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Religious Ethics and Obligations to Others

1.1 Introduction

This book is about our obligations to others. More specifically, it is about our obligations to assist severely poor people.[1]

On severe poverty, consider the following picture, one that is radically different than what affluent people experience. People who live under conditions of severe poverty are subject to widespread exploitation, chronic malnutrition, and a lack of access to adequate shelter, sanitation, and basic preventive healthcare; over a billion adults and approximately 700 million children are illiterate; and because of conditions of desperation, millions of children are chained to looms, conscripted into war, or sold into prostitution.[2]

[1] When I use the first-person plural pronoun "we," I refer to those of us who are affluent citizens of developed liberal democracies. This includes those who (and presupposes that we) have sufficient mental maturity, education, and political opportunities and therefore share responsibility in what our government does in our name regarding public policy and trans- and supranational institutional arrangements. This excludes those who lack sufficient mental maturity, education, and political opportunities, e.g., people with radical cognitive disabilities and poor and politically disenfranchised people. On this use, I follow Thomas Pogge, "Are We Violating the Human Rights of the World's Poor?" 2–3. For a criticism of "we" and collective responsibility, see Michael J. Baxter, "Dispelling the 'We' Fallacy from the Body of Christ."

[2] On severe poverty, consider the following figures. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "821 million people are

Moreover, even though human rights conventions and modern democracies prohibit it, there are roughly forty million people trapped in modern slavery, suffering everything from bonded labor to forced marriage. Given that they are chronically deprived of basic material needs, severely poor people are prevented from living minimally decent and autonomous lives. Moreover, given the gravity of such poverty, severely poor people are systemically precluded from lifting themselves out of such conditions. On any conscionable outlook, the existence of severe poverty is morally horrific.

Conditions of severe poverty continue to obtain, however, while there is great and rising affluence in the Global North.[3]

chronically undernourished; 844 million lack access to basic drinking water; 2.3 billion lack access to basic sanitation, including 892 million people who practice open defecation; 828 million people live in slums, with the figure continuing to rise; 840 million people lack electricity; 1.6 billion lack access to basic health services; 103 million children lack basic literacy skills; and there are about 265 million child laborers in the world." The UNDP's data are available at http://hdr.undp.org/en/data. "These severe deprivations persist," Thomas Pogge observes, "because people in the bottom half of the world's population are too poor to protect themselves against them," *World Poverty and Human Rights*, 2. Mortality rates among severely poor children and young adolescents are especially high. According to the United Nations Interagency Group for Child Mortality Estimation, "in 2018 alone, an estimated 6.2 million children and young adolescents under age 15 died, mostly from preventable causes. Newborns account for 2.5 million of these deaths, children aged 1–11 months for 1.5 million, children aged 1–4 years for 1.3 million, children aged 5–9 years for 560,000 and young adolescents aged 10–14 years for 360,000," *Levels and Trends in Child Mortality*, 8. For further data on severe poverty, see the World Bank's Poverty Monitor https://data.worldbank.org/topic/poverty. Though the data from the UNDP and World Bank are readily available and used in developmental studies, Thomas Pogge, Sanjay Reddy, and others believe that the data-calculation methods to be flawed. See, e.g., Pogge, "The First U.N. Millennium Developmental Goal" and Pogge and Reddy, "How *Not* to Count the Poor."

[3] "The average consumption expenditure of citizens in high-income countries is about 30 times greater than that of the global poor in terms of purchasing power (relative to an international commodities basket) and about 120 times

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Contrast the lives of severely poor people with what the historian Brad Gregory aptly terms *the goods life*.[4] Compared with the good life, which is concerned with individual and communal flourishing, committing to the goods life requires prioritizing our own self-interest over and against the well-being of others. On the terms of the goods life, we are formed and act not toward the good but rather toward goods, whose acquisition is restricted only by our credit limit.[5] Whereas severely poor people labor for access to basic material needs and for the conditions needed to exercise their agency, affluent people committed to the goods life exercise agency through acquisition, whether newer technology or seasonably fashionable clothing, all of which will be quickly discarded and replaced. For those committed to the goods life, Gregory notes, "[m]oneymaking mesmerizes, affluence anesthetizes, and comfort conduces conformist complacency." Consequently, affluent people don't have "so much as a thought, much less an action, for millions who are homeless, hungry, persecuted, or otherwise marginalized."[6]

For religious ethicists, severe poverty gives rise to several overlapping problems. In this book, I frame these problems and develop responses to them.

greater when the comparison is made at currency exchange rates. Assessed at such rates, the 2,533 million poor together accounted for only about 1.67 percent of all household consumption expenditure in 2004, while the 1,004 million people in the high-income countries together accounted for 81 percent," Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, 2–3.

4 See Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, ch. 5. On consumerism as morally formative, see also William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*.

5 On American consumer practices, luxury, and Christian ethics, see David Cloutier, *The Vice of Luxury*. Even practices such as asceticism have been coopted in the service of the goods life. For an analysis of minimalism as a new form of consumerism, see Dana Logan, "The Lean Closet."

6 Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 294–296.

1.2 Framing the Problems

I begin with the following commonsense view: We have moral and political relationships with others. These relationships obligate us in one or another way. But this commonsense view quickly opens itself up to a dizzying host of questions. For example, how do we determine who we share these relationships with? Given that we live in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, where we are connected with people we neither know nor will ever come into contact with, what is the scope of our moral and political obligations? And since so many people in our world are severely poor, what is the intensity of our obligations to them? Does the intensity of our obligations vary according to the nature of relationship – for example, our relationships with our compatriots compared to foreigners? How should we discharge our obligations, that is, through institutional reform or interpersonal giving? How should we adjudicate our obligations to severely poor people and our obligations to our near and dear, for example, our compatriots, family, and friends? And how should we adjudicate our obligations to severely poor people and our obligations to ourselves, including our other moral strivings and personal projects?

Despite starting from the commonsense view, these questions admit of complexity and interrelation. Moreover, considering the extensity and intensity of severe poverty, they are also morally urgent. To develop responses to these questions, the overall arc of my argument is as follows. First, I will argue *why* affluent people have obligations to severely poor people. Second and relatedly, I will argue that affluent people have *demanding* obligations to severely poor people. I develop and attempt to defend these against two criticisms that are widely espoused in popular, philosophical, and religious thought. According to the first criticism, affluent people

either have *primary* obligations to our compatriots or affluent people don't have *any* obligations to assist severely poor people. According to the second criticism, fulfilling demanding obligations to severely poor people won't permit affluent people the latitude to (i) honor our special relations (e.g., families and friendships) and (ii) maintain proper self-regard, which includes our other moral strivings and personal projects. Taken together, I attempt to defend the following view: Affluent people have demanding obligations, through institutional reform and interpersonal giving, to severely poor people. Committing to fulfilling such obligations, however, need not preclude the possibility of forming special relations or maintaining self-regard.

The questions that I posed earlier have been taken up and responded to in sophisticated ways by developmental economists and moral and political philosophers. For example, inspired by and extending John Rawls's basic structure argument, Charles Beitz and Thomas Pogge each argue for obligations to people around the globe that are incurred by virtue of our shared participation in economic and political institutions. Given our ever increasing global economic and political interdependence, these thinkers argue, our obligations can't be delimited simply by virtue of our membership in a particular nation-state.[7] In a related vein, Peter Singer in his famous article, "Famine, Affluence, & Morality," argues that we affluent people have demanding interpersonal obligations to assist severely poor people through giving to charitable organizations. Arguing on utilitarian grounds, Singer holds that we affluent people are morally responsible for allowing billions of severely poor people to suffer and die

[7] I will briefly canvas Rawls's institutionalism in Section 1.4 and more fully explore it in Chapter 3. See also Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*; Pogge, *Realizing Rawls*; and Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*.

from easily preventable causes because we prioritize our own well-being instead of the very lives of severely poor people.[8] Given their widespread influence and philosophical importance, I will be in conversation with such views about our obligations to severely poor people in the following chapters.

Whereas moral and political philosophers have long discussed our obligations to severely poor people, religious ethicists haven't yet given the questions that I posed sustained attention. Compared to conversations about related topics in human rights, for example, just war theory or the very universality of human rights language itself, to which religious ethicists continue to contribute, the relative lack of attention is surprising.[9] Similarly, Protestant social ethicists and liberation theologians have focused on related topics, for example, the demands of love of God and love of neighbor or structural sin and personal behavior.[10] To be sure, in our sinful and fallen world, these are salient topics for moral and theological reflection. But in the former case, the focus often becomes overly abstract: What we need is normative guidance about what love of God and love of neighbor demands in our current context of global interdependence. And in the latter case, the focus becomes overly concrete, attending too greatly on our contingencies and what *is* rather than what

[8] I will briefly canvas Singer's interpersonalism in Section 1.4 and more fully explore it in Chapter 4. See also Section 1.4 for my discussion of the means/ends and doing/allowing distinctions.

[9] Some recent exceptions from which I have learned include Eric Gregory, "Remember the Poor"; Susan Holman, *Beholden*; and Esther Reed, "Nation States and Love of Neighbour."

[10] In Protestant social ethics, Gene Outka's *Agape* is the standard text for thinking about obligations to God and to neighbor. In liberation theology, theologians from Gustavo Gutierrez (e.g., *A Theology of Liberation*) and Oscar Romero (e.g., *The Violence of Love*) to Daniel Finn (e.g., "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?") and Katie Grimes (e.g., *Christ Divided*) have focused on sinful social structures and personal behavior.

is necessary and what *ought* to be. In examining our obligations to severely poor people, one challenge is how we are to be informed by and bring to bear general and abstract moral and religious principles and particular and contingent economic, political, and social realities.[11]

To borrow from and improvise on an insight from the legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron, are there arguments, concepts, and frameworks in religious thought that religious ethicists may use to develop arguments about our obligations to assist severely poor people? And may these be put into productive conversation with developments in contemporary moral and political philosophy?[12] In conversation with influential moral and political philosophers who have theorized about our institutional and interpersonal obligations to severely poor people, I aim to illustrate how and why religious ethicists may learn from and contribute to debates about such obligations.

I further hope that my discussion about our obligations to severely poor people will also prompt religious ethicists to reflect on some foundational questions. For example, how does severe poverty force religious ethicists to rethink who counts as our neighbor and what neighbor-love normatively requires? How (if at all) does recognizing someone as our neighbor demand that we rethink our ordinary allegiances to our compatriots or bonds with our friends and family? And given that we are to

[11] In offering these descriptions, I have improvised on an idea from Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, ch. 2. Commenting on the relationship between universal human rights and our political context, Williams writes: "Utopian thought is not necessarily frivolous, but the nearer political thought gets to action, as in the concrete affirmation of human rights, the more likely it is to be frivolous if it is utopian," 25. See Section 1.6 for my methodological commitments.

[12] See Waldron, "What Can Christian Teaching Add to the Debate about Torture?," 337. See also Waldron, "Religious Contributions in Public Deliberation."

love our neighbors, how are we implicated in economic, political, and social institutions that preserve and promote gross economic inequality? In response to questions like these, this book focuses on our current situation of global economic interdependence and severe poverty and how these relate to the biblical injunction to prove ourselves neighbor, especially to the least among us.

1.3 Neighbor-Love and Moral Obligations

In Christian ethics and theology, there is a strong normative emphasis on our obligations to others, especially the least among us. More specifically, love of God and love of neighbor are, to use Paul Ramsey's characterization,[13] the *ground floor* of Christian ethics: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and all the prophets" (Matt. 22:37–40). By orienting ourselves first and foremost to God, our consequent love for our neighbors is, even if abstract and general in articulation, understood as normatively fixed and unalterable. Given the primacy of these commands, Christians must *love everyone as neighbor*.[14]

Throughout the Gospels and the Johannine and Pauline epistles, we find this message consistently emphasized. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches:

[13] Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 115n14. For an explication of Ramsey's ethics in conversation with contemporary deontology, see Bharat Ranganathan, "Paul Ramsey's Christian Deontology."

[14] On the various issues that concern the relationship between Christian ethics and religious ethics, see Bharat Ranganathan and Derek Woodard-Lehman, "Normative Dimensions in Christian Ethics." See also Bharat Ranganathan, "Between Distinctiveness and Integrity."

1.3 Neighbor-Love and Moral Obligations

> You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for his sun rises on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
>
> (Matt. 5:43–48)

And in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus converses with the lawyer and identifies what it is to *prove* ourselves neighbor:

> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."
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> But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell

> into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."
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> (Luke 10:25–37)

In these two examples, the normative direction of Jesus's teaching is clear. What Christian ethics demands is that we love all people as our neighbors, making no exceptions for even our enemies and strangers. Indeed, "since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:11–12).

In the Judgment of the Nations, Jesus's teaching continues. "For when I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matt. 25:34–36). Each reflects love of neighbor; moreover, each contains a particular by which to love the neighbor. But consider Jesus's teaching in relation to our contemporary world, where an overwhelming portion of the world's population is severely poor. Severely poor people *are* our neighbors. And yet severe poverty continues to exist. The continuing existence of severe poverty, however, conflicts with a further normative edict in the Judgment of the Nations: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (Matt. 25:45).

For affluent people, Jesus's edict in damning. By failing to love our severely poor neighbors, we will "go away to eternal punishment" whereas the "righteous to eternal life" (Matt. 25:46). To my mind, the Judgment of the Nations recasts the tension that I introduced with my comparison of the lives of severely poor people with the goods life. What is this tension? On the one side, we are given clear commands