that appears in both.

2 The phrase from the Roman poet and playwright Terence (c. 195-159 B.C.E.), "Homo sum: nihil humanum alienum a me puto" ("I am a human; nothing human is alien to me") had been taken, since the mid-19th century, as something of a motto by Christians concerned to bring redemption to all areas of human life; cf. Roberts, 1926,169.

3 Among theologians of the period between the wars, Richard Roberts seems to have been something of an exception in his attention to both the social and natural worlds (Roberts, 1926,5-17, 23-75; Roberts, 1929,131-51).
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