

Pastoral Care in a time of Global Market Capitalism¹
James Poling, June 18, 2003

Pastoral theology is the study of the micro-world of intrapsychic and interpersonal interactions with the tools of theology and the social sciences for the purpose of support and healing. In a typical class or supervisory session, we analyze the words, voice inflection, pace, and gestures of an intimate conversation between two people, looking for clues to the deep structure of personality and intimate relationships. The hope of such study is that we will see the revelation of God's love and power in action to validate and challenge the theological traditions that give us eyes to see and invite us to see more clearly.²

In Process Theology relationships to the whole universe are present in each moment. Therefore microanalysis of persons and relationships requires attention to the whole social context. Pastoral theology has been slow to understand the social context of everyday human life, although with the help of feminist, African American, and liberation theologies, we have been making progress in recent years. In this article I explore some of the themes in the relationship between the macro-world of global economics and the micro-world of individual and family relationships, trying to improve the ability of our field to do class analysis.

For several years I have been motivated by certain problems in pastoral care and counseling. Since 1985 I have been working as an educator and pastoral counselor in the area of sexual and family violence, and I have been disturbed by the many stories of inappropriate pastoral responses to victims, survivors, and perpetrators. We all know some of the bad responses: divorce is a sin; women should be submissive; children should obey their parents. There are subtle responses from so-called progressive pastors: Are you still in love with him? Are you sure your father/ mother did those things to you? Such responses serve to disempower persons who are oppressed and constitute, in my opinion, malpractice in pastoral care.³

For many years, but especially since 1991 when I first traveled to Managua, Nicaragua, I have been concerned about the pastoral care services for people who are economically vulnerable. In a world where poverty oppresses the majority of the world's people, the theories and techniques of pastoral care underestimate the obstacles in person's lives and impose middle-class values in inappropriate ways. Again, we recognize the worst pastoral advice: stop drinking,

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² Original definition

³ See *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) and *Deliver Us From Evil: Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996)

get a job, take a bath. But there are subtle responses from people who would call themselves progressives – I will help you take responsibility for your own life. Such responses are not good pastoral care and can serve to help establish the ideologies of oppression that create vulnerability.⁴

Three case studies have informed my reflection on pastoral care and economics. Brenda Ruiz, a pastoral counselor in Managua, has written the stories of women she has worked with in Nicaragua.⁵ They each resisted the effects of economic vulnerability and family violence by coming for pastoral counseling and seeking resources to help with healing and reorganization of their lives. Brenda explores the economic, patriarchal, and religious forms of oppression that constrict their lives even as they fight heroically for life and faithfulness. Linda Crockett, a friend from Pennsylvania, has written her personal story of traveling with witness for peace to El Salvador during the worst times of the war when over one million Salvadorans fled to the United States.⁶ Several times she was in a village that was attacked, and the presence of her North American group probably saved the people from a worse fate. As the faith and love of the campesinos transformed her life, she began to explore her own need for healing from the physical and sexual abuse by her mother. She shares her dramatic story of memory and healing. I have my own experiences as a pastoral counselor with male perpetrators of child sexual abuse. The heroic struggle of these men as they tried to heal from the internalized evil in their lives led me to a study of the economic exploitation of marginalized men who provide labor for capitalism without the opportunity for spiritual meaning.⁷

These cases frame the basic questions of my reflection on pastoral care and economics: What do people experience when they are economically vulnerable? How does economic vulnerability contribute to experiences of violence in families and communities? How are economic decisions made that determine the vulnerability of the world's population? How can Christian religion in general, and pastoral care specifically, be a resource of support for those who seek a better life in situations of economic vulnerability and family violence?

⁴ *Render Unto God: Economic Vulnerability, Family Violence, and Pastoral Theology*. (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2003).

⁵ *Render Unto God*, chapter 2. See also Brenda Consuelo Ruiz, *Violencia Contra La Mujer y la Niñez: Una Perspectiva de Salud*. Managua, Nicaragua: Escuela de Enfermería, Universidad Politécnica De Nicaragua (UPOLI), 1998.

⁶ *Render Unto God*, chapter 3. See also Linda Crockett, *The Deepest Wound: How a Journey to El Salvador Led to Healing from Mother-Daughter Incest* (NY: Writer's Showcase, 2001)

⁷ James Newton Poling, *Understanding Male Violence: Pastoral Care Issues*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003)

Pastors and pastoral counselors underestimate economic vulnerability and family violence partly because of the difficulty of understanding the macrosystems that create the economic conditions of people's lives. The large movements of natural resources, capital, and labor around the world are difficult to understand even for economists. I have studied the debates among theologians about market capitalism and tried to evaluate its structure and its impact on the daily lives of people. I find John Cobb to be one of the most reliable theologians on this subject.⁸ I believe that market capitalism has a place in the Christian vision of the world, but only if it is subject to a moral universe of humane values about land, animals, and people. My experience in Nicaragua has convinced me that global capitalism today has no plan for the majority of the world's people who live in desperate poverty. Workers in the United States, some of whom I have seen in pastoral counseling, are disempowered by their participation as labor in this system. When I look at the world through the eyes of the persons I have interviewed, I see capitalism as a corrupt system that must be demystified and transformed in light of the justice of God. We must understand its history and ideology in order to move beyond our own complicity.

To hear the macroeconomists speak, we might be tempted to think of those who are economically vulnerable as passive. In many economic theories, the masses of people are commodified as laborers, consumers, or collateral concerns. For example, when measuring economic output for the Nicaraguan economy, farm laborers who work for \$1 per day are counted as contributing to economic productivity, while peasants growing beans for their families and receiving no wages are not counted. Among people who live in vulnerable situations, there is much creative activity I call resistance to capitalism. I am especially interested in the actions of people who experience both economic vulnerability and family violence. First, there is the resistance of survival and revolt: many people manage to survive in spite of the dehumanizing conditions of their lives; some people revolt to overthrow the systems that create misery for so many. Second, people organize alternative institutions with different values from the greed and competition of capitalism. Cooperative endeavors exist in every community, where people work together for the general welfare and where profit is not the core value. Third, people develop alternative visions of human life that are based on economic justice and nonviolence. I believe that this resistance in Nicaragua, and among African Americans and women in the U.S. holds clues to understanding economic injustice.

Another question is how the Christian tradition provides resources and obstacles for persons who experience economic vulnerability and family violence? The title of my new book, *Render Unto God*, is taken from the ambiguous dialogue in Mark 12 about rendering to God or rendering to Caesar. Theologians have vacillated about whether this passage encourages loyalty to

⁸ John Cobb and Herman Daly, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*. (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

the political economy or rebellion against the dominant powers. The Christian church has always found a way of surviving within the social, political, and economic systems of its time, often by becoming an integral part of the power structures of society itself. Yet Christians in every generation have sought to return to the roots of the faith in the prophetic and persecuted Jesus and the disciple community. The tension between accommodation to the social order and critique and revolt against that order is central to the history of the Christian Church. The same thing is true in relation to market capitalism and its successes and failures.

Some Christians place themselves squarely within the capitalist system and advocate its expansion, believing that all human beings will prosper as capitalism prospers. Other Christians see market capitalism in the twenty first century as an evil force that must be opposed and challenged at every opportunity. Many Christians are somewhere in between.

I am skeptical of capitalism as a fair economic system and its value for humankind primarily because of the massive human suffering in the world during the twentieth century. I place myself among those who try to resist the dominance of capitalism in the world. If the people of the world can establish a humanistic and ecological value system with widespread support, then capitalist markets will have their place. Capitalism must be dethroned from its stature as a religious idol to a penultimate system of economic development, and we need to find the religious resources of our traditions that might contribute to such changes. I believe that resources from the Christian biblical tradition, especially the gospel of Mark and the life and work of Jesus can help us develop a doctrine of the church that embraces an ongoing witness to the values of economic justice and nonviolence.

Pastoral theology always makes the full circle from practice to reflection and back to practice, consistent with Whitehead's view of the relation of theory and experience. How can the people who have resisted economic vulnerability and family violence be empowered by pastoral care and counseling? Just as the church itself has been too often captivated by the dominant economic and ideological order, so pastoral care and counseling has functioned with middle-class, individualistic values that too often put the responsibility for change on persons who seek care. We must begin by listening and validating the experiences of oppression of many persons who seek our help, and revise our theories and practices so that their resistance to economic vulnerability and family violence is strengthened.

Rather than support the dominant order, the goal of care is the transformation of persons and communities toward economic justice and nonviolence, as Jesus taught in his life and by his death on the cross. Pastoral counselors must ask themselves: What do we render to God? Should we serve Caesar and reap the economic privileges of such collusion with injustice, or

should we serve God and risk our economic and physical lives for the sake of the gospel? While our calling does not always come to us in such clear choices, we must remember that our commitment to love God is always primary, and this commitment means that we often must resist the evil systems of this world for the sake of the gospel.

Three questions are especially important for the revision of pastoral theology, care, and counseling in a time of global market capitalism.

- ❖ How can we make the gospel commitments to economic justice and nonviolence more prominent in our doctrine of the church?
- ❖ How can we improve the quality of pastoral care across lines of gender, race, and class?
- ❖ How can we develop a progressive political movement across lines of gender, race, and class lines to transform market capitalism?
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Definition of the church: The Church is the body of Christ, a community of bodies and spirits, of humans and nature, in communion with the Holy Spirit, with the following marks: 1) Inclusive Love; 2) Loving Justice; 3) Nonviolent Resistance to Evil; 4) Multiplicity and Unity; 5) Ambiguity and Goodness.⁹

This definition arises out of my commitment to Process Theology as a framework for understanding the world today. 1) Inclusive love is based on my understanding of the unconditional receptivity of the consequent God, and the corresponding receptivity of each moment of experience to the past actual world. Based on my understanding of victims and perpetrators of violence, inclusive love needs to be carefully developed. For example, the church has not been open to the suffering and hope of victims of family violence because this reality upsets the dominant ideologies of gender, sexuality, and family. Likewise the church has not been open to the full experience of working class and poor people because too often our prosperity is linked to acceptance of the dominant economic realities. On the other hand, the church has not been open to the full experience of perpetrators of violence, the full agony, terror, humiliation, rage, and entitlement that they feel. Accepting and understanding this reality requires structures of accountability that we don't have in the church. I believe that the church should be more radically open and inclusive to the suffering and hope of human life. However, such receptivity requires strong faith and the integrity of boundaries. 2) Loving justice is based on my understanding of God's role as moral guide within the daily lives of people. The task of harmonizing contradictions is important for individuals and larger societies. Injustice often results from tolerating unresolved contradictions that challenge the integrity of the

⁹ Original definition by author. Page 201, *Render Unto God*.

society. For example, how can one part of the global society use 40% of the world's resources while half of the world faces daily threats from hunger, disease, and violence? 3) This leads to nonviolent resistance to evil. I believe that Jesus' witness is that God daily resists the power of evil. I have been convinced of this by studying the resistance of oppressed groups in Nicaragua and elsewhere. Resistance suggests an active, forceful program of engagement that promotes survival and aims to transform the structures of evil. However, this forcefulness must be nonviolent to be consistent with Jesus. The ends of the church must be consistent with the means of its mission. 4) The church must be a community with a balance of multiplicity and unity—the many becoming one and increased by one. Beauty is enhanced when multiplicity is encouraged with a goal of harmonizing the many into one. 5) Finally, the church must be a community with a tension of ambiguity and goodness. Ambiguity means the ability to tolerate particular instances of uncertain morality for the sake of novelty. Goodness means that the larger goal is always the transformation of this ambiguity into goodness. Over-commitment to one's image of goodness can become evil, as all evil masks itself as the good. Too much ambiguity without harmonization can lead to sloth with its own consequences of evil. Apathy in the U.S. population is one of the greatest dangers to the world today. I learned these last two points about multiplicity and ambiguity when I studied with Bernard Loomer at Claremont School of Theology in 1978. He was the first theologian I ever met who was willing to ask about the unity and goodness of God and consider the possibility that God was a multiplicity trying to become a unity and a mixture of moral contradictions trying to become good.¹⁰ This insight has freed me to put my own integrity at risk for the sake of research across lines of gender, race, and class. I submit that this above definition of the church could help us to more prominently deal with economic justice and nonviolence in our identity and programs.

How can we improve the quality of pastoral care across lines of gender, race, and class? The answer is improved training for laity and clergy. The usual training in pastoral care emphasizes empathy, personal history, family system, symptoms, and religious resources.¹¹ I have been teaching these topics for years and I will continue to teach them. But we must add new topics and transform the present list to include attention to gender, race, and class. For example, we must understand the impact of culture, especially in relation to power. There are certainly cultural differences between people, as anyone teaching in pluralistic seminary understands. But there is also cultural injustice and cultural domination. I define cultural domination as “the ability of some groups to make their values the norm by which other cultures are allowed to exist.”¹² When a woman from Nicaragua who has been victimized by family

¹⁰ Loomer, Bernard, William D. Dean, and Larry E. Axel. *The Size of God : The Theology of Bernard Loomer in Context*. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987.

¹¹ Page 213, *Render Unto God*.

¹² *Render Unto God*, p 221.

violence seeks pastoral care, the pastoral caregiver must understand the complexities of this encounter. She brings her culture of language, religion, and daily habits, and she also represents 500 years of economic oppression and resilient survival. Not only is her life the result of generations of economic injustice, but the U.S. culture continues to dominate and destroy the culture of resistance that has been creatively built up over centuries of rebellion and sacrifice. The vulnerabilities and resilience of the person seeking care cannot be seen by the pastoral caregiver without extraordinary sensitivity, especially if she or he is socialized into the dominant U.S. culture and benefits from the economic dominance.¹³

I have developed an interview form to conduct an economic assessment for pastoral caregivers and counselors.¹⁴ In addition to the standard sociological questions, I ask about the amount of control over daily activity at work, and the positive and negative experiences in pastoral care. In using these diagnostic questions in two seminary classes, I have discovered that the students were surprised by the openness of interviewees to talk about their economic life given the taboo nature of this topic. Students also discovered that most people have very little control over their daily jobs, even when they seemed to have adequate income. We were surprised at how vulnerable many people were – i.e. inadequate insurance and pension. Most were only a few paychecks away from economic disaster. Finally, nearly every person we interviewed had had one or more negative pastoral care experiences. That is, they had gone to the pastor for advice and had gotten bad advice, in their own opinion. We found dozens of examples of both good and bad pastoral care related to issues of social and economic class: a gay homeless man was told by priest that he lived in sin; women and men had to leave the church because of divorce;

How can we develop a progressive political movement across lines of gender, race, and class lines to transform market capitalism? I am aware that a new peace and justice movement is now emerging that links groups in many different social locations. I know that many college students are working with labor unions for global justice by organizing marginalized workers in the service and information industries. But the church has been derelict in its duty to bring together people from different social classes with a united political agenda. For example, I teach at Garrett-Evangelical, a United Methodist seminary where I am learning, for example, that the Methodists and the Baptists were the most successful churches in organizing grass-roots congregations in the United States. That is why there is a Methodist Church and a Baptist Church in every community. But as gender, race, and class differences have been exploited by the ruling elite, United Methodists and American Baptists have become professional and middle-class, especially at the leadership level. Therefore they

¹³ Render Unto God, p 221-222.

¹⁴ Render Unto God, pp 224-225.

lost their base in working class and poor communities. Conservatives have done much better in organizing these communities and recruiting them for reactionary causes: opposition to feminism, anti-abortion, anti-affirmative action, monoculturalism. Students have been complaining for years that we do not prepare them for the rural and working class cultures to which they are often called. This is because seminaries themselves are part of the university elitist culture that sets itself apart from working class and poor people. Of course we talk about poverty all the time, and we sometimes even have programs that focus on the poor. But the poor themselves are not well represented in seminaries.

One question asked frequently in the domestic violence movement is this: will your work today help protect at least one woman from family violence and empower at least one poor person who resists capitalism? This does not mean that everything we do has to be immediately practical because the intellectual task itself requires discipline and patience. But it does raise the question of to whom are pastors and scholars accountable for their work? What would be meant to do our work in accountability to working class and poor people in the world? What practical steps could we take to make this accountability real on an everyday basis? Such questions could challenge most professional religious leaders about the economic implications of their work – who pays for it, and who benefits from it.

In summary, I am arguing that the pastoral care and counseling movement has not done an adequate job of providing healing resources for persons who live with economic vulnerability and/or family violence. In order to improve our perspective on these issues, we must listen more carefully to the gender, race, and class issues of those who seek care from the church, we must study the macroeconomic issues of global capitalism, we must study the Scriptures for images of an alternative economic order, and we must revise our training of pastors and congregations for healing and care. I believe all these things are possible and that the church will be more faithful if we do these things.