On Seeing Ourselves: Anthropology and Social Ethics
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How are we as Christians ever going to find our way through the tangled thicket of social justice concerns that confronts the mission of the church in our time? The urgency of these concerns seems to be heightened by something of an “ethics boom” that has swept our society lately. Our individual and collective consciousness has been raised over and over again on a host of subjects from abortion to the latest developments in bio-medical science. Included among these issues are topics on social justice. One analyst after another has staggered us with the intricacies and complexities of a network of interrelated problems that include the international economic order, competing political philosophies, a variety of crises in the environment, and an unacceptable but seemingly irreversible commitment to nuclear weaponry. It appears fair to say that many Christians feel as though they are foundering in a sea of claims and counterclaims. We feel paralyzed by the “issues,” suffering a crisis in conscience but unable to move toward new resolve. In a situation like this it will always be tempting to retreat: to become defensive about one’s lifestyle, to be resistant to change, and to revert to those traditions which insist that the church should concentrate on a ministry to the spiritual needs of individuals.

If we are to forestall that retreat and find a way into and through the vexing problems of peace and justice in our century, we Christians will need to find something at the center of our faith that drives us to do so. If the perspective of our faith does not entail such an engagement with the world, then it simply won’t happen. The energies for reform generated by encouragements to seek justice will be dissipated by the frustrations of the task, if they are not continually renewed by the compelling convictions of our gospel faith. Even appeals to Scripture passages and concepts like God’s shalom are unequal to the task of fashioning an enduring commitment to peace and justice unless we are able to see them as integral to our self-understanding as Christians and to our understanding of the Church’s mission. To be sure, the lingering perversity of our sin will always hobble our stride toward a greater measure of care for human need, but a vision from within the depths of our faith can help to set us free from our lesser inclinations.

I. THEOLOGICAL VISION AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL ETHICS

I am arguing for a renewed theological vision that can enable renewed Christian resolve to accept the challenges of social ethics today. For some that may appear to be the old way of doing things. Haven’t the liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez and some of the “hope theologians” before him taught us that theology is critical reflection on praxis? That is, theology is informed by the activity of the church in the fight against oppression, not the reverse. The task of the church is to be about the business of liberation, not to spin its wheels in theological
reflection. Theological insight will come out of action.
If this is a bit of a caricature of the method of liberation theology à la Gutiérrez, it is not meant to be negative. Theology as *theoria* and Christian action as *praxis* have always belonged together. There is no Christian faith that is not active in love. Liberation theology has helped to revitalize our understanding of that fact and has pointed out some concrete and urgent ways in which the implications of our faith can find expression in our love. Yet, for any *praxis* to occur at all there must be a vision to set it in motion and sustain it. Carl Braaten has put the matter this way:

"Theory can have two meanings. When we say *theoria*, we point to its meaning as vision, which is an ingredient in the original Greek concept. When we say theory, we more commonly have in mind its function as explanation. Theory as explanatory is post-practical; it presupposes the existence of facts and actions which call for explanation. Theory as vision, however, is pre-practical; it is prior to every human decision or action. It is not casual explanation but alluring persuasion. If we stress the priority of theory over *praxis*, we have in mind the mental function of anticipation which is the prius of every meaningful act."

Theological vision, *theoria* as “alluring persuasion” which gives birth to action, is needful for any advance by Christians in the cause of justice. In their probing book on global economic injustice and poverty, *The Predicament of the Prosperous*, Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen devote a chapter to the need for a change in *perception*. It is not enough to consider technological change and changes in existing systems and structures. A more just world will happen, concerned analysts seem to agree, only if there is also a change in perception. Perception, the way we see things, our vision, is a basic shaper and interpreter of human needs with the capacity to transform culture. "Changes in perception often move at glacial speed. Like glaciers, however, perspectival change can also move mountains."

Stanley Hauerwas has written at great length on his contention that Christian character and ethics are formed by the narrative or story of Christ, which Christians receive as a truthful account of our existence. At the heart of Christian social ethics is the need to be faithful to our story and to address critically the competing stories which want to shape our policy and our destiny. To keep our own vision clear is crucial for Hauerwas:

"Christian social ethics too often takes the form of principles and policies that are not clearly based on or warranted by the central convictions of the faith. Yet the basis of any Christian social ethic should be the affirmation that God has decisively called and formed a people to serve him through Israel and the work of Christ."

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1Carl Braaten, *Eschatology and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) 142.
3Ibid., 60.
For Birch and Rasmussen the emphasis is on Christians looking toward a general change in vision or perspective, whereas for Hauerwas the focus is on the moral formation of the Christian community in its foundational story. Yet, they all lead us to see theological vision as “alluring persuasion” and the necessary prius of meaningful action.

Even Robert McAfee Brown, who has come to affirm the liberationist motif of emphasis on praxis, or action in the concrete situation, must still speak of seeing things in new ways. He exhorts us that it is the task of Christians who wish to promote peace through justice “to think and act as citizens of the global village” and “to see the world through eyes other than our own.”

How does one develop such a capacity? For Brown it appears that this is a function of repentance and a return to our fundamental understandings that the Gospel calls all to be sisters and brothers. “So there is a wide-based human solidarity in the vision of the Christian Faith...we are already one, no matter how we try to hide or corrupt that fact.”

Several years ago I attended a meeting of theologians who were invited to reflect on some recent research on beliefs and opinions held by a church-wide sample of parishioners. During one of the breaks a colleague expressed some disbelief that the survey showed such significant indifference to the church’s role in seeking social justice. How can this be when we have come so far as a church body in adopting social statements and taking stands on current issues? My suspicion is that we have not yet fully clarified our vision for our people. There remains a lingering individualism and other-worldliness in our representation of the Christian faith. It sounds like old stuff to make such observations, and yet they continue to seem in place.

II. SEEING OURSELVES: VISION IN ANTHROPOLOGY

It would be impossible to say that any one aspect of our faith or our theology is the key to an enabling vision for social ethics. It would be equally impossible to attempt to encompass and correlate all the major theological motifs that can contribute to our understanding in these matters. A choice must be made. My choice here is to concentrate on how we see ourselves. How we see ourselves—how we develop our anthropology—is at the center of our worldview. Although human beings in their freedom have a remarkable capacity to act in an inconsistent fashion, the formed or partially formed convictions we hold about our own nature and destiny have a governing influence on personal lifestyle and public policy. A few examples with specific reference to social justice concerns will suffice to make the point.

The early Marx laid the foundations for his social, economic, and political philosophy in his reflections on the human predicament as a question of anthropology. Marx speaks at length of human “self-estrangement” or “self-alienation” as the root of human misery as experienced under capitalism. Thus, the overcoming of capitalism in the ascendancy of socialism/communism is nothing less than the coming-to-be of authentic humanity. Latin American theologian José Míguez Bonino argues that at its inception, Marxism was clearly a humanistic programme motivated by a deep compassion for human suffering and a vision of authentic humanity as the goal of liberation. “Marx inherits the tradition which, through Kant, Hegel, and
Feuerbach, helped him to define ‘the essence of man’ as his freedom and rationality socially fulfilling their total possibilities in history and rejecting all forms of religious, political, and social alienation.”

Although far less well known than the Marxist tradition, the recent work of philosopher John Rawls has already established its importance in the area of social theory and deserves inclusion as another example. In his work, *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls attempts to establish universally valid principles of social justice that are responsive to the traditional categories of western philosophy but not derived from them. The means by which he seeks to accomplish this is to posit a hypothetical “original position.” In the original position an imaginary group of people, ignorant of their own sex and personal and cultural identity, engage in a bargaining process to establish principles of justice for their society. Though they know something about what social, political, and economical structure is, they are ignorant of any personal, social, or religious claims that might bias their judgment. From this pristine circumstance, Rawls contends, a rational argument for a social contract embodying certain principles of justice will emerge such that no reasonable person could deny its truthfulness. It is not necessary for our purposes to speak of Rawls’s specific principles. However novel and ingenious his use of the hypothetical original position may be, his argument presupposes an anthropology that is familiar to modern, western philosophy. Robert Benne, who is both appreciative and critical of Rawls, aptly describes his anthropological outlook:

Rawls’s world is a cool, rational one, bereft of insight into persisting social concupiscence—especially in its more demonic manifestations—or into the creative responsibility that each person has for the use of his or her gifts. Neither the demonic darkness, nor the soaring flights of the human struggle are much a part of Rawls’s world. This is because the naturalistic assumptions he operates with reduce the range of human willing to natural drives on the one side and rational control and guidance on the other.

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8José Míguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 76.

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It is arguable that Rawls’s theory of social justice is as much a product of his prior anthropological commitments to rationalism and naturalism as to any other facet of his reasoning.

It is interesting that Benne chooses Reinhold Niebuhr as his companion for his appreciative critique and appropriation of Rawls’s thought. Surely no other theologian in our time has had a greater appreciation than Niebuhr for the critical role of biblical/Christian anthropology in adjudicating the competing claims of various social philosophies. In his monumental work *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr set forth both the dignity of the human estate as God’s special creation and the reality of human sin in its manifold forms. His keen ability to interpret social-political alternatives from the standpoint of a Christian anthropology enabled him to provide insightful critiques of
everything from communism and pacifism to liberal Christian progressivism. Always the anthropological vision emerged as a key to social-political analysis and strategy. His combination of faith and realism in viewing the human prospect through the lens of biblical witnesses provided a corrective to pretense in the claims that movements made for their own version of social justice as well as an active conviction that Christians belong in the quest for justice. His understanding of how we see ourselves through the eyes of biblical faith inspired a generation of Christian social activism. His thought remains important despite significant changes in the social-political context since Niebuhr last wrote.

I have argued thus far that if Christians are to find their way through the challenges and dilemmas of today’s social issues, they will need to discover a motivation and commitment that is grounded in the vital center of their gospel faith. I have spoken of this grounding in terms of vision. Vision is necessary to action, even when the emphasis is on praxis. Specifically, the several foregoing examples serve to illustrate the critical instrumentality of the way we see ourselves in the shaping of our structures of justice. They suggest that Christian anthropological vision is a good place to start. Varied as these examples are, they also give us a hint of the variety of anthropological alternatives that confront us in our world. Thus, although it is not central to the task of this essay, there is always an apologetic dimension to clarifying the Christian vision of the nature and destiny of humankind.

III. THE PROBLEM OF DOUBLE VISION

A history of the doctrine of the image of God, the principal biblical symbol for Christian anthropology, shows a considerable variety of formulations. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to discern the common features of the viewpoints that have dominated until recent times. As I have tried to show elsewhere at some length, the notion of the image of God has most often been explained in terms of dualities.11 These dualities have, in turn, had a significant impact on the way we understand the human good as the goal of faith active in love for the neighbor.

To begin with, some have understood the very structure of the image of

toward double vision. As soon as we state our anthropology in a twofold fashion, we are led to see the human good in terms of two foci as well. One focus is on the natural and another on the supernatural or spiritual. The temptation to prioritize between the two is virtually irresistible. Certainly, we may invest the so-called natural image with some significance as a statement of human dignity and a grounding for human rights and civil righteousness. Thus, the church can feel some impulse to champion human rights and seek the justice required to insure and protect them. However, theologically speaking, the primary locus of concern in this tradition of Christian anthropology is the loss of original righteousness associated with the spiritual or supernatural image. After all, is not the forgiveness of sins through Christ and the ultimate restoration of lost righteousness through our justification the essence of the gospel for which the church exists? Of course it is. However, anthropologically speaking, the fact that this central affirmation of the faith can be and often has been related primarily to the spiritual or supernatural image tends toward the spiritualization of the human good. Indeed, the very notion that the lost image is restored in eternity sets up the additional duality of temporal existence in the natural image and eternal existence in the restored supernatural image of God. In this otherworldly orientation, the true human good lies beyond history. Grace is not directly pertinent to our natural, historical existence. Historical existence remains the arena of sin and there is little reason to be hopeful about things like justice. There are few resources in this vision to sustain the church in a fervent commitment to justice and other temporal or historical goals for the human good.

Modern biblical scholarship has made it virtually impossible to sustain a twofold definition of the image of God. The image is now understood as a reference to the whole of human nature as a unified reality. This helps to overcome the contrast between natural and spiritual and points toward a more unitive vision of the human good. Beyond that, the contemporary consensus also maintains that the Bible does not speak of the loss of the image of God in any sense. The effect of this is to suggest that the hope of the Gospel should no longer be construed as a return to lost origins through the restoration of the image in eternity. Rather, it may be possible to see Christ’s victory over sin as a sign of the ultimate salvation of our present existence. If we can thus reduce the contrast between history and eternity, if we can see ourselves as redeemed for the ultimate perfection of our historical existence in the image of God, then the historical struggles for the human good might make more sense and have more direction. The significance of the gospel for our present life might be clearer. Space does not permit making the case fully, but I would like to develop these possibilities nonetheless.

IV. SEEING OURSELVES IN THE FUTURE MADE PRESENT

In the New Testament our hope for fulfillment in the image of God is a hope associated with the resurrection (1 Cor 15:44-49; Rom 8:28-30), an eschatological hope. The outlook is decidedly future. Indeed, the connection of the fulfillment of the image with our resurrection hope makes it an expectation of the eschatological Kingdom of God. As Wolfhart Pannenberg has demonstrated, the first century expectation of the Kingdom included an expectation of the resurrection of the dead; Jesus’s resurrection was thus a clear sign that in a real sense the Kingdom had come. Consequently, we can begin to see our hope for authentic human existence as a hope for the coming Kingdom of God.

In fact our fulfillment in the image of God is more than just a hope for the Kingdom; its
substance and meaning is revealed by the one who has brought in the Kingdom. Inasmuch as Jesus Christ has become “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20), he has, according to his true humanity, been revealed as true _imago_—humanity in all its perfection.\(^ {13}\) He is our promised future made present to us. He is the first resurrected one in whom the resurrection promise of fulfillment in the image of God is realized. He is our prototype.

How then do we see ourselves? We see ourselves in terms of a future made present to us in Christ our prototype. And what is revealed in the Christ is a perfect communion and union with God and with his fellow human beings, a perfect bond of love. This is the ultimate human good of authentic _imago_ existence. It is not difficult, then to deduce the corollary goods of this vision of the ultimate good. Communion with God and one another means life, wholeness, freedom, peace, equality (a perfect justice), unity and harmony. Are these not the values which love is commanded to seek? Are these not the values we seek in the course of social justice? Love is the pursuit of our hope, the struggle to reach the vision of ourselves revealed in our prototype and promised in his victory.

Pannenberg has argued—I think convincingly—that the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God is nothing less than a statement concerning the future of all history. God is creatively drawing history to the consummation of his purposes in the fullness of his rule at the arrival of his future. When one is captured by this vision, one is “converted to the world.”\(^ {14}\) That is, knowing that the future of history is revealed in the victory of Christ, one can begin to care about history. Our

13I have offered a fuller biblical and theological discussion of Jesus as the image of God in both divine and human senses in _Christian Anthropology and Ethics_, 85-121.

actions to seek the human good in the present have meaning in view of the future.

The ethical implications of this become more concrete when we recognize that the Kingdom revealed includes a revelation of true humanity and the values we have associated with it. Specifically, when faith active in love seeks for all people the values of life, wholeness, freedom, equality, peace, unity and harmony, it bears witness to the hope of the gospel for the true _imago_—humanity of the Kingdom of God. When we see ourselves in the future made present in Christ, we are set free for that future by its promises. This is the cornerstone of Christian ethics and the beacon to social action.

We are constructing an _ethic of anticipation_. Christian social ethics is impelled by the urge to reach out for a future made present but not yet here. The urge of anticipation, the impulse to seek the human good through justice and social change, is rooted directly in the promised future of the gospel. To be sure, we cannot confuse the promise of the gospel with a program for social change. Similarly, working for justice and peace is not in itself proclaiming the gospel. However, we also cannot say that the gospel and its promise of true humanity in the Kingdom of God has nothing to say to historical striving for the human good through a better justice. Moreover, we cannot separate the church’s anticipation of the Kingdom of God through social action from its mission to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. No matter how imperfect our effort or unsatisfactory our results, the quest for justice and peace and the human good is integral to our witness. Moreover, we can’t help it; as faith is always active in love, so the proclamation
of the promise will be accompanied by acts of anticipation as a statement of the hope within us. I am speaking of an ethic of anticipation based upon an anthropology of the future. Both “anticipation” and “future” convey the element of the “not yet.” This is the other dimension of the way we see ourselves: sinners still, in a sinful world. Ours is an anthropology of dependent being. Ours is a hope for authentic existence only in the grace of God’s future. That grace comes to us now, for the future has broken in in the Christ. In that is the power and the possibility for a life of faith active in loving anticipation. Still there is the “not yet” within and without. As we see ourselves in the resurrection victory, the cross remains in our field of vision. We are disabused of any illusions of triumphalism. We recognize that the vision of true humanity in the Kingdom of God speaks judgment as well as promise. As a human race our dignity lies in our destiny. All one has to do is to look honestly at oneself and at the world around us to know the reproach of the cross which mirrors our perversity and death. Faith active in love seeking justice as a witness to the hope within us is a hard road to say the least. If our revised understanding of the image of God can help to overcome some of the misleading dualities of traditional anthropology, there is one duality that cannot be eradicated in the present: the contrast between what we are and what God would have us be.

Our dignity is in our destiny, not in our reality which is sin. Yet our destiny is given, our future made present. That, too, is our reality. In all too brief a fashion I have tried to suggest a way to see ourselves, a vision at the center of our faith that can be an “alluring persuasion” to an active social ethic and a source of constant renewal in the exhausting and frustrating struggle to do the good in love.

Such a vision will not lend clarity to the dilemmas and complexities of the various issues we confront in the real world. But we can identify the good we seek, and we can know why it is our vocation to seek it. We will find ourselves divided on some issues and may face the bitter prospect of division among us. However, it is not necessary or even likely in the ambiguities of the “not yet” that Christians always speak with one voice on every issue. What is necessary is that they speak. In a century in which there are probably more Christian martyrs than in any other, we can hardly expect success at every turn. Though we act expectantly, setting no boundaries to the grace and power of God, we are not called to success. We are called to speak judgment, to proclaim the promise, and to punctuate that proclamation with acts of love in all relations of life.